

# THE PRACTICES OF HALLYU FANDOM AS A DIGITAL NEO-TRIBE

## Trans-Bricolage and Post-Coding

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### Abstract

This study examines global Hallyu (Korean Wave) fandom as a pluralistic, heterogeneous counter current within the decentralizing flow of global popular culture. It conceptualizes this fandom as a form of digital neo-tribe and interprets its fluid, ever-shifting character through the theoretical lens of liquidity. To better understand the performative practices of these fan communities, the study adopts and applies the concepts of trans-bricolage and post-coding. Hallyu fandom practices can be broadly divided into two types: cultural practices and economic practices. Cultural practices are expressed through the reappropriation of K-content's forms and messages via modes such as quotation/commentary, reference/borrowing, and transformation/modification. In contrast, economic practices are manifested through the production of derivative content based on original material or the creation of halo content—content that gains value through association with K-content. The analysis reveals that global Hallyu fans actively decontextualize and recontextualize original content according to their own cultural logics and sensibilities. Through their creative interventions, Hallyu is continuously transformed and redefined, securing influence as a fluid, hybridized “third culture” within the global popular culture market. These findings challenge the notion of fandom as passive consumption and instead position global Hallyu fans as active cultural agents and co-producers of meaning. Consequently, Hallyu should be understood not as a unidirectional export but as a collaborative cultural formation shaped by transnational participation. Korean creators, in this context, are encouraged to reflect on their role not only as content originators but as reciprocal re-broadcasters within the dynamic global circulation of Hallyu.

## Keywords

digital neo-tribe, fandom, Hallyu, liquidity, post-coding, trans-bricolage

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## INTRODUCTION

The standardized and homogenized trajectory of modernity originating in the West is now entering a new phase. Samuel N. Eisenstadt introduced the concept of *multiple modernities*, emphasizing that the Western model of modernization has not functioned as a universal path. Although Western institutions and cultural forms have spread globally, each civilization and society has constructed its own forms of modernity based on distinct historical trajectories and traditions. Eisenstadt further argues that even within the West, there exists no single, unified form of modernity; instead, modernity manifests in multiple pathways and practices. This perspective provides a crucial theoretical foundation for discussions of cultural diversity and post-Western centrism in the age of globalization (Eisenstadt 1–29).

Building on Eisenstadt's concept of multiple modernities, this paper argues that similar dynamics shape cultural industries and popular culture. Until the late twentieth century, Western popular culture—bolstered by capital and technology—dominated globally, often suppressing local autonomy. Since the 1990s, however, neoliberalism and digital media have enabled refractive appropriations that challenge this dominance. While American culture remains influential, global production now exhibits greater hybridity and diversity. In this shifting landscape, Hallyu has emerged as a key countercurrent, offering alternative cultural expressions.

Hallyu can be seen as a cultural expression of multiple modernities emerging across diverse global contexts. Through this lens, it reflects how the Western-centric model of modernity in global cultural industries has been refracted and reimaged in non-Western settings. Since the early twenty-first century, Hallyu has sustained its global momentum by fusing *local codes* with *global codes* through *cultural hybridity*. In doing so, it marks a significant rupture in global popular culture and illustrates how non-Western societies construct their own cultural modernities—opening up new avenues for scholarly inquiry.

The contemporary expansion of Hallyu culture concretely illustrates a mode of global interaction grounded in the tension between forces of homogenization and heterogenization (Appadurai 32). There is a dynamic interplay among the various actors involved: Korea and Koreans, as the cultural originators of Hallyu; receiving countries; and global audiences who appropriate Hallyu content. These exchanges reveal a process of negotiated hybridity. Moreover, recipients of Hallyu have begun to form transnational and alternative communities that engage in new dimensions of cultural resistance or negotiation.

To effectively grasp the multidimensional nature of Hallyu's multiple modernities—namely, its patterns of diffusion and inflection—it is crucial to

recognize that today's intercultural exchanges occur rapidly and extensively against the backdrop of digital technological environments. Compared to the conditions under which David Harvey introduced the concept of *time-space compression*, the current global configuration has reached an entirely different level in terms of scale, speed, intensity, and density (Harvey 240). Hallyu itself can be viewed as a compressed cultural phenomenon shaped by strategic convergence. It synthesizes heterogeneous cultural materials and products in distinctive ways, while simultaneously dispersing and hybridizing with emerging cultural tendencies. Recipients of Hallyu creatively re-condense its content, rearticulating the underlying modes of thought, material forms, and representational practices embedded in Korean culture. In this respect, Hallyu exemplifies a hybridizing process that is both accelerated by and contributing to economic globalization (Burke 2). It functions as a mode of cultural recalibration—producing an alternative current to the standardizing scenario of Western popular culture and cultural industries.

To understand Hallyu as a salient manifestation of multiple modernities, it is crucial to explore its production and circulation within global cultural industries and sites of popular cultural appropriation. Hallyu audiences are no longer passive consumers but *active performers* engaged in adaptation as a complex cultural act—one that entails *creative hybridity*, *reflexive appropriation*, and the reconfiguration of meaning. Just as Koreans reshaped Western pop culture to create a “third culture” called Hallyu, global audiences now reinterpret and localize Hallyu within their own frameworks, generating new cultural forms.

Accordingly, this study views global Hallyu audiences not as passive consumers but as *creative and performative subjects*. In today's digital, mediatized world, they express tastes and desires online, forming cultural communities through shared sensibilities. This paper conceptualizes them as digital neo-tribes and examines their fluid, multilayered participation through the lens of *liquidity*, offering a framework to understand how contemporary audiences navigate identities and boundaries through relational and participatory practices.

This study introduces the concept of *trans-bricolage* to analyze how global Hallyu audiences creatively appropriate, reinterpret, and transform K-content. *Trans-bricolage* involves recombining elements from different institutional, industrial, and cultural systems to produce new meanings, values, and capital. To examine the processes of *de-contextualization* and *re-contextualization* that follow such appropriation, the study also employs the concept of *post-coding*, which captures audience-driven meaning-making beyond original intentions. These concepts are further explored in Section 2.

Through these conceptual frameworks, this study aims to illuminate the creativity and complexity inherent in the appropriation of Hallyu. In doing so, it aims to shed new light on Hallyu as both a decentralized cultural sensibility within global popular culture and a cultural manifestation of multiple modernities.

### LIQUID PRACTICES OF HALLYU FANDOM AS A DIGITAL NEO-TRIBE

In *The Time of the Tribes*, Michel Maffesoli introduces the neo-tribe as a post-modern community that departs from the modern model rooted in individualism, rationality, and institutionalism. He contends that social bonds today arise not from fixed identities or formal structures but through emotion, play, and aesthetic practices in temporary, autonomous ways. Neo-tribes function as trans-communities—fluid, interwoven affiliations that transcend rigid categories like gender or ideology. Sustained by shared emotional resonance and *ambient affect*, they foster loose social bonds through appearance, intensity, and aesthetic symbols, without formal leadership or structure. Maffesoli terms this affect-driven mode of association an *emotional community* (9–30), highlighting its liquidity, autonomy, and creativity. Lacking fixed goals or ideologies, neo-tribes exist *to be together*, and through collective affect, they open new avenues for social and political practice (Maffesoli 72–103).

The characteristics of neo-tribalism in postmodern society, as outlined by Maffesoli, manifest clearly in contemporary popular culture fandoms. Maffesoli cites the performative practices of subcultures like punks and paninari as examples of neo-tribes (11). Fandom arises from intense, shared emotions that are often spontaneous and locally situated. These loose, affective ties gradually evolve into structured social networks, forming a tribe. Within such communities, individuals find belonging and counter social alienation through emotional resonance and relational bonds. In this sense, popular culture fandoms exemplify the traits of neo-tribes as defined by Maffesoli.

The rise of digital environments and new media has rapidly transformed fandoms and their activities as neo-tribes. Mark Duffett notes that the internet has restructured fandom, vastly expanding the scale of fan engagement. Consequently, fan interactions have intensified, and public participation has grown. Fans now connect across cultures, forming transnational communities. Some reinterpret and recreate existing texts via digital platforms, producing secondary content. As this content circulates, it becomes a means of shaping and extending fan identities

(Duffett 235–54). In all these practices, the digital realm is like air—*ubiquitous and indispensable*—underpinning every facet of fan activity.

Indeed, prior research in fan studies has referenced the concept of the neo-tribe in analyzing the performative practices of Hallyu and K-pop fandoms. For example, WoongJo Chang and Shin-Eui Park regard the BTS fandom, known as ARMY, as a community that embodies four key neo-tribal characteristics: *digital intimacy*, *non-social sociability*, *translocality*, and *leaderless organization*. They particularly emphasize ARMY as a new form of global community in which emotional bonds and creative outputs are shared through digital platforms—serving as a foundation for driving social change (Chang and Park 260–87).

Hangsub Choi's study highlights Hallyu's evolution into a global creative culture where fans actively produce content. Centering on K-pop cover dance, he views fan practices—blending emotional engagement and creativity—as forming a postmodern tribal community. This *tribal affect*, Choi argues, fosters new social bonds in fragmented modernity and shows how global fandoms are shifting from consumers to creative agents (13–26). While these insights support the concept of Hallyu fandom as a digital neo-tribe, most neo-tribalism discussions have focused narrowly on K-pop. This study calls for broadening the term to include the wider Hallyu audience beyond K-pop.

Global Hallyu fandom arguably exemplifies *digital neo-tribal* culture, transcending national borders to build emotional solidarities and communities of affect through digital media. Fans actively shape this landscape, as diverse local cultures refract and hybridize Hallyu content, highlighting the generative power of cultural exchange. In this process, they become *reverse senders*—agents who reinterpret and re-circulate Hallyu's meanings. Positioned at intersections of nation, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality, fans express distinct identities and tastes while navigating fluid roles as interpreters and enjoyers. As key participants in evolving media ecologies and *taste cultures*, they increasingly influence Hallyu's global trajectory.

The global Hallyu fandom, seen as a digital neo-tribe, reflects the traits of liquid modernity as theorized by Zygmunt Bauman. In this framework, society is defined by constant transformation, much like liquids that lack fixed form—an apt metaphor for today's individuals and communities shaped by fluidity rather than stability. As traditional structures erode, people face expanding choices and must continually reconstruct their identities. Relationships, too, shift from fixed bonds to transient networks. Though this flux brings uncertainty, it also enhances personal agency and allows for the exploration of alternative life paths (Bauman 1–15).

While Bauman uses the concept of *liquidity* to critique the anxieties of contemporary life, this study adopts it as a value-neutral lens to interpret the creative fluidity of global Hallyu fandom. Performative fandom crosses fixed boundaries, embracing and circulating new cultural forms while flexibly reconfiguring identity through heterogeneous elements. These practices diversify taste cultures and can offer alternative modes of life outside dominant paradigms. For some, Hallyu becomes a medium for reconstructing sociocultural identities and exploring new trajectories. In this sense, Hallyu exemplifies the fluid cultural flows enabled by global digital platforms, serving as a catalyst for hybrid identity formation.

In summary, the diverse practices of global Hallyu fandom exemplify the agency of digital neo-tribes within the global cultural industry and broader popular cultural appropriation. Fans' fluid navigation of identity axes—region, nation, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality—based on taste and desire highlights fandom as a form of *liquid performance*. This study explores how cultural appropriation, identity reconfiguration, and creative performance converge in Hallyu fandom. Such analysis offers micro-level insights into multiple modernities and liquid modernity through comparative cultural and civilizational lenses. To this end, the paper introduces *trans-bricolage* and *post-coding* as conceptual tools to classify these performative practices and reveal their wider cultural relevance.

As is well known, the concept of *bricolage* originates from Claude Lévi-Strauss's explanation of the practices of the *bricoleur*—a cultural producer of “primitive” societies who relies on mythic thought. Bricoleurs work with limited materials and tools, engaging in activities guided by perception and imagination rather than predetermined rules or structures, and operate through images and symbols. Their practices stand in contrast to those of modern engineers, who produce outcomes based on logical and strategic concepts, following structured rules and procedures. According to Lévi-Strauss, the bricoleur autonomously constructs ad hoc solutions in response to emergent situations, whereas the engineer generates events through the structures of scientific hypotheses and theoretical frameworks (16–20).

Of course, Lévi-Strauss's binary distinction has been critiqued by Jacques Derrida as an artificial opposition. Derrida argues that believing in a strict separation between the *bricoleur* and the engineer is itself a mythic notion (285–96). The dichotomy serves primarily as a rhetorical device to emphasize the contrast between mythic and scientific thought, rather than reflecting any absolute difference. In reality, the aesthetic practices of artists in so-called primitive societies and the production processes of engineers in modern scientific civilizations share common ground (Lévi-Strauss 21–22). Especially in the age of global digital civilization, contemporary creative producers move fluidly between the roles of bricoleur and engineer, embodying elements of both in their hybrid practices.

Dick Hebdige of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies used the concept of bricolage to explain how subcultures creatively reassemble signs and materials from mainstream culture to produce new meanings. By subverting dominant messages, these groups construct distinct identities and convey resistance (Hebdige 102–06). Hebdige’s analysis of punk and Teddy Boys—their *creative reworking of cultural meaning*—offers a useful lens for understanding the *performativity of contemporary Hallyu fandom*.

However, the subcultures of 1970s Britain and the global Hallyu fandom of the 2020s differ markedly in their modes of performance, scale, influence, and forms of solidarity. Hallyu fandom’s performativity manifests through various modalities of the *trans-condition*. The prefix *trans-* denotes creative, autonomous transformation across identity markers—such as nation, ethnicity, race, and culture—as well as geography, temporality, media, and the boundaries between production and consumption. Given that the institutional and cultural norms of Hallyu fans’ countries differ from those of Korea, fans actively reinterpret and reconfigure Hallyu genres, styles, and symbols within their own contexts. Some also cultivate emotionally and sensorially bonded communities that generate new meanings, values, and cultural capital. These practices reveal the complex, multilayered nature of the *trans-dimension*, extending and reworking the original concept of *bricolage*.

A closer look at global Hallyu fandom reveals its reliance on platforms that enhance content accessibility and on technologies that support production and distribution. These practices exemplify the *proteur* phenomenon, where lines between amateur and professional blur. Hobbyist fan activities often achieve professional quality and, in some cases, evolve into careers. Thus, performative Hallyu fandom marks a key moment in the prosumer era (Toffler 387–91). In this digital ecosystem, fans act as both producers and consumers, using accessible tools to create based on personal taste. Diverse expressions of *trans-bricolage* emerge throughout these practices.

This section analyzes *trans-bricolage* within global Hallyu fandom by categorizing its cultural and economic dimensions. Cultural practices involve fans’ creative reinterpretation and appropriation of K-content’s genres, styles, and symbols within their local contexts. Economic practices refer to fan-led content production and distribution aimed at generating profit or value. Cultural modes include quotation/commentary, reference/borrowing, and transformation/modification. Economically, fans engage in derivative content creation for profit or produce halo content that gains value through its association with K-content and fandom networks.

While trans-bricolage highlights Hallyu fans' creative practices, *post-coding* analyzes how these practices generate new symbolic orders or reshape cultural positions through emergent meaning-making. Behind each act of trans-bricolage, post-coding subtly operates. According to Clotaire Rapaille, a code resides in the unconscious, with a culture code reflecting the unconscious meanings a society attaches to objects through culture (5). Hallyu fans, using their own cultural tools, recontextualize K-content and perform cultural translation. In doing so, Korean cultural codes may be inherited or extended—but also disrupted, transformed, or reworked. This dynamic exemplifies the essence of *post-coding*.

In the process of interaction and connection among such active Hallyu fans, the latent cultural sensibilities embedded within K-content is newly adapted and renewed. Naturally, their practices do not merely brand or reinforce images and symbols surrounding Korea. Rather, they transform the relationship between the “global” and the “local” into a more multifaceted structure, thereby reshaping the landscape of digital neo-tribalism characterized by liquidity.

In summary, active global Hallyu fandom practices *trans-bricolage* toward Hallyu culture, during which Hallyu texts undergo processes of *post-coding*. These conceptual frameworks serve as crucial analytical tools for interpreting the performative fandom that drives the dynamism of Hallyu culture. The following sections will examine how Hallyu culture is recontextualized by global fandoms, with a focus on both cultural and economic practices.

### **CULTURAL PRACTICES OF GLOBAL HALLYU FANDOM: “QUOTATION/COMMENTARY,” “REFERENCE/BORROWING,” AND “TRANSFORMATION/MODIFICATION”**

Global Hallyu fandom engages in cultural practices of reappropriation and re-signification, reflecting the dynamics of post-coding. These practices can be categorized into three modes. The first, “quotation/commentary,” involves preserving and applying the original content in contexts aligned with its message. The second, “reference/borrowing,” adapts elements of the original in related but new settings. The third, “transformation/modification,” creatively reinterprets content for entirely different contexts. Rather than merely imitating, fans actively adapt K-content to fit their communities, often giving rise to fandom activism that intersects with broader social and public interests.

This section presents a detailed discussion of the three modes of cultural practices through case analysis. Regarding the “quotation/commentary” mode, it is common to find instances in which the K-content is either imitated or summarized, often re-used without altering the original structure or message. For example, on platforms such as *YouTube* and various social media channels, users frequently introduce K-pop content or reproduce it by mimicking its music and choreography. On *TikTok*—a short-form video platform—approximately 97.87 million K-pop-related videos had been uploaded by 2021, with 92.8% of them produced outside of Korea. Indonesia ranked first, accounting for 16.4% of uploads, followed by the Philippines at 13.5% (tule). These figures reflect the widespread cultural phenomenon of using K-pop content as a means of self-expression across the globe.

On *YouTube*, there is a vibrant circulation of K-pop cover dance videos. A simple search using the keyword “K-pop cover dance” reveals a multitude of performances by fans worldwide. These videos transcend national boundaries, gender, race, and ethnicity and are often set against backdrops of iconic global landmarks or distinctly local environments that reflect community identities. Country-by-country analysis of top-viewed “K-pop cover dance” videos shows a remarkably diverse global spread. Some groups boast subscriber numbers on par with international pop celebrities.

Similar cases are also frequently observed in the reception of K-dramas. One representative example is *YouTube* content that introduces the K-drama narratives and provides scene analyses for local audiences. Although the level of familiarity with K-dramas and critical insight varies widely among creators, their review or reaction videos visibly demonstrate the process of cultural translation.

In the case of drama series released through global OTT platforms, various forms of *quotation/commentary* content emerge almost simultaneously. Frequently referenced titles in such videos include *Queen of Tears* (“HOOKED”), *Squid Game* (“Converting Friends to \*SQUID GAME\*”), and *All of Us Are Dead* (“NO!!!! ALL OF US ARE DEAD”). While most of these reviewers are not professional critics, they often offer persuasive interpretations that differ markedly from the commonly held interpretations in Korean media discourse.

Among the cases of *quotation/commentary*, there are instances in which elevated or moral values are identified and shared to foster emotional solidarity and reinforce beliefs within specific identity-based communities. According to a study on Indonesian Muslims’ reception of K-pop, audiences engage in self-reflection through lyrics centered on themes such as healing, consolation, and love, while also encouraging behaviors in line with religious teachings. Positive

attributes displayed by artists—such as cleanliness, diligence, and politeness—are internalized and adopted as personal norms (Wijaya Mulya 346–48).

Similarly, Bangladeshi fans of K-pop songs like BTS's *Spring Day* share messages of comfort and repose, experiencing a sense of emotional uplift together (Sultana). In this vein, Ranny Rastati has noted that for many Indonesian audiences, K-pop is more than mere entertainment. According to her, the themes embedded in K-pop—mental health, self-acceptance, and the like—resonate with social and psychological challenges commonly experienced by Indonesian youth. Through the lyrics of K-pop songs, they find ways to cope with inner conflict and collectively pursue renewed vitality in life (Dianti).

These examples illustrate how global fans actively seek out and enjoy the elements of K-content that resonate with the cultural codes of their own region, nation, ethnicity, religion, or gender, thereby reaffirming and strengthening the values they pursue.

In *reference/borrowing*, recipients selectively appropriate aspects of the original content's message and recontextualize them to fit their own frameworks. Compared to *quotation/commentary*, this involves greater interpretive freedom and a more active reuse of the content's form, narrative, and message. A common example is the creative memefication of Korean cultural images to create humorous scenes. A notable case is the global meme "Queen Never Cry," originating from the Korean webtoon *The Ki Sisters* by Beombae. In this scene, a mother tells her crying newborn, "Queen never cry," prompting the baby to suddenly adopt a haughty, composed look (U/OriginalAlberto). The meme gained traction globally through parodies and remixes, especially outside Korea (TOI Trending Desk).

Another representative example is the "Jungshook" meme, which originated from the surprised or flustered facial expressions of BTS member Jeon Jungkook. This fan-created internet meme first gained traction on social media platforms such as *Tumblr* and *Twitter* around 2017. Fans coined the term "Jungshook" by blending Jungkook's name with the English word "shook," a slang term denoting shock or astonishment. The meme circulated widely in the form of reaction images and GIFs, and came to function not only within K-pop fandoms but also across broader online communities as a symbolic expression of surprise or confusion (Lang).

Numerous other memes have also derived from Korean content, offering insights into the media literacy and creative reproduction capacities of global Hallyu fandoms. These examples involve selectively extracting scenes from their original context and borrowing them in personalized ways that fit desired situational contexts. Such practices of decontextualizing and recontextualizing

segments of original content into meme form reflect the participatory and playful culture of the digital age.

Another type of a “reference/borrowing” case takes on a distinctly different nature. For instance, during the Thai protests of 2020–2021, K-pop was appropriated as a symbolic resource. These protests, centered in Bangkok, called for the resignation of the prime minister and reform of the monarchy. Protesters incorporated K-pop music and dance into their performances as a means of nonviolent resistance. Among their preferred songs was Girls’ Generation’s “Into the New World,” which had also been used during the 2016 protests led by students at Ewha Womans University in South Korea (“이 화여대 폭력진압직전다만세부르는 학생들.”). In the Thai context, the song functioned as a kind of populist anthem used for mass gatherings. According to interviews with protesters, the song’s forward-looking and defiant tone appears to have made it a fitting choice for the movement (“Thailand protests”).

Of course, the specific lyrics of the song are not directly related to calls for monarchy reform or resistance to the delay in constitutional amendments. However, the song may have contributed to strengthening solidarity among participants and fostering a peaceful protest atmosphere on-site.

The use of K-pop was also observed during the Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar in 2021. In opposition to the military coup, Myanmar citizens launched a civil disobedience campaign. At the time, K-pop fandoms supported the protests both online and offline through their organizational power. On-site, many K-pop fans attempted to combine their fan identity with their identity as democratic citizens. For instance, there were protestors holding placards with the lyrics of BTS’s “Not Today” (노동효). The lyrics convey an attitude of resistance, hope, courage, and solidarity. Of course, the message has no direct relevance to Myanmar’s political situation.

There are also cases in which Korean dramas have been *referenced/borrowed* and applied to different situational contexts. The *Netflix* series *The Glory*, released in 2022 and 2023, tells the story of a protagonist who suffers brutal school bullying during her youth and takes revenge on her perpetrators 17 years later. The drama achieved global success, ranking third in total *Netflix* viewing hours in 2023.

What is particularly notable is that the drama served as a catalyst for school bullying victims around the world to form solidarity and share their own experiences. In Thailand, the “#TheGloryThai” campaign emerged through social networks. Thai viewers used the hashtag to expose past experiences of school violence and

identify their abusers. As a result, allegations of school bullying by Thai actors and singers resurfaced, prompting them to issue public apologies via social media (Lee).

Another globally successful Korean drama, *Squid Game*, has also been *referenced/borrowed* in a variety of ways. In November 2021, animal rights activists gathered in front of an In-N-Out location in San Francisco to protest alleged violations of animal rights at the slaughterhouses supplying the fast-food chain. They reenacted the “Red Light, Green Light” game from the drama. Wearing tracksuits like those worn by the game participants and donning cow masks, they performed a symbolic protest in which they were “shot” by guards in pink jumpsuits. They also constructed a replica of “Young-hee,” the large, menacing doll featured in the series (“Animal Rights Activists Hold ‘Squid Game’-Themed Protest Outside In-N-Out in San Francisco”).

A similar case occurred during the twenty-sixth UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) held in Glasgow, United Kingdom, in November 2021. Climate activists from around the world staged a protest by reenacting games featured in *Squid Game*, such as tug-of-war and dice games, under the slogan “Stop playing climate games.” In interviews, protest participants pointed out that the show’s depiction of structural inequality and brutal competition for survival echoed the structural inequalities present in the climate crisis (“Climate ‘Squid Game’ Protest Staged Outside COP26 Venue in Glasgow”). This example illustrates how Korean dramas, including *Squid Game*, have been appropriated by global audiences and fandoms as symbolic tools for dramatizing transnational issues.

“Transformation/modification” refers to practices characterized by the highest degree of interpretive autonomy and initiative in reworking the original content than in “quotation/commentary” or “reference/borrowing.” Among the practices that fall into this category are those in which K-content is creatively repurposed for political or socially beneficial actions. Therefore, “transformation/modification” can be seen as the most autonomous form of post-coding in the spectrum of cultural practices.

To begin with, efforts to channel fandom influence into social action reveal how fan networks function as agile conduits for sharing and amplifying agendas. Notable examples include the BTS fan club ARMY’s leadership in raising one million dollars in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 (Velez); the “no-show protest” against President Donald Trump’s campaign rally in Tulsa—a city with a history of anti-Black violence—during the same year (Evelyn); and the coordinated uploading of K-pop content on Twitter during the large-scale anti-government protests in Colombia in 2021 (Alsema), aimed at neutralizing conservative hashtags.

Furthermore, such practices can extend to explicit support for particular political figures or factions. For instance, during the 2021 presidential election in Chile, K-pop fan culture and networks were actively utilized in the campaign of candidate Gabriel Boric (Yim). Similarly, in the 2022 Philippine presidential election, supporters of Vice President Leni Robredo adopted the organizational strategies and cultural practices of K-pop fandom to conduct their campaign (Romero).

Other examples can also be found where global K-pop fandom practices are mobilized to address universal social issues, such as environmental concerns. A notable case is “Kpop4Planet” (K4P), a campaign that garnered significant global attention. K4P identifies itself as a “climate action platform” and was co-founded by Lee Dayeon from South Korea and Nurul Sarifah from Indonesia (Chan). It relies on the voluntary and active participation of K-pop fans around the world. According to its official website, the core values of K4P are inclusivity, empowerment of minority communities, and fan-centered activism. Under these guiding principles, K4P promotes various environmental campaigns, including reducing coal use, cutting carbon emissions, and creating forests (*Kpop4Planet*). These examples illustrate how the performative practices of Hallyu fandom can extend into broader social movements and contribute to the public good.

Another form of *transformation/modification* can be observed in the emergence of creatively edited fan-made videos. Typically, fan videos refer to edited compilations of celebrities’ footage produced by fans. While many of these videos remain at the level of *quotation/commentary*, some exhibit distinct characteristics of *transformation/modification*. These include instances where fans overlay their desired images or narratives onto a star, thereby generating new forms of storytelling. Particularly notable are practices where fan videos and memes are creatively deployed for gender-related expression and activism. Such practices have been unfolding in diverse ways since the emergence of performativity as a key framework in fandom studies (Jenkins 61–88).

For example, on *YouTube*, one can find numerous fan-made videos created by Thai fans that imagine BL (Boys’ Love) relationships between K-pop idols and Thai male actors (“Kpop idols + BL Thai actors”). Many of these videos are subjectively edited to imbue the idols with queer identities, reflecting the fans’ own desires and imaginative interpretations (“the most lesbian moments in kpop”). These practices represent highly autonomous reconfigurations of the original content, creatively bending it to align with personal or communal aspirations. Such examples can be seen as the most active and autonomous forms of post-coding within global fandom culture.

To avoid misunderstanding, it should be clarified that such cultural practices are not exclusive to Hallyu fandom. Since the early days of the Korean Wave, however, K-content has leveraged Korea's advanced ICT environment and *bottom-up* strategies to widen discursive spaces. A prime example is the K-pop boy band BTS, which diversified its direct communication through multiple social media platforms, fostering active fan participation. Hallyu artists are used to co-producing messages with *performative fandom* and continue to broaden horizontal participatory modes in response to shifting media and platform dynamics.

### **ECONOMIC PRACTICES OF GLOBAL HALLYU FANDOM: DERIVATIVE CONTENT AND HALO CONTENT**

Among various forms of recontextualization in performative Hallyu fandom, some involve economic practices of recontentization—the creative reproduction of K-content. Certain fans re-create content to generate income, producing and selling personalized goods. These practices fall into two types. First, fans create and sell *derivative content* by adopting the original's narrative, form, or message, often securing a stable consumer base. Second, they develop *halo content*—works gaining value through their association with K-content—thereby opening new markets. In some cases, *halo content* even gives rise to entirely new industries.

A key example of economic practices involving derivative content is the DIY economy, where fans produce and sell goods based on K-content. While some activities have explicit permission or are informally tolerated, many operate in legal gray zones, often using copyrighted material or image rights without authorization. Despite such issues, these fan-driven, profit-oriented productions foster cohesion within fandoms and broaden the identity of taste-based collectives. For example, fans of EXO's Chanyeol have created and circulated fan-made items like eco-bags, caps, and shirts via *Facebook* fan pages (Yeol), which serve both as circulation hubs for existing fans and as entry points for potential newcomers.

These DIY practices are, of course, far more commonly carried out through personal social media accounts rather than on official fan pages of a given fandom. Drawing on their own tastes and talents, these individuals produce customized goods reflecting the personal taste of their particular time and place (LeJulie).

These fan-produced goods function not only as everyday expressions of fan identity, but also as media that reinforce emotional bonds and a sense of communal

belonging. Fans actively combine conventional elements within their own cultural environments to devise new forms of collective expression. In doing so, they exemplify the dynamic sociality and fluid configurations of contemporary digital communities, which assemble in rhizomatic forms (Deleuze and Guattari 9–37) and interact with flexibility across shifting networks.

One notable example that demonstrates the transnational solidarity and derivative content production capacity of global Hallyu fandom is the widespread organization of *cupsleeve* events across the United States. According to a 2023 report, K-pop fans in regions such as Los Angeles and Orange County voluntarily organized *cupsleeve* gatherings to celebrate idols' birthdays or album release anniversaries (Burt). *Cupsleeve* events refer to offline fan meetups held on commemorative days related to K-pop idols, during which attendees receive beverage sleeves featuring idol images upon purchasing drinks. These events often include designated photo zones, merchandise sales, and fan-led activities. Such events have been concurrently held in various parts of the United States, including New York, California, and Chicago.

These *cupsleeve* events appear to have originated from the “birthday café” culture—a fan-initiated practice in which K-pop fans organize commemorative gatherings to celebrate idols' birthdays or debut anniversaries. Typically, fans rent or decorate café spaces, distribute or sell fan-made merchandise, and engage in communal interactions. Participants often produce custom items such as cupsleeves, photocards, and banners, while also incorporating charitable fundraising or small-scale fan art exhibitions.

This birthday café culture has expanded beyond South Korea to various parts of Asia, Europe, and North America. While it is difficult to precisely quantify the economic revenue generated from such events, they nonetheless contribute to localized economic circulation. These gatherings drive demand for materials used in merchandise production, promote the exchange of fan-made goods across regions, and support surrounding businesses, thereby forming a modest yet vibrant micro-economy.

In contrast to DIY-driven practices, there also exist derivative content initiatives that demonstrate different forms of application and community impact. One notable example involves the Thai K-pop fandom's response to the downturn in tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the number of international visitors to Bangkok sharply declined, fans organized support initiatives for local *tuk-tuk* (three-wheeled taxi) drivers.

To commemorate their favorite idols' birthdays or album release dates, fans independently designed and funded advertisement banners featuring idol images and celebratory messages, which were then displayed on *tuk-tuk* vehicles. They voluntarily raised funds to pay advertising fees directly to the drivers, resulting in an estimated additional monthly income of around USD 19 per driver. Moreover, these idol-themed advertisements transformed *tuk-tuks* into mobile "photo spots" for domestic and returning tourists, subsequently increasing ridership (Bryant).

This case exemplifies how derivative content—fan-produced advertisements leveraging star images—can contribute not only to fandom expression but also to generating tangible economic benefits for local small businesses and self-employed individuals.

Meanwhile, the realization of economic value through halo content demonstrates a more creative pathway, often hinting at the potential for new forms of industrialization. From the perspective of post-coding, such practices suggest layered and multivalent interpretations. It is important to note, however, that the diffusion of halo content cannot always be attributed to deliberate intention or strategic planning. Rather, it often emerges as a contingent discovery within the fluid dynamics of taste cultures, unfolding in unpredictable directions.

As previously mentioned, K-pop cover dance culture has gained global traction via social media. A striking example is the Vietnamese group ST.319, founded in Hanoi in 2011. In just two years, it amassed over 18 million *YouTube* views, achieving popularity comparable to mainstream celebrities (ST.319 Entertainment). Capitalizing on this success, member Min debuted as a singer, and the group founded its own entertainment agency. The agency later launched the boy band MONSTER, with several members pursuing solo careers. ST.319 gradually transformed into a talent incubator, producing both male and female artists who entered the entertainment industry (Adrian).

While the group's musical and performance styles are clearly grounded in the aesthetics of K-pop, they also incorporate distinctive elements of V-pop. The ten-year trajectory of ST.319 thus represents a development that extends beyond the conventional reproduction of derivative content for economic gain. It serves as a compelling case for how the economic practices of performative fandom can evolve into full-scale cultural production, suggesting the expansive potential of fan-driven entrepreneurial engagement.

There are also individualized cases of halo content production. Lenin Tamayo, a Peruvian musician, began as an ordinary K-pop fan but eventually developed a unique musical genre by creatively merging his own cultural identity with K-pop

(L E N I N). Having experienced bullying in his youth due to his appearance and ethnic background, Tamayo found solace and a stable sense of self through K-pop. He later combined K-pop's musical styles, performances, and visual aesthetics with Quechua language and traditional Andean cultural elements to create a distinctive genre called Q-pop (Quechua pop). In 2023, he released five digital singles and a debut album titled *Amaru*, gaining significant popularity among younger audiences on social media platforms such as *TikTok*, where his content has garnered over 4.4 million likes (Briceño).

His work demonstrates the potential for K-pop to intersect with marginalized local elements in global popular music markets, leading to new trends. As K-pop serves as a foundational influence and material resource for his music, Tamayo's creative endeavor may be understood as a form of halo content.

Another notable example of halo content is found in the field of K-beauty. In Indonesia, the emergence of the "Korean waved hijab" style has extended beyond mere aesthetic preference to exert a tangible influence on the local beauty and fashion industries. This style, inspired by the appearance of K-pop idols and K-drama actors, incorporates elements of Korean makeup and fashion into a modern hijab style adopted by Indonesian Muslim women.

The impact of Korean popular culture has led not only to changes in hijab styles, colors, and materials but also to increased demand for related accessories and Korean-style cosmetic products. Consequently, a proliferation of online content related to the Korean waved hijab has appeared on platforms such as *YouTube* and various social media (Hijab Tutorial).

This cultural phenomenon has been linked to Indonesia's national development strategy, "Making Indonesia 4.0," particularly within the textile and fashion sectors, where it has generated new forms of productivity and economic value (Taufik et al. 52). In this sense, Korean popular culture has transcended passive consumption to actively stimulate innovation in hijab fashion and the cosmetics market, thereby facilitating broader economic production.

The economic practices discussed in this section differ significantly from officially sanctioned profit-making activities conducted by states or corporations. Fan-driven economic reproduction does not generally follow institutionally authorized procedures, nor does it operate within a stable or formalized market framework. Nevertheless, the content produced by fandom communities and individual creators serves as an informal yet powerful force for promotion and market expansion, contributing substantially to the sustainability and global diffusion of the Korean Wave.

These cases demonstrate how diverse and often anonymous fans, each possessing unique identities, actively expand the infrastructure of Hallyu and emerge as creative cultural producers through engagement with K-content. Moreover, such practices can be interpreted as examples of “post-coding,” in which reconfigured signs and meanings—generated outside traditional industrial systems—form new symbolic orders and become capitalized through fandom agency. In this way, K-content has acquired unexpected cultural influence and industrial potential through processes that lie beyond conventional institutional control.

### CONCLUSION: RETHINKING THE SENDERS OF HALLYU CULTURE

This study began with the recognition that the phenomenon of multiple modernities, which became visible in the late twentieth century, can also be observed within the cultural industries and practices of popular culture consumption. In particular, it posits that Hallyu constitutes a pluralistic and heterogeneous form of counter- or alternative flow within the broader context of global popular culture’s decentering.

From this perspective, the study conceptualizes global Hallyu fandom as a form of “digital neo-tribe,” and interprets its fluid and flexible characteristics through the lens of “liquidity.” These fan communities, operating across digital environments and platforms, transcend traditional identity categories—such as nation, race, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, and sexuality—while engaging in affective bonding and performative cultural practices.

This study employed the conceptual frameworks of *trans-bricolage* and *post-coding* as analytical tools to categorize and interpret the performative practices of global Hallyu fandom. Grounded in these frameworks, the research classified fan practices into two overarching types: cultural practices and economic practices.

Cultural practices involve the processes through which fans quote or comment on, reference or borrow, or transform or modify the content, form, and messages of original K-content. These modes of engagement deconstruct and reconfigure the original meaning structures in creative and context-sensitive ways.

Economic practices, by contrast, manifest in two distinct forms. First, some fans generate direct revenue by producing and selling *derivative content* based on original K-content. Second, others realize value more indirectly by creating and circulating *halo content*—cultural products that acquire economic significance through their associative proximity to K-content. These two modalities illustrate

both intentional and emergent strategies of recontextualization that contribute to the broader cultural and economic impact of Hallyu fandom.

These findings affirm that global Hallyu fans actively engage in the decontextualization and recontextualization of original K-content through the sensory and cultural logic of their own local contexts. In doing so, they function as creative cultural producers who construct new symbolic orders. Persistently fluid in form and affiliation, these fans have continued to generate new modes of solidarity and participation. It is no exaggeration to suggest that it is through such autonomous and agentive practices that Hallyu has secured its position as a “third culture” within the global popular culture landscape.

Therefore, the view of global K-pop fans as mere recipients of the Korean Wave must be revised. This study demonstrates that Hallyu culture is fluidly produced and reshaped within a transnational network of diverse cultural agents. The global fandom-led processes of decontextualizing and recontextualizing K-content highlight the dynamic tensions of Hallyu’s cultural shifts. Global K-pop fans must thus be seen not as passive consumers, but as *flexible co-creators* of Hallyu. This recognition also encourages Koreans to reflect critically and engage as *reciprocal re-broadcasters* of the Korean Wave.

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