

# A Qualitative Case Study in Korean Language Learning Motivations of Filipino Hallyu Fans

Lance Isaac D. Leon<sup>1</sup>, Adrienne Clarisse Caugma<sup>2</sup>, Jeconiah Dreisbach<sup>3\*</sup>

*1 De La Salle University Integrated School  
2401 Taft Ave., Manila 1004, THE PHILIPPINES*

*2 Caloocan City Science High School  
P. Sevilla St. Cor. 10th Avenue, West Grace Park, Caloocan 1400, THE PHILIPPINES*

*3 Department of Filipino, De La Salle University  
2401 Taft Ave., Manila 1004, THE PHILIPPINES*

\*Corresponding Author: [jeconiah.dreisbach@dlsu.edu.ph](mailto:jeconiah.dreisbach@dlsu.edu.ph)

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explores the influence of Hallyu, or South Korean popular culture, on the indirect acquisition of the Korean language among Filipino fans. Through a focus group discussion, the study examines participants' motivations, learning behaviors, and perceptions of Korean language acquisition through media consumption. Findings reveal that repeated exposure to Korean dramas, K-pop, and other cultural products facilitates passive learning, enabling participants to recognize vocabulary, sentence structures, and pronunciation patterns. While some learners actively pursue formal instruction, most rely on informal methods such as peer discussions, digital resources, and incidental exposure. The study also highlights the role of social interactions and personal motivations in sustaining interest in language learning. While participants acknowledge their familiarity with Korean, most do not consider their skills sufficient for practical communication. The study suggests that integrating engaging media-based learning strategies into formal education could enhance language acquisition among young Korean language learners. Future research should explore long-term learning outcomes and intercultural influences of Hallyu in the Philippines.

## 1. Introduction

The widespread presence of Korean culture in the Philippines is undeniable. From the dominance of K-dramas on television to the integration of Korean beauty products into mainstream consumer markets, the "Hallyu wave" has made an indelible mark on Filipino culture. The extent of its influence raises the question of whether Korean elements have already been seamlessly incorporated into the Filipino cultural identity.

Hallyu, a term derived from Chinese characters meaning "Korean wave," refers to the global proliferation of South Korean culture, particularly through entertainment, cuisine, and fashion. This phenomenon has not only reshaped cultural consumption in the Philippines but has also contributed to the linguistic landscape of the nation.

## 1.1 The Globalization of South Korean Popular Culture

Jin and Yoon (2018) trace the origins of Hallyu to a 1999 music CD compilation by the South Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which was distributed across neighboring countries under the label "Korean Pop Music." The Chinese version of this compilation was specifically titled "Hallyu - Song from Korea." Around the same period, Korean television dramas began to attract significant audiences, first in China, Taiwan, and Japan before spreading to other Southeast Asian nations, including the Philippines.

Chua and Iwabuchi (2008) were among the first scholars to critically examine the rise of Korean pop culture in the early 21st century, branding it as the "Korean Wave." The 2012 global hit "Gangnam Style" by Psy further propelled Korean pop culture beyond its regional strongholds, reaching unprecedented international popularity through social media platforms.

## 1.2 The Korean Wave in the Philippines

In the Philippines, the influence of Hallyu has taken root in various facets of local pop culture. According to Igno and Cenidoza (2016), the introduction of Korean entertainment to Filipino audiences followed a pattern similar to that observed in Taiwan and Japan, where dubbed Korean dramas—referred to as "Koreanovelas"—became a television staple. The success of these dramas is largely attributed to their emotionally engaging and unique storylines, which differed from the typical narratives of homegrown Filipino teleseryes.

The widespread appeal of Korean aesthetics and narratives also led to Filipino adaptations of K-drama classics, a trend termed "Hanoyvela" (Vito-Cruz, 2018). Additionally, the presence of Korean expatriates in the Philippines facilitated the emergence of Korean personalities in local entertainment, including Sandara Park, Grace Lee, and Ryan Bang.

By the 2010s, the Hallyu phenomenon had given rise to organized fan communities—often called "stans"—which predominantly comprised Millennials and Generation Z. The rise of streaming services further accelerated the consumption of Korean media, extending the influence of Hallyu to domains such as cuisine, cosmetics, and cinema. Notably, Bong Joon Ho's "Parasite" and the global musical success of BTS and Blackpink marked the Korean wave's penetration into Western markets.

Igno and Cenidoza (2018) argue that Hallyu's endurance and expansion distinguish it from past cultural trends, such as the Mexican telenovela boom and the earlier Japanese pop influence. They utilize Joseph S. Nye's concept of "soft power" to explain how South Korea has leveraged its entertainment industry as a tool for cultural diplomacy and global influence.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Trends in Hanguk Learning in the Philippines

WordTips (2021) analyzed global search trends and identified Korean as the most sought-after language for study in the Philippines. This finding aligns with research by Bae and Igno (2012), who documented a growing interest in Korean as a foreign language (KFL) within top Philippine universities. The increasing demand for KFL courses led to partnerships for importing South Korean instructors and training local Filipino educators.

Bae and Igno's (2012) evaluation found that existing KFL curricula were generally practical and effective, with some educators adopting bilingual instruction to accommodate Filipino students. However, a monolingual approach was also observed, aimed at fostering immersive language acquisition.

Outside formal education, language learning has been significantly facilitated by digital resources. Hiromi (2021) conducted a case study on a Filipino migrant worker who successfully self-learned Korean through online video content, demonstrating that digital media enables autonomous language learning and contextual application.

### 2.2 Comparisons Between Hanguk-eo and Filipino

Linguistically, Korean and Filipino belong to distinct language families: Korean is often classified as a language isolate, while Filipino is part of the Austronesian family. Both languages share an agglutinative structure and utilize alphabetic writing systems. Table 1 presents these differences.

Despite their differences, both languages have absorbed foreign lexical influences. For instance, words like "고무 (gomu)" in Korean and "goma" in Filipino both originate from Latin, despite their intermediary sources being Japanese and Spanish, respectively. Similarly, "티켓 (tiket)" in Korean and "tiket" in Filipino share English roots, while "센터 (senteo)" and "sentro" both trace back to Latin "centrum".

**Table 1:** *Notable Comparisons Between Korean and Filipino Language*

	Korean	Filipino
Language Family	Koreanic; isolate but probably of Altaic origin	Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian)
Script	Hangul 40-character alphabet	Latin-based 28 character alphabet Baybayin (archaic)
Grammar	Agglutinative; S-O-V	Agglutinative; verb-initial
Lexicon	Native Korean (Polysyllabic morphemes) Sino-Korean (Monosyllabic morphemes) Phoneticized Japanese Loanwords English Loanwords	Native Austronesian Spanish loanwords Indo, & Japanese loanwords Chinese loanwords (predominantly Hokkien and Cantonese) Taglish
Major Dialects	Hanguryeo (South Korean) Chong-son mal (North Korea) Jejun-mal (Jeju language)	Northern Tagalog (Bulacan dialect) Central Tagalog (Manila dialect) Southern Tagalog (Batangas dialect) Marinduque Tagalog

### 2.3 Second Language Learning vs Acquisition

Krashen's (1983) natural approach differentiates between language learning and language acquisition. Learning involves conscious knowledge of grammatical rules, while acquisition is a subconscious process shaped by real-world interactions.

Meniado (2019) examined second-language acquisition among Filipino migrant workers and found that immersive experiences significantly enhance language proficiency. The study also noted that strong motivation and support from native speakers facilitate faster acquisition, whereas older age and limited necessity for the language in daily life slow the learning process.

### 2.4 Incidental Lexical/Vocabulary Acquisition

Incidental learning occurs through passive exposure to language in media and social settings (Ramos, 2014). Several studies have explored this phenomenon in various linguistic contexts. Letola et al. (2019) examined English speakers acquiring Italian vocabulary through subtitled films, while Alsubaie et al. (2020) investigated how Bangladeshi ESL learners acquired Japanese words through anime subtitles. Similar trends were observed among Arabic speakers learning Japanese (Alsubaie & Alabbad, 2020) and Indonesian learners exposed to Japanese media (Karimah et al., 2019).

Hussein (2019) highlighted how participation in multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) also facilitates incidental vocabulary acquisition. Such findings suggest that immersion in culturally rich environments accelerates lexical retention.

Additional discussions on the socio-political implications of the Hallyu wave in the Philippines can further elaborate on the transformation of pop culture. The dynamics of Filipino-Korean interactions, particularly in business, education, and everyday encounters, may also provide deeper insights into the influence of South Korean culture. Analyzing the effects of Hallyu on consumer behavior, fashion choices, and dining preferences can further solidify the understanding of this phenomenon. Lastly, discussing the evolving nature of language adaptation in the Philippines due to prolonged exposure to Korean media can demonstrate the linguistic impact of Hallyu beyond superficial trends.

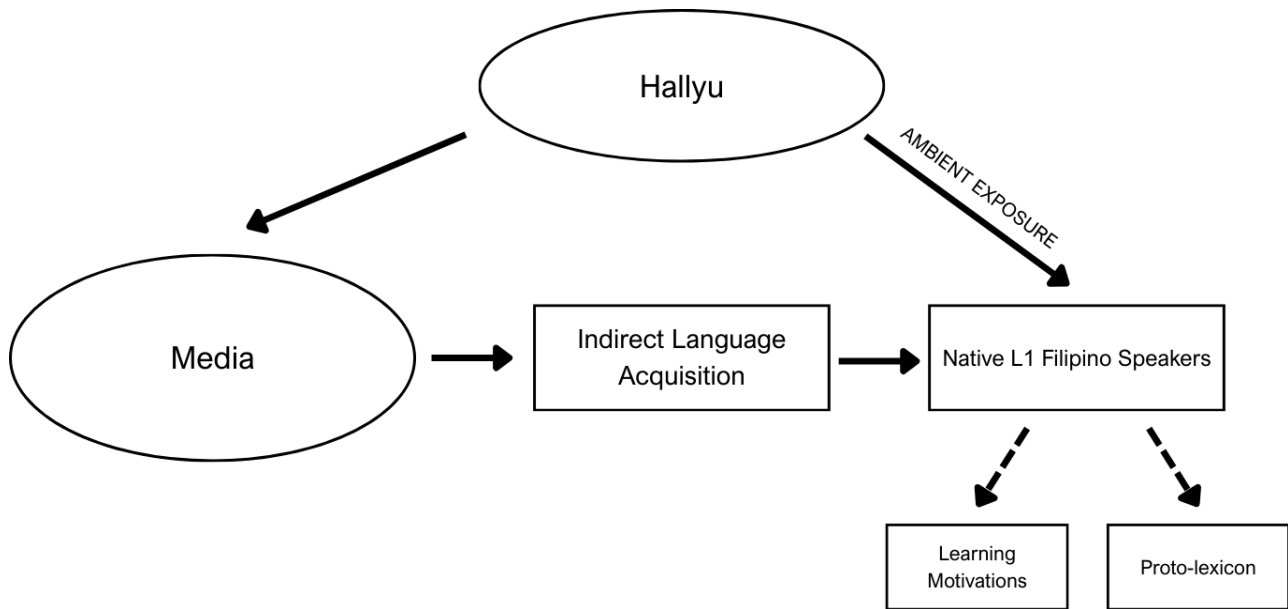
## 3. Statement of the Problem

This study produced a conceptual framework of indirect lexical acquisition through ambient exposure based on literature review. Additionally, learning motivations in the Korean Language by Filipino speakers were qualitatively inquired through a focus group discussion.

Specifically, the following themes were the subject of inquiry:

1. Interests in consuming media
2. Indirect Korean language learning
3. Korean language learning motivations
4. Collective Korean language learning with peers
5. Influence of Korean popular culture on language learning
6. Interest in the Korean Language Proficiency Test (TOPIK)
7. Overall viewpoint on Korean popular culture and language learning

#### 4. Conceptual Framework



**Fig. 1** Framework for Indirect Lexical Acquisition of Korean in Native L1 Tagalog Speakers through Hallyu  
*Media*

The framework was conceptualized on the basis that Hallyu affects the acquisition of vocabulary in L1 Filipino speakers. Hallyu infiltrates media and ambient exposure exposes the native to the Korean language, subsequently leading to the development of learning motivations and a possible proto-lexicon.

#### 5.0 Methodology

A small focus group discussion was conducted among seven (7) young Korean media enthusiasts, ages 18 to 22, to gauge their engagement with Korean popular culture and its influence on their language learning experiences. Purposive sampling was used to gather participants, all of whom are L1 Filipino speakers. Detailed information on the demographic of the participants are presented on Table 2.

**Table 2** Demographic Profile of Focus Group Participants

	Frequency (n=7)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	3	42.9%
Female	4	57.1%

Highest Educational Attainment		
Secondary School	2	28.6%
Diploma	3	42.9%
Undergraduate	1	14.3%
Bachelor's Degree	1	14.3%
Average Household Income Per Month		
Less than PHP 10,481	2	28.6%
PHP 20,692 - 41,924	3	42.9%
PHP 41,924 - 73,367	1	14.3%
PHP 209,620 and above	1	14.3%

\*1 USD = PHP 56.34 \*\*1 MYR = 12.87 PHP (As of 25 April 2025)

The study employed open-ended questions that revolved around several key themes, including interests in consuming media, indirect Korean language learning, motivations for learning Korean, collective language learning with peers, the influence of Korean popular culture on language acquisition, interest in the Korean Language Proficiency Test (TOPIK), and overall perceptions of Korean culture and language learning. Additionally, the group interview was conducted using a virtual video conference platform, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity for participants. The collected responses were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights within the data.

Thematic analysis was deemed the most suitable method for analyzing the focus group data due to its ability to identify, analyze, and report patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Unlike other qualitative methods, thematic analysis provides flexibility in examining meanings and experiences, allowing researchers to delve into both explicit content and underlying narratives (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Since this study aimed to understand participants' subjective experiences and perspectives regarding Korean language learning through popular culture, thematic analysis offered an effective way to structure and interpret complex qualitative responses.

Thematic analysis is not bound to a rigid theoretical framework, allowing researchers to interpret data in a way that aligns with the research objectives (Clarke & Braun, 2013). In the case of this study, responses from the focus group varied in depth and detail, requiring an analytical approach that could accommodate diverse expressions and viewpoints. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of key themes while preserving the richness of participants' narratives.

By analyzing the transcribed data, thematic analysis facilitated the identification of patterns across participants' responses (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). For instance, many participants may have expressed similar motivations for learning Korean, such as a desire to understand K-dramas or K-pop lyrics without subtitles. Identifying such patterns helped in understanding collective learning behaviors and cultural influences.

Since the focus group discussion included open-ended questions, responses were varied and personalized. Thematic analysis allowed the exploration of individual perspectives, capturing both shared and unique experiences. This approach was particularly useful in understanding how Korean media consumption shaped different learning paths among Tagalog-speaking participants.

Conducting focus group discussions via virtual platforms presents unique challenges, such as variations in communication styles and potential technical issues. Thematic analysis provided a structured way to organize and interpret data collected in an online setting, ensuring that key themes were systematically examined despite any limitations of virtual communication (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019).

## 6.0 Results and Discussion

### 6.1 Interests in Consuming Media

Most participants started getting into Korean pop culture (k-drama, k-pop, etc.) after the boom of the Korean wave post-2015 with idol groups like Blackpink and Twice. One significant note is that a lot reported that their interest took a k-drama to k-pop route. Furthermore, production value was most accredited to their interest in the consumption of Korean media in general as well as the fresh alternative it offers from the usual Western foreign media available to the Philippines, in addition to local productions.

“I do have the same sentiments because we know that the Philippines is a country with a colonial society especially with the influence of the west after their [colonization] so k-entertainment in general is like a source of fresh air for us Filipinos to consume. That’s what makes the entertainment special because it’s different from what we have been used to.” (Participant 3, Female, 18)

Participants’ engagement with Korean media, including K-dramas, K-pop, and variety shows, significantly influenced their exposure to the Korean language. The analysis highlighted that repeated exposure to Korean audio-visual content led to passive language learning and familiarity with common phrases and expressions.

## 6.2 Indirect Korean Language Learning

Participants considered studying the Korean language but did not continue the daunting task. Those who were informally studying the language claim that they were able to pick basic phrases and interjections from K-drama. Language apps and online videos were most popular for those informally studying the Korean language. However, among the participants, only two claim to have had casual conversations with a native speaker.

“What really prompted me to study Korean is K-drama. It was a big help because there were conversations [as well as] YouTube videos. I also read Korean websites randomly.” (Participant 5, 21)

Korean language learning was both incidental and intentional. While initially engaging with Korean content for entertainment purposes, they gradually began recognizing vocabulary, sentence structures, and pronunciation patterns. This aligns with studies showing that media exposure plays a critical role in second language acquisition (Rodgers & Webb, 2020).

## 6.3 Korean Language Learning Motivations

The ability to engage with native speakers was the most listed benefit of learning the Korean language. The participants agree that learning any foreign language is beneficial as it can be a great asset to show off, especially in their personal resumes. Learning the Korean language specifically will make it easier to consume the content but not very important in doing so.

“Learning any language in general is really beneficial since in the instance that you actually get to converse with the actual native from a certain country, you could have actual conversation — just converse your thoughts in a free manner.” (Participant 1, Female, 20)

Thematic analysis revealed that motivations varied among participants. Some were driven by personal interest, while others sought practical benefits such as enhancing their career prospects or planning travel to South Korea. These findings resonate with the motivational theories in language learning, such as Gardner’s (1985) integrative and instrumental motivation framework.

## 6.4 Collective Korean Language Learning with Peers

All the participants have friends who consume some form of Korean pop culture. They prefer to learn with their peers. One participant is part of an organization of fellow Korean language learners and enthusiasts.

“Yeah, I have few friends who like kpop and listen to kpop. I have one friend who is very loyal in his [series]. He updates his Twitter account everyday per episode, and ,yeah, online friends too.” (Participant 3, Female, 18)

Respondents indicated that their language learning journey was reinforced by peer interactions. Learning Korean in social settings, such as through fan communities or language exchange groups, contributed to motivation and retention. Studies suggest that social interaction enhances language learning outcomes (Swain, 2000).

## 6.5 Influence of Korean Popular Culture on Language Learning

While participants offered no concrete, explicit assumptions about the question, it was unanimously agreed among participants studying the language that Korean media must have had some extended degree of motivation for them to consider studying the language.

The analysis underscored the role of Korean popular culture as an informal yet powerful educational tool. K-pop lyrics, variety show subtitles, and social media interactions with Korean content creators helped participants acquire language skills organically.

## 6.6 Interest in the Korean Language Proficiency Test (TOPIK)

One participant offered an explicit number of around 5 to 7 hours in a day, with participants in the same room agreeing that their consumption frequency is also around the number. A binge-watching behavior was reported by most participants—as expected from the general easier access to content that streaming platforms offer these days. The data suggested that while casual learners might not prioritize standardized testing, those with academic or professional aspirations viewed certification as beneficial. This finding aligns with research indicating that standardized testing can serve as both a motivator and a barrier in language learning (Cho & Bridgeman, 2012).

## 6.7 Overall Viewpoint on Korean Popular Culture and Language Learning

The consumption of Korean popular culture in general helps in acquiring knowledge about the Korean culture itself, as well as in grasping the Korean manner of speech and communication. If given the opportunity to go to Korea, the participants do not consider their knowledge of the Korean language to be enough for them to get by for their daily living and everyday needs.

“I think initially when you discover a new culture, it’s through their creative output like their art, music, all of that. When it comes to these said avenues, it has pieces of their culture in it. Most of the time they show their culture, traditions, phrases that are easy to remember, and manner of speech as well, sometimes that you can piece from kdrama or manhwa and k-idols.” (Participant 7, 22, Male)

The general consensus among participants was that Korean popular culture serves as an engaging and effective gateway to language learning. Many viewed their learning process as enjoyable and low-pressure, contrasting with traditional classroom-based methods. This aligns with contemporary research suggesting that enjoyable and immersive learning experiences enhance language acquisition (Krashen, 1982).

## 7.0 Conclusions & Recommendations

This study highlights the significant influence of Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, on the language learning behaviors of Filipino learners. Korean media—such as K-dramas, K-pop, and variety shows—serves as a powerful tool for incidental language acquisition through exposure and engagement. Participants in focus group discussions showed passive learning of Korean phrases, sentence structures, and pronunciation, even without formal instruction. While some pursued structured learning through classes or apps, most relied on informal methods motivated by personal interest or social influence.

Learners were driven by varied motivations: some wanted to understand Korean content without subtitles, while others saw language proficiency as beneficial for academic or career goals. Peer interaction and community engagement further encouraged language learning, emphasizing the social aspect of acquiring a new language. Despite frequent exposure, most participants felt their language skills were insufficient for practical communication, highlighting the gap between recognition and application, and the need for formal instruction.

The study also explored views on the Korean Language Proficiency Test (TOPIK). Casual learners didn’t prioritize certification, but those with academic or professional goals valued it for its role in validating language skills. These findings suggest that Korean popular culture acts as an engaging entry point into language learning, making it both enjoyable and culturally enriching. To maximize this potential, educational institutions might develop curricula that blend traditional instruction with media-based content. As Hallyu continues to grow, further research is needed to assess its long-term impact on language learning and intercultural exchange.

This study reinforces the idea that language acquisition is a dynamic, multifaceted process influenced by both formal education and cultural engagement. The continued rise of Hallyu in the Philippines suggests that the interplay between entertainment, social interaction, and language learning will remain an evolving area of study, shaping the linguistic landscape of Filipino learners in the years to come.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

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