



Review

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## HALLYU FANDOMS IN KAZAKHSTAN: WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

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**Abstract.** The global Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) has transcended regional boundaries and reached Central Asia, where Kazakhstan represents one of its most dynamic reception spaces. While scholarly discussions of Hallyu have been abundant in East and Southeast Asia, the phenomenon's diffusion, localization, and fandom formation in the Kazakh context remain under-investigated. This article presents a qualitative systematic review of academic and semi-academic studies published between 2014 and 2025 (n=17) that examine the reception, fandom practices, and socio-cultural implications of Hallyu in Kazakhstan. The review synthesizes national and foreign-affiliated scholarship, classifies research by empirical versus secondary orientation, and identifies major thematic clusters such as soft power, identity formation, gender representations, and Q-pop glocalization. Findings reveal that most studies, especially by Kazakh researchers, rely on small-scale surveys or descriptive analyses, with limited methodological depth. Most narratives focus primarily on the emotional ambivalence of Hallyu's influence on Kazakh youth and view fans as consumers of South Korean soft power. The paper concludes by outlining methodological weaknesses, highlighting the need for national-scale, longitudinal, digital-ethnographic, and comparative approaches, and situating Kazakhstan within global fandom scholarship.

**Keywords:** *Hallyu*; K-pop; fandom; popular culture; soft power; Q-pop; cultural globalization; qualitative review; glocalization

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## ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ХАЛЛЮ ФЭНДОМДАРЫ: ЗЕРТТЕУЛЕРДЕН НЕНІ АҢҒАРУҒА БОЛАДЫ

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## ФЭНДОМЫ ХАЛЛЮ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ: ЧТО ПОКАЗЫВАЮТ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

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**Аңдатпа.** Жаһандық корей толқыны (Халлю) аймақтық шекаралардан асып, Орталық Азияға да жетіп, Қазақстан оның ең белсенді қабылдау кеңістіктерінің біріне айналды. Халлю феномені жөніндегі ғылыми талқылаулар Шығыс және Оңтүстік-Шығыс Азияда кең тарағанымен, бұл құбылыстың еліміздің контекстіндегі таралуы, локализациясы және фэндомның қалыптасуы әлі де жеткілікті зерттелмеген. Аталмыш мақала 2014-2025 жылдар аралығында жарияланған (n=17) академиялық және жартылай академиялық еңбектерге сапалық жүйелі шолу (QSLR) әдісімен талдау жасауға бағытталған. Зерттеу Халлюды қабылдау, фэндом тәжірибелері мен оның әлеуметтік-мәдени салдарын қарастырады. Отандық және шетелдік зерттеулерді біріктіріп, жұмсақ күш, мәдени кімдік, гендерлік репрезентациялар және Q-рор феноменінің глокализациясы сынды негізгі тақырыптық бағыттарды айқындайды. Қазақстандағы Халлю фантомдарын зерделеу жұмыстары әсіресе отандық зерттеушілер тарапынан әдістемелік тұрғыда шағын ауқымды қамтитын сауалнамалар мен сипаттамалық талдаулармен шектелген. Зерттеу нарративтерінің көбі Халлюдың қазақстандық жастар арасында эмоциялық кері ықпалы мен фанаттардың оңтүстік корейлік жұмсақ күштің тұтынушысы ретінде қызмет ететініне ғана назар аударды. Мақала ұлттық ауқымды қамтитын, ұзақмерзімді, цифрлық-этнографиялық және салыстырмалы тәсілдерді қолданудың маңыздылығын атап өтіп, Қазақстанды жаһандық фэндом зерттеулерінің ғылыми өрінісіне орнықтыру қажеттілігіне тоқталады.

**Түйін сөздер:** Халлю; К-поп; фэндом; бұқаралық мәдениет; жұмсақ күш; Q-поп; мәдени жаһандану; сапалық шолу; глокализация

**Аннотация.** Глобальная корейская волна (Халлю) вышла за пределы своего регионального происхождения и достигла Центральной Азии, где Казахстан стал одним из наиболее активных пространств её восприятия. Несмотря на большое количество исследований по Халлю в Восточной и Юго-Восточной Азии, её распространение, локализация и формирование фэндомов в казахском контексте остаются недостаточно изученными. Настоящая статья представляет качественный систематический обзор (QSLR) академических и полуакадемических работ, опубликованных в 2014-2025 годах (n=17), посвящённых восприятию, фанатским практикам и социокультурным последствиям Халлю в Казахстане. В обзоре синтезированы отечественные и зарубежные исследования, проведена классификация по эмпирической и теоретической направленности, а также выделены основные тематические кластеры такие как мягкая сила, формирование идентичности, гендерные репрезентации и глокализация феномена Q-поп. Результаты показывают, что большинство исследований, в частности, выполненных казахстанскими авторами, основываются на маломасштабных опросах или описательных анализах и характеризуются ограниченной методологической глубиной. Большинство исследовательских нарративов сосредоточены преимущественно на эмоциональной амбивалентности влияния Халлю на казахстанскую молодежь и рассматривают фанатов только в качестве потребителей южнокорейской мягкой силы. В заключение отмечаются методологические ограничения и подчеркивается необходимость лонгитюдных, диджитал этнографических и сравнительных исследований в общенациональном масштабе, направленных на позиционирование Казахстана в поле глобальных исследований фэндомов.

**Ключевые слова:** Hallyu; К-рор; фэндом; массовая культура; мягкая сила; Q-рор; культурная глобализация; качественный обзор; глокализация

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, the global expansion of the Korean Wave or Hallyu has reshaped the cultural geography of Asia and beyond. Originating in South Korea's post-1997 cultural policy strategy to promote its creative industries and cultural content, Hallyu has become a multi-layered cultural and economic phenomenon encompassing popular music (*K-pop*), dramas (*K-drama*), beauty and fashion industries (*K-beauty*), and Korean cuisine (*K-food*). Its remarkable diffusion has turned South Korea into a global cultural powerhouse, influencing perceptions, lifestyles, and identities across continents.

In recent decades, Hallyu has transformed from a media trend into a structured field of academic inquiry often referred to as Hallyu Studies (한류학, Hallyuhak). Dozens of doctoral dissertations and hundreds of scholarly articles have been produced, and dedicated research centers, chairs at universities have been established not only in Korea, but also in the United States and Europe.

In the Kazakh academic context, one of the leading pioneers of Korean Studies, German Kim, observed as early as 2012 in the *Bulletin of Korean Studies in Central Asia* that "Russian-language historiography of the Korean Wave has not yet produced any substantial academic works, even at the level of empirical or descriptive articles. The Korean Wave has not yet attracted the attention of researchers in Russia and Central Asia." (Kim, 2012). Building on Kim's observation after thirteen years, this study hypothesizes that even within Kazakhstan's academic scholarship, regardless of whether it is written in Russian, Kazakh, or English, the situation has not significantly improved, neither in terms of the quantity nor the quality of research on Hallyu.

While Hallyu's impact in East and Southeast Asia has been widely analyzed, its diffusion within Central Asia, and particularly Kazakhstan, remains a relatively unexplored field of study. Kazakhstan's hybrid cultural environment, marked by bilingualism and multiculturalism, Islamic and Turkic traditions, post-Soviet transitions, and digital youth cultures, provides a fertile ground for examining how global fandom models are localized and reinterpreted.

Existing studies reveal that the Hallyu phenomenon in Kazakhstan intertwines cultural attraction, language learning, identity transformation, and soft-power diplomacy. However, these studies remain fragmented and methodologically uneven, often published in Russian or Kazakh academic outlets with limited international visibility. There has been no systematic effort to synthesize the state of scholarship or to assess how Kazakh research relates to broader global Hallyu studies.

The present article fills this gap by conducting a qualitative systematic review (QSLR) of academic literature on Hallyu fandoms in Kazakhstan. It aims to identify the dominant theoretical and methodological approaches, map author affiliations, and situate Kazakhstan's fandom research within the transnational context of Hallyu studies.

Specifically, this review addresses the following research questions: How have Kazakh and foreign-affiliated scholars conceptualized Hallyu fandoms in Kazakhstan and their socio-cultural implications?

To address this question, the study pursues several research objectives:

1. To identify and describe the methodological and empirical patterns that characterize existing research on Hallyu fandoms in Kazakhstan.
2. To compare the scope, data, and analytical focus of Kazakh fandom studies with global Hallyu research.

By integrating local and international perspectives, this paper seeks to construct a meta-narrative of Hallyu research in Kazakhstan that reveals both the achievements and limitations of existing scholarship and outlines directions for future interdisciplinary inquiry.

## Methodology

This study employs a Qualitative Systematic Literature Review (QSLR) design, aimed at synthesizing and critically analyzing existing academic works rather than performing a statistical meta-analysis. The QSLR approach was selected because the field of Hallyu fandom studies in Kazakhstan remains emergent, fragmented across multiple disciplines, and published in three principal languages: English, Russian, and Kazakh. As Petticrew and Roberts (2006) emphasize, qualitative synthesis is particularly effective in developing conceptual clarity within underexplored areas of research, while Snyder (2019) notes that such designs are ideal for producing integrative knowledge in fields with heterogeneous methodological traditions. In this study, the QSLR model allows for a holistic, interpretive understanding of how Hallyu has been examined within Kazakhstan's academic landscape and how these approaches relate to global Hallyu scholarship.

### Corpus Selection

Given the limited and multilingual nature of existing literature, the review does not claim exhaustiveness but strives for comprehensiveness and representativeness. A systematic search was conducted across open-access academic databases and repositories, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, Project MUSE, **and the** Korean Citation Index (KCI), supplemented by targeted Google searches for conference papers and grey literature. Multilingual keyword combinations were used in English, Russian, and Kazakh, for instance, «*Hallyu fandoms in Kazakhstan*», «*K-pop fans in Kazakhstan*», «*Korean Wave in Central Asia*», and «*Korean Wave in Kazakhstan*».

Inclusion of the KCI ensured coverage of primary Korean-language academic materials relevant to Hallyu's international diffusion. One KCI-listed article, «*Socio-Economic Factors for the Spread of Hallyu in Kazakhstan*» (Jang, Nahm & Kim, 2014), was identified but excluded due to restricted access. Additionally, Korean-language articles from the KCI were translated into English, and their English versions were included in the analytical synthesis.

The final dataset consisted of seventeen peer-reviewed and semi-academic studies published between 2014 and 2025. The inclusion criteria were: (a) research explicitly focusing on Hallyu, K-pop, or Q-pop (insofar as it reflects the cultural influence of K-pop) within Kazakhstan; (b) publication in academic or semi-academic outlets (journals, conference proceedings, master or PhD theses); (c) verifiable author and institutional affiliation; and (d) relevance to themes of fandom, cultural identity, or soft power. (-) Journalistic reports, opinion essays, and policy documents lacking methodological transparency or academic referencing were excluded.

### Classification Framework

Each of the seventeen studies was classified according to three analytical dimensions:

1. Research Orientation – distinguishing *Empirical* (with original data such as surveys or interviews) from *Secondary* (conceptual or theoretical) research.
2. Author Affiliation – identifying whether the study was produced within Kazakh institutions or involved cross-national collaboration.
3. Methodological Type – categorizing studies as *Quantitative*, *Qualitative*, or *Mixed Methods*.

This multi-dimensional framework allowed for the visualization of epistemological diversity and methodological progression over time. It also facilitated a comparative reading between national and global research trajectories, particularly in terms of theoretical borrowing, methodological sophistication, and transnational collaboration.

### **Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis**

The data extraction followed a manual qualitative coding procedure inspired by NVivo logic and thematic synthesis models. Each article was analyzed for theoretical framing, research design, data type, sample characteristics, and key findings. From these coded elements, several recurring clusters emerged, representing the thematic evolution of Hallyu research in Kazakhstan.

The analysis further traced intertextuality and methodological links between Kazakh and international scholarship, identifying points of convergence (e.g., fandom as identity and community) and divergence (e.g., absence of fan labor and linguistic hybridity in Kazakh literature).

**Reflexivity.** In conducting the synthesis, reflexive awareness was maintained regarding language barriers, database accessibility, and the varying academic rigor of local publications. Moreover, as translation was involved in processing Korean sources, nuances of terminology might have undergone minor interpretive shifts. Nevertheless, triangulation through multilingual cross-checking minimized this risk.

**Ethical and Linguistic Considerations.** As a literature-based study, this research did not involve human participants and thus did not require ethical clearance. However, due attention was paid to proper citation, acknowledgment of intellectual property, and the faithful representation of ideas across languages. All translations were conducted for analytical clarity rather than stylistic adaptation, preserving the original authors' conceptual intent.

#### **Disclosure on AI Use**

The author used Artificial intelligence tools exclusively for linguistic and technical refinement, specifically for improving grammar, syntax, and clarity, using Grammarly. Additionally, the Author used the DeepL translation platform to translate Korean-language academic materials retrieved from the KCI database into English.

No AI-generated content, paraphrasing, or automated text creation was involved in the conceptualization, analysis, or interpretation of the data.

### **Results: Literature Mapping**

**Overview of the Corpus.** The body of literature includes seventeen studies published between 2014 and 2025, encompassing both Kazakhs and cross-affiliated foreign research. The corpus demonstrates a clear chronological and epistemological evolution from early descriptive analyses to more empirically and theoretically grounded investigations.

While Kazakh works remain primarily qualitative and descriptive, foreign-affiliated studies tend to employ quantitative modeling, mixed methods, or comparative regional frameworks. Nevertheless, the integration of local and international research contributes to forming a more coherent picture of Hallyu's localization in Kazakhstan.

**Early Conceptual and Soft Power-Oriented Studies (2014-2016).** The first phase of research focused primarily on Hallyu as an extension of South Korea's soft power. Among

the pioneering works, Kadirbek and Akmadi (2014) presented one of the earliest large-scale surveys ( $n \approx 1000$ , Taldykorgan city), showing that over 80% of respondents regularly watched Korean dramas and over 60% listened to K-pop, linking Hallyu to language learning and youth identity formation.

Kudaibergenova and Beisenbayeva (2016) analyzed how Korea's cultural attractiveness functioned as a diplomatic and educational tool in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet modernization discourse. Their article identified K-pop and K-drama as mediators of cultural proximity between Korea and Kazakhstan.

These early studies established the foundational «soft power-reception» paradigm, portraying Hallyu as an imported cultural force shaping new tastes and behavioral norms among youth.

**Descriptive Student-Level Research and Youth Perception (2017-2019).** A wave of student research conducted at Kazakh universities expanded the empirical basis of fandom studies. Among these, Niy (2019) and Ibrayeva et al. (2019) explored how Hallyu affects youth values, identity, and altruism through small-scale surveys (Taraz Pedagogical University  $n \approx 110$ ; Almaty city  $n \approx 116$ ). They revealed that fan communities contributed to socialization, collective identity, and language motivation, positioning K-pop fandoms as emotional micro-communities fostering social empathy.

Similarly, Myrzagaliyeva and Torebek (2019) analyzed South Korea's «soft power» expansion across Central Asia, framing Hallyu as a cultural-economic hybrid linking education, diplomacy, and consumerism.

While these works lacked theoretical sophistication, they remain crucial as the first efforts to capture fandom phenomena within Kazakhstan's youth culture context.

**Quantitative Modeling and Foreign-Affiliated Research (2018-2023).** Empirical sophistication emerged with cross-institutional collaborations. Uatay et al. (2018) developed a structural equation model analyzing relationships among «likability», «image of Hallyu», «image of Korea», and «visit intention». Their survey of Kazakh respondents ( $n \approx 253$ ) confirmed that exposure to Hallyu enhances Korea's national image and increases tourism motivation.

Bakytzhanova and Tuleshova (2023) further demonstrated that over 70% of respondents associate Korea primarily with K-pop, verifying its dominance as a soft power symbol in Kazakhstan.

Choo (2023), based on an empirical dataset from the KOFICE 2023 survey, provided comparative insight: 97.7% of Kazakh respondents were aware of Korea, and 80.9% held positive perceptions, although less than half perceived Korea as a cultural powerhouse. This indicates that emotional engagement through fandom exceeds institutional perception.

Identity Construction, Gender Reconfiguration, and Q-pop Localization (2018-2024). The intersection of fandom and identity formation has become the most productive thematic direction.

Oryn (2018) analyzed K-pop's «feminization of masculinity» in the Kazakh context using Butler's framework, Cornell's theory on masculinity and «moral panic» by Stanley Cohen, showing how young men reframe emotional expression and gender performance through Korean aesthetics. Danabayev and Park (2020) theorized Q-pop as a mirror of cultural nationalism, arguing that the genre localizes Hallyu elements, especially K-pop, while revitalizing the Kazakh language and civic identity.

**Zholamanova and Oh (2023, 2024)** expanded this argument, using mixed methods to assess Q-pop's strengths and limitations through a SWOT and glocalization model.

Together, these studies demonstrate that Kazakhstan's fandoms act as co-creators of hybrid cultural forms that merge global aesthetics with local linguistic and moral codes.

**Thematic Expansion: Cultural Identity, Hybridity, and Aesthetic Influence (2020-2025).** Suh et al. (2020) empirically examined Islamic consumers' global perspectives on Hallyu in Kazakhstan, showing that a stronger global outlook toward the Korean Wave positively influences attitudes toward Korea, Korean companies, and Korean products, ultimately increasing purchase intention.

Baidchigashyeva and Saudanbekova (2023) linked Hallyu to bilateral cultural diplomacy, emphasizing institutional actors such as the Korean Cultural Center and Sejong Institutes as soft power conduits between Kazakhstan and Korea. Both studies highlight the growing recognition of Hallyu as a dynamic cultural interface rather than a unidirectional media influence.

A notable advancement occurred with Pshenaeva (2025), whose qualitative study examined how K-pop and K-dramas reshape aesthetic ideals, body image, and lifestyle among Kazakh youth. Using Kincaid's dramatistic theory, the study demonstrated how emotional engagement with media characters leads to the internalization of Korean aesthetic norms, with young respondents aspiring to «look like K-drama heroes». Her research, based on 27 diverse participants (aged 9-78), represents the first in-depth cultural-aesthetic analysis of Hallyu's social implications in Kazakhstan.

**Comparative Korean-Language Research.** Imgazinova et al. (2016), Korean-language research, analyzed Kazakh consumers' perceptions of Korean products and Hallyu's influence on purchase intentions, identifying a strong correlation between exposure to Korean media and economic trust in Korean brands.

**Grey Literature in Educational Research: Grassroots Perspectives.** Grassroots contributions include Ospanova (2017) from Nazarbayev Intellectual School, who explored Hallyu's role in adolescents' self-development and cultural aspiration. Although methodologically limited, such projects provide early ethnographic evidence of fandom's pedagogical and motivational dimensions among younger demographics.

**Table 1. Mapping of Hallyu Research in Kazakhstan (2014-2025)**

№	Author	Year	Institutional Affiliation (Country)	Research Type / Methodological Design	Data Collection / Data Analysis
1.	Kadirbek M.A. & Akmedi M.A.	2014	Zhetysu State University (Kazakhstan)	Primary, Quantitative	Student survey / Descriptive (n≈1000, Taldykorgan)
2.	Kudaibergenova R.E. & Beisenbayeva A.B.	2016	Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Kazakhstan)	Secondary, Theoretical	Desk research on cultural diplomacy
3.	Imgazinova G., Lee Ch., & Ye D.	2016	Pukyong National Univ. (South Korea)	Primary, Quantitative	Survey (n≈128, Taldykorgan) / SPSS

4.	Ospanova A.	2017	Nazarbayev Intellectual School, Almaty (Kazakhstan)	Primary, Qualitative	Student project / reflective analysis
5.	Oryn D.	2018	Central European University (Hungary)	Primary, mixed method	In depth interview with Hallyu and Q-pop fans (n≈25, Astana, Almaty) / case study
6.	Uatay G., Reid E.L., & Lee H.Y.	2018	Kyungsung University (South Korea)	Primary, Quantitative (Model-based)	Survey (n≈200, Kazakhstan) / Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)
7.	Niy E.	2019	Taraz Pedagogical University (Kazakhstan)	Primary, Quantitative	Survey on youth perception (n≈110, Taraz Ped. Uni.) / descriptive analysis
8.	Ibraeva F., Mamutova D., & Kozhaeva A.	2019	KazUIR&WL (Kazakhstan)	Primary, Quantitative	Survey / descriptive analysis (n≈116, Almaty) / descriptive analysis
9.	Myrzagaliyeva E. & Torebek M.	2019	KazUIR&WL (Kazakhstan)	Secondary, Analytical	Desk research on cultural diplomacy
10.	Suh Y.G., An D.H., Bae I.H., & Kim J.H.	2020	Sookmyung University, Seoul National University, Hyupsung University, Kunsan National University (South Korea)	Primary, Quantitative	Survey (n≈317, Almaty) / Smart PLS 3.0
11.	Danabayev K. & Park J.	2020	Hanyang University (South Korea)	Primary, Qualitative	Two round In-depth interview with Hallyu and Q-pop fans (n1≈18, n2≈18)
12.	Baidchigashyeva D. & Saudanbekova S.	2023	Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Kazakhstan)	Secondary, Analytical	Review of bilateral cultural relations



13.	Bakytzhanova A. & Tuleshova L.	2023	L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Kazakhstan)	Primary, Quantitative	Online survey (n≈100) / descriptive analysis
14.	Choo, Young-min	2023	Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (South Korea)	Secondary, Quantitative	National-level Survey by KOFIC
15.		2023		Primary, Mixed Methods	Survey (n≈700, Astana, Almaty), In-depth interview (n≈?) / SWOT
16.	Zholamanova S. & Oh C.-J.	2024	Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (South Korea)	Primary, Quantitative	Survey with listeners of Q-pop and K-pop (n≈700, Astana, Almaty) / SPSS
17.	Pshenaeva E.	2025	T. Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts (Kazakhstan)	Primary, Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews

## Discussion

**Cross-Affiliations and Epistemic Geography.** An important observation from the corpus is the hybrid authorship structure. This hybridity reflects a de facto epistemic decolonization: Kazakh researchers gain international academic exposure, while Korean scholars incorporate Central Asia into global Hallyu geography. Such co-authorships not only enrich methodological diversity but also elevate Kazakhstan's visibility in global cultural studies discourse.

Whereas earlier Kazakhs studies viewed fandom primarily through the prism of soft power reception and youth interest in Korea, emerging mainly Kazakh-Korean scholarship (Oryn; Imgazinova et al.; Lee & Ye; Suh et al.; Danabayev & Park; Zholamanova & Oh) has begun to adopt hybrid theoretical frameworks that align with international cultural studies traditions.

This shift suggests that Kazakhstan's fandom research has started decolonizing its methodological lens. First steps from passive audience paradigms toward understanding fandom as a site of negotiation, localization, and creative agency. In this sense, the development of Q-pop and related cultural movements can be seen as evidence of glocal reflexivity where global aesthetic flows are indigenized to express national identity, language revitalization, and digital creativity.

Regarding the authors' institutional affiliations, Suh et al. (2020) represent an interdisciplinary team of South Korean scholars from four different universities, such as Sookmyung University, Seoul National University, Hyupsung University, and Kunsan National University. Their collaboration brought together expertise from business administration, art management,

tourism, and cultural studies, marking one of the first cross-disciplinary attempts to examine Hallyu's perception in Kazakhstan.

**Global Overview of Hallyu Fandom Research.** Over the past two decades, the Korean Wave (Hallyu) has evolved into a transnational cultural phenomenon, shaping fan communities and digital participatory cultures worldwide. International scholarship on Hallyu fandom shows that the Korean Wave did not spread in a single, centre to periphery direction but emerged through several regional gateways where local audiences, digital media, and Korean cultural diplomacy met.

One of the earliest non-Asian cases is Turkey. Oh and Chae (2013) demonstrated that Turkish fans built "culturally proximate spaces" through SNS, fan forums, and semi-official activities supported by Korean cultural centres. In their reading, Hallyu was accepted not only because it was fashionable but because Turkish viewers could connect it to shared historical memory, family-centred values, and to a narrative of modernity compatible with their own society. SNS worked as the real infrastructure of fandom. This mechanism, digital networks + perceived value proximity, will later be repeated in North Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Europe.

In the MENA region, several studies confirm that reception is filtered through religion and language. Elaskary (2018) shows that K-dramas became popular in Arab societies because they offered moral plots, strong family relations, and visually modern, but not sexually explicit, lifestyles; this made Hallyu look like a "safe" modernity for conservative viewers. Malik (2019) presents one of the earliest and most comprehensive studies of *Hallyu* in the Arab Gulf, focusing specifically on female Arab fans in Qatar. The study explores how these fans culturally translate Korean popular culture, particularly K-dramas and K-pop, into their daily lives and social realities. Touhami and Al-Abed Al-Haq (2017) go one step further: Algerian fans not only watch K-pop, but they speak it, mixing Korean words, English fandom terms and Arabic in online communication, which proves that fandom can generate a new sociolinguistic code. Later work from Morocco (Mellouk, 2024) and the broader North African context confirms the same pattern: Hallyu is used for identity negotiation, especially by young people who want to be cosmopolitan but still remain inside Islamic cultural frames. This is important for Kazakhstan because it shows that an Islamic or post-Soviet context is not a barrier to Hallyu; the key is whether fans can localize the content.

A second large cluster of research comes from Latin America. Lopez Rocha (2013) traces the history of Mexican fan clubs and shows that Hallyu only became stable in Mexico after fan communities began to organize events, language courses, and dance contests; fans effectively worked as informal cultural diplomats. Ko et al. (2014) compare Peru and Brazil and conclude that, in Latin America, Hallyu is less attractive because of ethnic or cultural similarity and more because it offers an emotional and gender alternative to local «macho» masculinity and to class inequalities. This Latin American material is useful for our article because it proves that Hallyu can grow in markets that are geographically far from Korea and where Korean communities are tiny, if fan labor and internet circulation are strong enough.

In East Asia, the most comprehensive account comes from China. Sun (2022) traces the evolution of K-pop reception across three technological eras, from television imports to the mobile internet age, and maps how Chinese fans developed hybrid media practices that blur the boundaries between consumption and production. Her dissertation demonstrates that K-pop fandom in China is not merely a passive audience, but an alternative creative industry built on fan labor, online organization, and identity negotiation. Moreover, Chinese K-pop idols such as

Jackson Wang embody the dual role of local celebrity and transnational cultural intermediary, reflecting how Hallyu adapts within politically restricted environments.

The global South is no longer a blind spot either. Reddy's (2024) study of South Africa, for example, documents how K-pop and K-dramas arrived through streaming platforms and then moved offline into small businesses, community projects, and cultural diplomacy events. This is very close to what Otmazgin and Lyan (2014) earlier described in Israel/Palestine: fandoms can become cultural brokers in politically sensitive regions because K-pop is seen as non-threatening and «third country» culture. Together with the MENA studies, these works suggest that Hallyu succeeds where it can be read as modern but not Western, global but not imperial.

European research adds another angle: fandom as a digital tribe in a highly mediatized, racially coded space (Chang & Park, 2019). In Sweden, Hübnette (2012; 2018) shows that post-Gangnam Style fandom is female-dominated, multi-ethnic, and often uses K-pop to escape or reverse local whiteness norms. K-pop idols offer an alternative masculinity and a safe, non-aggressive aesthetic, so the fans' motivation is not only entertainment but also symbolic resistance. In Central Europe, Hargitai et al. (2023) use a large online survey in Hungary and show that FOMO, peer pressure, and intensive media activity all increase purchase intention for Korean culture and products; fandom here is already an economic interface, not just a cultural one. French work by Chang et al. (2024) adds one more layer: French K-pop fans keep a local cultural identity but act inside transnational networks, which the authors call «transnational locality». In other words, they are global and local at the same time, exactly the situation we have observed with Q-pop listeners in Kazakhstan.

Berbiguier (2023) analyses the post-*Squid Game* debate on TikTok to show how digital platforms have become sites of *authenticity negotiation* in K-drama fandom. Using «performative commentaries», he reveals that «real fan» identity is now constructed through algorithmic visibility, linguistic competence, and affective capital, making authenticity itself a performative, rather than essential, category. Complementary to this, Berbiguier and Cho (2017) provide an important domestic perspective from Korea itself, analysing how Korean fans perceive and discipline overseas fandoms. Korean fans express intense *national satisfaction* when K-pop idols gain global acclaim. Online reactions to international success (e.g., BTS, EXO) often merge personal admiration with collective pride («our idols», «Korea's sons»). This emotional nationalism reproduces early 2000s *Hallyu triumphalism*, reflecting the state-led soft-power narrative that equates cultural export with national prestige. Fans also display particular excitement when Western celebrities engage with K-pop, interpreting it as validation of Korea's global status. Their internet ethnography shows that Korean fans experience both pride and anxiety about globalization: they celebrate Hallyu's success but also police its boundaries, reinforcing national ownership through language and digital hierarchy.

Meanwhile, Efimova (2024) examines Russian «K-poppers» as a moral and professional subculture that shows for young Russians, K-pop fandom provides both an alternative identity and vocational aspiration. Her findings bridge cultural sociology and media anthropology by demonstrating how fandom becomes a framework for lifestyle choice and career orientation, not only for cultural consumption.

Two recent strands need special mention because Kazakhstan still lacks them. First, studies on fan labor and industry logics. Proctor (2021) on BTS ARMY and Gutierrez-Jauregi et al. (2025) on social-media-driven K-pop visibility both show that fandom today is part of the value chain: fans translate, stream, vote, edit videos, and even manage brand reputation. Second, marketing-

oriented Hallyu studies such as Roh et al. (2025) for Japan confirm what Korean-language research on Kazakhstan found earlier: when national image and Hallyu exposure rise together, the intention to buy Korean products also rises. This directly resonates with the Kazakh survey by Imgazinova et al. (2016), which proved the same mechanism for Kazakh consumers.

Finally, global fandom research now increasingly looks at fans as agents of soft power, not just at Korea as a sender. Jung's U.S. dissertation (2017) is key that used a reversed ethnography with American fans. She argues that what makes Hallyu «global» is not the hybrid content itself. However, the fans attach emotions, identities, and even «we-ness» to it. This argument is parallel to what we see in Mexico, Sweden, France, and the MENA region. Once fandom becomes an emotional community, it can translate Korean soft power into local contexts without direct state mediation. That insight is important for Kazakhstan because many of our local studies still stay at the level of «Korea influences Kazakh youth», while global scholarship already speaks about co-creation, linguistic hybridization, and fan-driven diplomacy.

If we place the Kazakh Hallyu Studies against this global map, the following conclusion is clear. Internationally, Hallyu fandom studies have already moved from «consumption» to «agency», from «cultural proximity» to «digital production», and from «Asia» to «every continent». Our material on Kazakhstan is still catching up, but it fits into this trajectory, especially where it deals with Islamic audiences, gendered reception, and Q-pop glocalization.

**Comparative Perspective: Kazakhstan and Global Trends.** A comparative analysis of the two research corpora reveals clear structural and methodological differences between global Hallyu studies and those conducted in Kazakhstan. While international research from 2013 to 2025 evolved from describing cultural proximity to exploring fandom activism and digital participation, the academic trajectory dedicated to the Kazakh Hallyu fandom research has remained mostly descriptive, national in scope, and mainly focused on youth reception.

Globally, scholars moved beyond audience analysis toward multidimensional approaches that treat Hallyu as both a cultural and socio-economic system. Ethnography, phenomenology, and structural equation modeling (SEM) became dominant methodological tools.

By contrast, Kazakh studies from 2014 to 2019 relied heavily on descriptive surveys and basic statistical interpretation. They concentrated on how Korean pop culture affects young people's values, language use, and aesthetic preferences. Most of these projects were carried out within pedagogical or philological frameworks, limiting methodological diversity.

From 2017 onward, the global literature diversified significantly. Research began to examine digital fandoms as social communities, not just entertainment audiences. Scholars from Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East introduced perspectives such as «digital tribes», «fan labor», etc.

These frameworks recognize fandom as a site of creativity, organization, and activism as an area that has not yet been sufficiently developed in Kazakhstan's academic environment.

**Table 2. Summary of Comparative Insights**

Aspect	Global Studies o	Kazakh context studies
Temporal span	2013-2025	2014-2025
Dominant methods	Qualitative ethnography and PLS-SEM	Descriptive surveys and theoretical analysis
Theoretical maturity	Cross-disciplinary (sociology, psychology, media)	Emerging cultural-sociological hybrid

<b>Digital &amp; Fandom Studies</b>	Digital tribes, ARMY, FOMO, activism	Absent until 2023-2025 studies
<b>Language &amp; Linguistics</b>	Fan language (Algeria case) explored	No linguistic studies yet
<b>Soft Power &amp; Diplomacy</b>	Explicitly theorized (Nye, Castells, Jenkins)	Implicit, framed as “cultural influence

Mainly, Kazakhstan’s research trajectory still follows the first-generation Hallyu scholarship pattern as descriptive, nationally oriented, and youth-centered.

Global studies between 2017 and 2025 demonstrate methodological diversification: ethnography, SEM modeling, phenomenology, digital sociology, and fandom activism.

Joint works such as *Zholamanova & Oh* (2023) and *Danabayev & Park* (2020) begin bridging these paradigms, signaling a transitional phase toward international methodological standards.

**Thematic and Conceptual Divergence.** Global Hallyu studies treat the Korean Wave as a complex ecosystem of production, circulation, and participation. Researchers explore K-pop, K-drama, and fan labor as interconnected processes that shape cultural identity and digital modernity.

Kazakh research, in contrast, tends to isolate Hallyu within the framework of external influence. It primarily investigates whether Korean culture affects national identity, rather than how Kazakh audiences reinterpret or localize Korean content.

This difference arises partly from theoretical orientation. Global research often draws on Jenkins’ participatory culture, Castells’ network society, and Appadurai’s global flows, which recognize the agency of audiences as co-producers of meaning.

Kazakh Hallyu studies, however, rely more on Nye’s «soft power» in its state-centric sense, emphasizing cultural diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy rather than as a bottom-up form of engagement.

Thus, while global works view Hallyu as a transnational and participatory phenomenon, Kazakh research still treats it as an imported cultural trend.

**Methodological Asynchrony.** Between 2015 and 2020, when global scholars began to integrate digital ethnography, discourse analysis, and mixed methods, most Kazakh Hallyu studies remained limited to basic questionnaire-based surveys. Only after 2023 did new designs emerge that resemble global methodological standards. However, Kazakhstan still lacks longitudinal or comparative datasets that could reveal how fandom participation changes over time.

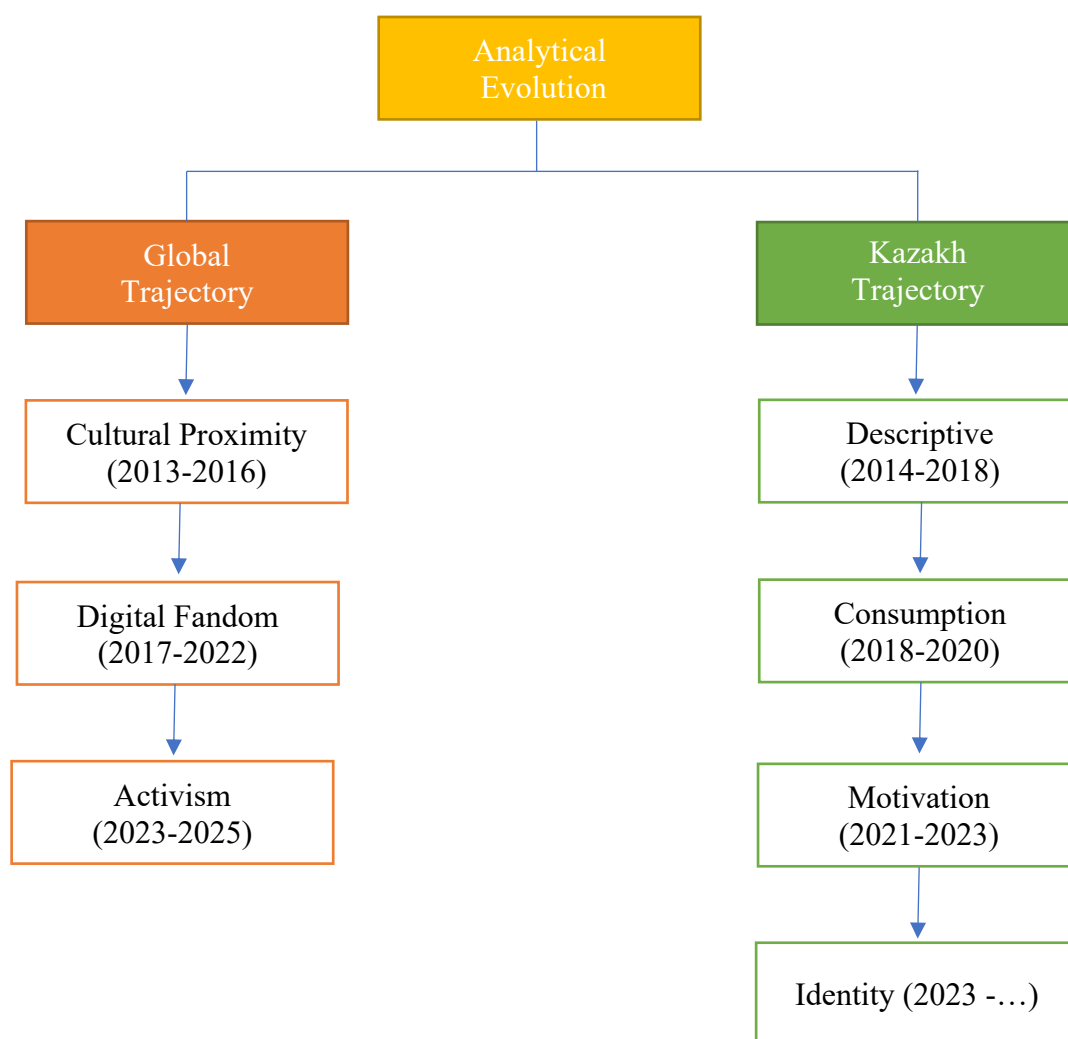
Internationally, researchers analyze social media platforms as ethnographic spaces that shape global fan interactions. In Kazakhstan, similar online environments have not yet been systematically studied. This absence narrows the analytical picture: local fandoms are visible only as consumers, not as creative or economic agents. Without incorporating digital fieldwork, the research risks reproducing a simplified narrative of passive reception.

**Institutional and Epistemic Context.** Institutional factors also contribute to these differences. Globally, Hallyu research spans a wide range of disciplines (cultural studies, sociology, communication, marketing, and psychology), creating a rich cross-disciplinary dialogue.

In Kazakhstan, the field remains confined to cultural and philological studies, often using outdated or narrow definitions of «mass culture». This institutional limitation restricts both conceptual and methodological development. The result is an epistemic lag.

Global research now explores fandom as a «laboratory of digital citizenship», connecting it to activism, gender expression, and cultural diplomacy. Kazakh works, on the other hand, tend

to frame Hallyu in moralistic or pedagogical terms: asking whether it is «useful» or «harmful» to youth. Therefore, the creative, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of fandom remain underexplored.



**Figure 1. Diverging Analytical Evolution of Hallyu Studies: Global vs Kazakh**

**Narrative Analysis.** The dominant narrative behind Kazakh research on the Korean Wave is largely protective and reactive. Hallyu is often portrayed as a foreign cultural force that must be studied, explained, and occasionally contained. Instead of analyzing fans as co-creators of transnational culture, most studies treat them as research subjects to be questioned or guided. This perspective reflects broader Islamic and (Soviet) post-Soviet patterns of cultural discourse, where external influences are viewed through the lens of moral or national defense.

A closer examination of the narrative structure within Kazakh Hallyu studies reveals several consistent gaps that distinguish them from international scholarship. One of the most visible issues is the limited recognition of fan agency. In most local publications, K-pop and K-drama enthusiasts are represented as consumers or youth audiences who merely absorb cultural influences from South Korea. Rarely are they portrayed as self-organizing cultural communities that actively produce, translate, and circulate content. Yet in the global literature, fandoms are

increasingly conceptualized as autonomous ecosystems of creativity and participation. Fans engage in subtitling, fan art production, event coordination, and social media activism, activities that transform them from passive spectators into cultural co-producers. The absence of such recognition in Kazakh research prevents scholars from understanding the social energy and creative capital embedded in local fan practices. Without acknowledging the agency of these communities, the research remains descriptive rather than analytical, focusing on «what» fans do but not on «how» or «why» they do it.

A second narrative limitation concerns the delayed adoption of the diplomatic and soft-power perspectives. Globally, Hallyu has long been analyzed as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and as a case study in nation branding. However, Kazakh research only recently began to discuss these aspects, and even then, the focus has remained external that centered on Korea's success story rather than Kazakhstan's potential to cultivate similar mechanisms of cultural influence. The analytical gaze is thus outward, examining how Korea's media exports shape perceptions of the country, but not inward, toward how Kazakhstan could leverage its own cultural production for international visibility. This absence of a reciprocal diplomatic lens suggests that the discourse on Hallyu in Kazakhstan still operates within a one-way framework of influence, where cultural power flows from Korea to Kazakhstan but not vice versa. Bridging this gap would require reimagining fandom not merely as evidence of Korea's soft power, but as a space where Kazakhstan's own cultural identity and foreign-policy potential could evolve.

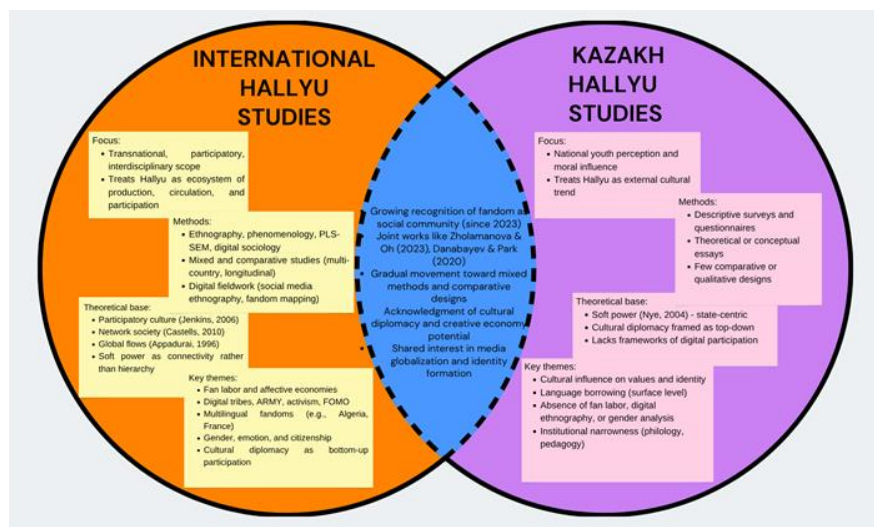
Equally underdeveloped is the analysis of fan labor and informal economies. Although the local K-pop scene clearly involves translation groups, event organizers, small merchandisers, and online content creators, no empirical research has yet mapped their scope or economic contribution. These activities are often dismissed as leisure rather than recognized as forms of unpaid labor that sustain a global entertainment economy.

In contrast, international fandom studies, particularly those in East Asia and Latin America, have treated fan work as a crucial component of the creative industries. By ignoring the economic dimension, Kazakh scholarship overlooks how fandom can intersect with entrepreneurship, digital commerce, and the emerging creative economy. Understanding this informal infrastructure is essential for linking fan practices to national strategies that aim to support youth innovation, cultural entrepreneurship, and soft-power development.

Finally, a significant gap lies in the neglect of multilingual and linguistic aspects of fandom participation. Kazakh fans navigate multiple linguistic environments simultaneously, communicating in Kazakh, Russian, English, and occasionally Korean. This multilingual hybridity is a defining feature of fandom interaction, influencing identity formation, group cohesion, and access to global fan networks. Yet Kazakh studies have not analyzed this complexity. They tend to mention lexical borrowing or the presence of foreign terms but fail to examine code-switching, language mixing, or translation practices as expressions of cultural identity. In contrast, research from Algeria, France has demonstrated that multilingual communication in fandoms operates as a marker of cosmopolitan identity and belonging. Ignoring this dimension in the Kazakh context limits the depth of sociolinguistic understanding and disconnects the analysis from broader global discussions about cultural hybridity and transnational communication.

Together, these narrative omissions illustrate a broader methodological and conceptual lag. They show that while Kazakhstan's academic community is increasingly aware of Hallyu's local relevance, it has yet to capture the complexity of fandom as a social, economic, and linguistic phenomenon. By addressing these gaps (through ethnographic engagement, economic mapping,

and multilingual analysis) future research can move beyond description and contribute substantively to global fandom studies, positioning Kazakhstan not merely as a site of cultural reception but as an active participant in shaping transnational cultural modernity.



(based on the author's own visualization created in Canva)

**Figure 2. Comparative Perspective of Hallyu Research**

The Venn diagram (Figure 2) illustrates the structural, theoretical, and methodological relationship between global and Kazakh Hallyu research. While global studies adopt cross-disciplinary and participatory frameworks emphasizing fan agency and digital engagement, Kazakh scholarship remains largely descriptive and state-oriented. As illustrated, the intersection highlights emerging similarities between international and Kazakh Hallyu studies, particularly in mixed method approaches and the focus on cultural diplomacy and identity formation.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, this systematic examination of Hallyu fandom research in Kazakhstan and worldwide reveals a dynamic tension between periphery and participation. While global fandom studies have reached maturity through interdisciplinary sophistication, Kazakhstan's field remains emergent yet rich with contextual uniqueness. Rather than perceiving this as a weakness, it should be viewed as a strategic opportunity: the chance to redefine the narrative of cultural globalization from the standpoint of Central Asia.

To move this emerging field forward, future research in Kazakhstan should adopt a more exploratory and context-sensitive approach. Rather than treating fandom as a curiosity or youth fad, scholars can approach it as a legitimate source of data, an empirical field that requires interviews, online ethnography, and participatory observation to capture its social complexity.

The analytical focus should also expand to include the economic and policy dimensions of fandom, tracing how it intersects with creative industries, informal markets, and the broader mechanisms of cultural diplomacy. Equally important is a stronger theoretical foundation that draws upon international frameworks of participatory culture, the networked society, and



affective labor, allowing Kazakh studies to converse with global debates rather than merely observe them.

Future work would also benefit from acknowledging the emotional, gendered, and digital safety aspects of fandom, recognizing it as both a psychological and social space. Finally, bridging K-pop and Q-pop within a single analytical frame could situate Kazakhstan not as a passive consumer of Korean culture but as an active node within global cultural flows.

### Limitation

This study is a qualitative review based on the analysis of publicly available academic sources and dissertations. It is therefore possible that some relevant works were not accessible through open databases and, as a result, were not included in the analysis.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

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