

The Korean Wave as a Marketing Catalyst: Gen Z Consumer Behavior toward Korean Food in Malaysia

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Abstract

The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has emerged as a global cultural phenomenon, influencing lifestyle trends and consumption patterns across Asia. In Malaysia, Gen Z consumers represent a strategic market segment whose food choices are increasingly shaped by media-driven fanaticism toward Korean entertainment. This study investigates how consumer fanaticism influences intention to consume Korean cuisine, drawing on Cultivation Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Using survey data from 523 Malaysian Gen Z respondents, the model was tested through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Findings reveal that fanaticism significantly enhances positive attitudes toward Korean food, which in turn mediates its impact on consumption intention. Normative social influence and perceived behavioral control also emerged as strong predictors of intention. These results contribute theoretically by integrating media influence with TPB to explain cross-cultural consumer behavior, and practically by offering insights for marketing management, food businesses, and policymakers. Specifically, F&B marketers can leverage celebrity endorsements, peer influence, and halal-certified accessibility to enhance market acceptance. The study highlights how cultural content consumption translates into consumer intention, providing a framework for businesses seeking to capitalize on the convergence of media, culture, and food marketing.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Fanaticism, Korean Entertainment, Food Marketing, Gen Z

Introduction

The globalization of media has transformed consumer behavior, shaping preferences beyond entertainment and into lifestyle domains such as food, fashion, and tourism. Among these, the Korean wave (Hallyu) driven by the popularity of K-pop, K-dramas, and online content has become a powerful marketing and cultural export strategy (Jin, 2016; Jeong, 2021). Food, as a symbolic and experiential products, is one of the most successful extensions of this phenomenon. Korean cuisine (Hanshik) has not only gained global recognition but has also

created new opportunities for the food and beverage (F&B) industry, tourism, and cultural branding.

In Malaysia, the appeal of Korean food is evident in the growth of Korean restaurants, retail products, and dining experiences. Gen Z consumers, defined by their digital nativity and high cultural openness, play a critical role in this consumption trend. They are not only frequent consumers of Korean media but also creative participants in fan communities that shape social norms and lifestyle choices (Lim et al. 2020; Tan, 2023). Recent studies by Razak et al.(2024) and Ali et al.(2019) further demonstrate that Korean food has moved from niche interest to mainstream consumption among Malaysian youth, highlighting the merging of cultural fascination and consumer intention. Similarly, Thanabordeekij et al.(2022) found that Thai consumers' exposure to Korean media directly influenced their willingness to try Korean food, suggesting comparable cross-cultural dynamics in Southeast Asia.

However, while previous research has acknowledged the cultural diffusion of *Hallyu*, few empirical studies have tested how media-driven fanaticism interacts with established consumer behavior theories in shaping food intentions. This study therefore builds on prior work by integrating cultivation theory and the theory of planned behavior (TPB) to examine how fanaticism toward Korean entertainment influences attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control in predicting Gen Z's intention to consume Korean food.

The scope of this research focuses on Malaysia Gen Z consumers aged 18-27, investigating their attitudes, social influence, and perceived behavioral control related to Korean food consumption. By narrowing the scope to this group, the study aims to uncover how exposure to Korean media content translates into actual behavioral intention. This phenomenon can be seen from (Figure 1) show the popularity of South Korean cuisine worldwide prove Malaysia become second biggest consumers of Korean food. This study can prove this data statement.

From a theoretical perspective, the research extends TPB by incorporating media fanaticism as a cultural antecedent of food consumption intention. From a managerial perspective, it provides insights for marketers, restaurant owners, and policymakers. For instance, Korean food promotions can be designed around fan engagement, peer influence, and accessibility (including halal certification), thereby strengthening cultural acceptance and marketability. According to the objectives of this paper are to examine the impact of consumer fanaticism toward Korean entertainment on attitudes toward Korean food, test the role of attitudes, normative social influence, and perceived behavioral control in predicting Gen Z's intention to consume Korean food and provide theoretical and managerial implications for cross-cultural food marketing and consumer behavior research.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing empirical discourse on media-induced consumption by bridging psychological theories and cultural marketing practices. It challenges prior descriptive research on *Hallyu* by offering a quantitative model that clarifies the indirect pathways between media fanaticism, attitudes, and intention in a non-Korean, Muslim-majority market context.

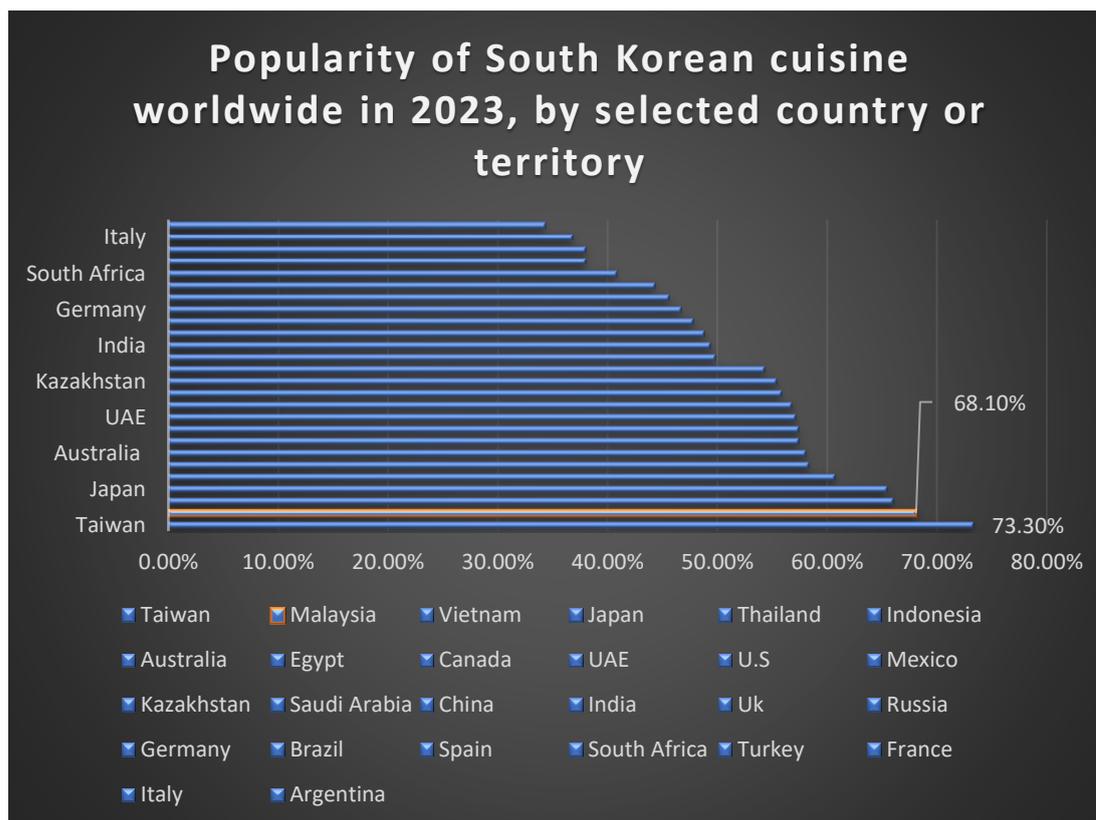


Figure 1 The popularity of South Korean Cuisine Worldwide in 2023, by Selected Country or Territory

Literature Review

The Korean Wave as a Marketing Catalyst

The Korean wave (Hallyu) has evolved from a regional entertainment movement into a powerful global marketing phenomenon that shape consumer lifestyles and cross-cultural consumption patterns (Jin, 2016;Jeong, 2021). The worldwide popularity of Korean dramas, K-pop, and social media content has created spillover effects into related industries such as fashion, beauty, tourism, and food. Within this context, food serves not only as symbolic extension of cultural identity but also as an effective vehicle of soft power. Korean cuisine (Hanshik) is now widely recognized as part of this cultural export strategy, promoted through celebrity endorsement, media representation, and digital fandom (Kim & Sim,2017).

Recent empirical studies confirm that the Korean wave has significantly influenced food consumption in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, Razak et al. (2024) found that young consumer's acceptance of Korean food was strongly shaped by perceived authenticity and health value, illustrating how *Hallyu* has normalized Korean cuisine within everyday dietary practices. Similarly, Thanabordeekij et al. (2022) reported that exposure to Korean dramas in Thailand directly increased willingness to consume Korean food, showing that repeated media imagery can transcend national and cultural boundaries. These findings align with cultivation theory, which posits that long-term exposure to media content cultivates worldviews and lifestyle preferences consistent with that content (Gerbner,1969; Shanahan & Morgan,1999).

Beyond exposure, the affective dimensions of fandom often described as consumer fanaticism has emerged as an important driver of cross-cultural consumption. Fanaticism

reflects intense emotional attachment to idols or media figures and motivates behavioral imitation in domains such as fashion and food (Cheah et al. 2018; Kim & Lee, 2019). A recent Malaysian study on adolescents' addiction to Korean dramas revealed that such media engagement significantly predicts purchase intention for Korean beauty products (Mahmood et al. 2023), supporting the emotional-behavioral link implied by Cultivation theory. However, despite this growing body of work, empirical testing of media-driven fanaticism within food consumption remains limited, particularly in Muslim-majority markets where cultural adaptation and halal assurance play crucial roles.

Fanaticism And Consumer Behavior

Fanaticism encapsulated consumers' intense enthusiasm and identity alignment with cultural icons (Thorne & Bruner, 2006). Prior research shows that fan identification influences not only product preference but also self-concept and social belonging (Lockwood & Kunda, 197; Huang et al. 2015). In the *Hallyu* context, Lim et al. (2020) demonstrated that Malaysian undergraduates' attachment to K-pop idols predicted stronger attitudes toward Korean beauty brands. Building on these findings, Kim & Lee (2019) and Rahmawati (2023) revealed that fans often emulate celebrities' food and lifestyle choices as expressions of admiration and cultural participation.

Nevertheless, existing studies tend to treat fandom as a psychological descriptor rather than an explanatory construct within behavioural models. Few have examined how fanaticism interacts with cognitive determinants such as attitude or subjective norms. The present study advances this line of inquiry by conceptualizing fanaticism as an antecedent to TPB variables, thereby explaining the indirect mechanism through which emotional media attachment shapes consumption intention for Korean food.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour in Food Consumption

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) remains one of the most robust frameworks for predicting consumer decision-making. Attitude toward behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (PBC) jointly determine intention, which in turn predicts actual behaviour. Past food-related studies have validated TPB's applicability across contexts ranging from organic food (Kabir & Islam, 2022) to halal consumption (Khalid et al. 2023) and ethnic cuisine (Ting et al. 2015).

Recent empirical work continues to extend TPB to contemporary consumption domains, for instance, Alam & Sayuti (2011) applied TPB to halal food purchasing, confirming that social and religious norms exert strong influence in Muslim contexts. Lim & An (2021) found that attitudes toward wellbeing food significantly predict purchase intentions among Korean consumers, while Memon et al. (2020) demonstrated that international students' attitudes and perceived control determine their intention to consume local Malaysian food. These studies collectively emphasize that TPB remains flexible across cultures but that context specific antecedents such as cultural exposure or media fanaticism can enhance its explanatory power.

In Malaysia, emerging studies have started connecting TPB with media influence. Osman & Ismail (2022) observed that exposure to Korean pop culture predicted favourable attitudes toward Korean products and subsequent purchase behaviour. Yet, empirical integration of

media fanaticism within the TPB structure for food consumption has not been addressed. This gap forms the conceptual foundation of the present study, which merges cultivation theory's long-term media effects with TPB's proximal cognitive predictors to explain Gen Z's intention to consume korean food.

Empirical Gaps and Research Contribution

Three key gaps emerge from prior literature:

1. Limited modelling of media antecedents – most studies describe cultural diffusion qualitatively rather than testing how emotional attachment (fanaticism) influences TPB constructs quantitatively.
2. Neglect of mediating mechanisms – the link between fanaticism and intention is often assumed direct, leaving the mediating role of attitude underexplored.
3. Underrepresentation of Muslim-majority contexts – although malaysia represents a large *Hallyu* consumer base, few studies account for perceived behavioural control elements such as halal assurance and accessibility.

By addressing this shortcoming, this study contributes to theory and practice in three ways. First, it empirically integrates cultivation theory and TPB, demonstrating how long-term media exposure (fanaticism) translates into behavioural intention through attitude formation. Second, it extends TPB by situating it within a cross-cultural and religiously nuanced consumption environment. Third, it provides data-driven insights for marketing management and cultural policy, showing how psychological, social and structural factors collectively shape Gen Z consumers' intention toward korean food in Malaysia.

Theoretical Framework

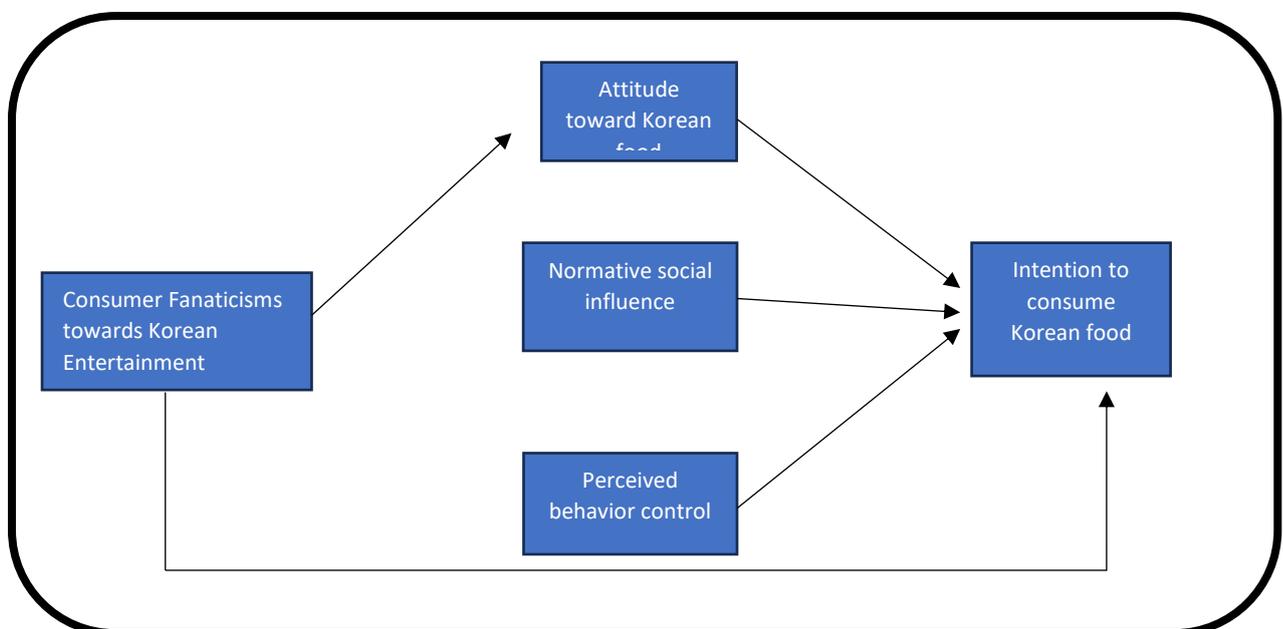


Figure 2 Research Framework

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

The research framework draws on two key theoretical foundations which is Cultivation theory, and Theory of planned behaviour (TPB). These theories provide critical insights into understanding consumer behaviour, particularly the attitudes and intentions of generation Z toward cross-cultural phenomena such as the Hallyu wave and Korean food consumption.

Fanaticism and Attitude

Fanaticism reflects intense emotional attachment to idols or media content, often leading fans to adopt associated lifestyles, including food choices (Cheah et al., 2018; Kim & Lee, 2019). In the context of the Korean Wave, exposure to idol-endorsed products and dramatized food scenes strengthens favorable consumer evaluations. Prior studies indicate that fan identification often translates into positive product attitudes (Rahmawati, 2023; Lim & An, 2021). Thus, fanaticism is expected to enhance positive attitudes toward Korean cuisine.

H1: Fanaticism positively influences attitudes toward Korean food.

Attitude and Intention

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), attitude is a primary determinant of behavioral intention (Ajzen, 1991). Positive evaluations of taste, authenticity, and cultural value increase the likelihood of consumption (Memon et al., 2020; Lim & An, 2021). Therefore, favorable attitudes toward Korean food should predict stronger consumption intention among Gen Z.

H2: Attitude positively influences intention to consume Korean food.

Subjective Norms and Intention

Subjective norms capture the influence of peers and social networks on behavior. Gen Z consumers, characterized by collectivist tendencies and high digital engagement, are particularly responsive to peer approval and group influence (Tan, 2023). Social media communities and fan groups amplify these effects, encouraging conformity in food choices.

H3: Subjective norms positively influence intention to consume Korean food.

Perceived Behavioural Control and Intention

Perceived behavioral control (PBC) reflects consumers' evaluation of the ease or difficulty of performing a behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In food consumption, this includes affordability, availability, and cultural compatibility, such as halal certification in Malaysia (Islam et al. 2019). Prior studies confirm that greater accessibility significantly enhances purchase intention (Kassem & Lee, 2004).

H4: Perceived behavioral control positively influences intention to consume Korean food.

Mediating Role of Attitude

While fanaticism shapes consumer perception, it may not directly translate into intention without positive attitudinal reinforcement. Prior research suggests that attitudes often act as a mediator between cultural affinity and behavioral outcomes (Lim & An, 2021). Thus, fanaticism is expected to indirectly influence intention via attitudes.

H5: Attitude mediates the relationship between fanaticism and intention to consume Korean food

Methodology

Population and sampling

The study's target demographic consisted of Malaysian Muslim individuals aged 18 to 27 years. This demographic was chosen due to its representation of a crucial section with considerable exposure to the Hallyu wave and notable purchasing power. This study adopts the concept of Gen z (i.e. those born from 1997 onwards) from the U.S context (Pew Research, 2019), due to the scarcity of research identifying the specific age group within the Malaysian context. Nevertheless, the research conducted by Ting et al. (2018) revealed that inheritors or young individuals who matured throughout the emergence of communication technologies routinely utilise diverse digital tools in their everyday activities. This corresponds with findings from Malaysian consultant businesses, which characterise Gen-Z (born about 1997) as deeply involved with technology, regularly utilising social media and participating in online commerce (Business Insider, 2019).

Recruitment was conducted through popular online platforms like Instagram and Facebook, which are widely used by Malaysian Gen Z individuals. To ensure the sample size was adequate for robust statistical analysis, the study aimed to collect at least 400 responses. This figure was determined based on sample size calculation using G*Power analysis, considering a medium effect size, a statistical power of 0.80, and a significance level of 0.05. Ultimately, 523 valid responses were collected, exceeding the minimum requirement and ensuring the reliability of the results.

The inclusion criteria for participants required them to be:

1. Aged between 18 and 27 years old.
2. Interested in Korean food and/or influenced by Korean pop culture.

This carefully defined population and sampling approach allowed the study to capture meaningful insights into the attitudes and behavioural intentions of Malaysian Gen Z consumers toward Korean food.

Measuring Instrument

The study utilized a structured questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was designed to measure key constructs, including fanaticism, attitudes toward Korean food, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and behavioural intentions. These constructs were chosen based on the study's theoretical framework, integrating Cultivation Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Each section of the questionnaire included items adapted from established and validated scales in the literature.

- Fanaticism was assessed with four items adopted from Thorne and Bruner (2006), capturing respondents' intense enthusiasm for Korean entertainment.
- Attitudes toward Korean food, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control were measured using items adapted from studies such as Ha (2019) and Kabir and Islam (2022).
- Behavioral Intentions were measured with three items adapted from Ting *et al.* (2015), focusing on respondents' likelihood of consuming Korean food.

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This scale was chosen for its simplicity and effectiveness in capturing respondents' levels of agreement without causing survey fatigue. The use of the five-Likert

scale was believed to alleviate respondent frustration, as compared to scales with seven or nine options (Bhatti et al. 2019). The questionnaire was pretested with a small group of respondents from the target demographic to ensure clarity, reliability, and content validity. Feedback from the pretest was used to refine the wording and structure of the items, ensuring they were culturally appropriate and easily understood by the participants. The finalized instrument provided a reliable and comprehensive means of capturing the psychological, social, and behavioural factors influencing Malaysian Gen Z's attitudes and intentions to consume Korean food.

Data Analysis

The current study, with the help of Smart-PLS software, analysed the data through PLS-SEM, which is a technique for structural equation modelling that permits assessment of complex causal relations in path model with latent construct.

Why choose PLS-SEM

The reason for applying the PLS-SEM method rests in its capability to analyze several paths all together and to attain greater degrees of statistical power than covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) Hair et al. (2021). Besides, scholars argued that PLS-SEM is a preferred method than CB-SEM due to small sample sizes (Hair et al. 2021), In the PLS-SEM approach, data was evaluated at two stages: (1) measurement model analysis and (2) structural model analysis.

Given this study context, as the primary interest is in understanding complex relationships between variables in Korean food, the Korean Wave, and cultural experiences, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) proves to be an excellent choice for several reasons.

Indeed, PLS-SEM is especially useful in cases where model blocks represent both reflective and formative constructs, situations which we commonly encounter when studying multi-dimensional cultural phenomena (Sarstedt et al. 2016). For example, in investigating how broad cultural antecedents such as food consumption, the perceptions of the Korean culture, and media exposure affect consumer behavior or attitude toward the Korean food, PLS-SEM is suitable since both types of relationships can be modelled at the same time. In the case of reflective constructs, the indicators reflect the underlying construct (e.g., attitudes or perceptions), while for formative constructs, the differences among indicators drive the formation of the underlying construct (e.g., media consumption patterns). Such existence multi-sequential process fits nicely with the complex nature of the variables.

A further key benefit of PLS-SEM is its capacity to address small sample sizes well. For a subject like this that can target groups (such as people in Malaysia exposed by the Korean wave), getting a sizeable sample is difficult. However, PLS-SEM is robust enough to provide reliable estimates and significant results even with relatively small datasets, which means it is an appropriate choice when traditional structural equation modelling (which usually requires large sample sizes) may not be possible.

Moreover, PLS-SEM is efficient when the research is causative exploratory or predictive instead of confirmatory. As the focus of the study is to identify antecedents driving

engagement with Korean food and culture instead of confirming a given theory or model, PLS-SEM is appropriate for hypothesis testing and identifying significant paths that can lead to improved understanding of consumer behavior.

Finally, PLS-SEM can produce path coefficients and is useful in terms of evaluating the strength (or direction of relationships between variables), and it contributes to establishing a comprehensive knowledge of how different variables are interdependent. For example, the model can represent how Korean media consumption influences Korean food perception then, in turn, its consumption behavior, which is familiar to you with implications to action for stakeholders in tourism, cultural exchange, and food industries.

Overall, PLS-SEM seems to be the most suitable method for conducting this study because of its adaptability, efficiency in handling intricate and small datasets, and its ability to simultaneously model reflective and formative constructs. For understanding the cultural and consumer aspects around the Korean Wave and Korean food, its capability of uncovering complex relationships, and predicting future trends is indeed cemented as extremely appropriate.

Findings and Discussion

Respondents Demographic Profile

Table 1

Respondents demographic profile

	Frequency (%)		Frequency (%)
Gender	Male = 86(16.4) Female = 437 (83.4)	Educational level	High school = 74 (14.1) Diploma = 126 (24.1) Bachelor's degree = 311(59.5) Master's degree = 12(2.3)
Age	18 – 22 years old = 269 (51.4) 23 – 27 years old = 254 (48.6)	Marital status	Single = 514 (98.3) Married = 6 (1.1) Widowed/divorce/separated= 3(0.6)
Ethnic	Malay = 345(66.0) Chinese = 27(5.2) India = 9(1.7) Bumiputera Sabah = 132(25.2) Bumiputera Sarawak = 10(1.9)	Religion	Muslim = 451(86.2) Christian = 42(8.0) Buddha = 22(4.2) Hindu = 8(1.5)

Table 1 presents the demographics distribution of the study's respondents. A total of 523 participants took part, with a majority being female (83.4%) and a smaller portion male (16.4%). A gender imbalance could affect the results, since previous research suggest that women are more likely to be engaged with k-dramas and k-pop (Yang, 2021), Ing et al. (2018). This imbalance may have led to a stronger representation on korean wave influenced consumer behaviour. However, whether this reflects the actual target population depends on broader consumer trends in Malaysia.

The largest age group was between 18 to 22 years old (51.4%), followed by those aged 23 to 27 years (48.6%). Most respondents were single (98.3%), with a minimal number married or previously married. These age ranges were chosen due to be their stronger engagement with Korean entertainment and digital media, Ing et al. (2018) agreed that Malaysian young adults hold positive attitudes towards Korean products. This aligning with the study's objective to examine the influence of the Korean wave on young consumers. Younger individuals are more likely to adopt global trends, making them an ideal group for studying cultural influence on consumption patterns.

In terms of education, the majority held a bachelor's degree (59.5%), followed by diploma holders (24.1%), high school graduates (14.1%), and those with a master's degree (2.3%). Ethnic distribution included most Malay respondents (66.0%), followed by Bumiputera Sabah (25.2%), Chinese (5.2%), Bumiputera Sarawak (1.9%), and Indian (1.7%). Most participants identified as Muslim (86.2%), with the remaining identifying as Christian (8.0%), Buddhist (4.2%), and Hindu (1.5%).

Measurement Model

The analysis was performed in two distinct stages. Initially, the measurement model underwent testing at the first level to ascertain the study's validity and reliability. Additionally, the second tier used the (PLS-SEM). Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) is suitable for assessing data collected through the Likert Scale, as stated by Hair et al. (2017).

PLS-SEM is comprised of two different stages: the outer model and the inner model. Firstly, the external (measurement) model was analysed. As all the components in the model are reflective, researchers assessed the discriminant validity, internal consistency, and convergent validity. The findings of the outer model are shown in (Table 2).

Cronbach's alpha values indicate the internal consistency of each construct. In social science, values above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable, indicating that the items within each construct reliably measure the underlying concept (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). All constructs exceed the 0.70 threshold, indicating good internal consistency and suggesting that the items within each construct consistently measure their respective concepts. All the constructs show CR values above 0.70, which further confirms the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement model. The average variance extracted (AVE) values indicate the level of variance captured by the construct relative to the variance due to measurement error. For good convergent validity, AVE values should exceed 0.50. Each construct achieves an AVE greater than 0.50, indicating that more than 50% of the variance in the indicators is explained by the latent construct, thus confirming adequate convergent validity. All values show strengthened confidence that the items reliably measure the intended theoretical concept and are suitable for further structural analysis.

Discriminant Validity and Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Discriminant validity is confirmed when the square root of each construct's AVE is greater than its correlation with any other construct, (Table 3). The Fornell-Larcker criterion compares the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct with its

correlations with other construct (Table 4). All constructs meet the Fornell-Larcker criterion, indicating adequate discriminant validity.

Table 2
Outer model results

Construct		Outer loading	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Attitude Towards Korean Food	ATTF1	0.888	0.893	0.899	0.758
	ATTF2	0.841			
	ATTF3	0.906			
	ATTF4	0.846			
Consumer Fanaticism Towards Korean Entertainment	FANS1	0.873	0.842	0.827	0.691
	FANS2	0.604			
	FANS3	0.905			
	FANS4	0.905			
Intention to Consume Hanshik	INT1	0.896	0.830	0.833	0.750
	INT2	0.920			
	INT3	0.775			
Normative Social Influences	NORM1	0.817	0.845	0.852	0.682
	NORM2	0.828			
	NORM3	0.837			
	NORM4	0.820			
Perceived Behavioural Control	PBC1	0.859	0.775	0.775	0.691
	PBC2	0.785			
	PBC3	0.848			

Note: CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted,
 Note: ATTF= Attitude Toward Korean Food, INT=Intention To Consume Of *Hanshik*,
 FANS=Consumer fanaticism towards Korean Entertainment, NORMS=Normative Social Influences, PBC= Perceived Behaviour Control

Table 3
Discriminant validity

	ATTF	FANS	INT	NORM	PBC
ATTF					
FANS	0.610				
INT	0.675	0.556			
NORM	0.718	0.534	0.586		
PBC	0.657	0.588	0.816	0.483	

Note: ATTF= Attitude Toward Korean Food, INT=Intention To Consume Of *Hanshik*,
 FANS=Consumer Fanaticism toward Korean Entertainment, NORMS=Normative Social Influences, PBC= Perceived Behaviour Control.

Table 4
Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	ATTF	FANS	INT	NORM	PBC
ATTF	0.871				
FANS	0.535	0.831			
INT	0.585	0.463	0.866		
NORM	0.619	0.451	0.494	0.826	
PBC	0.556	0.471	0.656	0.396	0.831

Note: ATTF= Attitude Toward Korean Food, INT=Intention To Consume Of *Hanshik*, FANS=Consumer Fanaticism toward Korean Entertainment, NORMS=Normative Social Influences, PBC= Perceived Behaviour Control

Structural Model (Hypothesis Testing)

After acceptable reliability and validity results, the hypothesis testing has analysed. First the result Table 5 and 6 shows the direct effect and mediating effect result of this study. This study offers an explanation, based on existing theories, for the relationships between idol attachment and fanaticism, as well as intention to consume Korean food. This research helps validate and further academic perspectives (Bowlby, 1982, Gerbner et al. 1969, and Ajzen, 1991.) On how cultural and psychological characteristics of consumerisms object influences its consumption behaviour.

Table 5
Result of this study

	Hypothesis	SD	Mean	T-values	F2	R2	P-value	Results
Fanaticism towards Korean entertainment -> attitude towards korean food	H1a	0.035	0.537	15.390	0.402	0.286	***	Significant
Fanaticism towards Korean entertainment -> intention to consume Korean food	H1b	0.039	0.072	1.872	0.007		0.061	Not significant
Attitude towards Korean food-> intention to consume Korean food	H2a	0.049	0.195	4.050	0.038	0.523	***	significant
Normative social influence -> intention to consume Korean food	H3	0.043	0.163	3.738	0.033		***	Significant
Perceived behavior control -> intention to consume Korean food	H4	0.047	0.450	9.538	0.272		***	significant

Note: *P< .05, **P<.01, P***<.001.

Table 6
Mediating effect of this study

	Hypothesis	Mean	SD	T-values	P-values	Results
Fanaticism towards Korean entertainment -> Attitude towards korean food -> Intention to consume Korean food	H2b	0.104	0.027	3.927	***	Significant

Note: *P< .05, **P<.01, P***<.001.

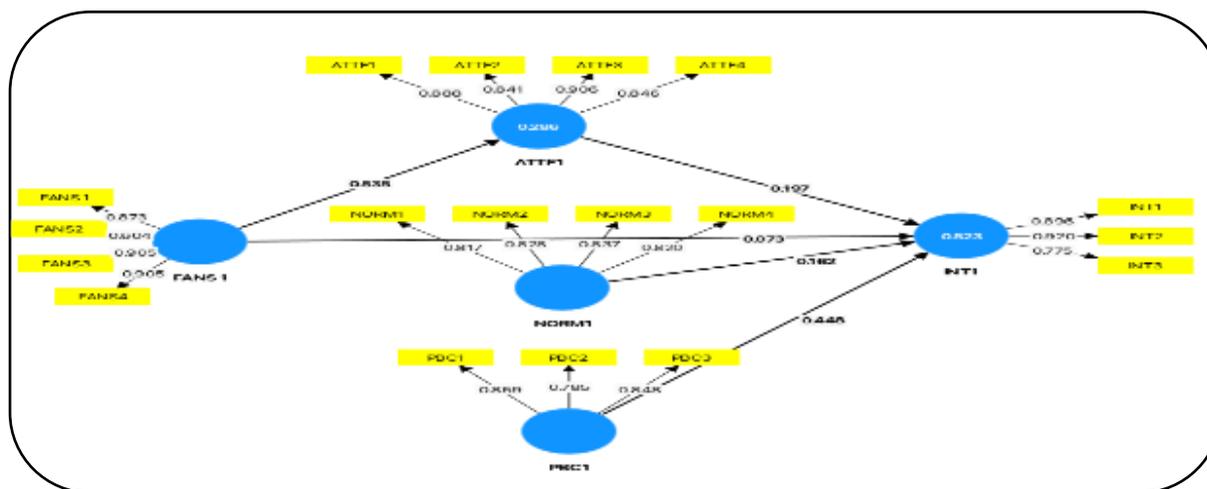


Figure 3 Bootstrapping Results

Structural Model Analysis

The structural model was evaluated through path coefficients, t-values, f² effect sizes, r² values, and mediation analysis.

The analysis showed that fanaticism towards korean entertainment significantly influenced attitude towards korean food ($\beta = 0.402$, $t = 15.390$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that higher levels of fanaticism are associated with a more positive attitude. Wan Nurdiayana (2022) found that K-dramas significantly drive increased spending on Korean products, including food, among Malaysian youth. Similarly, Lim et al. (2020) observed that Malaysian consumers have not only embraced Korean entertainment but have also adopted their food consumption patterns showing a clear inclination toward Korean cuisine. Iconic Korean dishes such as Kimchi, Tteokbokki (spicy rice cakes), Bibimbap, Kimbap, Bungeoppang (fish-shaped pastry), and Jajangmyeon have gained international recognition due to their frequent portrayal in K-dramas (The Star, 2023). These dishes are not merely background elements but are strategically woven into the emotional and cultural narratives of dramas. Through consistent exposure to Korean food in entertainment, coupled with the emotional engagement fostered by K-dramas and variety shows, audiences develop a strong affinity for these dishes. From the perspective of cultivation theory, repeated media exposure significantly shapes viewers' attitudes towards korean food, fostering familiarity and admiration.

However, fanaticism did not directly influence the intention to consume korean food ($\beta = 0.007$, $t = 1.872$, $p = 0.061$), suggesting no direct relationship. Although, media exposure can influence a positive attitude towards Korean food, these attitudes do not always can translate

into actual consumption. This situation has been explained by the cultivation theory, where it has explained how media shapes perceptions over time but does not always lead to immediate behavioral changes. It must have been a long period to change the behavioral. With the prolonged Korean media consumption, whether it can cultivate a positive view into consumption intention is often mediated by practical considerations. In food consumption, a personal taste preferences, dietary restriction, cultural familiarity, accessibility, and cost play a significant role in determining whether a consumer will try Korean food or not try. Cultivation theory provides a useful framework for understanding how media influences attitudes but also highlights the limitations of media in driving consumer intentions.

Attitude towards Korean food significantly predicted the intention to consume Korean food ($\beta = 0.038$, $t = 4.050$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the role of attitude as a strong determinant of behavioral intention. Attitude towards food plays a critical role in shaping the intention to consume Korean food, a relationship that can be effectively understood through the framework of Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (1991). Memon et al. (2020) and Saleki et al. (2020), which noted attitudes as main factors affecting the consumption of local and organic food. According to the studies, people's views on food significantly influence their eating behavior. Lim and An (2021) demonstrated within the specific context of Korean cuisine that consumer attitudes significantly impact the desire to consume food, thereby emphasizing the importance of positive attitudes in decision-making processes.

Normative social influence also showed a significant positive effect on intention ($\beta = 0.033$, $t = 3.738$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that social pressures and expectations affect consumption decisions. Normative social influence plays a significant role in shaping the intention to consume Korean food, particularly among Gen Z in Malaysia, where social validation and peer conformity are highly valued. Tan, (2023) agreed the representation of Korean food in popular media, which has effectively caught the imagination and taste buds of the younger generation, drives the Malaysian market's embrace of it. Media exposure to various cultures greatly influences food selections (Mun, 2009). In Malaysia, this trend is especially visible among young people who see Korean cuisine as both a fashionable and culturally enriching choice. Razak et al. (2024). This confirmed that social networks influence Malaysian consumers especially younger groups in their adoption of Korean food. Social media sites like Instagram and TikTok help to boost the social acceptability of Korean food by amplifying peer activities, therefore encouraging normative pressure to imitate them. The sharing of experiences with Korean food by influencers, celebrities, and peers establishes a cultural trend that compels others to follow. This social validation supports the notion that the consumption of Korean food is both a personal decision and a socially accepted practice. by Lim et al. (2020), who showed that especially younger consumer buying intentions are much predicted by normative social influence.

Perceived behavioral control has a substantial positive impact on intention to consume Korean food ($\beta = 0.272$, $t = 9.538$, $p < 0.001$), emphasizing that an individual's confidence in their ability to access and consume Korean food significantly shapes their intention. The availability of Korean food restaurants, Korean goods and ingredients have convenient to Malaysian gen-Z in terms of PBC. With the accessibility increase the willing to consume Korean food is rises. The spread of Korean food franchise such as Doopong and Seoul Garden, authentic Korean food restaurants and even Korean food mart (CU mart) has increased the

perceived accessibility and affordability of this cuisine. This availability enhances gen Z power over their dietary choices, study by Cheah et al. (2018) highlights that consumer who believe they have resources and opportunity to access the product are likely to have strongly behavioral intention. Thanabordeekji et al. (2022) study highlighted that Thai consumer found it simple to consume Korean food other than other foods, as a result in behavioral intention. Similarly, Islam and Khaleel (2019) highlighted that PBC is a critical factor in the intention to consume food, including when competing food choices exist. The R2 value for intention to consume korean food was 0.521, meaning that 52.1% of the variance in intention was explained by attitude, normative social influence, and perceived behavioral control. The mediation analysis further revealed that attitude towards korean food significantly mediated the relationship between fanaticism towards korean entertainment and intention to consume korean food ($t = 3.927, p < 0.001$). this finding suggests that fanaticism indirectly influences consumption intention through the formation of positive attitudes towards korean food. In conclusion, the structural model analysis confirmed that attitude towards korean food, normative social influence, and perceived behavioral control are significant predictors of the intention to consume Hanshik. fanaticism towards korean entertainments impacts intention indirectly through its effects on attitudes, underlining the mediating role of consume perception.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that media-driven fanaticism, while influential in shaping consumer perceptions, does not directly predict consumption intention unless mediated by positive attitudes toward food. This highlights an important nuance: media exposure and idol attachment may cultivate favorable perceptions, but actual behavioral intention requires additional psychological and contextual enablers. The findings confirm the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), where attitudes, normative social influence, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) significantly shape Gen Z's consumption intentions.

The results provide three key insights into Gen Z consumer behavior in Malaysia. First, attitudes toward Korean food act as a critical bridge between media fanaticism and behavioral intention, aligning with prior studies that link favorable evaluations of sensory and cultural value to food choices (Lim & An, 2021). Second, normative influence plays a substantial role, confirming that peer validation and social networks are powerful forces in shaping consumption decisions (Tan, 2023). Third, PBC is the strongest predictor of intention, underscoring that accessibility, affordability, and halal certification directly affect the feasibility of translating attitudes into action. Together, these findings reveal that while media exposure can glamorize food, successful market adoption depends on both psychological readiness and structural availability.

Theoretical Implications

Integration of Cultivation Theory and TPB: By incorporating media fanaticism as an antecedent, the study extends TPB into a cross-cultural, media-influenced consumer context. This theoretical integration demonstrates how long-term media exposure interacts with cognitive determinants to shape food-related intentions.

Refining the role of fanaticism: The findings suggest that fanaticism primarily influences attitudes rather than direct intentions, clarifying its position in consumer behavior models.

This adds nuance to the literature on fandom and consumption by distinguishing between emotional identification and actionable intention.

Contribution to cross-cultural marketing theory: By focusing on Malaysian Gen Z, the study highlights how cultural products such as Korean cuisine are adopted through a combination of media, peer influence, and accessibility, thus enriching the understanding of global consumer culture in Southeast Asia.

Managerial and Policy Implications

The findings also carry practical significance for food businesses, marketers, and policymakers:

Leveraging fan communities for marketing: Since fanaticism influences attitudes, marketers can collaborate with K-pop idols, drama placements, and social media fan groups to shape favorable food perceptions. Food promotions embedded in media content or endorsed by idols are likely to resonate with Gen Z consumers.

Harnessing peer influence: Normative social influence highlights the importance of group dining, peer-sharing campaigns, and social media engagement. Restaurants and food brands can create “shareable” dining experiences that encourage Gen Z consumers to post and validate their consumption within their networks.

Ensuring accessibility and halal assurance: PBC’s strong impact underscores the need for wide availability and cultural appropriateness. Halal certification, affordability, and easy access through food delivery apps can reduce barriers and significantly increase consumption intention.

Tourism and cultural branding: Policymakers and tourism boards can integrate Korean cuisine into cultural festivals, exchange programs, and culinary tourism initiatives. By positioning Korean food as part of Malaysia’s multicultural F&B landscape, stakeholders can strengthen bilateral cultural and economic ties.

Overall, the study shows that the Korean Wave functions not only as entertainment but also as a **marketing catalyst**, influencing Gen Z’s food-related intentions in Malaysia. For scholars, it contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of media-influenced consumer behavior. For practitioners, it provides actionable strategies to convert cultural fascination into sustainable business opportunities in the F&B and tourism industries.

Conclusion

This study examined how fanaticism toward Korean entertainment influences Gen Z consumers’ intention to consume Korean cuisine in Malaysia, integrating Cultivation Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Using PLS-SEM analysis of 523 respondents, the findings confirm that fanaticism shapes consumption indirectly through attitudes, while normative social influence and perceived behavioral control (PBC) act as strong direct predictors of intention. These results reinforce the importance of psychological and structural enablers in translating media fascination into actionable consumer behavior.

From a theoretical perspective, this research extends TPB by positioning media fanaticism as a cultural antecedent of food consumption, thereby offering a novel integration of media influence with consumer behavior theory. It also clarifies the mechanism by which fan culture impacts consumer choices, highlighting attitudes as the critical mediator.

From a managerial perspective, the study provides actionable insights for the food and beverage industry, tourism operators, and policymakers. Businesses can leverage idol endorsements, fan community engagement, and peer-based marketing strategies to enhance positive food perceptions. Accessibility and halal certification are essential in strengthening consumer confidence and purchase intention, pointing to clear strategies for market expansion. Policymakers and cultural agencies can also use these insights to promote cross-cultural exchange, culinary tourism, and economic collaboration between Malaysia and Korea.

In conclusion, the Korean Wave operates not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a marketing catalyst that reshapes consumption patterns among Malaysian youth. By demonstrating how media-driven fanaticism translates into consumer intention through psychological and contextual factors, this study contributes to both marketing theory and managerial practice. Future research may expand this model to other cultural products, comparative cross-national studies, or longitudinal designs to capture evolving consumer behavior in the digital era.

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