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Korean Wave in Nepal: The impact of the Korean Wave on Nepalese youth's intention to pursue higher education in South Korea

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Abstract

South Korean popular culture, known as the "Korean Wave" (*Hallyu*), has gained global popularity and strengthened South Korea's soft power. However, the relationship between the Korean Wave and Nepalese society, particularly educational migration aspirations such as the intention to pursue higher education, remains underexamined. This study conducted a qualitative content analysis to examine how Korea is perceived in Nepal and a quantitative study to examine which Korean soft power factors are associated with Nepalese youths' intention to pursue higher education. The qualitative content analysis found that the Korean Wave has shaped positive perceptions in Nepal. Furthermore, the quantitative study revealed that 80.5% of Nepalese youth intended to pursue higher education in South Korea. After controlling for sociodemographic factors, the results revealed that familiarity with Korea (odds ratio [OR]: 1.17; confidence interval [CI]: 1.04–1.32), exposure to the Korean Wave (OR: 1.24; CI: 1.09–1.42), perception of Korea's advancement (OR: 1.29; CI: 1.09–1.51), perception of Korea's cultural influence (OR: 1.39; CI: 1.18–1.65), and interest in learning the Korean language (OR: 1.54; CI: 1.31–1.81) were associated with Nepalese youths' intention to pursue higher education in South Korea. After controlling for all variables in the final model, interest in learning Korean remained significantly associated (OR: 1.46; CI: 1.19–1.80) with this intention. The study concludes that the Korean Wave extends beyond entertainment and functions as a source of soft power, including by attracting international students to South Korea.

Keywords: Cultural influence; Educational aspiration; Higher education; Korean language; Nepal; Soft power; Korean Wave; South Korea

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1. Introduction

We live in the era of the Fifth Industrial Revolution, marked by rapid technological change, increasing connectivity, information transparency, and technical assistance that cross borders and blur the boundaries of space, time, and culture (Ziatdinov *et al.*, 2024). In this context, the Korean Wave is no exception, as Korean popular culture has become a "global sensation" (Jin, 2016). South Korea, also known as the "country of the morning calm," is highly industrialized and modern. Nepal is uniquely endowed with rich natural and cultural diversity in its people and landscapes, situated in the lap of the Himalayas,

and is transitioning between "modernity and tradition" as it moves toward socioeconomic advancement.

South Korea and Nepal have maintained diplomatic relations since South Korea established its Consulate Office in Kathmandu in 1972. Since then, people-to-people relationships have gradually developed, as Nepalese youth have become increasingly interested in studying and working in South Korea. Nepal and South Korea signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Employment Permit System (EPS) in 2007 as a bilateral labor management system. Consequently, the number of Nepalese migrant workers in South Korea has steadily increased, and along with the growing number of international students, more Nepalese have entered South Korea's labor market. Statistics published by the Ministry of Justice (Ministry of Justice, 2026) show that 240,280 international students are currently studying in South Korea. Most students are from China (70,535), followed by Vietnam (65,109), Uzbekistan (20,450), Nepal (19,499), Mongolia (14,379), Myanmar (7,147), Bangladesh (5,548), Japan (3,315), Indonesia (2,390), India (2,033), and the United States (2,127). Nepal is the fourth-largest contributor of international students in South Korea. The Nepalese population in South Korea has increased substantially over the past decade, rising from 33,046 registered residents in 2016 to 99,408 by May 2026 (Ministry of Justice, 2026). This growth has been accompanied by notable increases in both EPS workers (E-9) and international students (D-2), with the latter rising particularly sharply from 629 in 2016 to 19,499 in 2026 (Table A1). In addition, Nepal Tourism Board statistics suggest that the number of Koreans visiting Nepal has increased every year. Koreans who practice Buddhism visit Nepal every year on pilgrimage to Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautam Buddha. Similarly, many Koreans visit Nepal for Christian missionary work, mountain climbing, and to experience Nepal's pristine nature and vibrant culture, a fusion of Hindu and Buddhist faiths and philosophies.

Nye conceptualized "soft power" as "the power of persuasion through ideas, cultures, and policies" (Nye, 2002), arguing that power is not necessarily coercive (Nye, 2005; 2021). Nye's idea of "power" is not directly applied to the cultural aspect; therefore, Appadurai (1996) further emphasized a sociological understanding of soft power by conceptualizing "cultural globalization" through five "scapes" (i.e., ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes, and financescapes), arguing that cultural globalization is not a state strategy but rather a phenomenon that occurs through these scapes. Bourdieu (1991) proposed the concepts of symbolic power, cultural capital, and habitus, explaining how perceptions, values, meanings, and attractions are shaped. This creates a sociological foundation for understanding non-coercive forms of cultural influence. Furthermore, Ang *et al.* (2015) reinterpreted Nye's idea of soft power and argued that real "soft power" is strengthened when influence emerges from audiences or grassroots actors rather than from state-driven cultural diplomacy. Specifically, in the East and Southeast Asian context (Iwabuchi, 2002; 2015), cultural diplomacy—mainly through transnational popular culture—and cultural globalization are not shaped solely by national interests, soft power, or nation branding, but are influenced by historical conditions and reciprocal cultural relationships in which audiences at the grassroots level play a significant role. Jin (2016), focusing more specifically on Korea and the Korean Wave, argued that the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) is a new model of transnational cultural power, a form of soft power that is digitally driven and shaped by social media networks. More specifically, Jang and Paik (2012) maintained that the Korean Wave has become a tool of Korea's new cultural diplomacy.

Previous studies have provided evidence that the Korean Wave's influence has expanded worldwide (Bok-Rae, 2015; Isar, 2013; Jin, 2019; H. Jung, 2009; Jung-Kim, 2014; Kim, 2016; Kuwahara, 2014). These studies have reported that the expansion of the Korean Wave has not only influenced cultural hybridization but also enhanced Korea's soft power, and that Korean cultural products have received positive impressions in the global cultural market. The Korean Wave has advanced Korea's economic interests, as Korean entrepreneurship and fan communities have grown, and South Korea has expanded its negotiating power beyond Asia to the world, even in political contexts (Jang & Paik, 2012; Jung, 2019).

Most studies conducted in country-specific contexts, i.e. Algeria (Touhami & Al-Haq, 2017), Bangladesh (Akter, 2019), the Czech Republic (Mazaná, 2014), India (Kaisii, 2017; Kuotsu, 2013; Reimeingam, 2014), Indonesia (Anwar & Anwar, 2014; Cahyowati & Ridaryanthi, 2012; Nurbayani & Annuraini, 2017), Iran (Koo, 2020), Poland (Barczynska & Kang, 2022), Taiwan (Hahm & Song, 2021), Turkey (Oh & Chae, 2013), and the United States (Ju & Lee, 2015; Yook *et al.*, 2014), have also provided evidence that *Hallyu* fans are increasing worldwide and that the Korean Wave has promoted Korean culture, language, and businesses. Especially in studies conducted in the Indian context, researchers have highlighted that K-pop is becoming increasingly popular among Indian youths and is viewed as a blend (hybrid) of Western and Korean cultures. In India, the Korean Wave is an alternative form of modernity, and Korean lifestyle, fashion, and amenities (i.e., spas) are gradually integrating into Indian culture.

In Indonesia, the Korean Wave has influenced youth such that young Indonesian women like to "be Korean," and

Indonesia seems to be entering the "era of Korea" (Anwar & Anwar, 2014). In Turkey, Oh and Chae (2013) reported that the Korean Wave has not only strengthened people-to-people connections but also has linked the cultural heritages of two civilizations (i.e., the East and Europe). In the United States, the Korean Wave has created new ethnic media that promote people-to-people relationships, and a new generation of American youth is becoming more interested in learning Korean culture and language and forming relationships with Koreans.

South Korea is industrialized and modern in many aspects, including music, drama, and culture, while maintaining its rich traditions and cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the richness and advancement of Korean culture have also been shaped by the fusion of South Korean culture, rooted in Confucian values and ethics, with Western values of individualism and materialism. This uniqueness in Korean popular culture is evident in contemporary Korean dramas, music, songs, and movies, with an aesthetic that has touched hearts worldwide, and Nepal is no exception. In this regard, South Korean culture has become a "means" of "soft power," creating and recreating "new value" in society in the era of cultural globalization from the micro to the macro context (Yun & Kim, 2008). In this context, the current study aims to explore, first, how Korea is perceived in Nepal, particularly what Nepalese national media portray about Korea, its soft power, and its influence in Nepal and on Nepalese youths. Second, given the growing number of Nepalese students in South Korea, this study explores which aspects of the Korean Wave are associated with Nepalese youths' intention to pursue higher education in South Korea. This examination of how Korea's soft power is presented in the global cultural market and how it has shaped a new paradigm is essential in a culture-specific context, with Nepal used here as an example.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Study sample

This study employed a mixed-methods design, using qualitative content analysis to explore how the Korean Wave is represented in Nepalese national media, followed by a survey. The selection of Nepalese national media is justified because peer-reviewed academic publications on the Korean Wave are scarce in Nepal. Newspaper articles were retrieved using keywords such as "Korean Wave," "*Hallyu*," "K-pop," "Korean culture," "Korea in Nepal," "Korean festival," "Korean food," "Korean language," "Korean universities," and "Korean restaurant." Twenty-five newspaper articles in both English and Nepali, published between 2012 and 2025 in major Nepalese national newspapers, were collected. Articles written in Nepali were translated into English by the author. All data were saved in an Excel file by article ID, publication date, source (e.g., The Rising Nepal, The Kathmandu Post, and MyRepublica), URL, and news content. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify news articles that explicitly referenced the Korean Wave, such as K-pop, Korean dramas, food, beauty, language, educational migration, and the EPS. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps to explore deeper meanings and narratives. The articles were read manually, and themes were derived from the reported content. For thematic mapping, the identified codes were compared and grouped by conceptual similarity, then organized into broader themes and subthemes. The resulting thematic structure consisted of six major themes: (i) cultural influence, (ii) diplomatic influence, (iii) educational aspirations and mobility, (iv) Korea as a model of governance and development, (v) economic outcomes, and (vi) challenges and concerns. The thematic analysis process and the resulting themes and subthemes are presented in Figure 1.

For the subsequent survey research, the sample comprised Nepalese youths aged 19 to 36 who were studying at Nepalese colleges and universities. The institutions for data collection were purposively selected from those offering higher secondary education (10 Plus Two colleges) or other colleges with a strong local reputation for providing quality education. The study sites were selected to capture geographic and contextual diversity across different regions of Nepal. These included Kathmandu, the national capital and a major metropolitan center in Bagmati Province; Dolakha, a predominantly rural and mountainous district in Bagmati Province; Pokhara, a major urban center and tourism hub in Gandaki Province; Kailali, located in the far-western Terai region of Sudurpashchim Province; and Dang, an Inner Terai district in Lumbini Province. Students from eight educational institutions participated in the survey, including three in Kathmandu, one in Pokhara, one in Kailali, two in Dang, and one in Dolakha. By including institutions from metropolitan, major regional urban, Terai, and rural/mountainous settings across four provinces, the sampling strategy sought to include students from diverse geographic and social contexts rather than concentrating recruitment in Kathmandu or a single urban setting. Pilot testing was conducted with 23 participants before the main data collection to assess the clarity, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness of the survey. Pilot testing indicated that the questionnaire was clear and comprehensive, and data collection proceeded with no substantial modifications.

For the main data collection, an email was sent to each school requesting participation in the study. Subsequently, one teacher from each school was assigned and contacted, and a video seminar was held in which the researcher explained the purpose of the study, the data collection procedure, and adherence to ethical standards (i.e., ensuring privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation). Afterward, the survey link and a QR code were posted on the school notice board, and interested students were asked to complete the questionnaire. The survey data were collected from April 1, 2026, to June 6, 2026.

A total of 240 Nepalese students responded to the questionnaire. After collecting demographic information and before proceeding to the main survey questionnaire on the Korean Wave and its influence, the respondents were asked, "Have you ever heard of the country South Korea?" Of these, 20 respondents (8.3%) answered "No," and those who had never heard of the country were excluded. Therefore, a total sample of 220 respondents (91.7%) was used for further data analysis.

2.2. Variables and coding

The survey questionnaire included demographic variables and elements of soft power, including familiarity with Korea (i.e., Korean universities, economic development, and achievements in science and technology), exposure to Korean culture (i.e., dramas, K-pop, language, and cuisine), perceptions of and attitudes toward Korea, and interest in learning the Korean language.

Demographic variables included age, gender, residence, and educational level. Age was measured as a continuous variable. Gender was categorized as male or female. Residence was coded as 1 for students living within Kathmandu and 2 for those living outside Kathmandu. Educational level was coded as 1 for higher secondary students (Plus 2), 2 for undergraduate students, and 3 for graduate students.

Familiarity with Korea was assessed using three questions: "How familiar are you with South Korean universities?", "How familiar are you with South Korea's economic advancements?", and "How familiar are you with South Korea's advancements in science and technology?". Respondents were asked to rate their familiarity on a scale from 1 (Not familiar) to 5 (Very familiar). The values from these three questions were then summed to produce a score ranging from 3 to 15, with higher scores indicating greater familiarity. The reliability (Cronbach's α) value was 0.774.

Exposure to Korean culture was assessed using four questions: "How often do you watch Korean dramas or movies?", "How frequently do you listen to K-pop (Korean) music?", "Have you ever tried learning the Korean language?", and "How often do you consume Korean cuisine or visit Korean restaurants?". Respondents were asked to respond on a scale of 1 for rarely or never, 2 for occasionally, 3 for several times a month, 4 for weekly, and 5 for daily. The four variables were combined to produce a score ranging from 4 to 20, with higher values indicating greater exposure to Korean culture. The reliability (Cronbach's α) was 0.674.

Perception of South Korea's advancement in education, high technology, and innovation was assessed using the statement: "Please rate your perception of South Korea's advancements in higher education, technology, and innovation," with responses ranging from 1 (less influential) to 10 (highly influential). Perception of South Korea's cultural influence was measured using the statement: "Please rate your overall perception of Korea's cultural influence on a scale from 1 to 10," where 1 indicates a very negative perception, and 10 indicates a very positive perception. Similarly, respondents who had heard of South Korea rated their interest in learning Korean and culture using the statement: "Please rate your interest in learning more about the Korean language and culture," with responses ranging from 1 (less interested) to 10 (highly interested).

The dependent variable was the intention to pursue higher education in South Korea, measured by the question: "Would you consider pursuing higher education (e.g., university studies) in South Korea?" Respondents who answered "Yes" were coded as 1, and those who answered "No" were coded as 0.

2.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive, bivariate, and logistic regression analyses. In the bivariate analysis, the chi-square test was used for categorical independent variables, and the independent samples *t*-test was used for continuous independent variables. Regardless of the level of significance in the bivariate analysis, all variables were included in the final logistic regression model. Models 1 to 6 were created to examine the extent to which familiarity with Korea, exposure to the Korean Wave, perceptions of Korea's cultural influence, and interest in learning the Korean language were associated with the outcome after controlling for sociodemographic variables (i.e., age, gender, residence, and educational level). For the thematic analysis, 25 articles were manually read by the author, and the main themes and subthemes were subsequently extracted based on recurring patterns (Table A2). All statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical

Package for Social Sciences (version 29), with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$.

2.4. Ethical approval

The survey questionnaire, research proposal, and data collection procedure were assessed by the Ethics Committee of Keimyung University's Institutional Review Board and were approved for data collection (No. 40525-202509-HR-045-03; Date of approval: March 23, 2026).

3. Results

The thematic analysis of the 25 articles published in Nepalese national media between 2012 and 2025 revealed six themes that reflect how the Korean Wave is presented, interpreted, and experienced in Nepal. These themes included: (i) cultural influence, (ii) diplomatic influence, (iii) educational aspirations, (iv) governance influence, (v) economic outcomes, and (vi) challenges. The first theme concerns the growing influence of the Korean Wave on Nepalese youth, particularly in shaping their identity and transforming their lifestyles. The second theme highlights the Korean Wave as an instrument for strengthening diplomatic influence and enhancing bilateral relations between South Korea and Nepal. The Korean Embassy in Kathmandu has organized various programs, and local youth have actively participated in embassy-led activities. Third, media narratives describe the growing interest among Nepalese youth in pursuing higher education in South Korea. Pursuing higher education has become an aspiration, with the expectation that it will improve their socioeconomic status. The fourth theme is that Nepalese media portray South Korea's digital governance system as a model Nepal could learn from and apply. The fifth theme concerns the entrepreneurial success stories of Nepalese migrant workers who returned. After returning from South Korea, they established businesses in Nepal, generating income and creating employment opportunities for other youth. The articles portray returnee Nepalese migrant workers as valuable entrepreneurial resources. Finally, Nepalese national newspapers also present the challenges associated with the Korean Wave, including educational scams, fraudulent consultancies, and student exploitation.

Because the Korean Wave has a substantial influence on Nepalese society, as portrayed in the media, and brings both benefits and challenges, a subsequent survey was conducted to examine whether Nepalese youth intend to pursue higher education in South Korea and which factors are associated with that intention. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, showing that 80.5% of students reported intending to pursue higher education in South Korea. Approximately half of the respondents were male, and half were female. About 59% of the students were from the Kathmandu Valley. Among the respondents, 37.3% had completed higher secondary education, 49.5% were undergraduate students, and 13.2% were graduate students. Approximately 42% of the students were pursuing studies in humanities and social sciences, including business and management, while 41.8% were in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. Students reported a high level of interest in learning Korean, a positive image of Korea, and positive perceptions of Korea's advancement in education, high technology, and innovation.

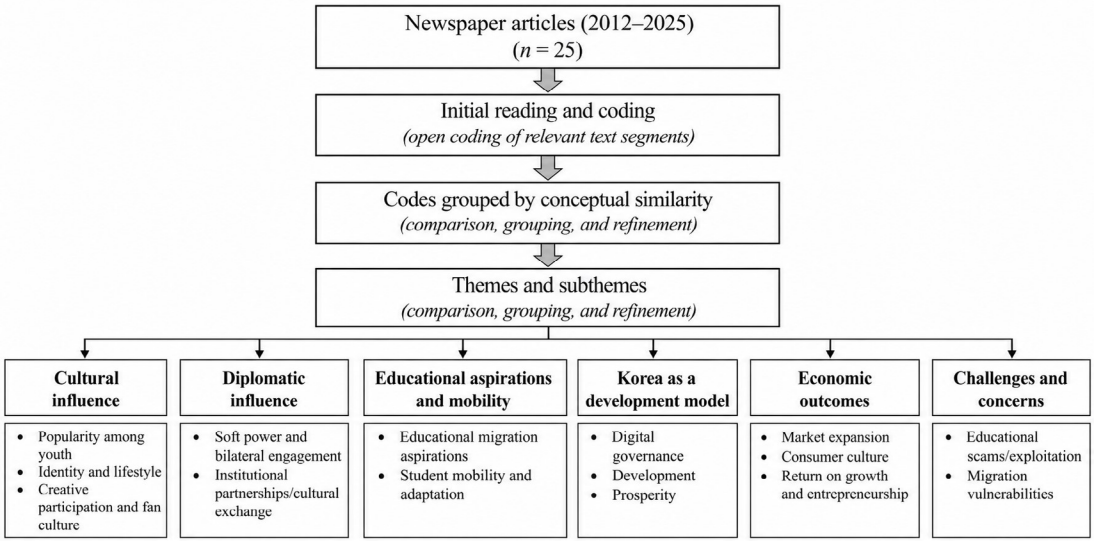

Figure 1. Thematic map of the qualitative analysis of Nepalese newspaper articles

Table 1. The descriptive characteristics of the sample (n = 220)

Variable	Number (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean (Standard deviation)
Demographic variables			
Age (years)			21.65 (7.10)
Gender			
Male	112	50.9	
Female	108	49.1	
Resident			
Outside of Kathmandu Valley	90	40.9	
Within Kathmandu Valley	130	59.1	
Education level			
High school graduate	82	37.3	
Undergraduate degree	109	49.5	
Graduate degree	29	13.2	
Familiarity			
Korean university			
Not familiar (1)	57	25.9	
Slightly familiar (2)	56	25.5	
Moderately familiar (3)	40	18.2	
Somewhat familiar (4)	39	17.7	
Very familiar (5)	28	12.7	
Economic development			
Not familiar (1)	58	26.4	
Slightly familiar (2)	56	25.5	
Moderately familiar (3)	39	17.7	
Somewhat familiar (4)	39	17.7	
Very familiar (5)	28	12.7	
Achievement in science/ technology			
Not familiar (1)	17	7.7	
Slightly familiar (2)	23	10.5	
Moderately familiar (3)	56	25.5	
Somewhat familiar (4)	52	23.6	
Very familiar (5)	72	32.7	

(*Cont'd...*)

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Variable	Number (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean (Standard deviation)
Exposure to the Korean Wave			
Ever watched a Korean drama			
Never	52	23.6	
Occasionally	34	15.5	
Several times a month	82	37.3	
Weekly	38	17.3	
Daily	14	6.4	
Ever listen to K-pop			
Never	94	42.7	
Occasionally	28	12.7	
Several times a month	52	23.6	
Weekly	25	11.4	
Daily	21	9.5	
Ever learn Korean			
Never	109	49.5	
Occasionally	55	25.0	
Several times a month	16	7.3	
Weekly	5	2.3	
Daily	35	15.9	
Ever consume Korean cuisine			
Never	98	44.5	
Occasionally	36	16.4	
Several times a month	80	36.4	
Weekly	5	2.3	
Daily	1	0.5	
Perceptual and attitudinal factors			
Interest in learning Korean (1–10)			7.17 (2.35)
Perception of Korea's cultural influence (1–10)			7.21 (2.16)
Perception of Korea's advancement in education, high-tech, and innovation (1–10)			7.50 (2.14)
Intention to pursue higher education in Korea			
No	43	19.5	
Yes	177	80.5	
Total	220	100	

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Table 2 presents the bivariate associations with the intention to pursue higher education in South Korea. Age showed a marginal association with the intention to pursue higher education in South Korea ($p < 0.10$), while place of residence and educational level were significantly associated with intention ($p < 0.05$). Familiarity with Korean universities, economic development, and achievements in science and technology were significantly associated with intention ($p < 0.01$). Exposure to the Korean Wave (i.e., dramas, K-pop, language, and cuisine), perceptions of Korea's cultural influence, and interest in learning Korean were significantly associated with intention ($p < 0.001$). Perceptions of Korea's advancement in education, high technology, and innovation were also significantly associated with intention ($p < 0.001$). Gender was not significantly associated with intention.

Table 3 presents the logistic regression analysis. Six models are presented, and each model includes sociodemographic variables. The first model includes sociodemographic variables and familiarity with Korea. The second model includes exposure to the Korean Wave; the third includes perceptions of Korea's advancement; the fourth includes perceptions of Korea's cultural influence; and the fifth includes interest in learning Korean. The final model includes all variables, including sociodemographic characteristics, familiarity with Korea, exposure to the Korean Wave, perceptions of Korea's advancement, perceptions of Korea's cultural influence, and interest in learning Korean.

In Model 1, students living outside the Kathmandu Valley were 2.50 times (confidence interval [CI] = 1.11–5.67, $p < 0.05$) more likely to intend to pursue higher education in South Korea than those living within the Kathmandu Valley. Place of residence (i.e., students living outside the Kathmandu Valley) remained statistically associated in all models. In Model 2, students with greater exposure to the Korean Wave were 1.24 times (CI = 1.09–1.42, $p < 0.05$) more likely to intend to pursue higher education in South Korea. In Model 3, students with more positive perceptions of Korea's advancement were 1.29

Table 2. Bivariate associations with intention to pursue higher education in South Korea (Yes, *n* = 177)

Variable	Number (*n*)	Percentage (%)	Mean (Standard deviation)
Demographic variables			
Age (years)			21.07 (6.24)
Gender			
Male	90	50.8	
Female	87	49.2	
Resident*			
Within Kathmandu Valley	98	55.4	
Outside of Kathmandu Valley	79	44.6	
Education level*			
High school graduate	69	39.0	
Undergraduate degree	90	50.8	
Graduate degree	18	10.2	
Familiarity and exposure factors			
Familiar: Korean university, economic development, and achievement in science and technology**			9.27 (3.26)
Exposure to the Korean Wave: Drama/movies, K-pop, language, and cuisine***			9.44 (3.65)
Perceptual and attitudinal factors			
Perception of Korea's advancement in education, high-tech and innovation (1–10)***			7.73 (2.09)
Perception of Korea's image (1–10)***			7.49 (2.09)
Interest in learning Korean***			7.67 (2.26)
Total	177	100	

Note: Statistical significance determined at *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

times (CI = 1.09–1.51, $p < 0.01$) more likely to intend to pursue higher education in South Korea. In Model 4, students with more positive perceptions of Korea's cultural influence were 1.39 times (CI = 1.18–1.65, $p < 0.001$) more likely to have such an intention. In Model 5, students with greater interest in learning Korean were 1.54 times (CI = 1.31–1.81, $p < 0.001$) more likely to intend to pursue higher education in South Korea. In the final model, only interest in learning Korean remained significantly associated with the intention to pursue higher education, along with place of residence. Students with greater interest in learning Korean were 1.46 times (CI = 1.19–1.80, $p < 0.001$) more likely to intend to pursue higher education in South Korea than those with less interest in learning Korean.

Table 3. Odds ratios for the intention to pursue higher education in South Korea

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
Age (years)	0.99 (0.92–1.06)	0.98 (0.92–1.06)	0.99 (0.92–1.06)	0.99 (0.92–1.06)	1.01 (0.94–1.09)	1.01 (0.94–1.09)
Gender						
Male (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Female	0.91 (0.45–1.87)	0.74 (0.36–1.55)	0.91 (0.44–1.88)	0.95 (0.45–1.98)	0.75 (0.34–1.63)	0.74 (0.33–1.65)
Resident						
Kathmandu Valley (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Outside of Kathmandu	*2.50 (1.11–5.67)**	3.20 (1.36–7.56)**	2.48 (1.10–5.60)*	2.76 (1.19–6.41)*	2.71 (1.15–6.41)*	3.08 (1.23–7.69)*
Education level						
Graduate degree (ref.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
High school graduate	1.42 (0.29–6.87)	1.30 (0.27–6.20)	1.71 (0.36–8.19)	1.97 (0.41–9.57)	2.08 (0.39–11.04)	1.89 (0.35–10.38)
Undergraduate Degree	1.65 (0.48–5.71)	1.27 (0.37–4.39)	2.06 (0.60–7.01)	2.17 (0.63–7.48)	2.06 (0.55–7.74)	1.84 (0.47–7.26)
Familiarity with Korea	1.17 (1.04–1.32)**					1.07 (0.94–1.23)
Exposure to the Korean Wave		1.24 (1.09–1.42)*				1.02 (0.86–1.21)
Perception of Korea's advancement			1.29 (1.09–1.51)**			0.92 (0.72–1.17)
Perception of Korea's cultural influence				1.39 (1.18–1.65)***		1.13 (0.89–1.44)
Interest in learning Korean					1.54 (1.31–1.81)***	1.46 (1.19–1.80)***
−2 log likelihood	199.101	194.528	197.283	190.960	174.006	171.204
Cox & Snell R^2	0.080	0.099	0.087	0.113	0.179	0.189
Nagelkerke R^2	0.127	0.157	0.139	0.180	0.285	0.302

Note: Statistical significance determined at *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.
Abbreviations: CI: Confidence interval; OR: Odds ratio.

4. Discussion

This study integrated media analysis with survey data to examine how South Korea is portrayed in Nepalese national newspapers and how the Korean Wave is associated with Nepalese youths' intentions to pursue higher education in South Korea. The findings revealed that Nepalese national media consistently portrayed the Korean Wave as extending beyond entertainment, functioning as a form of soft power that shapes cultural influence, diplomatic relations, economic outcomes, positive perceptions of South Korea's technological advancement, and educational aspirations. Together, these media narratives portray a favorable image of South Korea that may be associated with Nepalese youths' educational aspirations to pursue higher education in South Korea. Furthermore, the convergence of the qualitative and quantitative findings suggests that *Hallyu* in Nepal should not be understood simply as the consumption of Korean popular culture. Rather, it operates within a broader environment of cultural attraction, educational opportunity, technological reputation, and bilateral engagement through which South Korea has become increasingly visible and attractive to Nepalese youth.

Korean soft power has become an important means of strengthening and expanding Nepalese youths' interest in South Korea, as their desire to pursue higher education in the country has increased substantially. As exposure to South Korea has grown among Nepalese youth, the number of Nepalese students studying in South Korea has also increased exponentially. These findings align with Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2002; 2005), which suggests that, like United States institutions, the Korean Wave enhances positive perceptions of South Korea and increases its attractiveness as a destination for higher education. This finding also aligns with Ghazarian (2016). Although Ghazarian's study was conducted in the United States, its findings suggest that the rapid increase in Nepalese students at South Korean universities is associated with South Korea's positive national image. Furthermore, the qualitative findings portrayed South Korea as culturally influential, technologically advanced, and educationally competitive, while the quantitative findings further demonstrated that familiarity with Korea, exposure to the Korean Wave, and positive perceptions of Korea's advancement were associated with the intention to pursue higher education in South Korea. Moreover, the quantitative findings showed that interest in learning Korean was significantly associated with the intention to pursue higher education at South Korean universities. These findings suggest that the significance of the Korean Wave may extend beyond generating favorable attitudes toward Korean entertainment and culture. In the Nepalese context, cultural attraction appears to coexist with perceptions of South Korea as a technologically advanced and educationally attractive country. Thus, higher education represents one concrete domain in which Korea's soft power may be expressed through individual aspirations for international mobility. This extends the application of soft power theory from cultural attraction itself to the educational choices and aspirations of young people.

The most notable finding is that interest in learning Korean remained the only soft power factor significantly associated with the intention to pursue higher education in South Korea after controlling for all other variables. This finding provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the Korean Wave and educational aspirations. Although familiarity with Korea, exposure to the Korean Wave, perceptions of Korea's cultural influence, and perceptions of Korea's advancement were associated with study intention in respective adjusted models, these associations were attenuated when all soft power-related factors were considered simultaneously. In contrast, interest in learning Korean remained independently associated with study intention. This suggests that cultural exposure alone may not fully explain educational aspirations; rather, more active engagement with Korean culture, particularly through interest in learning Korean, may be especially relevant to the intention to study in South Korea. In this sense, interest in Korean may serve as an important bridge between cultural attraction and educational aspirations.

This finding also highlights the role of Korean language learning in South Korea's educational diplomacy and internationalization strategy. Similarly, the importance of learning Korean and youth interest, as reported in the Indonesian case (Youngsun *et al.*, 2024) and the Middle Eastern case (Nye & Kim, 2019), suggests that the Korean Wave has motivated youth worldwide to learn Korean. Consistent with previous country-specific studies (e.g., Akter, 2019; Barczynska & Kang, 2022; Koo, 2020; Hahm & Song, 2021; Ju & Lee, 2015; Oh & Chae, 2013; Yook *et al.*, 2014), the current study supports the idea that the Korean Wave has an increasing global impact, creating South Korea's soft power worldwide and promoting Korea, Korean culture, the Korean language, and entrepreneurship. The present study extends this literature by showing that, in the Nepalese context, interest in the Korean language is associated not merely with cultural engagement but also with a specific educational aspiration—the intention to pursue higher education in South Korea.

The Korean Wave gives South Korea a unique competitive advantage by increasing its attractiveness. As Nye (2005)

suggests, albeit in the American context, international students who have completed higher education in South Korea can further enhance Korea's image and strengthen its soft power. Consistent with previous studies (Bok-Rae, 2015; Jang & Paik, 2012; Jin, 2019; E.Y. Jung, 2009; H. Jung, 2019; Jung-Kim, 2014; Kim, 2016), the influence of the Korean Wave has expanded worldwide, and its role has extended beyond cultural products, generating a positive image in global cultural and political contexts while also contributing to the growing interest in and the expansion of South Korean higher education institutions. From a soft power perspective, attracting international students should therefore be viewed not as the endpoint of cultural influence but as the beginning of a longer institutional relationship. Students' actual academic and social experiences in South Korea can potentially reinforce—or undermine—the favorable image that initially attracted them. However, the long-term success of this strategy depends not only on increasing student enrollment but also on ensuring educational quality, adequate language preparation, academic support, and successful social integration. Strengthening these areas will help transform cultural attraction into successful educational experiences and sustainable international partnerships, ultimately enhancing Korea's soft power.

The media narratives of educational scams, student exploitation, and fraudulent educational consultancies in Nepal are also worth discussing. Due to the influence of the Korean Wave, many young people are eager to pursue higher education in South Korea, and these educational consultancies take advantage of this demand. More recently, a growing number of Nepalese students have enrolled in lower-tier universities in South Korea, where institutions struggle to recruit domestic students. The mass recruitment of international students also raises concerns about further challenges, such as the quality of student recruitment, the quality and design of educational curricula, and students seeking unauthorized employment opportunities in South Korea. In some cases, students lack accurate information about the South Korean higher education system, academic expectations, and Korean society and academic culture. These aspects need to be considered at the institutional level to maintain and sustain South Korea's long-term soft power strategy. These findings reveal an important limitation of soft power: cultural attraction alone does not guarantee positive outcomes in all contexts. Although the Korean Wave may generate initial interest in South Korea, negative experiences involving misinformation, financial burdens, inadequate academic support, or exploitation may weaken the favorable image on which soft power depends.

The qualitative findings of this study revealed that returnee migrants in Nepal are valuable entrepreneurial resources, contributing to positive economic outcomes. The vast majority of Nepalese in South Korea work under the EPS, which allows Nepalese unskilled and semi-skilled workers to work in South Korea. Those who completed their tenure and returned to Nepal have become economically successful by leveraging the technical skills and work diligence they acquired while working in South Korea, as well as the capital they accumulated during their employment. As depicted in the media, these returnee migrants have established businesses that contributed to local economic development in Nepal and created jobs in local communities. Although labor migration is distinct from educational mobility, these narratives demonstrate that Korea's image in Nepal is also shaped by the experiences and socioeconomic outcomes of Nepalese migrants. Returnees may function as informal transmitters of knowledge and perceptions about South Korea within their families and communities. Accordingly, Korea's soft power in Nepal appears to operate through interconnected cultural, educational, economic, and people-to-people channels rather than through popular culture alone.

The study has several limitations. First, the study employed a cross-sectional purposive sampling design; therefore, causal relationships cannot be established, and the findings cannot be generalized to all Nepalese students. Second, there is a lack of peer-reviewed empirical research on the Korean Wave in Nepal, and reliance on newspaper articles from Nepalese national media is another limitation. Third, the study examined students' intentions rather than their actual behavior in pursuing higher education. Fourth, the Korean Wave exposure scale showed modest internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.674$), possibly because it captures distinct forms of cultural engagement, such as watching Korean dramas, listening to K-pop, learning Korean, and consuming Korean cuisine, which may not necessarily occur together. Future studies could refine this construct by developing and validating separate or multidimensional measures of different forms of Korean Wave exposure. Fifth, voluntary participation may have caused self-selection bias. Sixth, because both the independent and dependent variables in the quantitative analysis were collected through the same self-reported survey at a single point in time, the findings may be subject to common method bias. Future studies could reduce this potential bias by using multiple data sources, longitudinal designs, or objective measures of educational behavior. Despite the limitations, this study has strengths. By integrating media narratives with a subsequent survey, it extends the literature on the Korean Wave by demonstrating that *Hallyu* not only provides

entertainment but also positively enhances South Korea's image and strengthens its economic, social, cultural, educational, and global competitiveness. These findings have important policy implications for strengthening the Korean Wave while also improving the understanding of its externalities, such as educational scams and student exploitation. Further research should explore the lived experiences of prospective and current students to better understand how the Korean Wave influences actual educational migration to South Korea.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that the Korean Wave in Nepal extends beyond popular culture and contributes to South Korea's broader attractiveness as a destination for higher education. The media analysis illustrates a wider environment in which Korea is portrayed through cultural influence, educational opportunities, diplomatic engagement, development, and economic outcomes, while also revealing challenges associated with educational migration. Importantly, although all soft power-related factors were individually associated with educational aspirations, interest in learning Korean remained the most robust factor when considered simultaneously. This suggests that the relationship between *Hallyu* and educational aspirations may not simply result from exposure to Korean popular culture itself; rather, cultural attraction may become particularly consequential when it develops into a more active form of engagement, such as interest in learning Korean. Accordingly, learning Korean may serve as an important bridge through which cultural attraction translates into educational aspirations. These findings highlight the potential role of language education, together with accurate information and institutional support for prospective international students, in sustaining South Korea's educational soft power.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

This is a single-authored article.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study protocol, including the survey questionnaire and data collection procedures, was reviewed and approved by Keimyung University's Institutional Review Board (IRB No. 40525-202509-HR-045-03). All participants provided informed consent before participating in the survey.

Consent for publication

Participants provided consent for their anonymized data to be used and published for research publication.

Availability of data

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix

Table A1. Registered Nepalese population in South Korea by selected visa categories, 2016–2026

Year	Registered Nepalese	EPS workers (E-9)	Students (D-2)	University professors (E-1)	Permanent resident (F-5)
2016	33,046	29,510	629	19	84
2017	36,290	31,509	881	14	106
2018	40,232	34,469	1,425	18	111
2019	43,653	35,136	1,984	12	125
2020	39,165	30,903	2,477	15	132
2021	37,116	28,457	2,599	23	141
2022	47,858	37,414	2,750	26	157
2023	63,369	46,516	4,251	16	189
2024	74,641	47,108	8,867	19	220
2025	91,895	50,782	15,584	15	258
2026	99,408	52,046	19,499	18	265

Note: The data were obtained from the annual data archives of the Ministry of Justice and can be retrieved from: https://www.immigration.go.kr/immigration/1569/subview.do
Abbreviation: EPS: Employment Permit System.

Table A2. Newspaper sources (*N* = 25)

Title	Date published	Newspaper source	URL
Nepal embraces and dances to the beat of *Hallyu*'s global influence	December 10, 2023	OnlineKhabar	https://english.onlinekhabar.com/hallyu-korean-wave-nepal.html
Korean Culture Night held	November 12, 2022	The Rising Nepal	https://risingnepaldaily.com/news/18410
The Korean wave	July 7, 2017	My Republica	https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/the-korean-wave
Korean wave subsides, but not snuffed	February 9, 2012	My Republica	https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/korean-wave-subsides-but-not-snuffed
K-Pop in K-Town	December 14, 2018	Nepali Times	https://nepalitimes.com/banner/k-pop-in-k-town
2024 K-pop World Festival held in Kathmandu	July 7, 2024	Nepal News	https://english.nepalnews.com/s/capital/2024-kpop-world-festival-held-in-kathmandu/
2024 K-pop World Festival held in Kathmandu	July 9, 2024	The Rising Nepal	https://risingnepaldaily.com/news/45469
K-pop has conquered the world—and Kathmandu with it	November 13, 2019	The Kathmandu Post	https://kathmandupost.com/art-culture/2019/11/13/k-pop-has-conquered-the-world-and-kathmandu-with-it-1573563789
Korean-wave: "Yo Man Ta Mero Nepali Ho"	January 27, 2024	Nepali Times	https://nepalitimes.com/news/yo-man-ta-mero-nepali-ho
Squid Game: latest addition to the global Hallyu wave	October 27, 2021	Nepali Times	https://nepalitimes.com/news/squid-game-latest-addition-to-the-global-hallyu-wave

(*Cont'd...*)

Table A2. (*Continued*)

Title	Date published	Newspaper source	URL
Surfing the K-pop wave	August 17, 2021	The Kathmandu Post	https://kathmandupost.com/art-culture/2021/08/17/surfing-the-k-pop-wave
The Final Round of 2022 K-pop World Festival in Nepal to be held tomorrow	June 17, 2022	The Kathmandu Post	https://kathmandupost.com/art-culture/2022/06/17/2022-nepal-preliminary-round-of-k-pop-world-festival-to-be-held-tomorrow
Minimare win Nepal K-pop fest	July 17, 2023	The Himalayan Times	https://thehimalayantimes.com/entertainment/minimare-win-nepal-k-pop-fest
Korian Bhasha Sikne Lahar [The growing trend of learning the Korean language]	March 22, 2023	Kantipur	https://ekantipur.com/koshi-pradesh/2023/03/22/167945219346216962.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com
Digital Shasanko Koriyali Model [The Korean Model of Digital Governance]	May 22, 2025	Kantipur	https://ekantipur.com/opinion/2025/05/22/the-korean-model-of-digital-governance-59-36.html?utm_s
Kirtiman Rachdai K-pop 'Aapti.' [K-pop 'APT.' Setting Records]	January 21, 2025	Kantipur	https://ekantipur.com/entertainment/2025/01/20/k-pop-aapti-creating-a-record-42-37.html?utm_sourc
Journey into the Culinary Heart of Korea: Dokdo	May 12, 2022	Nepal News	https://english.nepalnews.com/s/entertainment-lifestyle/journey-into-the-culinary-heart-of-korea-dokd
The Korean craze in Kathmandu	January 19, 2023	The Annapurna Express	https://theannapurnaexpress.com/story/37210/
2025 K-Beauty Festa celebrates Korean culture and cosmetics in Kathmandu	June 9, 2025	MyRepublica	https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/2025-k-beauty-festa-celebrates-korean-culture-and-cosmetics-in-kathmandu-53-94.html
Panchkhal students learning Taekwondo and Korean culture	July 28, 2023	The Rising Nepal	https://tinyurl.com/yc2bf2jh
Consultancy scams leave Nepali students stranded in Korea	August 28, 2025	The Annapurna Express	https://theannapurnaexpress.com/story/57868/
Market for cosmetic products looks good	January 15, 2019	The Kathmandu Post	https://kathmandupost.com/money/2019/01/15/market-for-cosmetic-products-looks-good
The Korean connection in Nepal	April 19, 2022	Nepal News	https://tinyurl.com/bdh7fckm
Affordable places for Nepali students in Seoul	October 13, 2025	The Kathmandu Post	https://tinyurl.com/yswaput5
Korean skills, enterprise in Nepal	April 15, 2025	Kantipur	https://ekantipur.com/opinion/2025/04/16/en/korean-skills-enterprise-in-nepal-15-41.html