THE IMPACT OF KOREAN CULTURE IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT ON LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS AND CULTURAL AWARENESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN HO CHI MINH CITY

TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA VĂN HÓA HÀN QUỐC TRONG MÔI TRƯỜNG SỐ ĐẾN HIỆU QUẢ HỌC TẬP VÀ NHẬN THỨC VĂN HÓA CỦA SINH VIÊN THÀNH PHỐ HỒ CHÍ MINH

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Abstract - This study investigates the impact of Korean digital culture on Korean language acquisition and intercultural competence of university students in Ho Chi Minh City. Grounded in the theories of Krashen (1985) and Bourdieu (1986), this research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining large-scale surveys with in-depth interviews to analyze links between popular culture exposure and psychological learning factors. A two-stage quantitative survey assessed cultural awareness in 4,690 students and the effects on learning motivation, language anxiety, and acculturation in 150 Korean language majors. Analyzed via descriptive statistics and correlation, the findings reveal that digital cultural exposure positively influences language acquisition and enhances intercultural understanding, confirming its significant role in foreign language education.

Key words - Korean Culture; Digital Environment; Hallyu; Cultural Awareness; Intercultural Competence.

Tóm tắt - Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu tác động của văn hóa Hàn Quốc trên nền tảng số đối với việc học tiếng Hàn và năng lực liên văn hóa của sinh viên tại TP. HCM. Dựa trên lý thuyết của Krashen (1985) và Bourdieu (1986), nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp, kết hợp khảo sát quy mô lớn và phỏng vấn sâu để phân tích mối liên hệ giữa mức độ tiếp xúc với văn hóa đại chúng Hàn và các yếu tố tâm lý trong học tập. Giai đoạn khảo sát định lượng gồm hai đợt: đợt một triển khai với 4.690 sinh viên nhằm đo lường nhận thức và sự quan tâm đến các yếu tố văn hóa như lịch sử, giáo dục, chính trị; đợt hai với 150 sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Hàn nhằm khảo sát tác động của văn hóa số đến động lực học tập, lo âu ngôn ngữ và khả năng thích nghi. Dữ liệu được xử lý bằng phương pháp thống kê mô tả và tương quan, cho thấy ảnh hưởng tích cực của văn hóa số đến việc học ngôn ngữ và tăng hiểu biết văn hóa.

Từ khóa - Văn hóa Hàn Quốc; Môi trường số; Hallyu; Nhận thức văn hóa; Năng lực liên văn hóa.

1. Introduction

In recent years, comprehensive cooperation between Vietnam and South Korea has continuously developed, particularly in the fields of culture and education. The Hallyu wave, with products such as K-pop, K-dramas, and Webtoons, has spread vigorously in Vietnam, attracting significant interest from young people, especially university students. Learners are not only consuming content but also actively interacting with Korean culture through digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Netflix, leading to more continuous and proactive exposure than ever before [1].

Vietnam is currently among the countries with the largest scale of Korean language training in Asia. The Hallyu phenomenon has grown strongly, with the emergence of Vietnamese K-pop artists like Hanbin (TEMPEST) and Hanni (New Jeans), and large-scale cultural events are held regularly. Following the success of series such as Squid Game (2021), Duolingo reported that in 2022, Korean became the seventh most studied language worldwide, and in Vietnam, the number of Korean learners surpassed both Chinese and Japanese [2], [3].

However, a question arises: Does cultural enthusiasm truly translate into sustainable learning motivation? Does exposure to culture through digital platforms enhance language proficiency and cultural awareness, or does it

lead to distorted perceptions? Most current research focuses on curriculum content and basic cultural theory [3], [4], while the digital environment and psychological-emotional factors of learners have not been fully explored, especially in local contexts such as Ho Chi Minh City. Therefore, this study aims to clarify the role of Korean culture in the digital environment in shaping motivation, language proficiency, and cultural adaptability among Vietnamese students, thereby narrowing the theoretical and practical gap in current language education research.

2. Literature review and research methods

For the first approach, this study examines the issue using Bourdieu's theory of Cultural Capital [5] and Krashen's Affective Filter [6] to understand how students construct and adapt digital cultural products - namely K-pop, K-dramas, and Webtoons - and transform them into learning motivation, while highlighting the potential impact of psychological conditions such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation on language acquisition.

Secondly, the theory of Cultural Adaptation [7] alongside Vygotsky's Social Interaction [4] helps explain how intercultural communication competence is formed through online interactions on digital platforms.

This study combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to clarify the two main impacts of Korean culture

in the digital environment on learning motivation and intercultural competence among university students in Ho Chi Minh City.

The research was conducted using a mixed methods approach to ensure both breadth and depth of results. The quantitative survey was carried out in two phases during October and November 2023.

• **Phase 1:** A convenience sampling method was applied with a sample size of 4,690 students at Van Hien University (Ho Chi Minh City). The questionnaire, consisting of 63 items, focused on the level of exposure to Korean culture through digital platforms (music, films, social media, etc.) and awareness of cultural aspects such as history, education, and politics.

• **Phase 2:** The second survey was conducted at three universities in Ho Chi Minh City offering Korean Studies programs. A purposive sampling method was used, with 150 Korean language majors completing a 25-item questionnaire. The content was adjusted based on prominent trends identified in the first phase, focusing on psychological factors such as learning motivation, language anxiety, and cultural adaptation.

• **In parallel with the quantitative survey**, the research team conducted in-depth interviews with 12 students to supplement qualitative perspectives, including 10 students who participated in the second survey phase. These semi-structured interviews were conducted in December 2023, centering on personal experiences with Korean culture in the digital environment and its impact on learning and cultural adaptation.

The interview content focused on personal experiences interacting with Korean culture via digital platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Netflix, etc.), clarifying psychological stages from initial curiosity to adaptation and acculturation, in line with the theories of Krashen [6] and Spencer-Oatey [7]. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis, with specific coded themes including: (1) learning motivation, (2) adaptation process, and (3) development of intercultural competence in the digital environment.

3. Research results

3.1. Impact of Korean culture in the digital environment on motivation and effectiveness in learning Korean

Survey results indicate that Korean cultural content on digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Netflix has a clear impact on the motivation to learn Korean among students in Ho Chi Minh City. The proportion of students who regularly listen to K-pop reached 53.8%, surpassing interest in traditional elements such as Hanbok or Arirang, reflecting a trend toward modern cultural engagement that aligns with youth preferences and stimulates language learning needs.

This analysis is consistent with Bourdieu's theory of "Cultural Capital" [5], whereby popular cultural products become resources that learners actively accumulate to enhance learning effectiveness. Notably, 81.8% of students in the in-depth survey stated that cultural proximity between Vietnam and South Korea helps reinforce learning

motivation. Frequent exposure to digital content not only generates interest but also reduces anxiety, supporting more effective acquisition and application of Korean in practice.

Table 1. *Perceptions of Hanbok in Korean Culture*

What is Hanbok?		
	Frequency	**Percentage (%)**
Classical literature	192	4.1
Folk songs	167	3.6
Traditional food	236	5
Traditional clothing	4095	87.3
Total	**4690**	**100**

Table 2. *Perceptions of Arirang in Korean Culture*

What is Arirang?		
	Frequency	**Percentage (%)**
Traditional cuisine	619	13.2
Famous landmarks	518	11
Songs	2749	58.6
National anthem	804	17.1
Total	**4690**	**100**

Table 3. *Frequency of Listening to K-pop*

Frequency Level		
	Frequency	**Percentage (%)**
Very frequently	1547	33
Quite frequently	977	20.8
Occasionally	1572	33.5
Rarely	482	10.3
Never	112	2.4
Total	**4690**	**100**

Tables 1, 2, 3: Source: Project survey results, 12/2023 [8]

The study found that regular exposure to K-pop, K-dramas, and other popular cultural content not only sparks interest but also fosters a distinct desire to learn. Specifically, 53.8% of surveyed students at Van Hien University regularly use Korean cultural products, and 60% of them are willing to learn Korean to experience the culture more deeply [1].

Not only in Vietnam, but also in Australia [2], K-pop and K-dramas have been identified as significant factors motivating students to choose Korean language studies. Consumption of Hallyu content via digital platforms enables sustained learning motivation, highlighting the need to facilitate cultural reception in target language acquisition.

Jee's research showed that the number of students registering for Korean language courses in the United States increased by 44.7% between 2009 and 2013 - the highest among less commonly taught languages [8]. This result reflects a growing trend in language learning motivation under the influence of popular culture, providing a comparative foundation for the current context of Vietnamese students.

3.2. Impact of Korean culture in the digital environment on intercultural competence

Survey results on attitudes towards the Korean language (Table 4) show that most students have a positive attitude, with 70.1% expressing favorable feelings - 35%

very favorable and 35.1% quite favorable. This demonstrates the important role of Korean culture, especially through popular cultural elements, in shaping positive attitudes and motivation for language learning.

Table 4. Attitude Toward the Korean Language

Level of Favorability	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very favorable	1641	35
Quite favorable	1646	35.1
Neutral	1290	27.5
Unfavorable	70	1.5
Very unfavorable	43	0.9
Total	**4690**	**100**

Table 5. Attitude Toward Korean People

Level of Favorability	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very favorable	1135	24.2
Quite favorable	1604	34.2
Neutral	1792	38.2
Unfavorable	113	2.4
Very unfavorable	46	0.9
Total	**4690**	**100**

Source: Project survey results, 12/2023 [9]

Analysis of survey data on cultural awareness and adaptability further clarifies the impact of Korean culture on digital platforms on students' intercultural competence. Table 5 indicates that 58.4% of students express positive attitudes towards Korean people, while Table 6 shows that 63.6% of students wish to make friends and interact with them. Comparing levels of positive attitude and desire for social interaction reveals a strong correlation between these factors.

Applying Spencer-Oatey's 'Cultural Adaptation' theory [7], in-depth survey results show that 89.6% of students reported that the digital environment significantly improved their adaptability and intercultural communication skills. This figure is noteworthy compared to the initial positive attitude rate (58.4%), indicating that not only is positive attitude reinforced, but adaptability and communication competence are also markedly enhanced through real interaction experiences on digital platforms.

Table 6. Willingness to Make Friends with Korean People

Level of Willingness		
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very willing	1346	28.7
Willing	1636	34.9
Neutral	1535	32.7
Unwilling	114	2.4
Very unwilling	59	1.3
Total	**4690**	**100**

Source: Project survey results, 12/2023 [9]

Vygotsky's 'Social Interaction' theory [4] provides further theoretical grounding, suggesting that direct and continuous communication experiences on digital platforms create a natural environment for students to develop intercultural skills effectively. Through in-depth interviews, students affirmed that these interactions helped them build confidence, reduce anxiety when using the language, and apply language and intercultural communication skills more naturally in real-life situations.

Synthesizing these analyses, the research comprehensively and profoundly elucidates the role of Korean culture in the digital environment, emphasizing the close correlation between cultural awareness, learning motivation, social environment, and the development of intercultural skills, thereby providing clear and convincing answers to the research questions. The psychological transformation from positive attitude to desire for interaction demonstrates the soft power of Korean culture in attracting and building trust among young people. From admiration for education to positive attitudes towards people, students in Ho Chi Minh City gradually develop a need for cultural integration, promoting language proficiency and social adaptability. To optimize this potential, it is necessary to enhance practical exchange activities, helping to transform positive attitudes into strong motivation for learning and personal development.

3.3. Key psychological factors affecting learning and communication

Through deeper surveys, the research shows that learning Korean among students is not merely about mastering the language but is closely related to exposure and absorption of Korean culture. Psychological factors including motivation, communication anxiety, and confidence directly affect learning outcomes.

According to Table 7, 93.5% of students believe that similarities between Vietnamese and Korean cultures greatly support Korean language learning; among them, 29.9% rate the influence as very high and 63.6% as high. These results align with Krashen's Affective Filter Theory [6], which proposes that a culturally attuned learning context can reduce psychological barriers and facilitate language acquisition.

Data in Tables 8 and 9 further support the importance of cultural factors for motivation and learning environment. Specifically, 81.8% of students believe that cultural similarities enhance learning motivation, and 89.6% believe that cultural similarities significantly affect their Korean learning environment; these findings integrate well with Vygotsky's Social Interaction Theory [4].

Table 7. Influence of Cultural Similarities on Korean Language Learning

Level of Influence	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very significant	1402	29.9
Significant	2983	63.6
Minor	244	5.2
None	61	1.3
Total	**4690**	**100**

Table 8. Influence of Cultural Similarities on Motivation to Learn Korean

Level of Influence	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very significant	1158	24.7
Significant	2678	57.1
Negligible	732	15.6
None	122	2.6
Total	**4690**	**100**

Table 9. *Influence of Cultural Similarities on the Korean Learning Environment*

Level of Influence	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very significant	793	16.9
Significant	3410	72.7
Negligible	487	10.4
None	0	0.0
Total	**4690**	**100**

Source: Project survey results, 12/2023 [9]

Note: In the survey, "learning environment" refers to spaces where Korean is used in practice, such as classrooms, clubs, peer communication, or digital-cultural learning environments (YouTube, social media, etc.).

According to Krashen's Affective Filter Theory [6] and Vygotsky's Social Interaction Theory [4], a positive psychological state can reduce anxiety and increase learning motivation, while a negative state hinders language acquisition and application. Data from the survey of 150 Korean Studies majors in Ho Chi Minh City show that the process of learning Korean often occurs through three psychological stages: initial curiosity, adaptation, and proficiency associated with cultural context.

In the early stage, exposure to Korean cultural content on digital platforms such as YouTube or TikTok often stimulates interest and activates intrinsic motivation. However, according to Krashen [6], positive emotions alone are insufficient to guarantee learning effectiveness if learners are still affected by anxiety and fear of making mistakes. Horwitz et al. [10] also pointed out that communication anxiety is a common barrier, especially among learners with limited intercultural interaction experience.

A fourth-year student shared:

"I was very hesitant when I first tried to start a conversation with a Korean person, afraid I would say something wrong" [9].

The gap between cultural absorption via digital environments and the ability to apply language in real life largely stems from a lack of guided interaction. According to Vygotsky [4], when learners do not receive support from peers, teachers, or native speakers, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is difficult to activate, resulting in cultural experiences remaining at a passive consumption level. Thus, while exposure to Korean culture via digital platforms may spark initial interest, without practical environments and appropriate pedagogical strategies, learners find it difficult to overcome psychological barriers to develop communication competence. Participation in practical activities such as exchanges with native speakers, online speaking practice, or cultural club activities helps students adapt more quickly and transform cultural knowledge into effective communication skills. This perspective is consistent with Vygotsky's Social Interaction Theory [4], which emphasizes the role of collaboration and feedback in language development.

"When I first interacted with Koreans, I felt quite confused. But after a few times, I gradually got used to it and my language integration and improvement sped up" [9].

Additionally, according to Schumann's Acculturation Theory [11], the degree of social integration and positive attitudes towards the target community play a decisive role in language acquisition. Participation in real-life communication helps learners not only improve language skills but also internalize cultural norms naturally.

At this stage, learners achieve natural use of Korean and can adjust their language to suit various communication contexts. Proficiency is not only about linguistic skills but also cultural competence - the ability to perceive, interpret, and behave flexibly in intercultural environments.

"Joining speaking clubs with Koreans, I learned how to communicate naturally and appropriately in each context" [9].

According to the survey (12/2023), 72.7% of students felt their learning environment improved thanks to cultural similarities between Vietnam and Korea (Table 9). Factors such as family culture, social etiquette, and forms of address create "soft contact points", helping learners reduce anxiety, increase closeness, and more easily acquire Korean.

Thus, factors such as integrative motivation, supportive social environment, and high-quality digital cultural content play a central role in reducing anxiety, increasing confidence, and forming intercultural communication competence. The combination of digital media, real-life communication, and pedagogical orientation creates an effective, sustainable language learning ecosystem suited to Generation Z.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Research findings show that frequent exposure to Korean cultural products on digital platforms is contributing to the formation of a new language learning ecosystem, where learners not only acquire language but also engage in the interpretation, internalization, and restructuring of cultural values. In this context, students' learning processes no longer follow a linear trajectory but develop through three interactive stages: exposure and elicitation of positive emotions, adaptation through guided practice, and application of language–culture strategies in diverse contexts. This three-stage model, derived from both quantitative and qualitative data, not only explains learning behavior but also opens new directions for designing curriculum and teaching methods integrated with digital culture.

However, it should be emphasized that cultural exposure via digital platforms, if lacking pedagogical guidance and real interaction, may lead to passive consumption, increasing the gap between "personal interest" and "intercultural practical competence." In particular, factors such as communication anxiety, lack of confidence, and a sense of not belonging to the learning

environment, if not identified and addressed in time, will become barriers to the sustainable development of language and intercultural competence.

Based on these findings, the study proposes several recommendations:

For Korean language curriculum: Systematically integrate elements of Korean popular culture into teaching content, not just as illustrations or introductions. Developing modules such as "Digital Culture and Intercultural Communication" will help learners cultivate critical thinking, decoding skills, and behavioral adjustment in intercultural communication contexts.

For experiential activities and learning environments: Training institutions should increase academic exchange activities combined with cultural experiences (online/offline), enabling learners to transform interest into practical skills. The learning environment should be designed as an open space where students can practice language in culturally contextualized communication situations, rather than being limited to traditional classrooms.

For learning materials and assessment tools: Encourage the development of highly interactive digital learning materials (reflective videos, multimedia learning journals, intercultural simulation scenarios, etc.) suitable for the learning characteristics of younger generations. Additionally, research and apply assessment tools for intercultural competence appropriate to the Vietnamese context, thereby improving training quality and learners' integration capacity.

For collaboration and policy support: Strengthen programs in partnership with Korean universities, international educational organizations, and Korean enterprises in Vietnam to create channels for real-life language and cultural practice. Simultaneously, implement scholarship policies, student research support, or internship opportunities in environments where Korean is used as a second language, increasing the applicability and output effectiveness of training programs.

In summary, digital culture is not only a catalyst but is becoming a central platform for shaping learning motivation and intercultural communication competence among students. To fully exploit this potential, close coordination is needed between curriculum content, pedagogical strategies, and practical support policies. The positive changes recorded in this study provide a foundation for building a more comprehensive approach to modern language education, where culture, technology, and people develop harmoniously and sustainably.

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