Negotiating Identity in the Korean Wave: Cultural Hybridity among Adolescent Girls in a Peripheral Context

Blajan Konradus; Katri Febrina Tasuib; Lasarus Jehamat; Petrus Ana Andung

Universitas Nusa Cendana, Jl. Adisucipto, Penfui, Kupang City, Indonesia

Abstract

Globalisation and the rise of social media have significantly influenced the lifestyle of youth in various regions, including Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), Indoneisa leading to changes in local culture, notably through the adoption of Korean lifestyle trends. This phenomenon has resulted in cultural hybridity, especially among young women who are the primary adopters of foreign cultural trends. This study aims to analyse the impact of Korean lifestyle influences on the cultural hybridity of local traditions among young women at State Senior High School 3 (SMAN 3) Kupang, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was used, employing a case study design, which involved participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis of relevant media and cultural trends. The findings reveal that the influence of Korean lifestyle extends beyond fashion and dressing styles to include social behaviours, communication patterns, and the values upheld by the young women at SMAN 3 Kupang. While there is a strong inclination towards adopting Korean trends, these young women still retain and integrate elements of NTT's local culture into their everyday lives, demonstrating a balance between foreign and indigenous influences. The study concludes that the hybridity observed among the young women at SMAN 3 Kupang is the result of a dynamic interaction between local and foreign cultures, creating a new identity that is both flexible and adaptive to the changing times. This cultural fusion provides insight into how young people negotiate their identities in a globalised world, blending traditional values with contemporary global influences.

Keywords: *Cultural Hybridity; Korean Lifestyle; Local Culture; Young Women; SMAN 3 Kupang; Globalisation*

Introduction

In the era of globalisation, cultures are no longer confined within geographic boundaries. The rapid advancement of communication technologies, particularly social media and digital platforms, has allowed cultural expressions to transcend borders with unprecedented speed. This phenomenon has led to cultural hybridisation in many societies, where local traditions interact with global influences to produce new and often ambiguous cultural forms. A compelling example of this global cultural movement is the Korean Wave or *Hallyu*, which refers to the rising popularity of South Korean entertainment and lifestyle

products such as K-Pop music, television dramas, fashion, and food across various parts of the world, including Indonesia (Lee et al., 2020).

Indonesia, with its large youth population and vibrant digital culture, has become one of the most receptive audiences to the Korean Wave. Through the pervasive use of platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, Korean popular culture has become deeply embedded in the daily lives of many Indonesian adolescents. Among these, young women are particularly enthusiastic consumers and participants in the *Hallyu* phenomenon, often emulating their favourite Korean idols in terms of fashion choices, beauty routines, language use, and even behavioural patterns (Putri & Reese, 2018). The accessibility and aesthetic appeal of Korean content have contributed significantly to this trend, providing youth with cultural models that are often seen as aspirational or ideal.

The infiltration of Korean culture into the Indonesian context is not merely a case of passive consumption but reflects a more complex process of cultural negotiation and hybridisation. This is particularly observable among adolescents in semi-urban or peripheral areas like Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, where the presence of global cultural flows intersects with rich local traditions. In schools such as SMAN 3 Kupang, teenage girls are increasingly adopting aspects of Korean lifestyle while still remaining rooted, to varying degrees, in their indigenous identity frameworks. The process by which these young women mix and match elements of Korean pop culture with their own local values represents what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) theorises as cultural hybridity: a site of negotiation and transformation where meaning is not fixed but constantly reconfigured.

In this hybrid cultural space, traditional markers of local identity—such as the wearing of tenun (woven cloth), the practice of local dialects, or participation in ethnic dances—are either displaced, modified, or recontextualised to fit within the aesthetics of Korean pop culture. For example, school uniforms may be personalised with Korean accessories, and traditional foods may be consumed alongside or even replaced by Korean dishes such as tteokbokki or kimchi, which are now readily available in local eateries. In social media interactions, Korean expressions like "annyeonghaseyo" (hello) or "saranghaeyo" (I love you) are increasingly used, often without a deep understanding of the language but as a way to affiliate with a larger, global fandom (Valenciana & Pudjibudojo, 2022).

What makes this phenomenon even more intriguing is the way these cultural borrowings are internalised and reflected in the self-identity of the adolescents. As noted in field observations and interviews conducted in SMAN 3 Kupang, many female students express admiration not only for the outward aspects of Korean idols but also for the values they believe these idols represent, such as discipline, aesthetic perfection, and emotional sensitivity. These perceptions, whether accurate or romanticised, shape how these students see themselves and how they aspire to behave in their social environments. This sense of identification may offer them a form of empowerment or confidence, yet it also risks creating a sense of detachment from their own cultural roots.

The phenomenon of cultural hybridity, while enriching in many ways, also raises concerns about the preservation of local cultural identity, particularly in regions with already marginalised or endangered cultural practices. As the consumption of global culture increases, especially among the younger generation, there is a legitimate worry that traditional knowledge, customs, and values may be sidelined or forgotten. Local stakeholders—such as educators, parents, and community leaders—face the challenge of encouraging critical cultural literacy, whereby students can enjoy and learn from global cultures without undermining their appreciation for local heritage (Pramadya & Oktaviani, 2016).

This research is further informed by earlier studies that demonstrate similar cultural dynamics. Nafie (2020), for instance, explored how female representations in NTT music videos embody hybrid cultural identities that challenge patriarchal expectations while still being constrained by them. Raditya (2020) examined how Pop Dawan musicians in Timor negotiate local and global influences in the digital age. Meanwhile, Sintowoko (2021) analysed how Korean dramas visually articulate hybrid forms of

beauty and morality, influenced by both Western and East Asian ideals. All three studies emphasise that hybridisation is not merely additive but transformative—it changes how culture is consumed, interpreted, and lived.

Yet, this present study differs by focusing specifically on female adolescents in a school context in East Indonesia, thereby offering a unique perspective on how cultural hybridity operates within educational and peer-group settings. Furthermore, while previous studies often centred on media production or theoretical analysis, this research employs qualitative methods—including interviews and social media observation—to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals internalise and enact hybrid cultural identities in their everyday lives.

The case of SMAN 3 Kupang offers a microcosm of broader global-local cultural interactions. Situated in a region that has historically been peripheral to mainstream Indonesian and international discourse, Kupang is now becoming a site where global cultural flows meet local identities in ways that are creative yet contested. The girls at this school do not merely mimic what they see online; they reinterpret, remix, and re-present Korean culture through a distinctly local lens. It is this process of cultural negotiation that is the central focus of this study.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyse the processes of cultural hybridity that occur as a result of this adoption and to explore its implications for local cultural identity. By doing so, this study contributes to the academic discourse on cultural globalisation and hybridity while also offering practical insights for educators and policymakers on fostering intercultural awareness among youth.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the forms of Korean lifestyle adopted by female students at SMAN 3 Kupang and to analyse the process of cultural hybridity resulting from these practices. A qualitative descriptive method is suitable for examining social phenomena through the perspectives and lived experiences of individuals (Sandelowski, 2000). This approach allows for a rich and detailed understanding of how participants internalise and express cultural meanings in their everyday lives.

The research was conducted at SMAN 3 Kupang, a public senior high school located in the city of Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. This site was purposively selected due to its culturally diverse student population and its significant engagement with Korean popular culture. Students in this school are notably active in digital media and social platforms, providing fertile ground for the observation of global cultural influences, particularly the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) (Lee et al., 2020). The school's central location within Kupang also ensures relatively high exposure to international content and trends.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that involves selecting individuals who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Criteria included being a female student in Year 10 or 11, expressing a strong interest in Korean culture, and being active in related fan communities or school-based activities. In total, twelve students agreed to participate, having met the criteria and provided informed consent.

Data collection methods consisted of non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted through participants' social media platforms, especially Instagram and Facebook, to examine their cultural preferences and expressions such as language, fashion, food, and fan interactions. Due to school holidays during the data collection period, in-person access to students was restricted. Thus, interviews were conducted via Google Forms containing open-ended questions, enabling participants to provide detailed responses on how they engage with Korean culture, how it entered their lives, and what meaning it holds for them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Documentation also played a significant role in triangulating findings. Screenshots from participants' social media activity, as well as visual and textual data, were collected to provide context and support for their statements. These documents helped verify how Korean cultural elements are manifested in students' everyday expressions, both online and offline.

Data were analysed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) model, which includes three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the first stage, only relevant data were retained, grouped, and coded. These were then organised and visualised to highlight patterns and themes. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring themes related to cultural hybridity and identity negotiation.

To ensure research credibility, data triangulation was applied using multiple sources including interviews, observations, and documentation (Patton, 2015). Member checking was also conducted by allowing participants to review and validate their responses. Furthermore, ethical standards were upheld through anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent, adhering to ethical research guidelines as outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020).

Findings

The findings of this research indicate that the adoption of Korean lifestyle elements among female students at SMAN 3 Kupang is not simply a matter of imitation but reflects a dynamic process of cultural hybridity. This process involves negotiation, adaptation, and integration of Korean cultural expressions with the existing local cultural context. Through continuous interaction with Korean popular culture—especially music, dramas, fashion, and cuisine—students develop hybrid identities that blend global and local influences.

One of the most observable aspects of this hybridity is in the domain of language. Several informants were found to frequently use Korean words or phrases in daily conversations, such as "annyeonghaseyo" (hello), "saranghaeyo" (I love you), or "aigoo" (an exclamation of frustration or surprise). This adoption of Korean expressions functions both as a form of cultural play and as an assertion of group identity among peers who share similar cultural interests. While these expressions may be superficial in isolation, their consistent use reflects a deeper cultural alignment with Korean social norms and media.

Fashion is another significant domain in which hybridity manifests. According to the data collected, many of the respondents have altered their dressing style in accordance with Korean fashion trends. Traditional school attire or local styles are often accessorised with Korean-inspired items, or replaced during casual settings with garments that reflect the minimalist, pastel-heavy aesthetic associated with K-Pop idols. For instance, crop tops and high-waisted jeans are now more popular, replacing more conservative local styles like tenun skirts or sarongs. Some students mentioned being inspired by Korean fashion advertisements seen on Instagram and TikTok (Zakiah et al., 2019).

The influence of Korean culinary practices was also strongly evident. Informants frequently mentioned eating Korean dishes such as tteokbokki, kimchi, and ramyeon, which they access through local restaurants that have adopted Korean-style menus. A notable example is the fusion menu at a Kupang-based restaurant called La Moringa, which serves "Moringa Chicken Yangnyeom Rice"—a dish combining moringa leaf-infused rice with gochujang-flavoured chicken. This exemplifies a hybrid culinary product born from the interaction between local agricultural identity and global Korean food trends.

Entertainment media, particularly Korean dramas and K-Pop, serve as primary conduits for the diffusion of lifestyle elements. The participants regularly consume K-Dramas and idol-related content not

just for leisure but as a means of emotional and social learning. Themes from dramas, such as perseverance, romance, and interpersonal respect, were cited as inspirational and even aspirational. Participants reported mirroring the behaviour, speech style, and even decision-making approaches of their favourite characters or idols.

Social media plays a pivotal role in the diffusion and reinforcement of these cultural elements. Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp were the main platforms through which participants engaged with Korean culture. Some shared clips of their idols, others posted fashion "reels" inspired by Korean aesthetics. Through these platforms, they not only consumed content but also produced and circulated hybrid cultural expressions, thereby becoming active agents in the hybridisation process.

The adoption of Korean culture also impacted participants' social identities and community engagement. Many respondents were involved in fandom groups, such as EXO-L Kupang or WhatsApp groups dedicated to particular idol groups like Gfriend. These communities organised birthday events, watch parties, and even coordinated merchandise sales. Through these interactions, the students built new social networks rooted in shared global cultural interests but localised through community participation.

Despite these shifts, hybridity does not imply the erasure of local identity. In fact, the majority of participants expressed a conscious awareness of their cultural background. Some mentioned still participating in local festivals or wearing traditional attire during formal events. However, they acknowledged that Korean culture provided a "refreshing contrast" and a form of escapism that allowed them to explore different facets of their personality. This supports Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where cultural identity is neither fixed nor pure but continuously negotiated in the in-between zone.

Sociologically, this form of hybridity has both positive and cautionary implications. On the one hand, students described personal benefits such as increased motivation, emotional expression, stress relief, and improved social connectedness. They also demonstrated heightened interest in learning foreign languages and engaging in creative self-expression through dance, fashion, and digital media. On the other hand, some participants also reported being misunderstood or judged by those who viewed their lifestyle changes as cultural betrayal or excessive imitation. This suggests a tension between cultural exploration and societal expectations, especially in communities where traditional values remain strong.

Parental and community responses to this cultural shift were mixed. While some parents appreciated the educational and inspirational benefits of Korean media, others expressed concerns about overconsumption and the potential displacement of local values. As a result, the students are often positioned between two cultural poles—aspiring to align with global trends while being reminded of their duties to preserve local traditions. This ambivalence is central to the hybridity discourse, reinforcing that identity formation is not a binary choice but a complex interplay of adaptation and resistance (Kraidy, 2005).

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend earlier scholarship on cultural hybridity and the influence of global cultural flows on adolescent identity. The adoption of Korean lifestyle elements among female students at SMAN 3 Kupang aligns with Lee et al.'s (2020) conclusion that the Korean Wave is not merely a trend but an avenue through which young people engage in identity negotiation within a globalised context. The fashion choices, culinary preferences, language use, and fandom participation among the students illustrate the hybridisation of cultural practices, echoing findings by Putri and Reese (2018) on how Indonesian adolescents increasingly align themselves with Korean values, aesthetics, and media narratives in everyday life.

This hybridity, however, does not occur in a vacuum. As Bhabha (1994) has theorised, the "third space" is where cultural negotiation takes place—an interstitial zone where individuals neither wholly reject nor fully assimilate external cultural influences. In Kupang, the girls' practices embody this third space: they incorporate Korean elements while simultaneously retaining ties to local festivals and traditions. Similarly, Kraidy (2005) emphasises that cultural hybridity is not about cultural fusion in harmony, but about tension, power dynamics, and contestation—dynamics which are evident in the discomfort some informants expressed when confronted by family or societal resistance to their lifestyle changes.

The present findings resonate with Nafie's (2020) study, which examined female representations in NTT music videos and concluded that these portrayals exhibit cultural hybridity as both a resistance to and reflection of traditional gender expectations. Like Nafie's subjects, the girls in this study use Korean culture to articulate alternative identities that challenge conventional norms. Meanwhile, Raditya (2020) explored hybrid musical forms in Timor, finding that local artists navigate global aesthetics through digital platforms, much as the students in this study engage with TikTok and Instagram to express cultural identity. These digital spaces become arenas for cultural experimentation, reinforcing Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity as a performative act.

Furthermore, the girls' active participation in fandoms and cultural communities also confirms previous observations about social identity formation. Pramadya and Oktaviani (2016) noted that the Korean Wave functions as a tool of cultural diplomacy that generates soft power while also transforming consumer behaviours and social affiliations. Students' involvement in EXO-L Kupang or other fan groups reinforces this idea, as their collective participation constructs new identity categories rooted in shared global cultural affiliations (Valenciana & Pudjibudojo, 2022).

Despite concerns about cultural erosion, hybridity does not imply cultural loss. Instead, it facilitates the emergence of new identity configurations that blend global imagination with local memory. As Kraidy (2005) argued, hybrid identities are unstable yet productive—they provoke reflection, adaptation, and sometimes resistance. The case of SMAN 3 Kupang illustrates that adolescents are not passive recipients of culture, but active agents who select, reinterpret, and recontextualise foreign influences in ways that are meaningful to their personal and communal lives.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study reinforce the relevance of hybridity as a conceptual framework for understanding identity in the age of globalisation. The case of SMAN 3 Kupang illustrates how hybridity is not only a result of passive cultural reception but an active, ongoing process shaped by digital engagement, peer interaction, and social negotiation. This supports the argument that hybridity is both a condition and a strategy in the construction of modern cultural identities.

Practically, this study offers insights for educators, policymakers, and cultural practitioners who are concerned with youth development and cultural preservation. Understanding how adolescents navigate cultural hybridity can help design better interventions, policies, and educational content that resonate with their realities. In a broader sense, recognising hybridity as a legitimate and valuable form of identity may lead to more inclusive, adaptive, and culturally responsive societies.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the adoption of Korean popular culture among female students at SMAN 3 Kupang is a clear manifestation of cultural hybridity. The incorporation of Korean language expressions, fashion styles, culinary preferences, and media consumption patterns illustrates how global cultural flows intersect with local identity formation. Far from being a mere imitation, these adoptions represent a dynamic process through which adolescents negotiate their identities within a

globalised world. The process is characterised by selection, reinterpretation, and localisation, suggesting that cultural hybridity is not only inevitable but also highly individualised and context-specific.

This study concludes that hybrid identity among these students is formed through continuous interaction with Korean cultural content and social networks, particularly via digital media. The resulting identity is neither purely traditional nor fully foreign, but a fusion of both—a space where local heritage and global influence coexist, sometimes harmoniously, and at other times in tension. This hybridity empowers students to express themselves creatively and emotionally, while also challenging them to navigate social expectations and cultural boundaries.

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations can be proposed. Firstly, educational institutions, particularly schools, should integrate media literacy and cultural awareness programmes into the curriculum. This will equip students with the critical tools to understand, evaluate, and reflect upon the cultural content they consume. Such programmes should emphasise not only the appreciation of global cultures but also the importance of preserving and respecting local traditions.

Secondly, local governments and cultural institutions in East Nusa Tenggara should create more inclusive platforms where youth can explore and express their hybrid identities without fear of stigma or marginalisation. Cultural festivals, youth forums, and social media campaigns can be strategically used to promote intercultural dialogue and encourage the creative blending of local and global cultural elements.

Thirdly, parents and community leaders should be encouraged to engage in open conversations with adolescents about their cultural interests. Rather than seeing the Korean Wave as a threat to local identity, they can be guided to understand it as a vehicle for new cultural expressions that can coexist with traditional values.

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