

K-WAVE FANS AND NON-FANS: CULTURE-SPECIFIC AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSES TO KOREAN COUNTRY AND PRODUCT IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – Malaysia is a multicultural society, comprising ethnic Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other ethnic minorities. Its culture has complex interactions among multicultural and multi-lingual people, with diverse faiths and religions. This study investigates how a multicultural and multi-religious society responds to the influx of Korean products in the market and explores the differences in responses between fans and non-fans of the Korean Wave.

Design/Methodology – Using the Online Focus Group Discussions (FGD) technique, qualitative research was conducted with ten participants to investigate multicultural Malaysians' response to Korean country and product image.

Findings – Through questions asked during the FGDs, themes that explain Malaysians' perceptions of the Korean country image, Korean culture, and Korean products were identified. "Valuing relationship", "Asian compatibility", "natural and authentic", "creativity and innovation", "projection of boldness and confidence", "cautious followers", and "protective and caring culture" were primarily identified, representing positive attributes; "cosmetic surgery" was viewed negatively.

Originality/value – Studies about the influence of culture and religion on Malaysian consumers' responses toward Korean products are scarce. The findings of this study would provide insights into Malaysian consumers from diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Understanding how foreign products enter and remain successful in a country like Malaysia could provide valuable insights to other countries and SMEs planning to enter new multicultural markets.

Keywords: Korean Country Image, Online Focus Group, Multicultural, Malaysia, Thematic Analysis

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1. INTRODUCTION

The characteristics of Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, with an open attitude toward foreign cultures are creating ripples by influencing the influx of the Korean Wave—a term commonly used to refer to the popular culture in Korea and which gained momentum in the early 2000s (Cho et al., 2017). As this gains momentum, there is a rapid increase in interest and demand for Korean products, including cosmetics, home appliances, plastic surgery, tourism, and Korean food, as well as Korean Wave content such as music, broadcasting, and games (Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, 2014). Malaysia is among the largest inbound markets for Korean-related products or services. In 2016, there was an increase of 223,000 Malaysian inbound visitors to South Korea compared to the previous year, resulting in a total of 311,000 visitors (Statista, 2021).

Although the attractiveness Southeast Asian markets, including Malaysia's, is increasing in international trade, there is a lack of research on the perception and behavior of Southeast Asian consumers (Cho et al., 2017). The available data is often limited to national overview figures, such as major economic indicators, and research on trends and effects of cultural content preference among Southeast Asian consumers related to the Korean Wave (Bae & Kim, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Song, 2014). Since Malaysia is a multicultural society, it has unique characteristics and consumer behavior (Sandikci & Jafari, 2013).

This study aims to address research questions regarding the impact of Korea's country image and product image, as well as the Korean Wave on the consumption of Korean products among the Malaysia's society. It seeks to understand how consumers' characteristics, including religion and race-relations among Malaysian residents, affect their consumption of Korean products, particularly between fans and non-fans. Understanding how foreign products enter and remain successful in Malaysia could provide valuable insights to other countries and SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) planning to enter new multicultural markets.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant literature has recognized country image as an important factor in explaining consumers' decision-making process for foreign products (Kaynak et al., 2000; Martin & Eroglu, 1993; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Country image is defined as the sum of associations and beliefs individuals hold toward a particular country (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). Limited product information enhances the significance of a country's image in evaluating quality and purchase intention, acting as an informative cue (Han, 1989; Lee & Ganesh, 1999; Nebenzahl et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2012). This halo effect shapes consumer perceptions of products originating from a particular country. Empirical studies on the Korean country image also revealed that a positive country image of Korea increases the intention to visit Korea (Kim, 2012), fosters a favorable image of the product, and influences the intention to purchase Korean products (Lee & Kang, 2006). Accordingly, it is expected that the country image of Korea will influence the purchasing behaviors of Malaysian consumers when they buy Korean products.

The Korean Wave has been shown to increase the consumption of Korean content by Malaysian consumers (Jeong et al., 2017). Favorable conditions in Southeast Asia attract Korean companies, establishing an attractive export market. The popularity of K-dramas and K-Pop music fuels Malaysian consumers' growing interest in Korean society and culture.

According to Manrai and Manrai (2011), cultural influence is the largest determinant of consumer behavior. This is particularly true for Muslims, as Islamic religion and culture are closely linked with their way of life. Therefore, factors such as the availability of Halal certification, which determines what is permissible for Muslims, has a direct impact on their consumption behavior (Antara & Musa, 2020; Awan et al., 2015; Aziz & Chok, 2013; Cheng, 2008; Hamzah et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2022). The global Halal market has, consequently, experienced significant growth, reaching a record of \$2.6 trillion in 2016. Gunawan and Gaffar (2021) found the significant effect of country of origin and religiosity on Indonesian consumers' purchase intention towards fast foods. According to them, "Indonesian consumers really pay attention to the country of origin as a provider of consumer products" (Gunawan & Gaffar, 2021, p.97), which implies the need for fast food companies originating from non-Muslim countries to improve their country image to better align with Islamic rules. Similarly, Malaysia is an important market and serves as a testbed to measure the effect of religion on product consumption behavior since it has a high number of Muslim consumers.

This study explores the soft power of the K-wave and combines two theories to understand multicultural Malaysians' responses to Korean country, culture, and product image. Firstly, Straubhaar's "cultural proximity theory" explains how cultures seek proximity in media consumption (1991). Recent studies have expanded this theory to explain consumers' consumption of media and products from foreign cultures (Carrère & Massod, 2018). The K-wave has fostered active consumption of Korean media content among Malaysians, aligning with transnational media consumption behavior.

Secondly, the "cultural hybridity theory" explains the adoption and assimilation of a foreign culture resulting in the formation of a unique identity that combines elements of both the foreign culture and one's own culture (Kraidy, 2006; Burke, 2009). Cultural hybridization, also known as cultural hybridity, takes place when "local cultural agents and actors interact and negotiate with global forms, using them as resources through which local peoples construct their own cultural spaces", as exemplified in the case of Korean Wave (Ryoo, 2009, p.144). Korean culture, in particular, has been a mediator of cultural hybridity in other countries/cultures, especially among Asian countries (Ryoo, 2009). The popularity of Korean culture in Malaysia can be understood through the lens of cultural hybridity, as evidenced by influence of the Korean entertainment industry on the local entertainment scene (with the adaptation of Korean songs and dramas), the proliferation of over 400 Korean-themed restaurants in Malaysia showcasing Korean cuisine, and the adoption of Korean fashion, skincare, and cosmetics, among other aspects of Korean culture. Cultural proximity and cultural hybridity theories jointly provide a framework for examining the responses of multicultural participants in Malaysia towards Korean country and product image. Based on the concepts of these theories, the authors foresee that consumers' purchase intention towards Korean products is significantly influenced by their favorable perception of Korean culture. Such favorable perception could be further affected by the consumers' social interaction and religion, along with other pertinent demographic aspects that were explored during the FGDs.

Based on the literature review and aforementioned discussion of the theories, this study utilized Focus Group Discussions (FGD) to study the needs and purchasing behavior of Malaysian consumers from their own religious and multicultural perspectives.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This research uses a constructive research paradigm to study the acceptance of Korean products in Malaysia's multicultural society. It employs qualitative research through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with prior users of Korean products.

FGD as a technique of qualitative research data collection that has been widely used and accepted in social sciences studies (Wilkinson, 1998; Ochieng et al., 2018), particularly in the field of marketing research (Morgan et al., 1998). The FGD is unique as, unlike an in-depth interview, it involves the element of discussion, argument, and counter-arguments among participants, which contributes to the group dynamics. Hence, a person's opinion at the individual level could be challenged at the group level and, eventually, the group may arrive at a consensus or choose to disagree with their stand. This technique has been employed to seek answers to the research questions presented in this study.

Online FGDs were conducted in two groups to facilitate better interactions among participants. The use of Online FGD has also gained popularity in recent years in social science studies with the advancement of computer-mediated tools and online human interactions (Stewart & Williams, 2012; Teixeira et al., 2018).

3.2. Sampling and Participants' Background

Participants were recruited from MBA classes in a Malaysian university. An announcement was made in these classes to inform potential participants about the research on Korean product purchase behavior in Malaysia. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used for recruitment. Initially, interested and potential participants from the MBA class were selected. They were then asked to refer friends and family members who used Korean products, expanding the participant pool.

Two selection criteria were considered. First, to understand Malaysian consumers from various cultural and religious backgrounds, three representative ethnic groups—Malays (to represent Muslims), Chinese, and Indians (to represent non-Muslims)—were selected. Second, in order to ascertain any possible differences in sentiments in the consumption of Korean products between fans and non-fans, participants who would consider themselves Korean Fans (followers of K-Pop, Drama) and non-Korean Fans were included.

Ten participants, Malaysians representing all three major ethnic groups in Malaysia, i.e., Malay, Chinese, and Indians, were selected. The sample size of ten participants was deemed sufficient to capture a variety of emerging themes and perspectives. It has been suggested that more than twelve respondents may result in fragmented discussions that become difficult to manage (Nyumba et al., 2018). All the FGDs were carried out virtually as Malaysia was under COVID-19 lockdown at the time of research data collection. In order to allow better interaction among

participants, they were grouped into two smaller groups with five participants each (Table 1). Each group had a representation of all three ethnic groups and religious backgrounds to encompass a diverse range of perspectives. Each online FGD lasted between 100 to 120 minutes. Table 1 details participants' backgrounds.

Table 1: Participants' Background and Demographic Information

No	Fan or Non-Fan	FGD #	Gender	Age Range	Ethnicity/Religion	Residence City/Out of City	Occupation	Income Range in Thousands (RM)
1	Fan	1	F	32	Chinese/Buddhist	City	Housewife	2-4
2	Fan	1	F	25	Malay/Muslim	Out of City	Student	nil
3	Fan	2	F	22	Chinese/Buddhist	Out of City	Student	nil
4	Fan	2	F	22	Malay/Muslim	City	Student	nil
5	Fan	2	F	29	Chinese/Buddhist	City	Teacher	4-6
6	Non-Fan	1	F	31	Chinese/Buddhist	City	Teacher	4-6
7	Non-Fan	1	F	28	Indian/Hindu	Out of City	Call Center Operator	2-4
8	Non-Fan	1	M	33	Chinese/Buddhist	City	Engineer	6-8
9	Non-Fan	2	F	30	Chinese/Buddhist	City	Financial Advisor	6-8
10	Non-Fan	2	M	21	Indian/Hindu	Out of City	Student	nil

3.3. FGD Questions Development

Prior to the online FGDs, the researchers prepared twenty-four questions (Table 2) covering five major areas: Korea country image, Korean culture, Korean products, perception of Korean product purchasers, and impact of personal characteristics on purchase behavior. The questions underwent thorough review by five experts in Korean research and qualitative research. They were then pre-tested and confirmed with 12 MBA students. Feedback from the pre-test phase led to the inclusion of a question on participants' residence (rural or city) as a potential influence.

Table 2: Semi-constructed questions for online FGD

Category	Guiding Questions
Korean product usage	1) What Korean Products do you use?
Korea country image	2) What comes to your mind when you think about Korea?

Korean culture	<p>3) What comes to your mind when you think about Korean culture?</p> <p>4) What do you like about the Korean culture?</p> <p>5) Are there similarities and differences between Korean culture and your own culture (Malay, Chinese, Indian)?</p> <p>6) Do you feel closer to Korean culture compared to other foreign cultures?</p>
Korean products (brands)	<p>7) Please explain your perception of Korean products in general.</p> <p>8) Do you use Global Korean products or SME products?</p> <p>9) What kinds of purchasing channels (i.e., retail outlets) do you use to buy Korean products?</p> <p>10) How do you get information about the Korean products (i.e., information channels)?</p> <p>11) How do Korean products benefit you?</p> <p>12) What attracts you to Korean products?</p> <p>13) Compared to products/brands from other countries, how do Malaysians think about Korean products/brands? (Do you think the image of “Korea” has an impact on the country’s product/brands evaluation)?</p>
Perception of people who purchase Korean products	<p>14) What do you think about Malaysian consumers who buy/consume Korean food or cosmetics/fashion?</p> <p>15) Why do you think Malaysian consumers like Korean food or cosmetics/fashion?</p> <p>16) Are there any concerns or hindrances for Malaysian consumers to buy/use Korean food or cosmetics/fashion?</p>

<p>Consumer characteristics: ethnic groups and religion, moral code, regulations, etc.</p>	<p>17) How does your social circle (friends and family) respond to your purchase of Korean products? Discuss their acceptance (lack of acceptance, if any).</p> <p>18) How does your religion/faith affect your use of Korean products and cosmetic and consumption of Korean food?</p> <p>19) Do you think religion is a consideration when purchasing Korean products?</p> <p>20) Do you think there are regional differences in Malaysia in terms of preference toward Korean products/brands (compare city and non-city dwellers)?</p> <p>21) Do you think there are ethnic differences in terms of preference toward Korean products/brands?</p> <p>22) How does your social circle respond to you being a fan (or non-fan) of Korean products?</p> <p>23) What is your perception of the marketing and promotional activities (e.g., ads, coupons, etc.) implemented by Korean brands/firms (SMEs) in Malaysia?</p> <p>24) Are those consistent with your values? Are they accepted by your social circle?</p>
<p>Miscellaneous</p>	<p>25) Do you have any other feedback regarding Korean products or brands, especially for Korean SMEs desiring to enter the Malaysian market?</p>

3.4. Data Analysis Method

The qualitative data obtained from the FGDs was recorded in video format and transcribed to aid subsequent content analysis in order to identify themes. All researchers involved in the study collaborated in the content analysis process, collectively reading and reviewing the transcripts. The themes that emerged from both FGDs, identified in response to each question, were checked and counter-checked by all researchers for consistency. Thematic analysis is known for its flexibility and applicability in various qualitative data analysis approaches, such as conversation analysis or interpretative phenomenological analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Smith & Osborn, 2003). It is widely accepted as a useful research tool that can potentially provide rich data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The definition by Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 57) is referred to for this study.

Thematic analysis is defined as a “method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Focusing on meaning across a data set, it allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. Identifying unique and idiosyncratic meanings and experiences found only within a single data

item is not the focus of thematic analysis. This method, then, is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities.” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57)

Themes and sub-themes that emerge from participant responses to the series of questions (Table 2) were ordered in terms of layers of abstractions to identify larger overarching themes (Creswell, 2014). Data reduction and identification of themes was done systematically for the results of both FGDs by all five researchers to ensure validity of and consistency in the interpretation of results.

As recommended by Willis et al. (2009), the analysis of focus group data ideally covers three ‘layers’ of discussions: individual level, group level, and group interaction level. Focus groups allow respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members. This synergistic effect of the group setting may result in the production of data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to systematically present the responses of all participants, the results are presented in the order of questions in Table 2.

4.1. *General products usage and Korea’s country image*

For the first question regarding usage of types of Korean products, participants mentioned products which include cosmetics, skincare, and food products. Non-fans were found to be regular consumers of Korean products.

For the second question on the country image of Korea, the responses were varied. Participants 1, 6, 8, and 9 mentioned “tourism destination”. Participants 2, 7, 8, and 10 mentioned “K-Pop and K-drama”, which led to a discussion revolving around these themes. Participants 4 and 9 mentioned “etiquette” as an outstanding image of the Korean culture, where “respect for elders” and “family orientation” were extensively discussed. Participants 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, and 10 mentioned “Korean food”, specifically “Kimchi”, as healthy. All participants, fans and non-fans alike, mentioned that Korea is a “peaceful country” that is welcoming to tourists.

Conversely, for the question pertaining to the country image of Korea, we identified “plastic surgery” as a negative theme discussed by participants. The recent survey among Malaysians reported that only 6.11% of the participants would go for cosmetic surgery in the future (Johan et al., 2018). which indicates the low acceptance of cosmetic surgery among Malaysian consumers and helps explain Malaysians’ negative view of cosmetic surgery among Korean celebrities.

Malaysians from all backgrounds were found to view Korea’s country image as a positive one, nurtured with values that are compatible with Malaysian values. A prominent theme that emerged from the discussions among Malaysians was the notion of Korea as an “inviting country and people.” This theme was evident in the discourse surrounding various keywords that emerged during the FGDs. The keywords identified in the FGDs are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Keywords and Themes identified through both FGDs

Category	Keywords	Emerging Themes
Korea Country Image (Q2)	“tourism destination”, “K-Pop and K-drama”, “etiquette”, “Korean Food”, “Kimchi”, “peaceful country”, “plastic surgery”.	Inviting country and people
Korean Culture (Q3–Q6)	“love”, “dedication”, “dressing”, “fashion”, “unique dance moves”, “humble”, “hardworking”, “Confucius culture”, “harmony”, “selfless attribute”, “loyalty”, “respect for elders”, “family”, “clothing”, “food”, “spicy food”, “filial piety”, “family harmony”, “sense of cultural pride”, “Asian culture”, “Asian values”, “fast-paced lifestyle”.	Valuing relationship Asian compatibility
Korean products (Q7–Q13)	“affordable”, include “natural health”, “good packaging”, “credibility”, “advanced technology”, “hype”, “credibility”, “quality”, “affordable quality”, “online”, “supermarket”, “procurement services”, “availability”, “slow to launch”, “social media”, “word of mouth”, “online word of mouth”, “friends”, “natural”, “health-benefits”, “fair price”, “reliable”, “fast result”, “self-esteem needs”, “creative packaging”, “affordable price”, “Korean brand ambassador”, “natural products”, “testimonial”, “reliability”, “advanced technology”, “positive country image”, “actually works”.	Affordable quality Natural and authentic Creative and innovative
Perception of people who purchase Korean products (Q14–Q16)	“confidence”, “bold”, “intangible benefits”, “functional benefits”, “authenticity”, “compatibility”, “food compatibility”, “Korean influencers”, “language barrier”, “limited promotion”, “Asian skin compatibility”, “fit”, “exaggeration of Korean fashion”.	Projection of boldness and confidence Cautious followers

Consumer characteristics: ethnic groups and religion, moral code, regulations, etc. (Q17–Q24)	“highly family oriented”, “empathetic understanding”, “harmony-seeking behavior”, “openness”, “famous celebrity”, “positive word of mouth”, “influencer”, “social media presence”.	Protective and caring culture
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4.2. Korean Culture

Question 3 (What comes to your mind when you think about Korean Culture?).

Responses were positively centered around “love” and “dedication” (internal values) and “dressing” and “fashion” (external traits). Fans also mentioned “unique dance moves” and “humble and hardworking” (humility). Both fans and non-fans mentioned “dedication” as an ethos of work, and Koreans and Malaysians seem attracted by this value.

Question 4 (what you like about Korean culture?).

Participants 1, 5, and 8 (Chinese and Malay participants) mentioned “Confucius culture” and “harmony” in relation to “selfless attribute”, willingness to offer help to others, and even “loyalty” to national products among Koreans being traits that are admired by participants.

Question 5 (similarities and differences between your own culture and Korean culture).

For similarities, themes of “respect for elders”, “family”, “clothing”, and “food” were mentioned. Malay participants related with the similarity of Korean and Malay foods, especially “spicy foods”. Additionally, Malay participants discussed “Baju Kurung”, which is the traditional Malay dress worn by Malay ladies, in relation to the traditional Korean costume for ladies, “Hanbok”. Chinese participants related with the similarity of “filial piety” and “respect for elders” between Korean and Chinese cultures. Malaysian Indian participants, on the other hand, related to the similarity of “family harmony” between Korean and Indian cultures. Indian participants also mentioned the “sense of pride” of cultural and tradition heritage among Malaysian Indians. Regarding the differences, participants 1, 4, 5, and 8 mentioned “fast-paced lifestyle”; this theme was debated in the discussion.

Question 6 (Do you feel closer to Korean culture compared to other foreign cultures?).

The response to this question was, as expected, clearly divided between fans and non-fans. Fans agreed that they were closer to Korean culture by emphasizing values, such as “love”, “family”, “harmony”, “loyalty”, and “Asian culture”. Conversely, non-fans (3 out of 5) debated and disagreed with the value mentioned; however, they did not say that they felt closer to the Korean culture than other foreign cultures. One Chinese non-fan (Participant 5) and one Indian non-fan (Participant 10), who said they were closer to Korean culture than other foreign cultures although they were non-fans of Korean drama and K-Pop, were exceptions.

The findings in this section show the positive impact of Korean culture on the perceptions of Malaysians. Two emerging major themes in this section include “Valuing Relationship” and “Asian Compatibility”. Malaysians value this and deem it a uniting force towards the Korean culture.

Malays emphasized traditional clothing and food as their main point of interaction with Korean culture. Malaysia is, undoubtedly, a food haven since it is a melting pot of cultures. Malay food is especially associated with “spiciness”. The two main points of interaction between Malay and Korean food is “beef” and “spiciness”.

Indian participants identified with the hierarchy of family relations (viewed as similarities between Korean and Indian cultures). For instance, “respect for elders” largely means uncompromising respect expected of the younger siblings towards their elder siblings. This is interpreted as the “rule of seniority” in traditional Indian culture (Patel, 2005, p. 218). Malaysian Indians find this similar with Korean siblings’ hierarchy in relationships where older siblings can call the younger siblings by name but the younger siblings are expected to call older siblings by kinship terms such as “older brother” or “older sister” (Goldstein & Tamura, 1975). Although this is a norm that is shared by all Malaysian families, Chinese and Malay families, too, practice this. Indian participants, however, find this trait particularly appealing as it is similar to their culture of “rule of seniority” in terms of their relationship with siblings.

4.3. Korean Products

Question 7 (Please explain your perceptions of the Korean products in general).

At an individual level, 9 out of 10 participants mentioned “affordable” in their response. Other keywords that emerged at the group level were: “natural health”, “good packaging”, “credibility”, and “advanced technology”. Fans and non-fans agreed on these and debated them in both FGD discussions.

Question 8 (Do you use Global Korean products or small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) products?).

Participants from both FGDs responded with Korean company and brand names that are global, including Samsung, Hyundai, Innisfree, Laneige, Atomy, etc. Participants (both fans and non-fans) were not aware of Korean SME products. When probed further, we discovered the lack of promotion/awareness on Korean SMEs’ products among Malaysian consumers. This suggests the need for more initiative-driven promotion among Korean SMEs to be recognized in the Malaysian market.

Question 9 (What kinds of purchasing channels (i.e., retail outlets) do you use to buy the Korean products).

Responses include “online”, “supermarket”, and “procurement services”. We noticed no difference in the procurement among fans and non-fans, or city dwellers and non-city dwellers. The only exception was the “procurement services” mentioned by participant 6 who is a fan. Procurement services are provided by local Malaysians who personally purchase Korean products from Korea for Malaysians who pre-order it at a cheaper price than they would have to pay for the product in local store.

Question 10 (How do you get information about the Korean products?).

“Social Media”, including Instagram and Facebook, were mentioned. Participants also discussed “word of mouth”, which was debated in both FGDs. Malaysian consumers emphasized the importance of “online word of mouth”, with particular emphasis on the feedback from users who have used the product before.

Question 11 (How do Korean products benefit you?).

The themes identified here include “natural”, “health-benefits”, “fair price”, “reliable”, and “fast result”. Participant 2 mentioned “Korean skincare will make my skin to be more flawless and also make my confidence level to be increased”. It sparked a discussion and led to agreement by participants 4, 6, and 7, who echoed this sentiment. This finding aligns with a previous study which found Korean skincare products’ users, especially women, associate the consumption of the product with increased self-esteem (Sundah et al., 2019). The study also discovered association by users of Korean skin care products with “natural ingredients” as similarly found in the theme of this discussion.

Question 12 (What attracts you to Korean products?).

All participants debated positive responses and the following themes emerged: “creative packaging”, “affordable price”, “Korean brand ambassador”, “natural products”, and “testimonial”. In both FGDs, there was a subtle difference among fans and non-fans, whereby fans emphasized more on soft aspects of the Korean products (flawless, ambassador, celebrity), while non-fans seemed to be more functional oriented (utilitarian) by focusing on testimonial, quality, and affordability.

Question 13 (Compared to products from other countries, how do Malaysians think about Korean products?).

Participant 6 mentioned that Korean cosmetics were superior: “skin condition of Korean people is good and look younger than their actual age”. Malaysians perceive Korean products as affordable good quality products (cosmetics and skincare products) and believe that they “actually works” as they claim. We find themes “natural and authentic” and “creativity and innovation” best describe participants’ responses to Korean products.

4.4. Perception of people who patronize Korean products

Question 14 (What do you think about Malaysian consumers who buy/consume Korean food or cosmetics/fashion?).

Positive discussions were observed on behalf all fans and non-fans. Although one non-fan (participant 3) said Malaysians who used Korean products were normally K-drama lovers, upon probing it was found to not be a negative comment. Instead, the group thought that K-drama has influenced Malaysians in general to try Korean products. Keywords that we observed include positive traits of Malaysians being “open minded” to try new things (open to foreign products and brands).

Question 15 (Why do you think Malaysian consumers like Korean food or cosmetics/fashion?).

Fans highlighted the “intangible benefits” of using Korean products (mainly food and skin-care products), while non-fans discussed the “functional benefits”. Fans mentioned “authenticity” in Korean skincare, saying that it is “not covering imperfection”. The keyword “compatibility” (for Asian skin) is noticed throughout both FGDs. We find the theme of “projection of boldness and confidence” best describes Malaysians’ perception of people who use Korean products, as was previously found in a study in Indonesia (Sundah et al., 2019).

Question 16 (Are there any concerns or hindrances for Malaysian consumers to buy/use Korean food or cosmetics/fashion?).

Participant 3 mentioned “Rise of local cosmetic brands and the plenty of choices in the market are the big challenges for Korean brands. Some of the products from Korea do not have information translated to English and cause the consumers lack of confidence to buy the products.” From subsequent FGD discussions, the keywords identified include “language barrier” and “limited promotion”. Participants noted that Korean SME products had no promotion in Malaysia, which led to a lack of awareness among consumers. Participants also highlighted some drawbacks of Korean cosmetics, such as limited color ranges. Despite this, the products were compatible for Malaysians due to the “Asian skin compatibility”. Some participants in both FGDs found it unusual to see men using eye liners and lipsticks. This indicates that, although Malaysian consumers are open to trying foreign products, they have certain preferences and stereotypes with respect to how a man and women should dress (based on accepted Malaysian cultural norms). They are deemed “cautious followers”.

Overall, we find the themes “Projection of boldness and confidence” and “cautious followers” as the best description for Malaysians’ perception of people who use Korean products.

4.5. Consumer characteristics: ethnic groups and religion, moral code, and regulations

Question 17 (How does your social circle i.e., friends and family respond to your purchase of Korean products?).

The majority of participants (8 out of 10) mentioned that their social circles were supportive of them adopting Korean products. Participants 2 and 7 said “They are very open about it and willing to try. They know that the products are legitimate and trustworthy because they have seen it through social medias, Korean drama and TV shows.” FGD1 members felt that elders in their family (elderlies who are aged 55 and older) may not be supportive of adopting Korean products. It was argued that a possible reason for this is that they (as leaders of the family) saw it as a competition to their own tradition and culture, which caused them to worry that younger family members who excessively follow a new trend, would have tendency to abandon their own culture. However, participants also noted it was not alarming because Korean culture is “highly family oriented”, and there was no evidence of negativity for them to worry about, as aspects of “filial piety” (as noted in discussion earlier) in Chinese family is compatible with “respect for elders” and “Asian values” evident in Korean cultures.

Question 18 (How does your religion/faith affect your use of Korean products? Cosmetic and Food?). Malay participants mentioned ‘Korean product sold in Malaysia should be checked to get the Halal status. Then, the product is safe to use by the Muslim people without any worries. While a Chinese participant mentioned ‘My faith doesn’t allow me to eat beef. For example, beef bulgogi rice.’, she also added ‘I enjoy eating Korean food. I just order other chicken and noodle-based food without beef.’ The discussions that ensued showed Malaysian Muslims do not have concerns for Korean products, be it food or cosmetic due to the Halal certification process that is conducted by Malaysian Islamic authorities.

Question 19 (Do you think religion is a consideration when purchasing Korean products?).

All participants from both FGDs affirmed that religion was neither a consideration nor hindrance when purchasing Korean products. However, through the discussion, Participant 1 (Chinese) from FGD1 mentioned “For me no concern. But Muslim and Indians will have concerns for

food.” This led to a discussion where we noted a keyword “empathetic understanding” among people of different faiths and religion in Malaysia towards their friends from other faiths.

Question 20 (Do you think there are regional differences in Malaysia in terms of preference toward Korean products?).

Although most participants from both FGDs said there was no regional difference among consumers of Korean products in Malaysia, some thought that there could be demographic and cultural impacts of region on consumption behaviors. From the discussion, we noted that city dwellers had the perception that Malaysians living far in the East Coast (Kelantan and Terengganu states) could be more religious/Islamic, thus showing less affinity towards foreign cultures or products.

Question 21 (Do you think there are ethnic differences in terms of preference toward Korean products?).

The discussions led to an understanding that some very important themes are present in this study with respect to responses for question 19 above. Participant 1 (Chinese/Non-Muslim) mentioned “Yes, for Muslim they require Halal certification and must be Halal food. For Indian Hindus they can’t eat beef. Cows are sacred to them.” Participant 3 (Chinese/Non-Muslim) supported that by saying “Yes, for Muslim the products and food must be Halal.” Similarly, participants 4, 5, 8, and 9 (all Non-Muslims) echoed similar sentiments whereby each mentioned the importance of food products to be acceptable to those who belong to other faiths. It was an interesting observation that Muslim participants in both FGDs did not mention the issue of “Halal” at all in their discourses; on the contrary, the non-Muslim participants frequently highlighted the need for food to be “Halal” for their Muslim friends. This indicates Malaysians “protective/caring” nature of their Muslim friends, vegetarians, Hindus, and anyone who belongs to a different faith or prefers a different diet. We termed this as the “empathetic understanding” trait of the Malaysian society that suggests a mature and caring society which, although differs in their way of life, is still able to celebrate differences among ethnics in the country.

Question 22 (How does your social circle respond to you being a Fan (or Non-Fan) of Korean products?).

All participants responded that their social circles were positive and supportive of their purchase and patronage of Korean products; however, both Malay participants (2 and 6) mentioned that their social circles did not encourage their patronage towards Korean products due to higher price perception and the lack of local ingredients in Korean cosmetics, although they did not object to their purchase. Participant 6 added “Some of them prefer to use local products to support local manufacturer. The price difference between local products and Korean products made them have second thoughts to purchase Korean products”. It appears that there exists a delicate line for foreign cosmetics usage among Malay consumers in which traditional products are revered in the community as effective “time-and-tested”.

Questions 23 (What is your perception of marketing and promotional activities (e.g., ads, coupons, etc.) implemented by Korean firms (SMEs) in Malaysia?) and 24 (Are those consistent with your values? Accepted by your social circle?).

The keywords we discovered in the FGDs for these two questions include “famous celebrity”, “positive word of mouth”, “influencer”, and “social media presence”. Participants also

commented that the promotion of Korean products in Malaysia was consistent with Malaysian values and accepted by their social circles.

Question 25 (Any other feedback about Korean products especially for Korean SMEs desiring to enter the Malaysian market?).

Participants from both FGDs expressed their satisfaction as users of Korean products, regardless of whether they were fans or non-fans of the Korean Wave. They also noted “lack of awareness” and “lack of promotions” of Korean SME products in Malaysia. Participants felt that there was a general lack of marketing efforts by Korean SMEs in the Malaysian market and each user had to seek more information to understand the compatibility of the products they used and their needs. We labelled this as the general “lack of marketing of Korean SMEs” in the Malaysian market.

4.6. Differences in Keywords Identified between Fans and Non-Fans

Table 4 presents the differences in keywords identified between fans and non-fans. The majority of differences were found in the Korean products category. During the FGDs, it was observed that fans were attracted to Korean products due to their soft aspects. “Flawless”, “ambassador”, and “celebrity” were the keywords stated by most of the fans. On the other hand, non-fans mentioned the functional or utilitarian aspects of Korean products, focusing on “testimonial”, “quality”, and “affordability”. Fans agreed on intangible benefits and authenticity of Korean products, while non-fans emphasized on the functional benefits of the products. There were also very minor differences found between fans and non-fans, particularly with respect to external traits. Although both fans and non-fans agreed on the “standing out” of Korean dressing and fashion, fans have emphasized the uniqueness of Korean dance moves. In addition, trivial differences were also observed in participants’ feelings of closeness to Korean culture when compared to other foreign cultures. Fans have specifically mentioned their feelings of closeness to Korean culture in contrast to cultures from another country.

Table 4: Differences between fans and non-fans

No.	Comparison Between Fans and Non-Fans			Degree of Differences
	Category (Subject)	Fans	Non-Fans	
1	Korean Culture (Perception of external traits)	Dressing, Fashion, Unique Dance Moves	Dressing, Fashion	Low
2	Korean Culture (Closeness to Korean culture when compared to other foreign cultures)	Closeness to Korean culture as compared to other foreign cultures in terms of love, family, harmony, loyalty, and Asian culture	Agreed on the values of love, family, harmony, loyalty, and Asian culture but did not mention feelings of closeness to Korean culture as compared to other foreign cultures	Low

3	Korean Products (Attraction to Korean products)	Soft aspects of Korean products: Flawless, Ambassador, Celebrity	Functionality oriented (Utilitarian); Focusing on Testimonial, Quality, Affordability	High
4	Korean Products (Reasons behind Malaysian consumers liking Korean food/cosmetics/fashion)	Intangible Benefits, Authenticity	Functional Benefits	High

5. MANAGERIAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study found several interesting themes to explain Malaysian multicultural multi-religious consumers' perception of Korean country and product image.

Malaysians of all races view Korea as a country in positive light, as well as an inviting destination for tourism. "Inviting country and people" was a theme association with the discussions pertaining to the country image of Korea as perceived by Malaysian people. Malaysians are open to learn and accept new cultures and foreign products.

The emphasis on relationships and respect in Korean culture is highly admired by Malaysians, and this is seen as "Asian compatibility" between the two countries. This view pervades Malaysians' image and eventually influences their acceptance and consumption of Korean products. Fans of the Korean Wave identified with this theme in a much stronger manner, where they said to have obtained intrinsic benefits from Korean products, i.e., self-esteem and confidence. Non-fans, on the other hand, generally postulated a utilitarian viewpoint regarding their consumption of Korean products by saying that it works as claimed. Similarly, fans were also found to be attracted to Korean products due to its soft aspects, such as attractiveness of the product's ambassador or the celebrity who endorsed it. As for non-fans, they were pulled towards Korean product purely because of their functional benefits.

With regards to Korean products, we learnt new themes from the discussions. Malaysians appreciate the "affordable quality" of Korean products, which is seen as accessible to general Malaysians' socioeconomic status. Malaysians agree that it is not merely a "Korean hype" that has brought about the success of Korean products in Malaysia, and instead attribute it to the proven superior quality of the products.

Korean fans in Malaysia view the consumption of Korean products among their peers as a sign of standing out of the crowd. They deem this as making their mark and we label this theme as "projection of boldness and self-confidence". This is an intrinsic benefit they derive from consuming Korean products, which is seen as setting them free to live their lives to the fullest, as depicted by Korean celebrities and famous Korean personalities. This was the biggest difference between Korean fans and non-fans observed in this study. Fans derived deeper intangible benefits

from their consumption, while non-fans looked for the tangible benefits and projected a utilitarian viewpoint for their consumption behavior. The result is consistent with prior studies, which found that fans evaluate licensed products more favorably than their counterparts (Kwak et al., 2015); as such, Korean fans evaluate the products originated from Korea more favorably than non-Korean products. Given the nature of the symbolic products that have value-expressive propositions such as self-identity and prestige (Khalil, 2000), fans who often consume the symbolic products (e.g., cosmetics) from Korea are more likely to perceive that they derive deeper intangible benefits from using those products than their counterparts.

The last interesting theme found in this study was the “protective and caring culture” of Malaysians collectively towards people of other ethnic group, religion, or practices. It is rather peculiar to see the extent to which Malaysians would go in order to ensure their friends from other faiths were able to stay consistent with their faith and lifestyle practices.

The findings of this study present useful themes for foreign business and products entering the Malaysian consumer market. Specifically, for Korean businesses/firms, the findings imply greater acceptance of the country image of Korea and its products among Malaysians. However there is a lack of Korean SME products and brand promotion in the Malaysian market at the moment. Korean companies that wish to penetrate oriental markets, including that of Malaysia, need to emphasize on the aspect of similarity in creating more positive attitudes and favorable perceptions about their products. Beyond that, affordable quality and attractive packaging are equally important to grab consumers’ attention, thus resulting in their intention to purchase.

6. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Online FGDs may have hindered the observation of participants’ emotional responses during the discussion; this limitation could thus be overcome with a physical FGD in future studies to better understand the emotional and non-verbal responses of participants.

Using a collective FGD in this study, where our focus was to get responses that are culturally interactive, could be a weakness when one ethnic group may self-censor their responses due to not wanting to disclose deeper nuances in the presence of other ethnic groups. Future studies may consider conducting separate FGDs for each ethnic groups in Malaysia and compare the findings with FGDs that contain mixed ethnic groups. Additionally, future studies may carry out a quantitative study to further test and validate the themes discovered in this research.

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