



Streaming Hallyu, Negotiating Values: Digital Platforms, Social Inequality, and Cultural Reception in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital streaming platforms has accelerated the circulation of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) across Southeast Asia, yet its reception cannot be understood as a linear process of cultural diffusion. This study aims to examine how cross-border cultural flows are mediated by digital platforms and interpreted within diverse socio-cultural contexts across the region. Employing a qualitative literature review with thematic analysis, the research synthesizes scholarly works on media globalization, streaming platforms, and cultural reception in Southeast Asia. The findings reveal that Hallyu reception is shaped by three interrelated factors: digital infrastructure and platform algorithms that expand access and shape preferences; social inequalities that differentiate consumption patterns across class, education, and geography; and local cultural values, particularly religious norms and identities, that drive processes of adaptation, resistance, and hybridization. Audiences selectively adopt, adapt, or resist cultural elements, producing diverse forms of cultural hybridity that indicate globalization fosters differentiation rather than uniformity. The study concludes that cultural globalization in the digital era is multidimensional, requiring integrated analysis across technological, social, and cultural domains. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening local cultural resilience and offer valuable lessons for developing creative industries capable of competing globally while preserving unique cultural identities in Southeast Asia.

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Introduction

The ongoing digital transformation has fundamentally reconfigured contemporary media ecosystems, altering the production, dissemination, and consumption of cultural content in increasingly interconnected global environments (Alzubi, 2023; Vlassis, 2021). The emergence of streaming platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, Disney+, and Viu has accelerated transnational cultural flows, enabling audiovisual content to circulate instantly and reach increasingly diverse audiences (Chalaby, 2022, 2023). Within this



digital environment, the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) has become one of the most influential examples of non-Western cultural globalization, illustrating how Korean dramas, popular music, and entertainment industries have successfully expanded beyond East Asia to establish a strong presence throughout Southeast Asia and other regions of the Global South (Glodev et al., 2023; Jin, 2024). However, the globalization of Korean popular culture should not be interpreted as a straightforward process of cultural diffusion. Instead, it reflects a dynamic interaction between digital media infrastructures, platform algorithms, local cultural contexts, and audience agency, where global cultural products are continuously interpreted, negotiated, and reconfigured through local social and cultural realities (Hao, 2025; Schrape, 2021). Consequently, understanding *Hallyu* requires moving beyond technological determinism toward a broader examination of how digital media mediate cultural globalization within culturally diverse societies.

Southeast Asia provides an especially significant context for examining these transformations because it combines rapid digital adoption with extraordinary cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. Although streaming platforms have dramatically increased access to Korean cultural products, their reception varies considerably across countries shaped by different historical experiences, levels of digital development, and dominant cultural values (Arevalo et al., 2023; Rattanasevee, 2023). In predominantly Muslim societies such as Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, Korean dramas and K-pop frequently encounter negotiations with local religious norms, family values, and collective identities (Mujani et al., 2022; Inayatussahara & Hasan, 2023). Rather than passively consuming foreign media, audiences actively evaluate, reinterpret, adapt, and occasionally reject elements perceived as incompatible with local traditions (Son & Schwak, 2022; Loo & Loo, 2021). Moreover, disparities in digital infrastructure, media literacy, education, and socioeconomic conditions further shape unequal patterns of access and participation in global cultural consumption. These conditions position Southeast Asia as a strategic setting for exploring how streaming technologies intersect with local cultures to produce multiple forms of cultural negotiation.

Existing scholarship on the Korean Wave has generally developed along three major trajectories. The first views *Hallyu* primarily as a successful instrument of South Korea's cultural diplomacy and creative economy, emphasizing state policies, industrial competitiveness, and the global expansion of Korean cultural industries (Affandi & Putri, 2023; Fitria et al., 2021). A second body of research examines audience consumption by focusing on lifestyle transformation, identity formation, fashion, beauty standards, and consumer

behavior influenced by Korean popular culture (Liu, 2024; Tahrali et al., 2023). More recently, a third strand has explored the role of streaming platforms, digital infrastructures, and algorithmic recommendation systems in facilitating the transnational circulation and visibility of cultural content (Damásio et al., 2025; Jin, 2025; Sarkar & Yang, 2025). While these perspectives have substantially advanced understanding of *Hallyu*'s global expansion, they remain fragmented. Much of the literature treats technological infrastructure, audience behavior, and cultural identity as separate analytical domains, paying insufficient attention to how these dimensions interact within culturally heterogeneous societies. Consequently, relatively little research has systematically examined how digital infrastructures, social inequalities, and local cultural values collectively shape the reception of Korean popular culture across Southeast Asia.

This study addresses this gap by proposing an integrated perspective that combines digital media studies, reception theory, and cultural globalization to explain how cross-border cultural flows are negotiated within Southeast Asian societies. Rather than conceptualizing *Hallyu* as a unidirectional process of cultural influence, the article argues that its reception constitutes an active process of cultural negotiation in which audiences continuously reinterpret global media through local religious beliefs, cultural identities, and everyday social practices. The study further contends that the reception of Korean popular culture is conditioned not only by technological accessibility but also by unequal digital infrastructures, media literacy, and broader socio-cultural contexts that shape patterns of adaptation, resistance, and cultural hybridity. By integrating technological, social, and cultural dimensions within a single analytical framework, this article contributes to contemporary debates in media and cultural studies by extending discussions on digital globalization, platform culture, audience agency, and cultural hybridity in the Global South. Although empirically focused on Southeast Asia, the conceptual insights generated by this study offer broader relevance for understanding the reception of transnational media and the negotiation of global cultural flows across diverse postcolonial societies.

Accordingly, this study addresses three interrelated research questions: (1) How do digital streaming platforms facilitate the circulation of transnational cultural flows in Southeast Asia? (2) How do social inequalities influence differentiated patterns of Korean cultural consumption across the region? (3) How do local cultural values, particularly religious norms and cultural identities, shape processes of adaptation, resistance, and cultural hybridity in the reception of *Hallyu*? Through these questions, the article seeks to advance a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between digital

technologies, media globalization, and local cultural dynamics in contemporary Southeast Asia while contributing to broader discussions on media policy, cultural diversity, and digital society.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative literature review design to examine how the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) is received and negotiated across Southeast Asia. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables an interpretive understanding of complex media, cultural, and social phenomena while synthesizing diverse scholarly perspectives into a coherent analytical framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than measuring causal relationships, the study seeks to explain how digital platforms, social inequalities, and local cultural values collectively shape the reception of transnational cultural flows. As a form of document-based inquiry, literature review facilitates the critical examination of academic publications to identify recurring patterns, theoretical debates, and emerging perspectives on digital media, cultural globalization, and audience reception (Bowen, 2009). This approach also captures the socio-cultural meanings embedded in existing scholarship, providing an *emic* understanding of how *Hallyu* has been interpreted within Southeast Asia's diverse cultural and religious settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The literature was systematically collected from Scopus and Google Scholar, using combinations of keywords including *Korean Wave*, *Hallyu*, *streaming platforms*, *cultural reception*, *Southeast Asia*, *digital media*, *cultural globalization*, and *cultural hybridity*. The review prioritized peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and research reports published between 2015 and 2025, while also incorporating seminal theoretical works because of their conceptual relevance. Sources were selected based on four inclusion criteria: (1) discussing *Hallyu*, streaming platforms, or cultural reception in Southeast Asia; (2) examining digital media, cultural globalization, or identity within Asian or Global South contexts; (3) originating from reputable academic publications; and (4) being written in English. Studies lacking scholarly credibility or unrelated to the research objectives were excluded.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The analytical process consisted of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, relevant literature was identified, screened, and coded according to the research objectives. The coded findings were then organized into three analytical themes corresponding to the study's research questions: (1) Streaming Platforms and the Circulation of Transnational Cultural Flows in Southeast Asia; (2) Digital Inequality and

Differentiated Patterns of Hallyu Consumption; and (3) Negotiating Hallyu: Local Values, Religious Identity, and Cultural Hybridity. In the final stage, relationships among these themes were interpreted through Reception Theory, Cultural Globalization Theory, and the concept of Cultural Additivity to explain how digital media infrastructures, social inequalities, and local cultural values shape the reception of Korean popular culture across Southeast Asia. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed source triangulation, by comparing evidence from journal articles, books, and institutional reports, and theoretical triangulation, by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives.

This methodological approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how global cultural flows are negotiated within diverse Southeast Asian societies while contributing to broader discussions on digital media, cultural hybridity, and media globalization.

Table 1
Thematic Categories and Analytical Framework

Theme	Sub-themes	Key Concepts	Representative Sources
1. Streaming Platforms and the Circulation of Transnational Cultural Flows in Southeast Asia	Streaming platforms, algorithms, digital connectivity	Platformization, algorithmic curation, cross-border cultural flows, digital infrastructure	Chalaby (2022, 2023) ; Jin (2025) ; Sarkar & Yang (2025) ; Ju (2023) ; Pan (2024) ; Oh (2021) ; Lotz & Eklund (2023)
2. Digital Inequality and Differentiated Patterns of Hallyu Consumption	Access disparities, social class, education, urban-rural divide	Digital divide, cultural capital, media literacy, consumption inequality	Schwittek & Reyes (2023) ; Liu (2022) ; Velasco (2023) ; Permana & Taufan (2022) ; Yang (2021) ; Arevalo et al. (2023)
3. Negotiating Hallyu: Local Values, Religious Identity, and Cultural Hybridity	Religious norms, cultural identity, adaptation, resistance, hybridity	Reception theory, cultural hybridity, cultural additivity, glocalization, selective adoption	Vuong et al. (2021) ; AISDL (2021) ; Tohari & Azizah (2022) ; Hasyim et al. (2024) ; Zayadi (2023) ; Mujani et al. (2022) ; Inayatussahara & Hasan (2023)

Source: Developed by the author based on [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#).

[Table 1](#) summarizes the analytical framework used in this study. The first theme examines how streaming platforms facilitate the circulation of Korean popular culture across Southeast Asia. The second theme explores how digital inequality and socioeconomic differences produce diverse patterns of cultural consumption. The third theme investigates how local religious values, cultural identities, and traditions shape audience responses through processes of

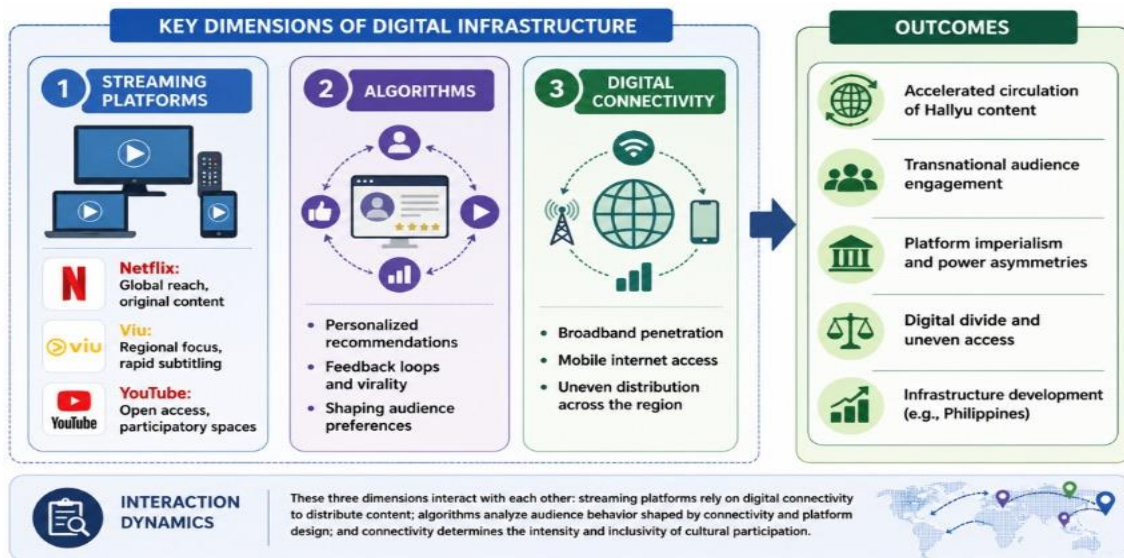
adaptation, resistance, and cultural hybridity. Together, these themes provide an integrated framework for explaining how *Hallyu* is negotiated within Southeast Asia's diverse socio-cultural contexts and contribute to contemporary debates on media globalization, audience reception, and digital cultural transformation.

Digital Infrastructure and the Expansion of Cross-Border Cultural Flows in the Streaming Era

The rapid expansion of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) in Southeast Asia has been driven by the transformation of digital media infrastructures, particularly streaming platforms that have reshaped cultural production, distribution, and consumption. Platforms such as Netflix, Viu, and YouTube function as digital infrastructures that influence audience preferences through algorithmic recommendation systems and on-demand accessibility. These technologies enable Korean dramas and K-pop to circulate simultaneously across national borders, fostering transnational cultural flows while reducing geographical and temporal barriers. The figure below illustrates how streaming platforms, algorithmic systems, and digital connectivity collectively accelerate *Hallyu*'s regional diffusion while also generating new forms of platform dependency and digital inequality (Sarkar & Yang, 2025; Pan, 2024; Othman & Aini, 2021).

Figure 1

Digital Infrastructure and the Expansion of Cross-Border Cultural Flows



Source: Developed by the author based on Chalaby (2022, 2023), Jin (2025), Sarkar and Yang (2025), Ju (2023), Pan (2024), and Oh (2021).

As illustrated in Figure 1, streaming platforms constitute the primary infrastructure through which Korean popular culture circulates

globally. Netflix has played a strategic role by investing heavily in Korean original productions, transforming series such as *Kingdom* and *Squid Game* into global cultural phenomena. Beyond distributing content, Netflix utilizes personalized recommendation systems that continuously expose users to Korean productions, thereby increasing audience engagement and expanding the global visibility of Hallyu (Ju, 2023; Jiang, 2024). By integrating content production, distribution, and algorithmic curation within a single ecosystem, Netflix has significantly strengthened the international competitiveness of the Korean cultural industry.

While Netflix operates on a global scale, **Viu** has successfully adopted a regional strategy tailored to Southeast Asian audiences. Its rapid subtitling system, which often provides multilingual subtitles within hours after Korean broadcasts, has substantially reduced temporal barriers between domestic and international viewers (Widia et al., 2021; Wambrauw & Affandi, 2023). This strategy demonstrates that distribution speed has become an important competitive advantage in the contemporary streaming economy, where audiences increasingly expect immediate access to newly released content. Rather than simply replicating Netflix's model, Viu illustrates how localized platform strategies can effectively strengthen regional cultural consumption while responding to diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

YouTube complements these subscription-based services by functioning as an open and participatory media ecosystem. Unlike Netflix and Viu, YouTube enables K-pop agencies, entertainment companies, and fan communities to distribute, remix, translate, and circulate cultural content without significant institutional barriers. As argued by Oh (2021) and Rojo et al. (2022), YouTube transforms audiences from passive consumers into active participants who generate reaction videos, fan edits, subtitled content, and online discussions that further amplify Hallyu's global visibility. Consequently, digital cultural circulation becomes increasingly interactive, collaborative, and community-driven rather than following the traditional one-way broadcasting model.

The effectiveness of these platforms is reinforced by algorithmic recommendation systems that determine the visibility of cultural content. Artificial intelligence-based algorithms analyze users' viewing histories, preferences, and interaction patterns to personalize recommendations, thereby creating feedback loops that continually reinforce audience exposure to Korean cultural products. Research by Han (2023), Ju (2023), and Jin (2025) demonstrates that such recommendation systems significantly accelerate the virality of Hallyu by increasing the likelihood that users will repeatedly encounter similar content. In this sense, algorithms do not merely reflect audience preferences; they actively

shape them by influencing cultural visibility and directing patterns of media consumption. As [Park and Park \(2025\)](#) observe, YouTube's recommendation system has become one of the principal mechanisms facilitating the global expansion of Korean popular culture.

Despite these advantages, the dominance of global streaming platforms also raises concerns regarding platform imperialism and asymmetrical power relations. [Jin \(2025\)](#) argues that companies such as Netflix and YouTube exercise considerable influence over cultural circulation through their control of digital infrastructures, algorithms, and global distribution networks. Although Hallyu is often celebrated as a successful example of Korean cultural globalization, its international dissemination remains heavily dependent upon platform ecosystems controlled by multinational technology corporations. Consequently, the visibility of Korean content is shaped not only by cultural quality but also by commercial priorities, algorithmic governance, and platform-specific policies. These conditions illustrate that contemporary cultural globalization is increasingly embedded within the broader political economy of platform capitalism.

Furthermore, the expansion of Hallyu remains closely linked to uneven patterns of digital connectivity across Southeast Asia. Although internet penetration has improved substantially over the past decade, disparities in broadband infrastructure, mobile connectivity, and digital access continue to shape unequal opportunities for cultural participation ([Findlay & Tangkitvanich, 2021](#); [Beschorner, 2021](#)). Communities with limited internet access remain less able to engage with streaming services, creating differentiated patterns of cultural consumption throughout the region. The experience of the Philippines demonstrates how streaming platforms can simultaneously stimulate technological development. [Pan \(2024\)](#) shows that Netflix's adaptation of streaming quality to local network conditions encouraged internet service providers to upgrade digital infrastructure, illustrating how global media platforms may indirectly contribute to national technological modernization. Similar observations by [Affandi and Putri \(2023\)](#) suggest that increasing demand for high-quality streaming has encouraged broader investment in communication technologies throughout Southeast Asia.

Overall, the expansion of Hallyu across Southeast Asia reflects the interaction of three mutually reinforcing dimensions: streaming platforms as global cultural infrastructures, algorithms as mechanisms governing cultural visibility, and digital connectivity as the material foundation enabling audience participation. These dimensions collectively explain why Hallyu has become one of the most influential examples of transnational cultural circulation in the digital

era. More broadly, they demonstrate that contemporary cultural globalization cannot be understood solely through cultural production or audience reception but must also consider the political economy of digital platforms and the unequal distribution of technological infrastructure that shapes participation in global cultural flows.

Social Inequality and the Differentiation of Global Cultural Consumption Patterns in Southeast Asia

Contemporary Southeast Asia is often understood as a “space of flows,” characterized by the intensification of cross-border movements of capital, people, goods, information, and ideas, a process that lies at the core of globalization while simultaneously reshaping cultural consumption patterns in the region. These flows occur not only through trade and investment, but also via tourism, digital media, retail platforms, and remittances linked to migration ([Srisamoot, 2022](#)). At the regional level, these dynamics operate through a cooperation architecture centered on ASEAN, which is no longer limited to economic integration but also encompasses social and cultural dimensions through frameworks such as ASEAN+X, covering sectors like culture, information, and tourism ([Ting & Yongkun, 2023](#)). The ASEAN Community-building agenda explicitly integrates a socio-cultural pillar alongside political-security and economic pillars, underscoring that culture is not merely a byproduct of the nation-state but a strategic arena in regional integration ([Velasco, 2023](#); [Dosch & Kliem, 2023](#)).

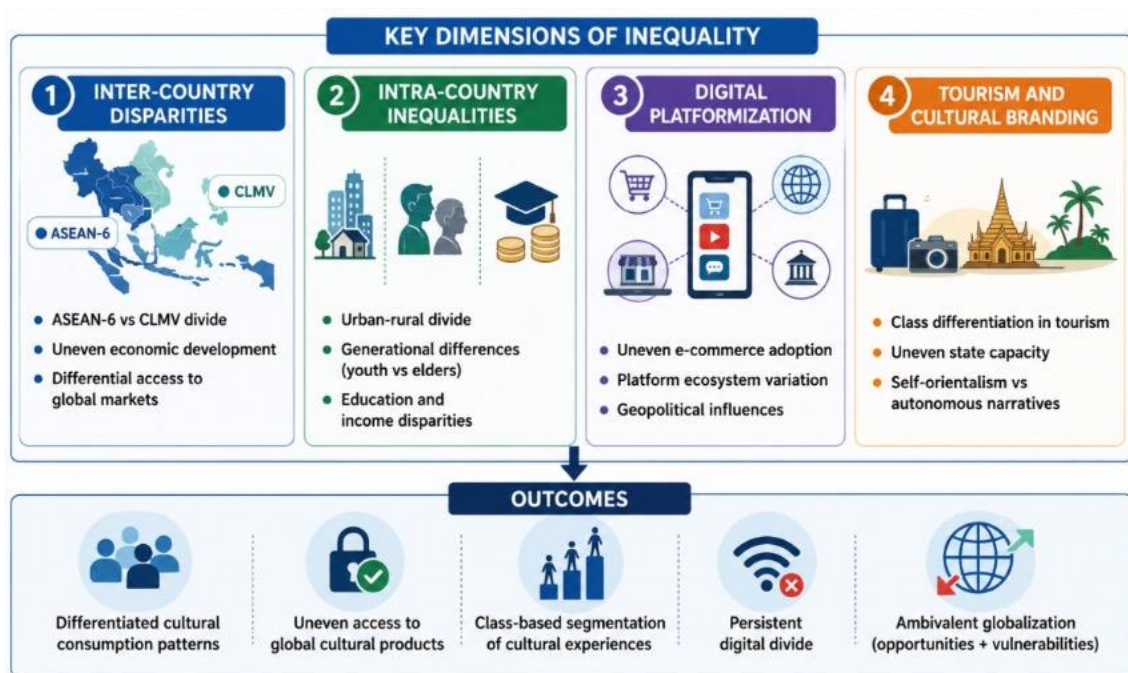
Despite the rapid diffusion of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) across Southeast Asia, the region remains characterized by profound social, political, cultural, and economic diversity that fundamentally shapes patterns of cultural consumption. ASEAN member states differ considerably in their religious traditions, ethnolinguistic compositions, political systems, and levels of economic development, resulting in uneven capacities to access and engage with global digital media ([Arevalo et al., 2023](#); [Rattanasevee, 2023](#)). These structural differences influence not only the availability of digital infrastructure but also individuals’ access to streaming platforms, internet connectivity, education, and purchasing power, all of which determine participation in transnational cultural flows ([Schwittek & Reyes, 2023](#); [Liu, 2022](#)). Consequently, the expansion of Hallyu should not be interpreted as evidence of a homogeneous or culturally convergent Southeast Asia. Instead, cultural consumption varies significantly across national and local contexts, reflecting existing inequalities in digital access, economic resources, and technological literacy. While digital platforms have facilitated the cross-border circulation of Korean popular culture, they have simultaneously reinforced new forms of exclusion and platform dependency

among audiences with differing socio-economic conditions. Therefore, understanding Hallyu in Southeast Asia requires moving beyond narratives of regional integration toward a more critical perspective that recognizes how structural inequalities continue to shape access, participation, and the experience of global cultural consumption (Schwittek & Reyes, 2023; Arevalo et al., 2023).

The figure below presents a simple visual framework illustrating how social inequalities shape the differentiation of global cultural consumption patterns in Southeast Asia. The diagram shows four key dimensions, inter-country disparities, intra-country inequalities, digital platformization, and tourism and cultural branding, that collectively determine who can access global cultural products and how consumption patterns are formed.

Figure 2

Social Inequality and the Differentiation of Global Cultural Consumption Patterns in Southeast Asia



Source: Developed by the author based on Srisamoot (2022), Velasco (2023), Schwittek & Reyes (2023), Arevalo et al. (2023), Permana & Taufan (2022), Yang (2021), and Liu (2025).

Figure 2 above provides a simple visual summary of how social inequalities shape the differentiation of global cultural consumption patterns in Southeast Asia. The top section identifies four key dimensions of inequality: inter-country disparities (ASEAN-6 vs CLMV divide, uneven economic development), intra-country inequalities (urban-rural divide, generational differences, education and income disparities), digital platformization (uneven e-commerce adoption,

platform ecosystem variation, geopolitical influences), and tourism and cultural branding (class differentiation, uneven state capacity, self-orientalism vs autonomous narratives). The bottom section shows outcomes: differentiated cultural consumption patterns, uneven access to global cultural products, class-based segmentation of cultural experiences, persistent digital divide, and ambivalent globalization offering both opportunities and vulnerabilities. This simple model enables readers to quickly understand the holistic nature of social inequality's role in shaping cultural consumption.

These inequalities operate at multiple scales, both between and within countries, and constitute a key factor shaping the differentiation of global cultural consumption. In ASEAN literature, development gaps between countries, often framed as the ASEAN-6 versus CLMV divide, are identified as major obstacles to achieving equitable economic development and comprehensive regional integration ([Permana & Taufan, 2022](#)). ASEAN economic integration efforts are consistently linked to the goals of poverty reduction and the narrowing of socio-economic disparities, while also facilitating the free flow of goods, services, and investment, all of which contribute to the formation of consumer markets for global cultural products ([Velasco, 2023](#)). However, persistent economic inequality can also generate social tensions and hinder the formation of a cohesive socio-cultural community, meaning that cultural integration, including convergence in consumption, remains constrained by uneven material conditions ([Liu, 2022](#)). This is crucial because global cultural consumption is fundamentally mediated by the market: global brands, streaming services, international travel, and platform-based services tend to develop more rapidly in areas with higher purchasing power, strong connectivity, and well-developed logistical infrastructure. Literature on ASEAN economic integration also highlights the importance of foreign investment and participation in global value chains as primary channels for the diffusion of consumer goods and cultural commodities, which in turn produce uneven distribution patterns ([Permana & Taufan, 2022](#); [Velasco, 2023](#); [Wardani, 2021](#)). Consequently, more globally integrated regions tend to become early adopters of global cultural trends, while less developed areas experience delayed, selective, or compressed adoption ([Jin et al., 2021](#); [Schwittek & Reyes, 2023](#)).

Beyond inter-country disparities, inequality also exists within countries and is generational in nature, particularly among youth. Studies on young people in Southeast Asia show that economic development coexists with entrenched inequalities, creating highly diverse life opportunities shaped by migration, demographic change, and socio-economic transformation ([Schwittek & Reyes, 2023](#)). These inequalities are not limited to income distribution but also shape

cultural consumption capacities through access to education, mobility, and transnational networks. In many cases, global cultural consumption is supported not only by local income but also by transnational household strategies, such as remittances from migrant workers (Doan & Dai, 2021; Schwittek & Reyes, 2023). This aligns with the argument that globalization accelerates the growth of cultural industries and transnational forms of production and consumption based on information technology, while simultaneously producing social segmentation based on access to these technologies and markets (Doan & Dai, 2021). Thus, social inequality is not merely an outcome of globalization, but also a mechanism that determines who can participate in global cultural consumption, from streaming subscriptions to aspirational lifestyles promoted through tourism and global branding. The generational dimension is particularly significant, as younger, more digitally native populations in urban areas are often early adopters of global cultural trends, while older generations and rural populations may have more limited exposure and access.

In the contemporary context, digital platformization has become a primary channel for the globalization of everyday cultural consumption, particularly through e-commerce and app-based services. Southeast Asia's e-commerce ecosystem has experienced rapid growth, driven by cross-border competition among regional and global technology firms and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the use of mobile internet and electronic payment systems (Yang, 2021). However, despite this growth, per capita e-commerce consumption in the region remains relatively low, around 5%, indicating both significant room for expansion and persistent inequality in adoption across populations and countries (Yang, 2021). This suggests a paradox: global cultural consumption through digital platforms is expanding rapidly, yet remains uneven. Moreover, geopolitical factors such as the South China Sea conflict and U.S.–China rivalry also shape the digital ecosystem through their impact on platform strategies, consumer trust, and regional regulation (Yang, 2021; Caballero-Anthony, 2022). Within ASEAN's open regionalism framework, countries retain flexibility in forming bilateral economic partnerships, resulting in platform ecosystem development that varies depending on investment relations, logistics, and payment infrastructure (Permana & Taufan, 2022; Caballero-Anthony, 2022). As a result, global cultural consumption through digital platforms does not follow a uniform regional pattern, but is heavily influenced by national political-economic conditions. The interplay of these factors creates a complex landscape where some populations are deeply integrated into global digital consumption networks while others remain

marginal, reinforcing existing social hierarchies through new technological means.

Tourism also plays a crucial role as a channel for global cultural consumption and as a site of cultural representation of Southeast Asia to the world. Analyses of ASEAN tourism media indicate that regional representations remain influenced by Western discourses through practices of self-orientalism, although there is a growing trend toward more autonomous and diverse self-representation (Liu, 2025). This demonstrates that global cultural consumption is shaped not only by economic factors, but also by symbolic power relations in meaning-making processes. As economic integration and investment increase, some ASEAN countries have greater capacity to curate and export their own cultural narratives, while others remain more dependent on global market expectations (Liu, 2025; Liu, 2022). At the same time, the tourism sector reveals sharp class differentiation, particularly in luxury and health tourism segments. Thailand, for instance, occupies a significant position in the global wellness tourism and international medical services market, which is largely accessible only to high-income groups (Srisamoot, 2022). This phenomenon highlights that global cultural consumption is segmented not only geographically but also socially, with certain cultural experiences becoming exclusive to specific classes. The rise of wellness tourism and medical tourism in Thailand illustrates how cultural consumption is increasingly stratified by income, creating parallel worlds of consumption where high-income tourists experience a curated, sanitized version of local culture while the broader population remains excluded from these premium experiences.

Cultural globalization also unfolds through food and lifestyle branding, as seen in initiatives such as “Kitchen of the World,” which promotes the internationalization of Thai cuisine as a global consumer product (Srisamoot, 2022). This initiative illustrates how states can strategically package culture as an economic commodity for global markets. However, such success is uneven across ASEAN, as it depends on state capacity, tourism infrastructure, and market integration (Schwittek & Reyes, 2023; Liu, 2022). Finally, migration and transnational households shape consumption patterns by linking local communities to global labor markets and remittance flows. This mobility facilitates not only economic transfers but also the circulation of norms, tastes, and consumption aspirations across borders (Doan & Dai, 2021; Srisamoot, 2022). However, the literature also cautions that migration-driven globalization can produce uneven social impacts, rendering the resulting global cultural consumption ambivalent, offering both opportunities and vulnerabilities (Doan & Dai, 2021; Schwittek & Reyes, 2023). Global cultural consumption patterns in

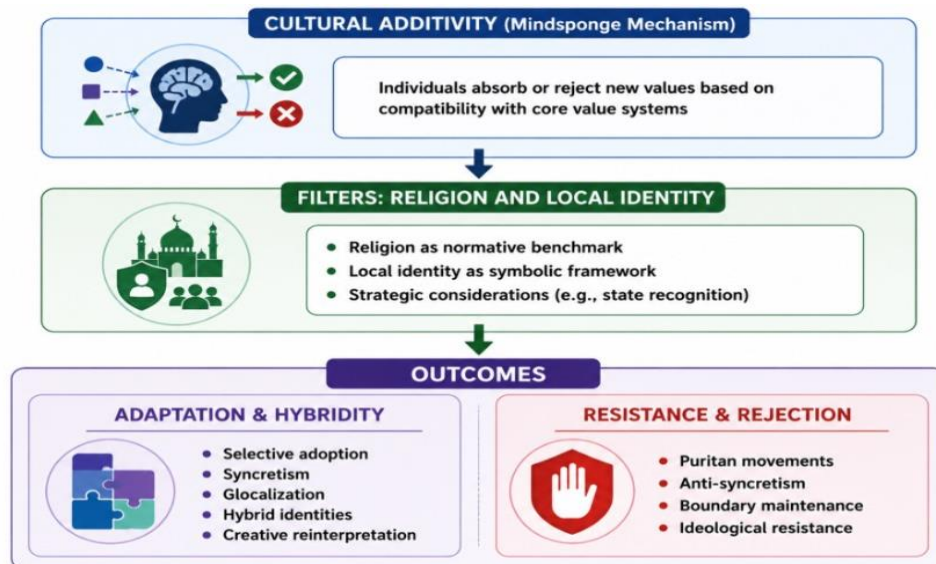
Southeast Asia do not move toward homogenization; rather, they are deeply differentiated by structures of inequality operating across multiple social, economic, and political scales. The cumulative effect of these intersecting inequalities is a region where cultural globalization is experienced profoundly differently depending on one's location, income, education, age, and access to digital infrastructure, creating a complex mosaic of consumption patterns that resist simple generalization.

Negotiating Local Values: Adaptation, Resistance, and Hybridization in the Reception of Hallyu

Globalization does not produce uniform cultural outcomes; instead, individuals and communities actively evaluate, adapt, or reject external influences according to their existing cultural values and social norms. This process can be explained through the concept of cultural additivity, particularly the mindsponge mechanism, which suggests that new values are filtered based on their perceived benefits, costs, and compatibility with core beliefs (Vuong et al., 2021; AISDL, 2021). The figure below illustrates how cultural additivity, mediated by religion and local identity, generates varied outcomes, including cultural adaptation, hybridity, selective acceptance, and resistance to global cultural influences.

Figure 3

Negotiating Local Values: Adaptation, Resistance, and Hybridization



Source: Developed by the author based on Vuong et al. (2021), AISDL (2021), Tohari and Azizah (2022), Hasyim et al. (2024), Zayadi (2023), and Fuadi et al. (2024).

As illustrated in [Figure 3](#), the negotiation of global culture begins with the cognitive filtering process described by the mindsponge mechanism. Individuals do not indiscriminately accept foreign cultural values; instead, they evaluate them through pre-existing moral, religious, and cultural frameworks. Religion functions as a normative benchmark that defines acceptable forms of cultural expression, while local identity provides symbolic references through which new meanings are interpreted. Political and institutional considerations may also shape this process, particularly in contexts where religious affiliation is associated with legal recognition or social legitimacy. The interaction among these filters produces multiple trajectories of cultural reception rather than a single, predictable outcome.

Empirical evidence suggests that most societies adopt neither complete acceptance nor absolute rejection of global cultural influences. Instead, they pursue selective adaptation, incorporating external cultural elements while preserving local traditions and identities. The Muslim Tengger community in East Java, for example, demonstrates how Islamic teachings have been reinterpreted through indigenous cosmological traditions, producing the hybrid cultural identity known as *Waralaga* ([Tohari & Azizah, 2022](#)). Likewise, the Garassik Muslim community in Tana Toraja combines Islamic values with Torajan cultural practices, illustrating that religious transformation does not necessarily require abandoning local traditions ([Hasyim et al., 2024](#)). These examples indicate that cultural adoption is fundamentally a creative process of reinterpretation rather than simple imitation. Within the context of Hallyu, this implies that Southeast Asian audiences actively reinterpret Korean cultural products according to their own cultural experiences, producing localized meanings that differ from those originally encoded by Korean media producers.

Religion and local identity remain the most influential filters shaping these negotiations. Religious traditions establish normative boundaries that distinguish acceptable from unacceptable cultural practices, while local identities provide historical and symbolic resources through which external influences are evaluated. Research on urban Sundanese communities demonstrates that the encounter between Islamic teachings and indigenous traditions has generated productive forms of religious ambiguity rather than direct conflict, allowing communities to maintain cultural continuity while accommodating social change ([Zayadi, 2023](#)). Similarly, the Towani Tolotang community illustrates how strategic political considerations influence cultural adaptation. Their formal adoption of Hinduism for state recognition did not eliminate indigenous belief systems but instead created a layered religious identity in which traditional practices coexist with officially recognized religious institutions ([Tahara, 2023](#)).

Comparable patterns can also be observed among the *Wetu Telu* community in Lombok, where Islamic practices remain closely intertwined with pre-Islamic cosmological traditions (Sirnopati et al., 2022). These cases demonstrate that cultural reception is simultaneously shaped by religious principles, historical identity, and broader socio-political contexts.

Sustained processes of selective adaptation frequently generate hybrid and syncretic cultural forms. Syncretism should not be understood as an arbitrary mixture of traditions but as an intentional process of cultural innovation that combines selected elements from multiple value systems (Frankfurter, 2021; Nwosu, 2022). This phenomenon is evident in Zimbabwe, where Pentecostal churches integrate indigenous African religious practices into Christian worship while maintaining theological continuity (Marimbe, 2024; Nel & Kgatle, 2024). Similar dynamics characterize Javanese Islam, whose inclusive identity has evolved through centuries of interaction among Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and indigenous traditions (Rofiqoh et al., 2021; Tohe, 2021). The Rishi movement in Kashmir likewise illustrates how Islamic identity develops through continuous dialogue with local cultural traditions (Nasir, 2025). These examples highlight that hybrid identities emerge not from cultural decline but from sustained processes of negotiation and reinterpretation. Applied to Hallyu, this suggests that Korean popular culture in Southeast Asia is increasingly localized through the incorporation of regional languages, religious values, aesthetic preferences, and everyday cultural practices, producing forms of cultural expression that are simultaneously global and local.

Nevertheless, cultural negotiation also generates resistance. Communities may reject external cultural influences when they are perceived as threatening established moral principles or collective identities. Such resistance reflects efforts to preserve cultural boundaries rather than simple opposition to globalization itself (Vuong et al., 2021; AISDL, 2021). In Indonesia, reformist Islamic movements reject certain indigenous traditions regarded as *bid'ah* and advocate religious purification based on scriptural interpretations (Soedrajad & Tohir, 2022; Fuadi et al., 2024). Likewise, some neo-Pentecostal communities in South Africa oppose the incorporation of traditional African religious practices into Christian worship because they consider such practices incompatible with biblical teachings (Kgatle & Ngubane, 2023; Tagwirei, 2023). Within the context of Hallyu, comparable forms of resistance emerge when Korean dramas or popular music are perceived to promote lifestyles, gender norms, or romantic relationships that conflict with local religious values. Such responses illustrate that cultural rejection constitutes an active assertion of moral and cultural identity rather than passive resistance to foreign influence.

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that globalization intensifies cultural negotiation rather than producing cultural uniformity. Exposure to global media often strengthens local identities because communities become increasingly conscious of preserving values they regard as fundamental. Consequently, the reception of Hallyu in Southeast Asia should be understood as a continuous process of adaptation, hybridity, and resistance mediated by religion, culture, and social identity. The mindsponge mechanism provides a valuable framework for explaining how individuals selectively absorb external values, while religion and local identity define the normative boundaries within which cultural adaptation occurs. Over time, these interactions generate diverse cultural configurations that reflect both the transformative potential of globalization and the resilience of local traditions. Rather than dissolving cultural differences, global cultural flows encourage societies to continuously reconstruct identity through ongoing negotiation between global influences and locally grounded systems of meaning.

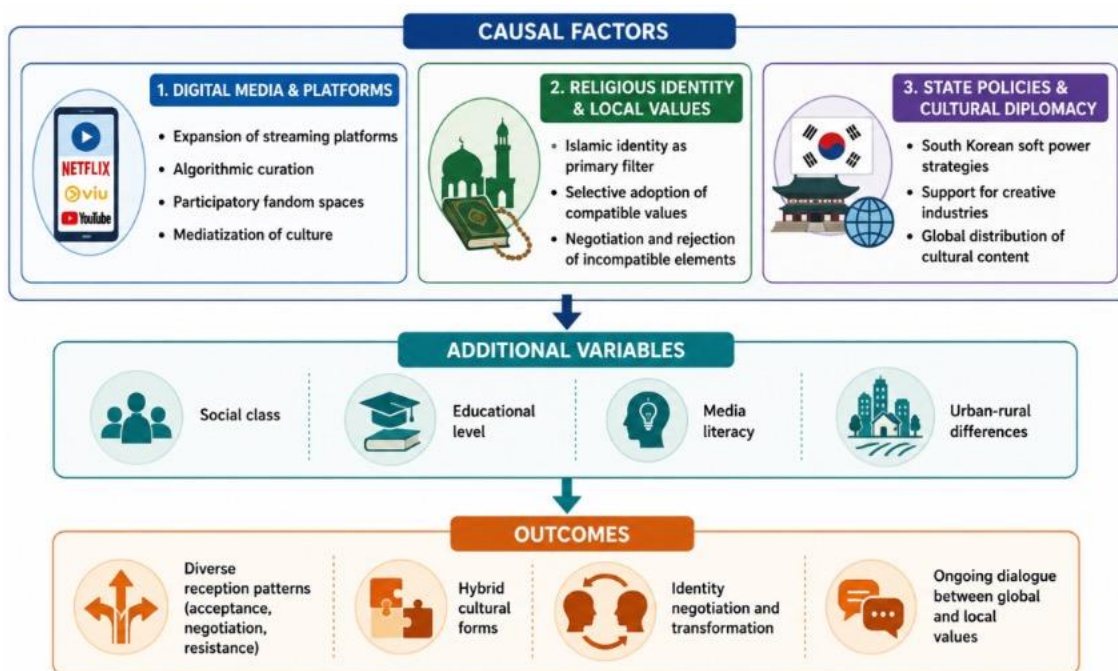
Causal Dynamics of Cultural Reception: A Theoretical Analysis through Cultural Globalization and Reception Theory

The reception of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in Southeast Asia extends beyond a simple process of cultural globalization or media diffusion. Rather, it is produced through the interaction of digital infrastructures, socio-cultural contexts, state policies, market dynamics, and audience agency. From the perspective of cultural globalization theory, Hallyu illustrates a significant transformation in global cultural flows by demonstrating that cultural influence is no longer dominated exclusively by Western powers but is increasingly generated by non-Western actors, particularly South Korea (Yoon, 2022; Yoon & Garcia, 2024). However, the international circulation of Korean cultural products does not automatically result in uniform meanings or audience acceptance. Reception theory argues that audiences are active participants who interpret, negotiate, adapt, and sometimes resist media texts according to their own cultural values, social experiences, and ideological orientations rather than consuming them passively (Widodo, 2022; Prabawangi et al., 2022). Consequently, Hallyu reception varies considerably across Southeast Asia, reflecting differences in religion, language, historical experience, and digital environments. These diverse responses indicate that cultural reception is a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by multiple interacting mechanisms operating simultaneously at global, national, and local levels. Understanding Hallyu therefore requires an integrated analytical perspective that connects transnational cultural circulation with

localized practices of meaning-making, audience interpretation, and digital media engagement.

The figure below presents a conceptual framework illustrating how digital media, religious identity, cultural values, and state policies collectively shape patterns of Hallyu reception across Southeast Asia. It also highlights the influence of additional social variables and the diverse cultural outcomes generated through this multidirectional process

Figure 4
Causal Dynamics of Hallyu Reception in Southeast Asia



Source: Developed by the author based on Yoon (2022), Yoon and Garcia (2024), Widodo (2022), Jin (2024), Mujani et al. (2022), Fitria et al. (2021), and Affandi and Putri (2023).

As illustrated in Figure 4, the reception of Hallyu is driven by three interconnected causal factors. The first is the rapid development of digital media and streaming platforms, which have fundamentally transformed the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural content. Platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, Viu, and various social media applications function not only as distribution channels but also as algorithmically governed ecosystems that continuously shape audience preferences, visibility, and cultural participation (Jin, 2024). Through recommendation systems, participatory fandoms, fan translations, and user-generated content, audiences increasingly become active co-producers of meaning rather than passive consumers (Roy & Das, 2022; Syahriyani et al., 2022). From the perspective of mediatization theory, digital

platforms have evolved into cultural infrastructures that organize social interaction and redefine how transnational cultural identities are constructed.

The second causal dimension concerns the role of religion and local cultural values as interpretive filters. Reception theory argues that audiences decode media texts according to their own social positions, cultural experiences, and ideological commitments (Widodo, 2022; Primadini & Setianoto, 2024). In Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, Islamic values strongly influence how Korean cultural products are interpreted. Elements emphasizing discipline, family solidarity, educational achievement, and collective responsibility are generally perceived positively, whereas representations of sexuality, romantic relationships, or gender practices that conflict with local religious norms are often selectively negotiated or rejected (Mujani et al., 2022; Inayatussahara & Hasan, 2023). This selective interpretation demonstrates that globalization does not eliminate cultural diversity; instead, global cultural products are continuously localized through processes of adaptation, reinterpretation, and resistance. Furthermore, audience responses are not homogeneous but differ according to educational background, media literacy, generational experiences, and varying interpretations of religious teachings, producing multiple forms of negotiated cultural reception.

A third causal factor is the institutional role of the South Korean state through cultural diplomacy and soft-power strategies. The global success of Hallyu has been supported by sustained government investment in creative industries, international cultural promotion, and strategic partnerships with digital media platforms (Fitria et al., 2021; Affandi & Putri, 2023). These policies demonstrate that cultural globalization is not solely an organic market process but also the outcome of deliberate political and economic interventions designed to enhance national influence through cultural exports. However, the effectiveness of these strategies ultimately depends upon local audience responses. Additional variables, including socioeconomic status, educational attainment, media literacy, and urban-rural disparities, further mediate how individuals access, interpret, and engage with Korean cultural products. These intersecting variables explain why Hallyu generates differentiated patterns of reception across Southeast Asian societies rather than uniform cultural outcomes.

This study also recognizes several methodological limitations. Much of the existing literature focuses on digitally active populations, online fandom communities, or social media users, potentially underrepresenting broader segments of Southeast Asian society. To reduce this limitation, the analysis employs source triangulation across studies conducted in different national contexts and disciplinary traditions. Such diversity enriches comparative

understanding by incorporating countries with distinct religious compositions, political systems, and digital infrastructures, ranging from predominantly Muslim Indonesia and Malaysia to Buddhist Thailand and Catholic Philippines. Future empirical research would benefit from greater attention to underrepresented social groups and offline cultural practices that remain less visible within digital scholarship.

The findings further suggest several important directions for future research. One promising avenue concerns the influence of platform algorithms on cultural visibility, audience preferences, and identity formation. Recommendation systems increasingly determine which cultural products become visible while simultaneously shaping patterns of engagement and interpretation. Another important issue concerns how younger generations negotiate cultural identities through continuous interaction with Hallyu and other forms of transnational media. Examining these processes would deepen understanding of the relationship between algorithmic governance, audience agency, and long-term cultural transformation within digitally mediated societies. Overall, this causal analysis demonstrates that the reception of Hallyu is best understood as a multidirectional process resulting from the interaction of digital technologies, cultural values, religious identities, state strategies, and audience agency. Rather than representing unilateral cultural domination, Hallyu functions as a contested arena in which meanings are constantly negotiated between global media industries and locally embedded systems of belief. These findings reinforce broader debates in media and cultural studies that conceptualize globalization as a dialogic process characterized by hybridity, negotiation, and cultural pluralism rather than homogenization (Yoon, 2022; Naguim & Nfissi, 2023). Beyond explaining the success of Korean popular culture, this framework offers a broader conceptual contribution for understanding how digital media reshape cultural circulation, identity formation, and power relations across the Global South in the contemporary era.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the reception of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in Southeast Asia is a complex, dynamic, and non-linear process shaped by the interaction of digital technology, structures of social inequality, and local cultural values. Streaming platforms such as Netflix, Viu, and YouTube have fundamentally transformed the distribution and consumption of Korean cultural content, yet their role extends beyond mere distribution to actively shaping audience preferences through algorithmic curation. However, Southeast Asian societies are not passive recipients of global cultural flows; they actively engage in

selection, adaptation, and resistance based on religious norms, cultural identities, and social contexts. This process produces diverse forms of cultural hybridity, demonstrating that globalization fosters differentiation rather than homogenization, and often strengthens rather than erodes local cultural identities.

The study contributes to media and cultural studies by integrating three analytical dimensions, digital infrastructure, social inequality, and cultural negotiation, into a comprehensive framework for understanding cultural reception in the Global South. By foregrounding the active role of audiences and the mediating influence of digital platforms, the research extends both cultural globalization theory and reception theory beyond Western-centric perspectives. The findings also highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity in the production and distribution of global content, offering valuable lessons for Southeast Asian countries seeking to develop local creative industries capable of competing globally while preserving unique cultural identities. However, this study acknowledges its reliance on secondary sources, which limits its ability to capture empirical realities at the individual and community levels. Future research should address these gaps through ethnographic studies of Hallyu audiences, comparative analyses across Southeast Asian countries, and investigation into the role of social media algorithms in shaping cultural preferences. Ultimately, understanding Hallyu reception is not merely an academic exercise but a pathway to comprehending broader processes of cultural globalization, identity formation, and power negotiation in an increasingly interconnected digital world.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical Approval

This study is a literature review based exclusively on secondary data from published academic journals, official reports, and policy documents. It does not involve primary data collection from human subjects, animals, or any form of direct intervention. Therefore, ethical approval was not required for this research.

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