Generations of Hallyu's Fans

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Поколенията фенове на Халю

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Abstract

Currently, a significant transformation of Hallyu involves fans becoming prosumers of Korean popular culture. Although most of the research on Hallyu fans has focused on the younger generation, mainly Generation Z and Generation Alpha, this article examines the specific behavior of Hallyu fans as modern prosumers. Although presently the consolidation of prosumer activities is currently possible due to ongoing technological changes, especially the development of the Internet, the main hypothesis of this study is that for each Hallyu generation—from Hallyu 1.0 to Hallyu 4.0 - has a counterpart that can be identified and characterized within the generational levels of the population. In addition, different generations of prosumers can also be identified and categorized. The empirical data analyzed in this study is qualitative and it was collected between 2011 and 2020. The results of the research showed the desire for prosuming among Hallyu fans belonging to different generations. At the same time, the analysis identified the factors specific to prosumers belonging to a certain generation for certain types of Hallyu products.

Keywords: generations, popular culture, prosumers, consumers, Hallyu, Romania

Резюме

В момента една значителна трансформация на Халю включва превръщането на феновете в потребители на корейската популярна култура. Въпреки че по-голямата част от изследванията върху феновете на Халю са фокусирани върху по-младото поколение, главно поколение Z и поколение Алфа, тази статия разглежда специфичното поведение на феновете на Халю като съвременни потребители. Въпреки че в момента консолидирането на дейностите на потребителите е възможно поради текущите технологични промени, особено развитието на интернет, основната хипотеза на това изследване е, че всяко поколение на Халю – от Халю 1.0 до Халю 4.0 – има еквивалент, който може да бъде идентифициран и характеризиран в рамките на генерационните нива на населението. Освен това, различни поколения потребители също могат да бъдат идентифицирани и категоризирани. Емпиричните данни, анализирани в това изследване, са качествени и са събрани между 2011 и 2020 г. Резултатите от изследването показват желание за потребителска дейност сред феновете на Халю, принадлежащи към различни поколения. В същото време анализът идентифицира факторите, специфични за потребителите, принадлежащи към определено поколение, за определени видове продукти на Халю.

Ключови думи: поколения, популярна култура, потребители, Халю, Румъния

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Introduction

With regard to the current changes brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Ziemba (2013) stresses that the term prosumer indicates the blurring of traditional differences between "producer" and "consumer." Thus, "prosumption" is a continuous process of co-creation of individualized value, in which the prosumer is invested with innovation potential (i.e., he/she is involved in the process of creating innovation), participates in the creation of new products and offers, is aware of such an offer, and shares his/her evaluation of this offer both online and in the real world (Nath & Agrawal, 2023).

From a very general perspective, while Toffler (1980) considered prosumption as a separate category of production and consumption, many other authors (Ritzer, 2015; Ritzer, 2017; Dusi, 2018) published numerous articles addressing this concept, conceptualizing both production and consumption as subcategories of consumption (Kosnik, 2018). The revolution in information and communication technology (ICT), the everyday presence of the Internet and social networks have caused a massive change in access to knowledge (Davis, 2016), a change that has blurred the distinction between producers and consumers (Eden, 2017).

In the case of consumers of Hallyu products, this volatility of the boundaries between prosumers and consumers is even more pronounced. As the literature on this topic shows (Bok-Rae, 2015; Chang & Park, 2019), the future of Hallyu in the context of current technological changes and the advent of Web 3.0, will entail several changes in this area. Based on the existing literature (Howard & Lekakul, 2018; Sinuraya, 2021; Kim, 2022), one of the major changes regarding about Hallyu is the clear transformation of its fans into prosumers of South Korean popular culture.

However, this certainty regarding to the primacy of prosumers among Hallyu fans is the result of research that has so far mainly focused on the fans who were recruited from the younger generation - mainly Generation Z (individuals born from the mid to late 1990s to the early 2010s) and, more recently, Generation Alpha (individuals born from the mid to late 2010s) (Howard & Lekakul, 2018; Truong, 2018; Nguyen, 2019; Sinuraya, 2021; Kim, 2022).

Consequently, there are few studies that examine fans from the Millennial Generation (individuals born from 1980s to the mid-1990s to early 2000s), Generation X (people born from the mid-to-late 1960s to the late 1970s to early 1980s) or Baby Boomers (people born from 1946 to 1964, during the mid-20th century) (Sejon, 2018; Nesmeyanov et al., 2019; Pham, 2022; Choo, Lee, & Xie, 2022).

This article focuses on the specificity of Hallyu fans' behavior as modern prosumers from a generational perspective.

The main research questions are:

RQ1: What are the distinctive characteristics of consumers and prosumers of Hallyu fans from a generational perspective?

RQ2: What are the factors that make declarative prosumers of a certain generation interested in certain types of Hallyu products?

RQ3: What are alternative models of the influence of individual characteristics of respondents on the tendency to become prosumers in the case of Hallyu fans?

Methodology

To answer the research questions, we used a set of qualitative data - individual interviews - collected in the period between 2011 and 2020. The interviews were applied to a sample of 51 respondents from Romania: nine people from the Baby Boomer generation, seven from Generation X, ten respondents from the Millennial Generation, nineteen from Generation Z and six people from Generation Alpha. Two-thirds of all respondents were women and only two people live in rural areas, while the rest live in cities.

The respondents were classified according to their respective generational cohort on the basis of their year of birth. The interviews were face-to-face and the subjects gave their consent to participate in the research.

There was no pre-determined guide for the interview, the only points that guided the conversation were the research assumptions. The interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half and two hours and a half, with an average of one hour and 15 minutes. All were recorded and kept in a separate archive. In accordance with the research protocol, all quoted responses were anonymized beforehand and the only descriptor mentioned is the generational affiliation.

Analysis of the results

The increasing visibility of Hallyu in Romania became evident in 2009, the year when the main public television channel started broadcasting historical Korean TV series (Marinescu & Balica, 2014). Almost at the same time, music audiovisual channels started to include time slots for K-pop (Marinescu & Balica, 2013).

The second phase of the spread of South Korean popular culture coincided time with the opening of brick-and-mortar stores, dedicated exclusively to the distribution of Korean products—food, clothing, cosmetics and body care products, media (albums, postcards,

posters, concert sticks, CDs, and DVDs, stationery, and accessories), as well as Korean restaurants (Marinescu, 2021). Event organizers quickly seized the opportunity and successfully negotiated with South Korean musicians to perform live concerts in Romania. Furthermore, even during the Covid-19 pandemic, K-pop fans were kept active through online dance classes on video communication apps such as Zoom (Marinescu, 2021).

The initial segmentation of audiences and fans of South Korean cultural products into two large groups corresponded to this stage of Hallyu penetration, which, according to the specialized literature, can be identified as Hallyu 1.0 and Hallyu 2.0 (Hae-Joang, 2005). Thus, in our research, we found people who mostly consumed products that corresponded to Hallyu 1.0 (especially TV series and movies) and people who became fans of K-pop and of the new products exported with the second wave of Hallyu. From a generational perspective, it was clear that Hallyu 2.0 was accepted and embraced mainly by people who belong to Generation Z and Generation Alpha, children, teenagers, and young people (Marinescu & Balica, 2013). However, the general picture of the group of people who were attracted to the products corresponding to the first wave of Hallyu was more diverse internally and not, as we would have expected, strictly limited to Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers. The qualitative empirical data at our disposal showed that fans of South Korean TV series and films were relatively evenly distributed across generations (Marinescu & Balica, 2014), which was indeed a feature of the penetration of Hallyu in Central and Eastern Europe (Marinescu, 2020).

If, in the strict case of consumers of Hallyu products, we have identified the existence of these two clearly distinct segments, what do the empirical data tell us about the prosumers of South Korean cultural products? Are they equally homogeneous, divided into two or more groups or is there a greater diversity? Moreover, is there a more visible intergenerational differentiation among Hallyu prosumers (RQ1)? What are the factors that predispose prosumers to belong to a certain generation for certain types of Hallyu products (RQ2)?

According to the data we analyzed, the prosumers of Hallyu products made the transition from simple consumers to co-producers of specific content in different ways. For example, for some respondents who identified with the Alpha and Z generations, this process took place during the time when they started to learn Korean language, as they had previously been fans of K-pop bands.

> It seemed interesting to me that, after a year and a half of attending Korean language courses organized by the XXXX association, I felt that I could start singing in the same

> way as my idols. Of course, at first, I was just copying their songs and singing only for myself. But when you listen to and watch BTS, Big Bang, EXO, Ateez, GOT7, Super Junior, or 2PM on the Internet every day, you start to want to look, dance and sing like them. I found two other girls who were also fans and we started rehearsing. First, we did it at home, then in the park, and finally we debuted at an event. Now we have our own YouTube channel, a Facebook page, and an Instagram page. The world is watching and we get a lot of likes. (GH, female, high-school student, Generation Alpha)

For other prosumers from the same generation, the path was less straightforward and more tortuous. Some of them first developed a passion for other cultures of geographical proximity (Japan, China), and then turned to producing cultural products inspired by South Korea:

> Hmmm... I can say that, I was first interested in anime and then in Manga. In fact, when I think about it, it all started with Manga. I went from there to Manhwa and, from there, it wasn't too difficult to start drawing. But you should know that now, in "Cărturești, they have whole shelves of Manga and Manhwa." It wasn't like that before. These things were hard to find, we used to borrow them from each other. Now I have noticed that parents buy these books for their children, even though they don't know what's in them and some of them aren't even for 5- or 7-year-olds. But I digress... So, I started drawing, first I copied on paper, I struggled a bit, but slowly I let go and then graphic tablets came along, and it is much easier and cheaper to draw on something like that, because it works better. Since I spent a lot of time on the Internet, I joined the online community, various accounts... we exchanged ideas, virtual drawings, etc. I saw that they started Romanian Mangas last year and I am waiting for them to start with Manhwa as well. In the meantime, I'm putting together a portfolio and posting them on my Instagram. I also go to festivals related to Asian culture and sometimes I sell them. That's how we met, because you bought a set of my drawings, right? (OM, female, student, Generation Z)

According to the same set of interviews, some Gen Z and Alpha prosumers —more specifically, those who are attracted to Korean TV series and movies—took a different path. For example, one Gen Z prosumer explained how his passion for Hallyu not only led him to use these types of products, but also had a significant impact on his professional development:

> I liked contemporary romance series from Korea. I followed them online and I was fascinated by the story. Especially those with a fantastical touch, with magic, with a transition from a past era to the present. Since I study in a humanities-oriented high school, they make us read a lot and that's what I thought: if they make us write and read, why shouldn't I keep a diary like this... of dreams, of what I imagine. And let it be with the action in Korea—I know I watched a series with Lee Min Ho, "The Heirs." And there is a complicated story for me, on several levels. So, I started to write my own story inspired by that TV series. And I made a blog and wrote the story there serially, in fragments. I still have them. Later, I realized that it was difficult to write such a long story and I started to write shorter stories. I even published one in the high school magazine. After that, the idea of applying for Korean language courses came naturally and now I want to learn Korean well enough so that I can write the stories in Korean and maybe publish them in Korea. Well, I brought a book of stories to the festival, which I copied and sold myself, without being published by a publisher. But I still think that in time, who knows, I will reach a big publishing house in Korea... like I said. (AG, male, student, Generation Z)

For some prosumers from the "mature" generations (Generation X and the Millennials), the transition from simple consumers to more proactive participants corresponded to a change in professional status. For example, a Gen X prosumer, who was an account director in an advertising agency, became the president of an association of fans of South Korean popular culture and organized activities dedicated to Hallyu.

> I had learned Korean before, I studied at the church, and I never thought that it would change my life, Then, you know, when they started broadcasting "Jewel in the Palace" on TVR1 [the main state TV channel] and I was already working at the ZZZZZ agency, I realized that the TV series was successful. So, I bought a ".ro" domain and created the YYYYY website, where, at first, I just presented the summaries of the episodes of the series. Okay, I left the comments section open, and people started writing there. It even became a community. That's how we met the girls, first on the net and then off it, and we thought of making an association with the name TTTTTT. The site grew beyond the presentation of TV/ series and movies, we posted about our participation at various

> events or videos made by fans on various topics. So, the community grew unexpectedly. And, as if everything was somehow connected, I was able to leave the respective agency to the Romanian representative of a South Korean company where I still work. Let's see what we can do in the future... (PD, male, PR Manager Korean-owned company, Millennial)

Participating as fans in the activities related to the popularization of South Korean cultural products has led some Millennial respondents to become producers of such products themselves:

> What can I say? In the beginning, I spent more time online, watching movies, looking at websites and Facebook pages, commenting, talking to others about our common passion. But I also went to the meetings of the XXXXX association, where we got to know each other, and we did some activities together. My friend was passionate about Korean cuisine, she always tried to prepare Korean food, she cooked, she also bought equipment and materials from shops and online. Since I like to cook too, I said: "Why not?!" And with her help, I learnt too, "testing" the products on family and friends. When we had money, we used to go to Korean restaurants and usually to all the events where they came and we could go to. Now we are thinking that maybe it wouldn't be such a bad an idea if we tried to open a business beyond friends and neighbors. It takes money and time, but I think we should try something like that. (RS, female, owner of a small company, Millennial)

At the same time, the transformation of some Millennials and members of Generation X into prosumers coincided with the development of greater skills and competencies in the use of new technologies, thus marking the transition from Hallyu 1.0 to Hallyu 2.0 at the individual level.

> I think I wouldn't have thought of learning how to edit video documents if it wasn't for these portable devices and new apps and programs, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. At first, I watched "Jumong"and I was a self-confessed fan of Song Il-kook. I started a YouTube channel and initially uploaded videos featuring Song Il-kook. Since I was already online, I joined his fan communities and met people from the US, Australia,

> the Philippines, and other countries. And I saw that they had YouTube channels with personal videos, videos made by themselves. I found some simple programs on the Internet and I made my first videos dedicated on the subject. Now I'm getting ready to go to Korea, to Seoul, for a reunion of Song Il-kook's fans. I have already prepared a gift for him, a painting that I have made, in a classical style, and I hope to give it to him personally. (CP, female, civil servant in a state agency, Generation X)

As expected, the shift towards prosumption of Korean popular culture among baby boomers did not involve a transition from one wave of Hallyu to the next, higher level. For them, erasing the boundaries between simple passive consumers and producers of some cultural products was somehow similar to the evolution of the younger generations (Z and Alpha generations). For one baby boomer respondent, a passion for handicrafts and East Asian cultures served as a primary motivator:

> I started making these Korean-style flower-embroidered tapestries after watching the historical series on TV. I used to work by hand, and I have been passionate about East Asian culture, for a long time specifically Japanese culture. I can tell you that when I was young, I attended courses at Dalles University, where university professors gave lectures on the subject. Since I have quite a lot of time now, I also watched TV and, as I said, I liked the Korean TV series with beautiful actors and very rich costumes. So, I asked my daughter to help me—she knows how to work with new technology—and she brought me some patterns, flower drawings that she found on the internet, and told me that they are specific to Korea. I made a test embroidery first, and on the second, my daughter asked me to give it to her as a gift for a colleague. At first, I didn't ask for anything, but now my daughter is selling them to her colleagues or at least giving them away, where she needed them. (VO, female, retired, Baby Boomer)

Thus, our empirical data show that, as in the case of prosumers associated with Hallyu 2.0, for prosumers still strictly dependent on cultural products specific to Hallyu 1.0, the main factors determining the change in status were openness to artistic activity, fascination with and attraction to East Asian cultures, with a special emphasis on South Korean culture.

Discussions: Categories of prosumers behavior

Regarding the factors that lead fans of a certain demographic generation to be both consumers and prosumers of a certain generation of Hallyu products, our data, as we highlighted above, show a relatively direct dependence on the level of technology to which the respondents not only had access but, more importantly, had the skills and the competences necessary to use it.

Gen Z and Alpha prosumers belong to the group that is commonly referred to as "digital natives" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2011). Therefore, for them, both the exposure to the products of South Korean culture and the act of achieving something related to their passion are realized through new technologies, the Internet, computers, and mobile devices. At the same time, we found a greater uniformity among these respondents in terms of where they are headed with their prosumer activities. Although we cannot provide statistical data, we can say that most have become prosumers of K-pop, manhwa and, in general, specific Hallyu 2.0 products (Hae-Joang, 2005). Consequently, this type of prosumer belongs to the category "innovators," i.e. people who seek new elements and adapt to the challenges posed by the changes that accompany the progress of civilization.

For Generation X, Millennials, and Baby Boomers respondents, the blurring of the boundaries between consumer and producer was much more heterogeneous. Among the factors that enabled for this transformation, we identified, along with age, changes in the personal and professional careers, gradual digital literacy, participation in the online and offline activities of Hallyu fan groups—with the role of "bridging and bonding" (Norris, 2002) - family, and even one's own personal history. The variation in the aforementioned factors made it impossible, at least in the case of the responses analyzed, to strictly link the members of a particular generation to a particular stage of Hallyu development (the first or second stage), as was possible in the case of the younger demographic generations.

As a result, we found a relatively high degree of heterogeneity in the areas in which these prosumers are active: from the creation of video material with the help of new technologies and devices (which would bring them closer to the members of the X or even Alpha generations), to the activation of age-specific manual skills - such as cooking, sewing, etc. - in order to create new products linked to the South Korean cultural space. We are thus dealing with a relative overlap between Generation X, Millennials and the Baby Boomer prosumers and the products specific to a clearly defined stage in the development of Hallyu (be it Hallyu 1.0 or its 2.0 variant).

Hence, defining one or more types for this subcategory of presumption is very difficult. However, we have made this classification, without any claim to generalization or monolithicity. In the case of Hallyu prosumers from Generation Z, Millennials, and Baby Boomers, we can distinguish "Traditionalists" (people who make classic objects and products without using on new technologies), "Experimenters" (prosumers for whom crossing the threshold of inactivity also meant acquiring of new skills and competences, especially in the digital field, and experimenting with new product categories) and, to a certain extent, with a similar category, that of "Innovators," in the case of the Z and Alpha generations, which we could call "progressives" (i.e. people who use the condition of prosumers not only to disseminate, exchange, and distribute their objects and products derived from South Korean culture, but also to advance socially and to achieve a beneficial occupational change).

Conclusions

Despite the fact that at present the strengthening of the prosumer activities is currently made possible by the ongoing technological advances, especially the development of the Internet (Maciaszczyk & Kocot, 2021), the main hypothesis of the study is that, on the one hand, for each internal generation of Hallyu - from Hallyu 1.0 to Hallyu 4.0 (Bok-Rae, 2015) - one can identify and characterize a correspondent within the population's generational levels and, on the other hand, one can distinguish different generations of prosumers.

Our research results showed that the presumption readiness of Hallyu fans from different generations differed greatly, depending on some elements and factors.

We have developed a set of categories of the kinds of behaviors that were most common among Hallyu's fan groups from a generational perspective. We have seen that the relatively high homogeneity of prosumer's behaviors among members of the "young" generations (Z and Alpha) contrasts with the heterogeneity found in the case of prosumers from Gen X, Millennials, and Baby Boomers.

This analysis also made it possible to define the factors that predispose declarative prosumers of a certain generation to certain types of Hallyu products. Even if the boundaries between the different types of prosumers are blurred in the case of the "Traditionalists," "Experimenters," and "Progressives," we can see that among the factors that have influenced them to become prosumers there are elements related to their personal development (personal history, professional career, family and friendship networks) and the degree to which they have approached the new world of communication technology (more precisely, the level of digital literacy). For the category of "Innovators," who are a much more homogeneous group from a

generational point of view (they include only two generations - Z and Alpha) and from a prosumer point of view (they create, modify, and sell a relatively specific set of products), these factors are essentially centered on the new communication technologies and on the updated or acquired skills related to these new devices.

What we were not able to do in this study was to build alternative models of the influence of respondents' individual characteristics on the tendency to become prosumers in the case of Hallyu fans. Together with the focus on the case of prosumers from a well-defined geographical area - that of Romania - and the use of only one set of methods for collecting empirical data (i.e., interviews) these are the limitations of the present study.

However, our analysis suggests that the perspective offered by the generational, demographic approach of Hallyu studies can significantly enrich the understanding of the phenomenon represented by the export, diffusion, and reception of South Korean cultural products in different countries and geographical areas.

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