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# Exclusive: Navigating the Korean wave – Six marketers on engaging India's K-fandom

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In an exclusive MediaBrief deep dive, **Ambika Sharma** (Founder & Chief Strategist, Pulp Strategy); **Chandan Bagwe** (Founder/Director, C Com Digital); **Pragati Agarwala** (Partner, Three Fourth Solutions); **Soumabha Nandi** (EVP – Creative Strategy & Growth, Social Panga); **Vishal Shrivastava** (Business Strategy Head, AnyMind Group India); and **Yasin Hamidani** (Director, Media Care Brand Solutions) explore the rise of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in India and its impact on brands, consumers, and digital culture.

They trace Hallyu's journey from a digital subculture to a mainstream phenomenon, examining the unique factors that fueled its adoption in India and analyzing how brands are leveraging this cultural shift. For brands looking to connect authentically, their insights offer a roadmap: respect the fandom's passion and embrace creativity over gimmicks. Read on.

**S**peaking about the digital spark that ignited India's Korean obsession, **Pragati Agarwala**, Partner, **Three Fourth Solutions**, traced the shift to digital democratization: "The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has redefined cultural influence in India's digital space. What started as a niche fascination is now a force shaping everything from how brands talk to Gen Z to how products are packaged, promoted, and placed."

**Agarwala** adds, "It's not just music or drama; it's a full-stack aesthetic that's influencing beauty rituals, fashion choices, and even the tonality of campaigns. For brands, it's a wake-up call where cultural capital is no longer local — it's global, digital, and community-led."

**Vishal Shrivastava**, Business Strategy Head, **AnyMind Group India**, highlighted emotional resonance: "In the past decade, the Korean Wave, once a niche subculture, has grown into a sweeping tide redefining pop culture across India's digital landscape. No longer limited to the occasional K-drama binge or a catchy K-pop track, Hallyu today influences everything from skincare routines and fashion aesthetics to meme formats and music playlists. Its surge is no accident."

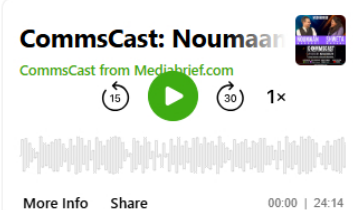
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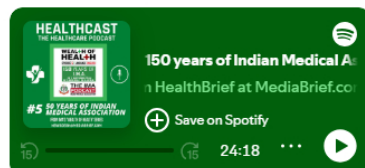
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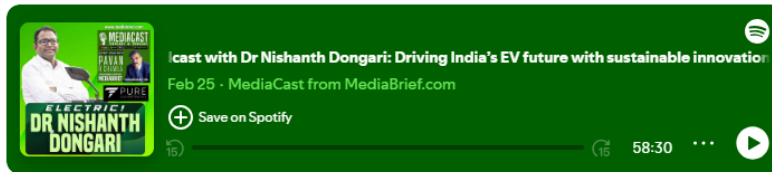
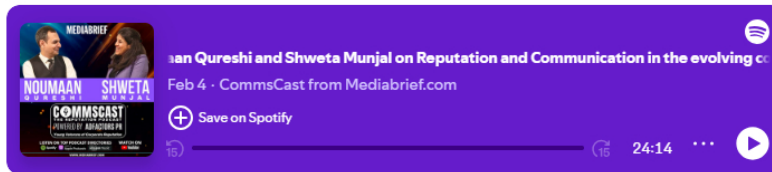
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"It's the result of digital acceleration, lifestyle alignment, and a generation that embraces cultural plurality. From the billboards of BTS in Bandra to rice mask recommendations on e-commerce platforms, the echoes of Seoul are increasingly shaping Indian hearts, habits, and home screens."

The momentum behind the Korean Wave in India, **Shrivastava** explains, is driven by a unique convergence of accessibility, emotional relatability, and cultural synergy. The pandemic years acted as a catalyst, exposing Indian audiences to Korean content via streaming platforms and algorithm-driven discovery. But the roots were already in place. What drew audiences in wasn't novelty, but familiarity.



"There's an emotional universality to Korean storytelling: quiet resilience, familial tension, aspirational youth that aligns with Indian sensibilities. Add to that the visual precision of K-beauty, the clean lines of K-fashion, and the global fluency of K-pop, and you have a cultural package that speaks to Indian audiences both emotionally and aspirationally," **Shrivastava** adds.

**Soumabha Nandi, EVP – Creative Strategy & Growth, Social Panga**, distilled it sharply: "I think it is to do with data packs and broken hearts. Somewhere between the two, India collectively discovered K-dramas."

What really accelerated it? The perfect storm: global-quality storytelling, idol perfection, and algorithmic magic. Throw in a pandemic, and boom—K-Wave tsunami.

"And let's not forget," **Nandi** adds, "the Korean government. Through well-orchestrated, government-backed initiatives, they exported their culture—music, drama, and yes, even skincare—straight into our feeds and hearts."

Speaking about what has accelerated the rise of the Korean Wave in India's digital space, **Chandan Bagwe – Founder/Director of C Com Digital**, says, "The Korean Wave has been shaped by several key factors. Affordable smartphones and widespread internet access have made K-dramas, K-pop, and Korean beauty trends accessible to millions in India. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and streaming services have removed traditional media barriers, giving audiences direct access to content they love."

media currency, giving audiences direct access to content they love.

"Despite cultural differences, Korean dramas resonate with Indian values such as family bonds, romance, and personal struggles. The high production quality and aspirational visuals also captivate a young audience eager for fresh inspiration."

"BTS," too, he says, "has played a major role in this cultural shift, creating a massive following in India and sparking interest in broader Korean culture. Their ARMY has opened doors to K-pop, Korean actors, and content creators, making it an exciting cultural exploration for fans."

**Bagwe** notes that social media has taken this exchange to another level. "Platforms like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts have made Korean content go viral. Fan-made edits, dance challenges, and reaction videos spread the culture and draw even more curiosity from new viewers."

He adds, "South Korea has also strategically used its entertainment to promote cultural influence on a global scale, creating a fanbase united by a shared love for all things Korean. This cultural exchange isn't just about media consumption; it's about building bridges and celebrating diversity through shared stories and dreams."



"I believe the rise of the Korean Wave in India was inevitable the moment short-form content collided with global accessibility," says **Ambika Sharma – Founder and Chief Strategist – Pulp Strategy**.

**Sharma** explains, "K-dramas, K-pop, and beauty routines arrived not as exports but as emotionally resonant, subculture-rich content ecosystems—exactly what Gen Z thrives on. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and OTTs created low-barrier access, and Indian audiences, especially young women, leaned in with intensity and curiosity. What used to be niche is now algorithm-led and emotionally sticky."

**Yasin Hamidani, Director – Media Care Brand Solutions**, credits its rise to the pandemic, elaborating on this, he says, "India's digital boom and increased exposure to global content during the pandemic significantly accelerated the Korean Wave. High-quality, visually appealing Korean dramas (K-dramas) on streaming platforms like Netflix and viral K-pop music videos from BTS and BLACKPINK created a powerful combination of relatable storytelling and aspirational imagery."

"Social media," he says, "amplified fan-driven communities, creating widespread buzz and engagement that traditional entertainment struggled to match, making Korean culture accessible, aspirational, and highly shareable—perfect for India's growing digital-first generation."

## Bollywood, Cricket, and Hallyu? Why brands are betting on all three

While Bollywood and cricket dominate mindshare, **Ambika Sharma of Pulp Strategy** argues Hallyu fills a gap: "For decades, Bollywood and cricket dominated aspirational bandwidth. But the Korean Wave doesn't compete with them—it complements and reshapes the aspirational narrative. It's driven by fandom, aesthetic precision, and emotional storytelling. That makes it incredibly potent for brands that want to build relevance with younger, urban audiences who crave identity-driven engagement rather than mass-market messages."

**Yasin Hamidani, Director at Media Care Brand Solutions**, notes its global appeal:



"The Korean Wave presents a refreshing alternative to Bollywood and cricket by delivering global yet relatable narratives centered around authenticity, innovation, and emotional engagement."

"Unlike Bollywood's star-driven model or cricket's national pride appeal," he says, "Hallyu offers inclusive community-building and aspirational lifestyle appeal, ideal for digital natives seeking differentiated content."

"Its strength in aesthetics, diversity, and storytelling uniquely positions it as a complementary strategy that helps brands remain culturally relevant while attracting a broader, highly engaged younger demographic across India's evolving consumer landscape," adds **Hamidani**.



**Chandan Bagwe, Founder of C Com Digital**, emphasizes the need for diversification: "While Bollywood and cricket have long been dominant cultural pillars, the Korean Wave offers a fresh and distinct appeal, especially to the increasingly globally connected younger generation."

He adds, "The Korean Wave draws in a new audience with different consumption patterns and preferences, allowing brands to engage with a digitally active and passionate demographic. Associating with this trend can give a brand a global 'cool factor,' enhancing its modernity, trendiness, and appeal to younger consumers."

**Bagwe** notes that, unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, engagement with the Korean Wave often taps into genuine fandom, fostering more authentic and loyal connections. This kind of cultural alignment feels more natural and less transactional.

Speaking about a narrative shift, **Pragati Agarwala – Partner at Three Fourth Solutions**, says, "The rise of the Korean Wave in India can be traced to one core shift, where platforms like Netflix, YouTube, and Instagram didn't just introduce Indian audiences to Korean content but also handed them the remote. Suddenly, people had access to fresh narratives, layered characters, and emotionally rich storytelling. That emotional pull, paired with hyper-aesthetic visuals, resonated hard."

"Unlike Bollywood," she says, "which often speaks in broad strokes, K-content offers a more intimate, stylized world — and for brands, that's a dream sandbox to play in. It's not a replacement for Bollywood or cricket — it's a cultural side-door that lets brands connect with a younger, more globally attuned audience in a way that feels fresh, aspirational, and emotionally real."

**Soumabha Nandi of Social Panga** doesn't see it as so black and white, saying, "It's not an alternative—everything coexists. But the Korean Wave brings what Bollywood sometimes forgets: subtlety, swag, and skincare routines that require spreadsheets."

He adds, "It gives brands access to a younger, hyper-engaged audience that isn't just looking for entertainment, but a full-on cultural experience. It's not just content—it's devotion. Strategic goldmine."

"Where Bollywood and cricket offer massive reach, the Korean Wave brings focused intensity," says **Vishal Shrivastava – Business Strategy Head – AnyMind Group India**. "It's not a question of either/or; it's about tapping into a different emotional cadence. Hallyu fans are hyper-connected, digitally fluent, and globally attuned. They don't just watch or listen; they create, translate, remix, and advocate."

For marketers, **Shrivastava** notes this presents a new model of engagement, explaining,



"Traditional celebrity influence gives way to community credibility. Instead of mass-market monologues, brands have the opportunity to speak within tightly-knit subcultures that are deeply invested not just in content, but in identity-building. The trust and loyalty these communities hold can't be bought; it must be earned."

## Fan armies as economic powerhouses: How K-communities drive commerce

Speaking about how fan-driven communities are influencing product discovery and purchase behavior — particularly through platforms like Instagram Reels and YouTube —

**Pragati Agarwala** observed the peer-to-peer revolution: "Fan-driven communities are no longer spectators; they're content engines. They're influencing product discovery not through ads, but through organic, peer-powered storytelling."

"On Instagram Reels and YouTube," **Agarwala** says, "you'll see fans turning a product into a ritual, a skincare step tied to a K-drama moment, or an unboxing video that feels like a tribute. From a branding perspective, that's powerful. It's not just visibility, but it's emotional engagement at scale. When a fandom backs a brand, they don't just talk about it, they campaign for it. That kind of authenticity is near impossible to manufacture."



**Vishal Shrivastava** notes that these platforms are "Not only influencing it, they're designing it. Social media has shifted the center of gravity. A 15-second clip of a Korean-inspired outfit or a skincare reel themed around a drama character can drive more interest and purchase than a national campaign. On platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and even emerging audio-video hybrids, peer discovery is the new path to brand adoption."

He adds, "These aren't passive viewers. They're cultural curators. Reaction channels, thrift accounts, aesthetic compilations all form an interconnected ecosystem where desire is sparked through storytelling, not sales tactics. Discovery today is democratic and deeply emotional."

Speaking about hyper-engaged communities, **Soumabha Nandi** says, "These fan communities could sell snow to a Himalayan monk. Reels and Shorts are no longer just entertainment—they're shopping triggers with a storyline. We've entered the age of: 'If he wore it, I want it,' 'If she used it, I need it,' and 'If they unboxed it—I'm buying three.' It's not influence anymore; it's indoctrination."

Pointing to social media's role, **Yasin Hamidani** says, "Fan-driven communities strongly influence purchasing behaviors, especially through interactive platforms like Instagram Reels and YouTube."

"Fans actively promote, review, and discuss Korean products—ranging from skincare brands like Innisfree to Korean snacks and merchandise endorsed by their favorite stars—driving peer-to-peer recommendations and virality."

**Hamidani** adds, "Such communities build trust and excitement organically, converting passive viewers into active buyers. User-generated content from fans serves as powerful digital word-of-mouth, significantly shortening the path from discovery to purchase for young consumers who prioritize authenticity over traditional advertising."

"Fan-driven communities have become powerful economic engines," says **Ambika Sharma**. "I've seen firsthand how a single fan edit or unboxing video on Reels can spike interest and drive trials. These communities operate with trust, emotional loyalty, and hyper-engagement—three things traditional media often struggles to deliver. They don't just follow trends—they shape them."

Sharing his perspective on this, **Chandan Bagwe** says, "Absolutely, fan-driven communities are significantly influencing product discovery and purchase behavior. Platforms like Instagram Reels and YouTube are epicenters of this influence."

"Fans create and share content—reviews, tutorials, 'dupes' (product comparisons) inspired by Korean trends, and recommendations—that often feels more authentic and trustworthy than traditional advertising. Fan communities actively identify and promote products their idols use or feature in K-dramas, leading to viral trends and increased demand."

"Social media allows for direct interaction between fans and brands, providing valuable feedback and shaping perceptions. Brands that actively engage with these communities can build strong loyalty," **Bagwe** adds.

## Turning points: When India's K-Wave went mainstream

Looking back at a brand, campaign, or moment that stood out to him as a turning point in how India embraced the Korean Wave, **Yasin Hamidani** cites a fast-food frenzy: "The McDonald's 'BTS Meal' campaign in 2021 marked a turning point in India's Korean Wave adoption. This campaign successfully leveraged the massive BTS fandom, leading to unprecedented excitement, long queues, rapid sell-outs, and viral social media engagement."

**Hamidani** informs that it showcased the potential of collaborating authentically with Korean pop culture to capture Indian consumers' hearts and wallets. The overwhelming reception validated Korean entertainment's commercial viability in India, encouraging numerous brands across beauty, fashion, and FMCG sectors to integrate K-pop into their strategic marketing efforts.

For **Soumabha Nandi**, it was Nykaa, which made a decisive entry into the K-beauty space, recognizing its rising influence among Indian consumers. "Rather than easing in, they made a bold commitment to the category," says Nandi.

**Pragati Agarwala** also thinks that Nykaa hit the nail on the spot, explaining, "The key turning point was when brands started actively integrating the Korean Wave into their strategies. The Workmark's annual Korean Festival brought K-culture to life with immersive F&B experiences, while Nykaa's early bet on K-beauty and Spotify's localized K-pop playlists signaled a clear shift — this wasn't just a trend, it was a cultural movement. That's when brands moved from watching the wave to riding it."



**EXCLUSIVE**

**Start with respect, not replication. Don't mimic the aesthetic—understand the emotion. This audience sees through performative brand behavior instantly.**

**Collaborate with fan communities, creators, or K-inspired storytellers who are already trusted. Let them lead the tone. Authenticity isn't a filter—it's your entire creative strategy.**

**AMBIKA SHARMA**  
Founder & Chief Strategist — Pulp Strategy

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**Ambika Sharma**, while agreeing that the Innisfree–Nykaa crossover was an early one, believes what really cemented the shift was when BTS billboards popped up in Mumbai, funded by fan clubs, and then got reposted across beauty and fashion accounts. "That's when I knew this wasn't just a fan movement—it was a cultural shift with commercial velocity."

For **Vishal Shrivastava**, it wasn't a particular moment but grassroots momentum: "It wasn't a single moment. It was a mindset shift. The realization that foreign doesn't have to mean distant stories told in another language, from another context, could still mirror personal struggles, aspirations, and joys marked a significant inflection. Korean culture came to be seen not as an exotic curiosity, but as a cultural ally in the global conversation on self-expression, identity, and care."

"This shift from trend to resonance, from watching them to seeing us in India's digital psyche, is what truly rooted Hallyu," he adds.

psychic, is much more rooted than you, he adds.

## The golden rules of fandom engagement

Sharing advice for brands looking to authentically engage with the K-fandom in India, **Pragati Agarwala** warns against shortcuts: "Stepping into the world of K-pop or K-drama fandoms isn't just another marketing move — it's entering a universe with its own language, rituals, and deep emotional codes. These aren't just audiences; they're communities with radar-level sensitivity for anything inauthentic. If you're a brand, think less 'campaign,' more 'collaboration.'"

"The magic," she says, "happens when you stop talking at them and start creating with them. Blend into the culture, don't just borrow from it. Because in this space, real wins, and relevance is earned, not bought."

**Vishal Shrivastava** stresses the importance of cultural homework: "Don't just participate. The Korean fandom community values sincerity, nuance, and effort. They're quick to spot inauthentic gestures and equally quick to reward thoughtful engagement. Brands should invest in co-creation, community building, and long-term cultural alignment. Partner with bilingual influencers who live and breathe the space. Lean into fan rituals. Respect the storytelling arcs."

"And," he stresses, "always listen before you launch. In a world saturated with content, cultural trust is a rare currency. And once earned, it becomes a formidable asset, one that travels far, speaks deeply, and converts meaningfully."



**Soumabha Nandi** kept it blunt, saying, "Respect the fandom. They're loyal, organized, and they notice everything. You have to do it right, not just jump in for clout. One needs to get the vibe and pronounce the names correctly. One slip, and your campaign will be saying goodbye before it even starts."

**Chandan Bagwe** advises prioritizing genuine understanding and respect for the culture and the fandom's passion. While **Hamidani** warns against appropriation: "Brands aiming for authentic K-pop or K-drama engagement must genuinely understand and respect fan culture. Avoid superficial tokenism; instead, invest in meaningful content collaborations, influencer partnerships, or community-led initiatives aligning closely with fandom values and interests."

"Fans appreciate brands supporting rather than exploiting their passion," adds **Hamidani**. "Foster genuine interactions through participatory experiences—giveaways, challenges, personalized merchandise—or curated events, thus creating lasting relationships built on authenticity, mutual appreciation, and trust, resulting in sustained loyalty and deeper emotional connections with the audience."

**Ambika Sharma**'s advice is rooted in genuine understanding. She says, "Start with respect, not replication. Don't mimic the aesthetic—understand the emotion. This audience sees through performative brand behavior instantly. Collaborate with fan communities, creators, or K-inspired storytellers who are already trusted. Let them lead the tone."

She wraps up the conversation by saying, "Authenticity isn't a filter—it's your entire creative strategy."

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