



Hallyu Fans' Perceptions of The Use of Korean Swear Words in Everyday Communication

Ni Komang Cantika Hyang Sari^{1*}, I Gede Budasi¹, Made Suardana¹

¹Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, Bali, Indonesia

cantika@student.undiksha.ac.id*

ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of Korean culture (*Hallyu*) over time has also influenced the increased exposure of *Hallyu*, such as Korean dramas, music, films, and language to *Hallyu* fans, especially fans who are non-native Korean speakers. One of the exposures of Korean language elements is swear words through media and online interactions, so that some fans also use these words, some even use them without knowing their meaning. This study aims to find out *Hallyu* fans' perception of the use of Korean swear words and what factors influence them to use these words. This study is a qualitative study. Data collection was carried out by conducting semi-structured interviews using Indonesian with *Hallyu* fans who have different characteristics, backgrounds, and Korean proficiencies. The results of the interviews were converted into transcripts then translated into English. The collected data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method which has six stages, namely familiarization, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and report. The results of the study show that *Hallyu* fans' perceptions of Korean swear words are relative, depending on the context. The factors that influence the use of swear words are Korean content and the social environment. In addition, this study can help learners avoid misuse and develop more appropriate pragmatic competence in real-life communication.

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INTRODUCTION

In this era, common people use Korean Language, like *aigoo*, *omoo*, and *saranghae* in everyday communication, both in face-to-face conversation also online interactions. The increase of Korean Culture is not only about language but also television drama, music, fashion, food, and celebrities (Shim, 2006). This Korean

popular culture is called “Korean Wave” or, in simplified “K-Wave” (*Hallyu* or Hanryu in Korean), which has reached out around the world, especially Indonesia. This phenomenon then led to the creation of a community of Korean culture, *Hallyu* fans. According to Abd-Rahim (2019) *Hallyu* fans are people who are loyal to South Korean culture. The influence of foreign cultures causes people to start adapting and learning foreign languages (Meliani et al., 2021). Some fans mentioned that the Korean language is the part of Korean culture that most increases their interest (Reindra et al., 2024).

In addition to the use of expressive expressions, many fans also use swear words that they encounter in the dialogue of a drama that can cause fans to start using swear words in their daily communication. People more interested to use swear words than good words because they thought that swear words are more interesting for them (Saniada et al., 2023). According to Prayuda et al. (2019), swear words are the most common signals to be used as emotional expression, especially when one is angry. A person swears to do something, to another individual or entity, and occasionally an individual swears when they lose control (Prayuda et al., 2019). In the Korean language, the swear words that are used, such as *ssibal*, *jenjang*, *saekkye*, and many others (Az'Zahrah et al., 2019). Without understanding the meaning and context of their use in depth, they may not realize that these swear words can be considered inappropriate by native Korean speakers.

In addition, the use of Korean swear words often occurs because fans simply mimic the expressions used by the characters of a drama or their idols without knowing the socio-cultural nuances attached to the words as well as the level of harshness. This can lead to misunderstandings, as the use of swear words is related to rudeness and rudeness learned in linguistics, where there are no written rules stating when and where the use of swear words is considered appropriate or not (Timothy & Janschewitz, 2008). Because people also tend to use various languages without being tied to strict language standards (Wedananta, 2023). People also usually use language based on social behavior that is agreed upon and accepted as their community (Purandina et al., 2014).

In cross-cultural communication, the phenomenon of the use of Korean swear words by *Hallyu* fans is a crucial issue. Someone should be careful in choosing the words when communicating with other people because the wrong choice of words can hurt someone's feelings and can cause social offense (Setyaningtias et al., 2023). This kind of phenomenon also happens in real situations through interaction on social media. For example, one of TikTok videos which told about the word *ssibal*, several responses emerged that had different points of view among *Hallyu* fans. Some fans said that the swear word sounded funny and some emphasized that the swear word should not be used carelessly because it is very rude.

The study of how language works in casual communication and the media we see or watch in our daily lives is called sociolinguistics (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015).

Sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that examines how language is influenced by social factors such as class, age, gender, ethnicity, and group identity (Jean, 2023). Sociolinguistics is an important field for deepening our understanding of the complex relationship between language and society because by examining language variation, power dynamics, code-switching, and language change, sociolinguistics can explain how language can reflect and create identity and social structure (Andrus, 2024). This theory is used as the main basis for understanding that the use of swear words is related to the social and cultural conditions of the language user.

Swear words are a form of expression that includes profane words (Meliyana, 2024). Swear words can be described as rude, abusive, and even inappropriate to say (Prayuda et al., 2019). Swear words are 'bad language' that refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatized in a culture, inappropriate to say, and can be used to express emotions (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990). Most people use swear words when they are angry, upset, disappointed, and in pain (Sembiring et al., 2019). Yani et al. (2017) also stated that swear words are taboo words and bad language to use in communication. The theory of swear words is employed to provide a conceptual understanding of swear words as a linguistic phenomenon. In situations where there are differences of opinion or tension, speakers often use swear words or other forms of harsh expression to express their displeasure, anger, or dissatisfaction with the situation they are facing (Wijana, 2004).

In every language, swear words have their own characteristics because people often have their own way of creating swear words (Az'Zahrah et al., 2019). The use of swear words is a linguistic phenomenon that also exists in Korean. Mahayoni (2025) found that there were 26 Korean swear words used by South Koreans. On the other hand, Az'Zahrah et al. (2019) in their research, found 39 Korean swear words. From the two studies, it can be concluded that there are total 62 Korean swear words; *cegiral, dijyoso, doracci, gulrae, iron ssagaji, jiral, michin, ssibal, bakhwibolle, bolle, gaeguri, gaejasiga, gaesaekki, horosaekki, I jwisaekkiya, malmijal, saekkia, ssibasaekki, gaesoru, gomphangi, guttanssuregi, phiiji, ttong, ttongman ssanun gigye, yodurum, cciccidura, dyokkanne, gaepul, gyothol, jonnamongmon, jot, jot-gat-eun, chon-nom, com, nyeom, bal-byeong-shin, byungsin, michinom, ttorai, i angma, yeom- byeong, dakcheo, dwijyeo, jenjang, jiralhajimasipsyo, jojdwaesseo, jonna, kkeojyo, ssibalnom, ssibuong, yeosina meogeuryom, i ccaktung kkangphae sikki, ccinccibogo, iron dwenjang, iron sikppang, babo, byonthae saekki, hansimhan nom, i ccinttasaekki, sikchungi, training baeksu, jenjang, and ssyang.*

The phenomenon of the spread or popularity of South Korean culture, such as Korean music Pop, Korean dramas, Korean foods, and so on, throughout the world is called *Hallyu* (Rafdinal et al., 2023). Rafdinal et al. (2023) also explain that the term *Hallyu* comes from the Chinese word Han and Liu, which means 'Korean Wave'. *Hallyu* or Korean Wave is a phenomenon of Korean cultural development consisting of

cultural contents such as films, dramas, music, fashion, skincare, food, and so on (Maulidya & Hidayat, 2023).

According to (Burn, 2018), "Perception is the process by which individuals register and evaluate information detected from the internal or external environment, consciously or unconsciously," which means that when someone receives information by seeing, hearing, or feeling, the brain will consciously or unconsciously process the information to understand the information that has been obtained. Similarly, according to Qiong (2017), perception is a way for someone to think, pay attention, and listen to something either through the mind, five senses, or natural ability to understand something quickly. So, perception is a way for people to understand and judge something based on their abilities, thoughts, or five senses which are done consciously or unconsciously. Qiong (2017) also stated that If communicators use knowledge gained from their own culture to interpret information received from other cultures, there will be differences in perception.

The use of swear words is not only choosing the words to be used, but is also influenced by several factors. Timothy & Janschewitz (2008) in their study entitled 'Pragmatics of Swearing' stated three main factors in the use of swear words: (a) Neurological factors, (b) Psychological factors, and (c) Sociocultural and Pragmatics Factors. Neurological factors is the use of swear words or swearing that influenced by the normal function of the forebrain, where the forebrain functions to control behavior and logical thinking, so people will tend to swear more often or behave inappropriately if this part is damaged. This happens because brain damage in the main language area (Broca's area) can cause excessive emotional reactions and increased swearing. The psychological aspect of swear word usage develops depending on age and experience, where the type of words used to swear often changes as someone develops. Swearing habits are related to psychological factors, such as anger, religiosity, sexual anxiety, verbal aggressiveness, and type A personality (individuals who tend to be impulsive, easily stressed, and competitive). Gender, age, and personal experience also influence the use of swear words.

The use of swear words depends on the sociocultural and pragmatics factors such as the topic of conversation, the relationship between the speaker and the listener, gender, job, status, and social background such as whether the use of swear words is done in a public or private place, formal or informal situations. Furthermore, the relationship between the speaker and the listener also greatly influences the use of swear words. The use of swear words is greatly influenced by social and cultural factors which cannot be used carelessly, because it depends on the context of when, where, and to whom it is appropriate to use swear words. In addition, Budasi (2012) shows that swearing is part of linguistic practice that is influenced by cultural context.

Previous studies have examined how non-native speakers perceive the use of Korean swear words by native speakers. However, one problem that emerges is the lack of understanding of the sociocultural context surrounding the use of these swear

words by non-native speakers. Related to research questions, this research aims to explore *Hallyu* fans' perceptions of the use of Korean swear words, in what kind of situations they usually use these words, and what social factors influence them.

METHOD

This study was designed in the form of a descriptive qualitative study, as described by Sandelowski (2000) with an orientation towards naturalistic inquiry. The subjects of this study were *Hallyu* fans who were non-native speakers and who, in their everyday communication used Korean swear words. Five of the subjects were selected as informants and ranked as I1, I2, I3, I4, and I5. This study was conducted at Ganesha University of Education, with participants who were *Hallyu* fans that had different characteristics, backgrounds, and Korean proficiencies. Data collection was conducted in an academic environment, either face-to-face or online, as agreed with the participants for their convenience. This approach was intended to ensure that participants would share their experiences freely without any pressure from the environment.

The data was collected through in-depth interviews with a semi-structured interview approach. The interview technique was conducted using Indonesian to ensure a clear understanding between the interviewer and informants. The data collected through interviews were translated into English for further analysis. The selection of informants in this study used purposive sampling, a technique for selecting informants that is carried out intentionally with predetermined criteria that are relevant to the study (Patton, 2002). Data analysis in this study used thematic analysis techniques. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) based on data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach used six steps: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generating codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the reports.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis process conducted by the researchers, two main themes were found that represent the patterns of meaning in the data, including 1) *Hallyu* Fans' Perceptions; and 2) Factors Influencing the Use.

1. *Hallyu* Fans' Perceptions

This theme is a theme that discusses fans' perceptions of Korean swear words and how they interpret or understand these words.

The results of the analysis show that *Hallyu* fans' perceptions of the use of Korean swear words vary and were not absolute, with some informants expressing negative perceptions when they first learned about these words.

"Pertama kali saya mendengar kata-kata itu bingung, karena saya tidak tahu artinya. Setelah mengetahui, agak shock dan merasa bahwa itu sangat kasar."
(I1)

"I feel confused at the first time I heard those words, because I didn't know the meaning. After I found out, I'm a little bit shock because I think those words are very rude."

However, this perception has changed over time and with increasing exposure to Korean popular culture, and the use of these words is also common in entertainment media such as Korean dramas. Several informants stated that the meaning of Korean swear words is not always harsh, depending on the situation and context in which they are used. Under certain conditions, Korean swear words were perceived as humorous and part of a normal emotional expression.

"Kalau dipakai bercanda menurut aku tidak kasar, malah lucu." (I4)
"If it is used for joking, I don't think it's rude, it's funny instead."

In addition, most informants stated that Korean swear words are perceived as a sign of closeness or familiarity between individuals.

"Saya biasanya menggunakannya hanya kepada teman-teman terdekat saja."
(I3)

"I usually used it only with my close friends."

The findings also show that most informants expressed their perception that Korean swear words did not sound as harsh as Indonesian swear words.

"Menurut saya, kata umpatan Korea tidak se kasar di Indonesia." (I1)

"In my opinion, Korean swear words are not as rude as Indonesian's."

"Beda banget rasanya mengumpat pakai bahasa Korea dan Indonesia. Bahasa Indonesia itu kaya aku udah yang benar-benar kesal banget. Kalau bahasa Korea masih chill dan supaya dapat ketawa." (I4)

"It feels very different to swear in Korean and Indonesian. In Indonesian, it's like I'm really angry or feel annoyed. In Korean, it's still chill, and there's still a joking feeling."

Although some informants considered Korean swear words to be less offensive than Indonesian swear words, on the other hand, there is one informant who considered Korean swear words to be as offensive as Indonesian or English swear words. This shows that language differences do not reduce the level of rudeness of a word, because they have the same meaning and function.

“Menurutku itu sama sih kaya kata umpatan dalam bahasa Indonesia maupun bahasa Inggris ya, kurang nyaman aja dengarnya, apalagi kalau terus-terusan diucapkan benar-benar gak nyaman dengarnya.” (I5)

“In my opinion, it's the same as swear words in Indonesian and English, it's just uncomfortable to hear, especially if you say it continuously, it's really uncomfortable to hear.”

Although most informants thought that Korean swear words sounded funny and were not as harsh as Indonesian or English swear words, they understand that it is important to have an awareness of politeness and an awareness of understanding swear words even in a foreign language.

“Menurut saya penting untuk paham maknanya agar tidak salah pengucapannya dan agar tidak salah diartikan. Takutnya nanti gak tau artinya, dipakai, trus yang tau artinya dengar, bisa aja mereka tersinggung atau dianggap aneh.” (I5)

“I think it's important to understand the meaning so we don't mispronounce it or misinterpret it. I'm afraid that if we don't know what it means, we might use it, and then someone who does know the meaning might hear it and be offended or think it's strange.”

Overall, these findings suggest that *Hallyu* fans' perceptions of Korean swear words were dynamic and contextual. Perceptions can change depending on the context, cultural exposure, and to whom the words are spoken.

2. Factors Influencing the Use

This theme is a theme that explains what factors influence *Hallyu* fans as individuals who are not native speakers to use Korean swear words in their everyday communication.

The analysis results show that the main factor influencing them to use Korean swear words in everyday communication is exposure to Korean media, such as dramas, variety shows, music, and Korean content on social media. Continuous and ongoing exposure causes informants to become accustomed to hearing Korean swear words in various contexts, which leads to an understanding of these words so that they directly or indirectly use them both in real life and online communication.

“Yang mempengaruhi saya menggunakan kata-kata umpatan ini yang pertama karena ketertarikan, saya juga sering mendengar lagu K-pop dan menonton drama Korea yang bikin saya ingin menggunakan kata-kata itu.” (I1)

“What influenced me to use these swear words was firstly because of interest, I also often listen to K-pop songs and watch Korean dramas which makes me want to use those words.”

Another factor that also influenced *Hallyu* fans is the social environment, such as friends around them, even one informant said that they were directly influenced by Korean native speakers when playing games.

“Yang sangat mempengaruhi aku sampai ikut mengucapkan kata ini teman-teman latihan dance sih, karena ada beberapa dari mereka sering pakai, bahkan ada yang sampai ngomong bahasa Korea dan diselipin kata umpatannya itu.” (I5)

“My dance practice friends really influenced me to even say this word, because some of them used it often, some even spoke Korean and included the swear word.”

“Aku main game, ini game perang dan aku salah ngirim pasukan atau gimana, trus orang-orang Korea itu bilang ke aku ‘micheonnyeo?!’ gitu.” (I2)

“I was playing a game, it was a war game and at the moment I sent the wrong troops or something, then those Korean people said to me ‘micheonnyeo?!’ like that.”

Overall, these findings show that the factors influencing the use of Korean swear words by non-native *Hallyu* fans were a combination of media exposure, social environment, and direct exposure to native speakers.

Discussion

1. *Hallyu* fans' perceptions of the Use of Korean Swear Words

The thematic analysis revealed four codes representing *Hallyu* fans' perceptions of the use of Korean swear words. These perceptions are diverse, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Codes Related to *Hallyu* Fans' Perceptions of the Use of Korean Swear Words

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code
<i>Hallyu</i> Fans' Perceptions	Negative Perceptions	Swear words as harsh words
	Positive Perceptions	Swear words as funny words
		Swear words as a sign of closeness
	Relative Perceptions	Equality and inequality with other languages

Based on the Table 1, informants' perceptions were dynamic and contextual, with variations in perceptions of Korean swear words. This study found differences in informants' perceptions regarding the level of rudeness of Korean swear words. Some

informants viewed Korean swear words as rude and inappropriate words, which could potentially offend someone who hears them. Some informants also viewed Korean swear words as not too rude, in fact, Korean swear words were considered humorous words, commonly used in casual conversations and jokes with the other person.

Furthermore, some informants' perceptions of Korean swear words also depend on the context of when, where, and to whom they are used. Informants revealed that Korean swear words are considered rude when spoken with emotion, with high intonation, and intended to put down the other person. This indicates that swear words were considered negative when used to express emotions. Meanwhile, Korean swear words were considered less rude and even humorous when used jokingly.

On the other hand, some informants perceived Korean swear words as less offensive than Indonesian swear words, which is their native tongue. Other informants also stated that Korean swear words and Indonesian swear words have the same level of rudeness. This indicates that the perception of the level of rudeness of swear words is relative and influenced by each individual's background understanding of the meaning of the words. Nevertheless, most informants still consider that limiting the use of swear words is necessary, especially in formal contexts or when communicating with respected parties.

Thus, the perception of *Hallyu* fans who are not native speakers towards the use of Korean swear words varies greatly depending on how they process new information, then 'gives meaning' to the information based on cultural background and past experiences, which shows differences in perception from each informant. This is in line with the Perception theory by Qiong (2017) which states that if communicators use knowledge gained from their own culture to interpret information received from another culture then there will be differences in perception. Furthermore, this result also in line with Saniada et al. (2023), they said that people more interested to use swear words than good words because they thought that swear words are more interesting for them. Some fans mentioned that the Korean language is the part of Korean culture that most increases their interest (Reindra et al., 2024).

2. The Factors that Influenced the Use of Korean Swear Words by *Hallyu* Fans

From the thematic analysis, three codes were found that represent factors that influence *Hallyu* fans to use Korean swear words in daily communication, which have been described in Table 2, including social media exposure, social environment, and the experience of receiving swearing from native speakers in an emotional context.

Table 2. Codes Related to the Factors that Influenced the Used of Korean Swear Words by *Hallyu* Fans

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code
Factors Influenced the Use	The influence of social media	Social media exposure

exposure and social environment	Social environment
Direct exposure from native speakers	The experience of receiving swearing from native speakers in an emotional context

Based on the Table 2, the use of Korean swear words by non-native *Hallyu* fans was influenced by various factors. The first influencing factor is social media exposure, especially exposure to Korean content such as Korean dramas, music/songs, variety shows, and Korean-language content that is easily accessible through social media such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, X, etc. The Korean swear words known and used by informants mostly appear in dialogues in Korean dramas. This exposure increases informants' familiarity with Korean swear words, thus causing informants to use them in everyday communication.

Furthermore, the social environment is also a factor influencing informants in using Korean swear words. Some informants stated that their friends greatly influence their use of swear words. This is because the closer the relationship between the speaker and the listener, the easier and more frequent the exposure to swear words, thus influencing the listener to consciously or unconsciously use swear words. This is in line with the theory of Factors of the Use of Swear Words by Timothy & Janschewitz (2008), which states that the use of swear words is strongly influenced by social and cultural factors. Therefore, the background and level of closeness between speakers encourage the use of swear words. According to Jean (2023), sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that examines how language is influenced by social factors such as class, age, gender, ethnicity, and group identity. Similarly, Andrus (2024) said that sociolinguistics is an important field for deepening our understanding of the complex relationship between language and society because by examining language variation, power dynamics, code-switching, and language change, sociolinguistics can explain how language can reflect and create identity and social structure.

On the other hand, one informant stated that direct interaction with Korean native speakers through online media also influenced the use of Korean swear words. This direct exposure allowed the informant to gain a more concrete understanding of Korean swear words, such as the intonation used and knowing when to use them. Thus, the factors influencing *Hallyu* fans who are not Korean native speakers were a combination of exposure to Korean media and content; social environment, such as friends with a high level of familiarity; and direct interaction experiences with Korean native speakers also play an important role in influencing the use of Korean swear words.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of research and analysis of *Hallyu* fans' perception of the use of Korean swear words, it can be concluded that *Hallyu* fans' perceptions of the use of Korean swear words were varied and relative. Some informants view Korean

swear words as offensive, comparable to swear words in other languages. Others view Korean swear words as less offensive and even humorous, especially when used jokingly. These differences in perception indicate that views on Korean swear words were heavily influenced by context, understanding of the word's meaning, and the informant's background. The factors influencing informants' use of Korean swear words largely stem from exposure to Korean media or content (Korean dramas, songs, variety shows), social environments, and direct online interactions with native Korean speakers. This exposure can introduce Korean swear words to non-native *Hallyu* fans, strengthening their understanding, and influencing them to use these swear words.

For the implications, language educators should incorporate sociocultural context when teaching Korean, especially for informal or taboo expressions like swear words. This can help learners avoid misuse and develop more appropriate pragmatic competence in real-life communication. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to address not only formal language but also informal and culturally sensitive expressions, including swear words, within appropriate boundaries. In addition, future studies could involve a more diverse group of participants beyond *Hallyu* fans to gain broader insights. Researchers may also explore actual language use through conversation analysis or ethnographic methods to complement perception-based data.

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