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Korea as a New Religion:
The Paradox of Fanaticism and Sacred Idol Devotion

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Abstract.

This article examines Hallyu culture as a form of cultural religiosity by analysing the paradox of emotional fanaticism and the formation of alternative spaces of meaning among Indonesian youth. The urgency of this study lies in the increasing tendency of fandom practices to exceed entertainment consumption and function as symbolic, affective, and quasi-sacred spaces within digital life. The study employed a mixed-methods design with a sequential explanatory approach. Primary data were obtained from questionnaires distributed to 50 Hallyu fans in Medan aged 16–30 and in-depth interviews with 10 selected informants. Secondary data were drawn from literature, previous studies, and supporting digital documents related to Hallyu fandom. Data were collected through Likert-scale questionnaires, interviews, and documentation. Quantitative data were analysed using SEM-PLS with SmartPLS, while qualitative data were analysed through the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model. Data validity was strengthened through construct validity, reliability testing, and source and method triangulation. The findings show that material and social sacrifices exert the strongest significant effect on the alternative space of meaning, followed by emotional fanaticism, while ritual commitment is not statistically significant. The discussion indicates that Hallyu fandom operates as a negotiated sacred space where idols, merchandise, and digital practices acquire symbolic value resembling contemporary religiosity. The study concludes that Hallyu is not merely popular culture, but an alternative arena of meaning production, collective attachment, and post-religious affect in the digital era. These findings enrich communication and cultural studies by showing fandom mediates spirituality, solidarity, identity, and belonging beyond formal institutions today.

Keywords: hallyu, new religion, emotional fanaticism, cultural space, alternative space.

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INTRODUCTION

Korean popular culture, or Hallyu, has evolved into a global phenomenon that is not merely aesthetic but also existential in nature (Ahn, 2022; Chang, 2022). This wave transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, becoming a source of identity, affect, and community for millions of its followers. The phenomenon illustrates that Hallyu is not simply a form of entertainment but has also constructed a symbolic order resembling contemporary religious practices within a mediatized society (Loo, 2023).

The level of interest in Korean culture among Indonesians reaches 86.3%, making Indonesia the country with the highest level of enthusiasm for Hallyu worldwide, according to the 2024 Overseas Hallyu Survey by the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (Gandhawangi, 2024). This is further reinforced by Indonesia's position as the third-largest market for K-pop streaming globally, behind the United States but ahead of South Korea. Such conditions indicate that Hallyu has become an inseparable part of the digital affective ecosystem of Indonesian youth.

Fandom activities are no longer limited to passive consumption but involve emotional commitment, material sacrifice, and collective participation that resemble social rituals (Gammon, 2025). Young Indonesians form intense emotional relationships with their idols, internalize their messages, and use fandom communities as spaces to reinforce identity and solidarity. Within this structure, a sense of devotion and ritualistic practices emerge, structurally and symbolically mirroring patterns of religiosity.

This phenomenon reveals that, in the absence of stable and authoritative value systems in the digital era, popular culture such as Hallyu assumes religious functions by providing meaning, comfort, and moral orientation (Park, 2022; Kang, 2023; Son, 2024; Tang, 2024). Individuals no longer seek spiritual enlightenment solely through formal institutions but construct alternative spaces of meaning filled with aesthetic symbols, narratives of idol success, and solidarity-based virtual communities. Korean culture is not only admired but also "lived."

In *The Elementary Forms* of Religious Life, Durkheim (2018) emphasizes that religion is essentially a social construct that provides collective sacredness through symbols, rituals, and solidarity (Kapishin, 2022). Based on this approach, Hallyu can be positioned as a form of "cultural religion" that substitutes for traditional religiosity by filling the individual's symbolic void. Accordingly, emotional fanaticism toward idols, fandom rituals, and material sacrifices can be viewed as manifestations of religious functions within the framework of contemporary popular culture.

This development generates a cultural paradox: a formally religious society exhibits transcendental affection toward public figures originating from an external value system (Yoo, 2023). Practices such as celebrating idol's birthdays, creating digital altars, and allocating special funds for concerts and merchandise signify a shift of sacred meaning from religious institutions to the structures of popular culture. Here, the tension between religious identity and fandom identity creates an intellectually significant contradiction (Crome, 2023).

Social media, as a space for meaning production and consumption, plays a crucial role in mediating these values (Chung, 2024; Hisham, 2024; Triansyah, 2025). Digital algorithms act as engines of emotional proximity, reinforcing affective attachment between fans and idols and producing a form of spirituality rooted in affect and visual repetition. This aligns with Baudrillard's notion of simulacra as representations that replace reality itself. Idols are no longer merely human figures but also semi-divine icons that inspire and unify transnational virtual communities.

The transformation of Hallyu is therefore not merely a matter of cultural consumption but also represents a shift in how individuals construct existential relationships and life orientations. As religious and national identities lose emotional resonance, individuals seek meaning through figures who touch their deepest affective cores. In this context, Hallyu emerges not simply as entertainment but also as a symbolic space of mediation space that offers illumination. This study is thus important for uncovering vital to uncover how emotional fanaticism toward Hallyu affects not only entertainment preferences but also the meaning structures and value systems of Indonesia's digital youth, reflecting a broader transformation of values amid the tension between local identities and global cultural flows in a digitalized society (Ahn, 2022).

Recent studies have examined Hallyu from various perspectives, such as tourism semiotics that emphasizing Hallyu's narrative construction as a tourist attraction (Luo, 2024), corpus analysis that maps the linguistic features of English in K-pop lyrics (Barnes-Sadler, 2025), and comparative studies of popular culture and fashion in East Asia (Tang, 2024). However, these works remain confined to representational, linguistic, and aesthetic dimensions of consumption, stopping at the instrumental level. None of these studies has systematically explored how Hallyu fandom practices generate collective sacredness through emotional devotion and material sacrifice, nor how audiences decode these meanings from dominant, negotiated, or oppositional positions. This study thus positions itself by proposing the *Cultural Religiosity* Model of Fandom to explain Hallyu not merely as a form of popular culture but also as a form of cultural religiosity among digital generations.

The study of Hallyu fanaticism as a "new religion" is grounded in the theoretical perspectives of Émile Durkheim and Stuart Hall. For Durkheim, religion is a social construct that reinforces solidarity through symbols, rituals, and shared emotional experiences, which he terms "collective effervescence"—an outburst of collective affect that generates a sense of sacredness and togetherness. In this context, idols and fandom communities function as symbolic objects that trigger emotional attachment, foster social cohesion, and generate spiritual experiences beyond formal religious institutions (Durkheim and Zemskova, 2018). This framework strengthens Castells's (2016) argument that, within the domain of communication, both fandom and media play crucial roles in representation. Meanwhile, Hall's encoding/decoding theory positions audiences as active agents who interpret media messages according to their identities, much like Hallyu fans who treat idols' messages as sources of inspiration and meaning in life (Hall, 2023). Accordingly, Hallyu is not merely a form of popular culture but also a sacred space produced through the interaction between social structure and audience agency. This analytical foundation is further reinforced by bibliometric mapping conducted using VOSviewer on 1,000 articles published between 2021 and 2025 and retrieved from Scopus and Google Scholar, as illustrated below:

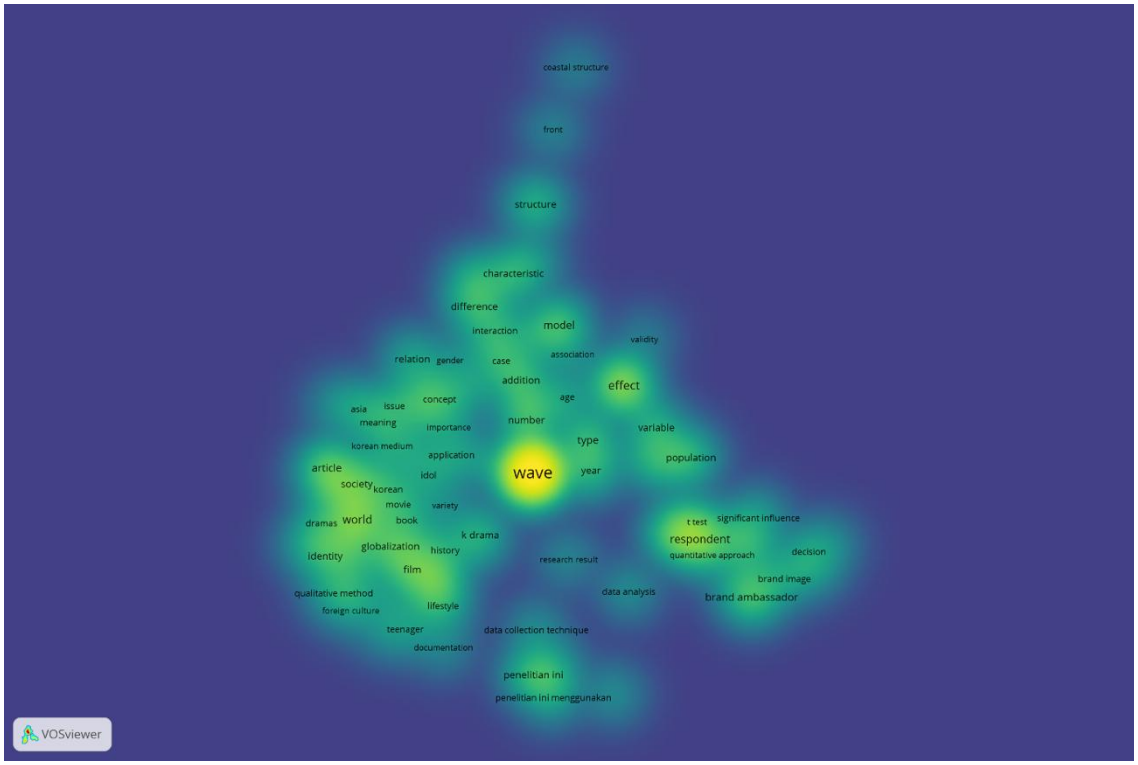


Image 1. Density Analysis of Previous Studies
Source: (Data Processed by the Researchers, 2025)

The density map analysis as seen in Image 1 indicates that areas with high term intensity are concentrated around topics related to consumption (purchase decision, intention, brand image) and soft

power/globalization (society, the world, and culture). The brightest density zones highlight how previous literature continues to frame Hallyu primarily as an instrument of economic and cultural diplomacy. However, this study occupies a different space by shifting attention from consumption and soft power to the dimensions of cultural spirituality and emotional fanaticism. Thus, the contribution of this research lies in offering a new perspective: Hallyu is not only to markets and cultural politics but is also interpretable as a form of contemporary religiosity that produces collective sacredness and alternative spaces of meaning for younger generations.

Hisham (2021) emphasizes the role of mediatization in constructing the relationship between Hallyu and Malaysia's Generation Z during the pandemic. Using a mixed-method approach combining online surveys and focus group discussions, the study shows that K-pop functions as a space for identity expression and the release of collective affect during periods of crisis. The findings highlight the symbolic role of Korean culture beyond entertainment, although the focus remains on identity representation. The study does not yet explore how fandom practices can be interpreted as sacred rituals, leaving an analytical gap that the present study aims to fill by examining Hallyu through Durkheim's lens of religiosity.

In a different context, Gammon (2025) investigates Hallyu in Hanoi through *urban ethnography*, combining participant observation and in-depth interviews. The findings show that Korean culture helps shape urban spaces that mediate between local and global identities, transforming the city into a hybrid cultural arena. This contributes to an understanding of how Hallyu constructs new material and cultural landscapes beyond Korea, though the focus remains on spatial and urban dimensions. The present study differs by moving beyond urban transformation and conceptualizing fandom spaces as *sacred arenas* where affect, sacrifice, and digital rituals intertwine to form a new religiosity among youth.

Meanwhile, Harris (2025) explores the pedagogical use of Hallyu through a qualitative study based on classroom observations and teacher interviews. The findings reveal that Hallyu functions as a pedagogical instrument that enriches linguistic and cultural learning and serves as a form of *cultural capital* in education. While the study successfully highlights the instructional potential of Hallyu, it remains within an instrumental framework. This research, however, takes a different approach by viewing Hallyu not merely as an educational medium but also as a source of *cultural faith* that reinforces meaning in life, inspires emotional devotion, and evokes a sacred dimension parallel to contemporary forms of religiosity.

This study aims to examine how Hallyu fandom constructs alternative spaces of meaning through emotional fanaticism, material and social sacrifices, and ritual commitment among Indonesian youth. Specifically, it analyses the extent to which these three dimensions shape the formation of spaces of meaning and explains why material and social sacrifices emerge as the strongest predictor, why emotional fanaticism functions as a significant affective driver, and why ritual commitment remains statistically non-significant. Through the integration of PLS-SEM and qualitative audience reception analysis, this study further seeks to interpret the paradox of Hallyu as a form of cultural religiosity: fans may formally distinguish fandom from religion, yet their emotional devotion, sacrificial practices, and symbolic defence of idols reveal patterns of sacred attachment that resemble contemporary religious experience.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, beginning with a quantitative phase to measure the relationship between emotional fanaticism toward Hallyu and the formation of alternative spaces of meaning, followed by a qualitative phase aimed at exploring respondents' affective experiences, symbolic meanings, and value constructions (Weyant, 2022; Takona, 2024). This approach was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena through the combination of statistical data and personal narratives (Edmonds and Kennedy, 2020).

The research was conducted in Medan City, one of the key centres of Korean culture fandom in the Sumatra region. The population consisted of young people aged 16–30 who actively consumed Hallyu content and participated in online fandom communities. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 50 quantitative respondents who met three criteria: being active followers of Korean idols, following at least one social media account belonging to ani dol identified as their "bias," and engaging in fandom

activities. The qualitative phase involved 10 key informants selected through purposive sampling from among the questionnaire respondents (Creswell and Creswell, 2022).

The research instrument comprised a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire designed to measure four variables: emotional affection toward idols (X1), ritual commitment to fandom (X2), material and social sacrifices (X3), and the alternative space of meaning (Y). Each variable contained 15 items. The operational definitions and measurement indicators for each variable are presented in Table 1:

Table 1
Operational Definitions of Variables

Variable	Subvariable/Dimension	Indicator	Scale	Source
X1: Emotional Fanaticism toward Idols	Personal emotional affection	Enthusiasm and comfort derived from idol-related content	Likert 1–5	(He and Sun, 2022)
	Emotional attachment	Feelings of closeness to, inspiration from, and pride in idols	Likert 1–5	
	Collective emotional response	Feelings of pride, sadness, and happiness in response to idols' achievements or idol-related events	Likert 1–5	
X2: Ritual Commitment of Fandom	Digital routines	Daily activities involving the consumption of idol-related content consumption	Likert 1–5	(Ananda and Windah, 2021)
	Participation in fandom communities	Active involvement in fanbases and fandom projects	Likert 1–5	
	Symbolic and ritual practices	Ritualistic behaviors such as watching idol-related content and celebrating idols' birthdays	Likert 1–5	
X3: Material and Social Sacrifices	Financial expenditure	Allocating money to or purchasing products related to idols	Likert 1–5	(Ayu Dinda Tri Dewinta, 2024)
	Social sacrifice	Conflicts or social consequences arising from fandom participation	Likert 1–5	
	Consumption prioritisation	Prioritising idol-related spending over personal needs	Likert 1–5	
Y: Alternative Space of Meaning	Source of emotional support and motivation	Idol as sources of inspiration and motivation in life	Likert 1–5	(Laffan, 2021)
	Value orientation	Adoption of idols' values as a source of personal moral guidance	Likert 1–5	
	Community as a space for affirmation	Fandom community as a safe space and sites of self-reflection	Likert 1–5	

Source: (Data Processed by the Researchers, 2025)

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. The analysis included an evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) to assess construct validity and reliability, as well as an evaluation of the structural model (inner model) to examine the relationships among variables (Hair Jr *et al.*, 2021; Sarstedt, Ringle and Hair, 2021; Richter *et al.*, 2023).

Qualitative data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020). In the qualitative phase, ten informants were selected from among the questionnaire respondents to represent different levels of emotional fanaticism, ritual commitment, and material and social sacrifices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the informants' interpretations of their attachment to idols, their participation in fandom practices, their willingness to make financial or social sacrifices, and their understanding of fandom as a source of motivation, identity, and emotional refuge. The interview data were then transcribed, coded, and categorised using NVivo 15 to identify recurring themes related to emotional devotion, symbolic rituals, material sacrifices, social belonging, and audience reception. Data condensation was carried out by selecting statements directly related to the quantitative constructs and removing responses that did not address the formation of alternative spaces of meaning. Data were displayed through thematic mapping, word cloud visualisation, and reception category

matrices based on Hall's dominant, negotiated, and oppositional positions. Conclusion drawing was performed by comparing the qualitative themes with the PLS-SEM results, particularly to explain why material and social sacrifices became the strongest predictor, why emotional fanaticism remained significant, and why ritual commitment was statistically non-significant. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing the narratives of informants with different levels of fandom involvement and method triangulation, which involved integrating questionnaire results, interview data, and documentation of fandom practices (Flick, 2022). Research ethics were maintained through the use of informed consent, the use of initials in place of real names, voluntary participation, and guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality for all participants.

RESULTS

Quantitative Results: The Effect of Emotional Fanaticism on the Formation of Alternative Spaces of Meaning

Based on the quantitative approach described in the Methods section, data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The analytical procedure began with validity and reliability testing to ensure that each construct demonstrated adequate internal consistency and accurately represented by its corresponding indicators. The results of these measurement evaluations provided a basis for proceeding with the structural model analysis, which aimed to examine the relationships among variables within the conceptual framework of the study.

Table 2
Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Alternative Space of Meaning	0.956	0.959	0.961	0.657
Emotional Fanaticism toward Idol	0.958	0.962	0.963	0.669
Material and Social Sacrifices	0.943	0.946	0.952	0.715
Ritual Commitment of Fanaticism	0.961	0.965	0.966	0.668

Source: (SmartPLS 4, 2025)

All constructs meet the recommended criteria for PLS-SEM. The Cronbach's alpha values for all variables exceeded 0.90, indicating excellent internal consistency. Similarly, the composite reliability values (ρa and ρc) were all above the minimum threshold of 0.70, confirming that the indicators consistently reflected the latent constructs being measured (Hair Jr *et al.*, 2021). The average variance extracted (AVE) values were all greater than 0.50, demonstrating that the proportion of variance explained by each construct was higher than the measurement error. Therefore, the construct reliability and convergent validity of the model were considered satisfactory, allowing the analysis to proceed to the structural model evaluation (inner model).

The quantitative analysis using the PLS_SEM approach by testing indicator reliability through the outer loading values. This stage aimed to ensure that each item statement of the research variables made a significant contribution to the construct being measured. Indicators with loading values above 0.70 were retained as valid representations of their respective constructs, whereas those below the threshold were considered for elimination to improve the quality of the model. The following figure presents the outer loading results for the variables Emotional Fanaticism toward Idols, Ritual Commitment to Fandom, Material and Social Sacrifices, and Alternative Space of Meaning, which constitute the main focus of this study.

Several indicators were eliminated during the outer model evaluation because their loading values were below the recommended threshold of 0.70. This decision was made to improve indicator reliability and to ensure that each retained item adequately represented its latent construct. However, the elimination

process was not treated merely as a statistical procedure. In substantively terms, the indicators with low loadings suggest that some fandom practices, particularly those related to ritual commitment, were not consistently interpreted by respondents as meaning-producing activities. Activities such as watching idol content, streaming, voting, and celebrating idol-related events may be performed frequently, yet they do not automatically form an alternative space of meaning unless accompanied by emotional attachment or material-social sacrifice. Therefore, the removal of these indicators strengthened the measurement model while also revealing that not all repetitive fandom practices carried the same symbolic weight in the formation of sacred or existential meaning.

Table 3
f-Square Analysis

	Alternative Space of Meaning	Emotional Fanaticism toward Idol	Material and Social Sacrifices	Ritual Commitment of Fanaticism
Alternative Space of Meaning				
Emotional Fanaticism towards Idol	0.258			
Material and Social Sacrifices	0.785			
Ritual Commitment to Fanaticism	0.007			

Source: (SmartPLS 4, 2025)

The results of the f-squared analysis indicated that each independent variable contributed differently to the formation of the alternative space Meaning ($f^2 = 0.785$). This was followed by Emotional Fanaticism toward Idols ($f^2 = 0.258$), which was categorized as having medium effect. Interestingly, the Ritual Commitment of Fanaticism variable showed an f^2 value of only 0.007, far below the threshold for a small effect (0.02), indicating that its contribution to the formation of alternative meaning spaces was almost negligible. The low effect size may be attributed to several factors, such as limited response variation among the ritual-related indicators, the reduced number of valid indicators after the indicator-dropping process, or the possibility that, conceptually, the ritual dimension does not possess strong predictive power within the context of Hallyu fanaticism in Medan. This finding suggests that the ritual dimension tends to be more symbolic than substantive in shaping alternative meanings, warranting further theoretical evaluation as well as refinement of the research instrument design in future studies.

Substantively, the dominance of Material and Social Sacrifices indicates that the alternative space of meaning in Hallyu fandom is formed less through repetitive rituals and more through costly attachment. Fans do not construct sacred meaning merely because they consume idol content regularly but because they are willing to invest money, time, social reputation, and emotional energy in defending and sustaining their relationship with idols. This finding is central to the paradox examined in this study: although fans may not define their attachment as religious, the logic of sacrifice resembles a religious mechanism in which devotion becomes credible when it involves cost, loyalty, and personal consequence. Emotional fanaticism strengthens this process by transforming idols into sources of comfort, pride, motivation, and symbolic intimacy. Ritual commitment, however, makes only a limited contribution because routine practices are easily normalized within digital culture and do not necessarily generate deep existential meaning unless accompanied by emotional attachment or sacrificial validation.

During the bootstrapping stage, the analysis focused on testing the statistical significance of each indicator forming the research constructs by estimating the original sample, mean, standard deviation, t-statistic, and p-value. This procedure provided insight into the extent to which each indicator contributed to representation of the latent variables and ensured the empirical reliability and validity of the measurement model. The results obtained at this stage served as the foundation for assessing the strength of inter-variable relationships, both direct and mediated, thus enabling statistically sound and empirically tested conclusions.

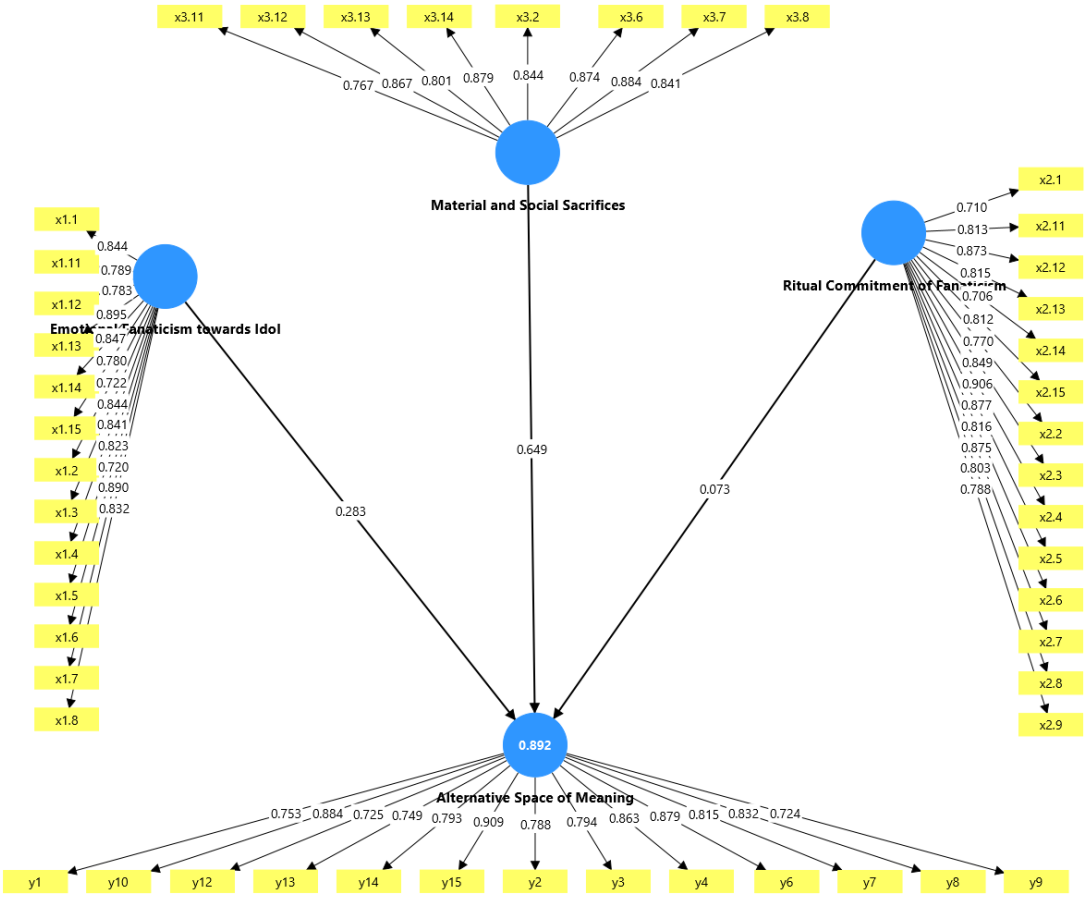


Image 2. Loading Factor (Source: SmartPLS 4, 2025)
Source: (Data Processed by the Researchers, 2025)

In the Image 1, structural model illustrates the relationships among the latent variables in this study, in which Emotional Fanaticism toward Idols, Material and Social Sacrifices, and Ritual Commitment of Fanaticism act as predictors of the Alternative Space of Meaning. The path coefficient values indicate that Material and Social Sacrifices exert the strongest influence on the formation of the Alternative Space of Meaning (β = 0.649), followed by Emotional Fanaticism toward Idols (β = 0.283), whereas Ritual Commitment of Fanaticism shows a relatively weak influence (β = 0.073). Most indicators within each construct have factor loading values above 0.70, suggesting a significant contribution to their respective constructs, although several indicators below the threshold were eliminated during the outer model evaluation stage to maintain reliability and validity. These findings indicate that the formation of alternative meaning spaces within the context of fanaticism is primarily influenced by material–social sacrifice and emotional factors rather than ritual commitment.

Tabel 4
Analisis Path Coefficients

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Emotional Fanaticism towards Idol → Alternative Space of Meaning	0.283	0.288	0.131	2.161	0.031
Material and Social Sacrifices → Alternative Space of Meaning	0.649	0.639	0.123	5.283	0.000
Ritual Commitment of Fanaticism → Alternative Space of Meaning	0.073	0.077	0.141	0.517	0.605

Source: (SmartPLS 4, 2025)

The results of the bootstrapping analysis on the path coefficients show that Emotional Fanaticism toward Idols has a positive and significant effect on the Alternative Space of Meaning, with a path coefficient of 0.283 and a p-value of 0.031 (t = 2.161), indicating that emotional attachment to idols plays a role in shaping alternative meaning spaces. Similarly, Material and Social Sacrifices exhibit a stronger and statistically significant positive effect, with a coefficient of 0.649 and p<value of 0.001 (t = 5.283), confirming that material and social sacrifices are dominant factors driving the construction of meaning. Conversely, Ritual Commitment of Fanaticism shows a positive but statiscally non-significant effect (β = 0.073; p = 0.605; t = 0.517), suggesting that ritual commitment does not make a meaningful contribution to the formation of alternative meaning spaces within this model.

These path coefficient results demonstrate that the construction of alternative meaning is not equally influenced by all dimensions of fandom. Material and social sacrifices represent the most decisive pathway because they involve tangible consequences that transform fandom from preference into commitment. The willingness to buy merchandise, attend concerts, join collective projects, defend idols in public debates, or experience social criticism marks a transition from ordinary cultural consumption to affective devotion. Emotional fanaticism also contributes significantly because it provides the affective foundation through which idols are perceived as inspirational, comforting, and morally meaningful figures. By contrast, the non-significant effect of ritual commitment suggests that digital fandom routines alone do not automatically create sacred meaning. Rituals become meaningful only when they are connected to emotional attachment and sacrificial commitment. This explains why Hallyu fandom may resemble religion at the level of devotion and sacrifice yet remains unstable as a religious structure because its rituals are fragmented, optional, and continuously negotiated by fans.

Table 5
R-Square Analysis

	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Alternative Space of Meaning	0.892	0.883

Source: (SmartPLS 4, 2025)

The R-square value of 0.892 and the adjusted R-square of 0.883 indicate that the structural model possesses very strong explanatory power, with Emotional Fanaticism toward Idols, Material and Social Sacrifices, and Ritual Commitment of Fanaticism collectively explaining 89.2% of the variance in the Alternative Space of Meaning. This high percentage suggests that the three predictor variables contribute significantly to the construction of alternative meaning spaces, while the remaining 10.8% is explained by factors beyond the scope of this model.

The PLS-SEM analysis further shows that, collectively, Emotional Fanaticism toward Idols, Material and Social Sacrifices, and Ritual Commitment of Fanaticism explain 89.2% of the variance in the Alternative Space of Meaning ($R^2 = 0.892$), signifying a strong collective contribution to the formation of alternative meaning spaces among Hallyu fans in Medan. Individually, the Material and Social Sacrifices construct is the most dominant and significant predictor (β = 0.649; p < 0.001), followed by Emotional Fanaticism toward Idols, which is also significant though more moderate (β = 0.283; p = 0.031). In contrast, Ritual Commitment of Fanaticism shows a positive yet statistically non-significant influence (β = 0.073; p = 0.605). Interpreted through Durkheim's theoretical lens, religion is not merely about divinity but about collective sacredness emerging from devotion, sacrifice, and communal solidarity. Within this framework, the Hallyu fandom clearly manifests a comparable form of sacredness: idols function as semi-divine figures, fandom communities act as spaces of solidarity that affirm "sacred" experiences, yet at the individual level, fans consciously differentiate fandom from formal religion. This paradox makes Hallyu particularly intriguing: sociologically, its practices resemble religion, but subjectively, followers perceive it as a form of affection and cultural passion rather than institutional faith.

The high R-square value should not be interpreted merely as statistical strength but as evidence that the proposed model captures the core mechanism through which Hallyu becomes meaningful for fans. The

combination of emotion, sacrifice, and ritual explains most of the variance because these dimensions correspond to the main elements of cultural religiosity: affective attachment, symbolic validation, and collective practice. Nevertheless, the remaining 10.8% is theoretically important because it signals that alternative meaning is also shaped by factors beyond the model, such as friendship, advice, everyday support, and the search for belonging. This residual dimension prevents the interpretation of fandom from becoming overly deterministic. Hallyu functions as a new religion not only through idol worship but also through the social ecology that allows fans to feel accompanied, understood, and emotionally sustained.

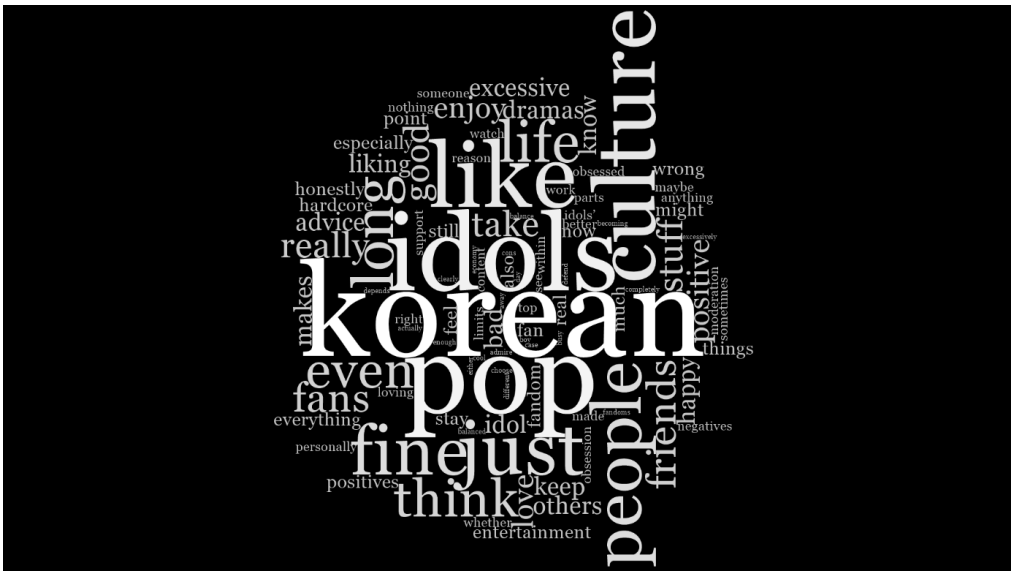


Image 3. Word Cloud from Open-Ended Questionnaire Responses
Source: (NVivo 15, 2025)

The word cloud analysis in Image 3 derived from the respondents' open-ended answers indicates that the unexplained 10.8% of the variance in the quantitative model originates from social and existential dimensions extending beyond the three main constructs. Words such as *life*, *friends*, *people*, *enjoy*, and *advice* highlight that, for some fans, Hallyu is not merely about personal emotion, fandom rituals, or material sacrifice but also serves as a space for building social networks, receiving emotional support, and finding practical guidance in everyday life (Lee, 2021). These factors suggest that fandom is perceived as a cultural community offering *life advice*, friendship-based solidarity, and collective enjoyment, which conceptually overlap with religion's function as a support for social relationships and a source of existential meaning. Thus, this residual 10.8% of the variance underscores that the socio-existential aspect of fandom serves as an additional variable that should be considered when interpreting Hallyu as a form of contemporary sacred space.

Qualitative Findings: Symbolic Meanings and Spirituality within Fandom Communities

The qualitative findings provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Hallyu fans, particularly concerning emotional attachment, material sacrifice, and ritual practices negotiated in everyday life. Through the analysis of ten informants using NVivo, this study identifies variations in audience reception, including dominant positions, which elevate idols to sacred figures; negotiated positions, which balance admiration with rational boundaries; and oppositional positions, which reject excessive fanaticism. This diversity of perspectives reveals the complexity of fandom practices while illustrating how Hallyu is internalized as a source of meaning and identity—at times even resembling a form of religious devotion.

Table 6. Description of Informants

No	Initial	Duration of K-pop Engagement
1	DR	5 years
2	UT	6 years
3	BL	4 years

4	ZS	5 years
5	DN	6 years
6	NZ	4 years
7	AR	5 years
8	NS	4 years
9	SA	7 years
10	RC	8 years

Source: (Data Processed by the Researchers, 2025)

Based on the tabulation above, the informants in this study exhibit diverse backgrounds and experiences in their engagement with K-pop culture, with durations of involvement ranging from four to eight years. This variation reflects different levels of engagement in fandom—from those who have only recently become active fans to those who have been deeply immersed in fandom culture for many years. Against this background, the in-depth interviews captured in detail how the informants interpreted their attachment to idols, the ritual practices they either performed or neglected, the forms of sacrifice they undertook, and their positionality in making sense of the Hallyu phenomenon, whether as dominant devotion, a negotiated stance, or even oppositional resistance.

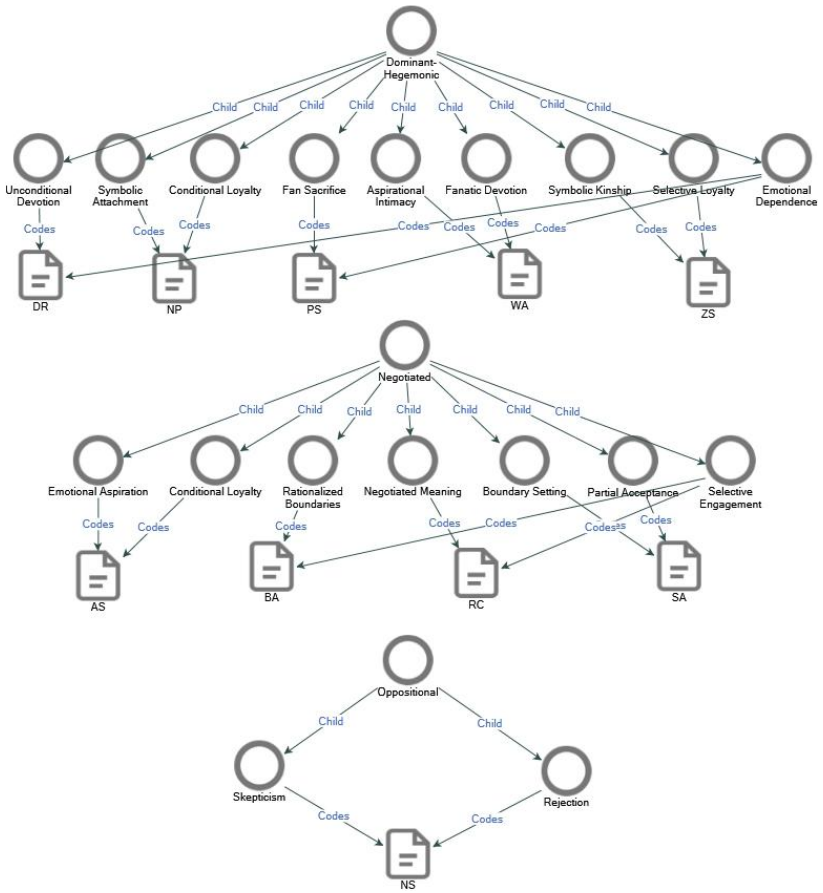


Image 4. Interview Thematic Map
Source: (NVivo 15, 2025)

The qualitative interviews reveal diverse audience responses to Hallyu culture, which can be mapped onto Stuart Hall's three categories: dominant-hegemonic reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading as seen in Image 4. In the dominant category, informants expressed intense emotional and symbolic attachment, positioning idols not merely as entertainers but as sacred figures and centers of devotion. For example, DR demonstrated unconditional devotion and emotional dependence, treating idols as family members or spiritual companions. Similarly, PS demonstrated fan sacrifice through a willingness to dedicate time and effort, further reinforcing emotional dependency. WA went even further, exhibiting

aspirational intimacy and fanatic devotion, viewing idols as moral exemplars and role models in everyday life. Meanwhile, NP and ZS affirmed their symbolic attachment and symbolic kinship yet maintained conditional or selective loyalty. These variations suggest that although dominant fans affirm the sacredness of idols, they retain some flexibility in interpreting loyalty (Choi, 2024; Yoo *et al.*, 2025).

In contrast, the negotiated group displayed an ambivalent stance: they accepted certain aspects of fandom meaning while maintaining boundaries to avoid excessive fanaticism. AS, for instance, described *emotional aspiration* as a source of motivation, yet she remained conditionally loyal, offering support only as long as idols upheld certain moral standards. BA emphasized *rationalized boundaries* and *selective engagement*, acknowledging the entertainment value of K-pop while limiting participation to enjoyable, non-disruptive activities (Inayatussahara, 2023). RC portrayed fandom as a space of negotiated meaning, selectively appropriating idol messages without fully conforming to community norms. SA illustrated boundary setting and partial acceptance, treating fandom as a space for emotional recreation rather than a central identity marker. These findings show that negotiated audiences engage meaningfully yet maintain autonomy, ensuring that fandom remains significant without dominating their lives (Rocha, 2023; Kim, 2025).

On the other hand, oppositional informants offered sharp critiques of the Hallyu phenomenon. NS explicitly rejected fanatical practices, emphasizing skepticism and disapproval. For NS, idols are ordinary humans, not divine figures worthy of worship. She expressed discomfort with fans who defend idols blindly even amid scandals or proven misconduct. This narrative underscores that not all audiences perceive Hallyu as sacred; for some, fandom represents an excessive and intrusive form of popular culture. The presence of this oppositional stance completes the spectrum of audience reception from full devotion to outright rejection, demonstrating the complexity of how people make sense of Korean culture.

The synthesis of these three reception categories shows that the meanings of Hallyu fandom are multilayered and negotiated according to individual experiences and identities. In the dominant group, meaning is constructed through emotional devotion, sacrifice, and collective symbolism that closely resembles religious practices (Tertiano and Salehudin, 2023; Wei, 2023). In the negotiated group, meaning is selectively constructed: positive values such as motivation, entertainment, and solidarity are embraced, while fanaticism and extreme rituals are rejected (Ding and Wu, 2023; Kashina, 2023). Meanwhile, the oppositional group perceives fandom as excessive and irrational, rejecting the sacredness of idols altogether. These findings confirm Hall's framework that audiences are not passive receivers but active interpreters who decode messages based on their social and personal contexts.

The implications of these results reinforce the earlier quantitative findings, particularly the non-significant effect of ritual commitment (X2) in explaining the alternative space of meaning. From a qualitative standpoint, this can be understood in terms of how even dominant informants derive meaning more from real sacrifice and emotional bonds than from ritual routines. Negotiated participants viewed rituals as merely symbolic, while oppositional informants rejected them entirely. Thus, the residual meaning unexplained by quantitative variables can be interpreted through audience agency: fandom rituals are not the core of meaning but complementary expressions that can be negotiated or abandoned.

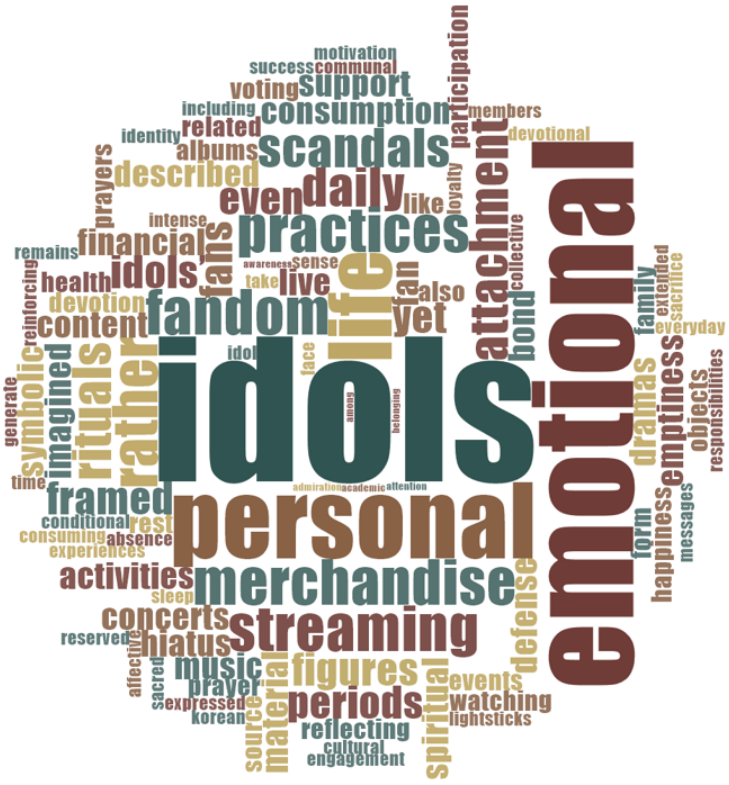


Image 5. Word Cloud from Interview Data
Source: (NVivo 2025)

Image 5 present the qualitative word cloud analysis reveals the dominance of the words *idols*, *emotional*, and *personal*, indicating that emotional attachment and personal connection form the core of the fandom experience. Informants explained that idols are not merely entertainers but figures who provide emotional comfort, life motivation, and even a sense of symbolic intimacy. This confirms that fandom operates beyond the logic of consumption, moving toward intense emotional relationships (Hernández and Lee, 2021).

Beyond the emotional aspect, words such as *life*, *attachment*, and *practices* demonstrate how fandom is integrated into fans' daily lives. Activities such as streaming, voting, or attending concerts are not merely routines but devotional practices that structure everyday rhythms. However, interviews reveal that although such rituals are frequently mentioned, their meanings are largely symbolic and participatory rather than sacred in a formal religious sense, explaining why the ritual dimension (X2) was statistically non-significant in the quantitative model.

The presence of words like *merchandise*, *albums*, and *material* underscores the importance of material objects in fandom experiences. For many informants, owning idol-related items such as photocards, lightsticks, and albums is not mere consumption but a symbol of attachment and a representation of loyalty. These objects serve as modern totems that reinforce collective identity and stand as tangible evidence of financial sacrifice. This finding supports the quantitative result identifying material and social sacrifices as the dominant factor shaping alternative spaces of meaning (Drianda, 2024).

Another salient cluster involves words such as *scandals*, *defense*, and *loyalty*, which expose the paradoxes of fandom. Some informants admitted to defending idols even in the face of controversy, while others maintained critical distance and set boundaries on their support. This variation illustrates the spectrum of audience reception from full devotion to opposition—consistent with Stuart Hall's dominant, negotiated, and oppositional decoding categories. Thus, the word cloud demonstrates that Hallyu fandom is a complex space where emotion, sacrifice, and ritual intertwine yet are interpreted differently according to audience positions.

Interpreted through Hall's framework, the interview findings exemplify three decoding positions. Dominant informants accept idol messages hegemonically, positioning idols as sources of devotion and

meaning in life. Negotiated informants selectively appropriate messages, embracing motivation and solidarity while rejecting excessive ritualism or consumption. Oppositional informants, on the other hand, reject excessive fanaticism and criticize idol worship as irrational. This confirms the audience's active role in producing rather than passively receiving meaning.

Viewed through Durkheim's perspective, fandom can be understood as a form of cultural religiosity. Idols function as totems generating collective sacredness, merchandise operates as a symbolic object, and fandom celebrations such as concerts create moments of collective effervescence. Yet unlike formal religion, this sacredness is flexible and negotiated: some fans treat it as mere entertainment, while others embrace it as a moral compass. This explains the paradox of Hallyu fandom—it operates sociologically like religion but is rarely acknowledged as such by its followers.

Combining Hall's and Durkheim's perspectives enables a more comprehensive reading. Structurally, Hallyu functions as a sacred space producing solidarity, devotion, and new forms of totemism. Agentically, audiences engage in differentiated decoding, producing a spectrum of receptions from hegemonic devotion to oppositional rejection. Thus, this study affirms that Hallyu is not merely popular culture but a meaningful arena where religion, entertainment, and cultural identity converge to form a contemporary form of youth religiosity.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that the formation of alternative spaces of meaning in Hallyu fandom cannot be explained solely by the frequency of fandom participation but by the depth of emotional and sacrificial investment attached to it. The PLS-SEM results show that Material and Social Sacrifices constitute the strongest predictor of the Alternative Space of Meaning, while the interview data explain why this relationship is dominant. Informants did not interpret merchandise, concerts, fan projects, or social defence of idols as ordinary consumption alone but as tangible proof of loyalty and emotional seriousness. In this sense, material objects and social risks operate as symbolic validators: they make devotion visible, measurable, and socially recognisable within fandom communities. This explains why sacrifice becomes more influential than ritual: sacrifice produces personal consequences, whereas routine practices can remain casual, repetitive, and weakly internalised.

This analytical integration also clarifies the significant role of Emotional Fanaticism. Quantitatively, emotional fanaticism has a positive and significant effect on the Alternative Space of Meaning, but its coefficient is lower than that of material and social sacrifices. Qualitative findings reveal that emotional attachment functions as the affective foundation of meaning rather than its final expression. Fans describe idols as sources of comfort, motivation, pride, and symbolic intimacy, yet these feelings become stronger and more meaningful when they are translated into concrete acts such as purchasing merchandise, defending idols, joining fandom projects, or enduring criticism from non-fans. Emotional fanaticism therefore does not stand alone; it becomes socially and existentially powerful when it is materialised through sacrifice and recognised within the fandom community.

The non-significant effect of Ritual Commitment is likewise explained more clearly through the qualitative data. Although activities such as streaming, voting, watching idol content, and celebrating idol-related events appear ritualistic on the surface, informants did not always interpret them as sacred or existentially meaningful. Negotiated informants treated such routines as entertainment, relaxation, or selective participation, while oppositional informants rejected excessive ritualisation altogether. Even among dominant informants, ritual practices gained meaning only when connected to emotional devotion or sacrificial commitment. This explains why ritual commitment is statistically non-significant: repetition alone does not produce sacred meaning. Ritual becomes meaningful only when it is affectively charged and socially validated through sacrifice.

The qualitative findings therefore do not merely confirm the quantitative results; they explain the mechanism behind them. Hallyu becomes an alternative space of meaning not because fans repeatedly perform fandom routines but because emotional attachment, symbolic objects, social belonging, and personal sacrifice converge into a negotiated experience of sacredness. This integration also sharpens the central paradox of the study. Fans may reject the idea that they treat idols as religious figures, yet their willingness to defend idols, spend resources, seek comfort from idol narratives, and construct belonging

through fandom communities shows that sacredness has shifted from formal doctrine to affective and digital-cultural practices. The mixed-methods findings consequently reveal that Hallyu religiosity is not institutional, dogmatic, or formally theological but affective, negotiated, and mediated by digital culture.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that Hallyu fandom has moved beyond the conventional boundaries of popular culture, consumption, and entertainment. Quantitative results indicate that material and social sacrifices constitute the strongest predictor of the alternative space of meaning, followed by emotional fanaticism, while ritual commitment does not exert a significant effect. Qualitative findings explain this pattern by revealing that fans construct meaning not primarily through repetitive fandom routines but through affective attachment, symbolic defence, financial expenditure, social risk, and the feeling of belonging generated within fandom communities. This integration demonstrates that the sacredness of Hallyu does not emerge from ritual repetition alone; rather, it is produced when emotional intensity is validated through sacrifice and is socially recognised within digital fandom culture (Laffan, 2021; Tertiano and Salehudin, 2023; Choi, 2024).

This finding requires a more critical reading of Durkheim's conception of religion. Durkheim's theory is useful because it explains how sacredness is socially produced through symbols, rituals, and collective effervescence (Durkheim and Zemskova, 2018; Kapishin, 2022). In Hallyu fandom, idols may function as symbolic centres, items of merchandise may operate as quasi-totemic objects, and concerts or online fan projects may create moments of collective emotional intensity. Yet the findings also show the limits of applying Durkheim in a direct and uncritical manner. Unlike institutional religion, Hallyu does not possess fixed doctrines, moral obligations, or stable ritual authority. Its sacredness is fluid, commercialised, affective, and mediated by digital platforms. Fans may defend idols with religion-like devotion, but they rarely recognise their practices as religion. This paradox suggests that sacredness in digital culture is no longer confined to formal belief systems; it can emerge through repeated emotional exposure, collective identification, and sacrificial participation in media environments (Crome, 2023; Yoo, 2023; Hisham, 2024).

The non-significant effect of ritual commitment further complicates Durkheim's emphasis on ritual as a central mechanism of collective sacredness. In classical religious communities, ritual stabilises belief and reproduces collective identity (Durkheim and Zemskova, 2018). In Hallyu fandom, however, ritualised activities such as streaming, voting, watching idol content, and celebrating idol-related events do not automatically create existential meaning. These practices may be frequent, but frequency does not necessarily equal sacred depth. The qualitative data show that rituals become meaningful only when they are connected to emotional attachment and sacrificial validation. This finding extends Durkheim by showing that in digital fandom, sacredness is not generated by ritual performance alone but by the convergence of affect, cost, visibility, and collective recognition (Wei, 2023; Choi, 2024; Yoo et al., 2025).

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework also helps explain the heterogeneity of fandom reception, but the findings indicate that audience interpretation in Hallyu fandom exceeds the level of textual decoding. Dominant fans do not merely accept idol messages; they transform idols into figures of motivation, comfort, and symbolic guidance. Negotiated fans accept the emotional and inspirational value of Hallyu while maintaining rational boundaries against excessive devotion. Oppositional fans reject the sacred elevation of idols and criticise blind defence as irrational. This spectrum confirms Hall's argument that audiences are active producers of meaning (Hall, 2023). Nevertheless, the present study develops Hall's framework by showing that fandom reception is not only interpretive but also affective and material. Fans do not simply decode media texts; they translate their interpretations into spending, defending, collecting, voting, and participating in collective digital actions (He and Sun, 2022; Ding and Wu, 2023; Rocha, 2023; Kim, 2025).

This theoretical dialogue clarifies why material and social sacrifices become the strongest predictor in the quantitative model. Sacrifice transforms fandom from preference into commitment. Emotional attachment may create intimacy, but sacrifice makes devotion visible and socially consequential. A fan

who buys merchandise, joins fundraising projects, pays for concerts, or defends idols during public controversies performs a form of loyalty that resembles religious validation, even when the fan rejects any formal religious analogy. This explains the core paradox of the study: Indonesian youth may maintain formal religious identities, yet some fandom practices reveal patterns of devotion, defence, loyalty, and symbolic reverence that resemble sacred attachment. Hallyu therefore operates not as a replacement for religion in a doctrinal sense but as an alternative affective structure through which meaning, comfort, and belonging are produced (Inayatussahara, 2023; Kashina, 2023; Drianda, 2024).

The novelty of this study becomes clearer when positioned against previous Hallyu scholarship. Hisham's studies on mediatization explain how social media mediates Hallyu consumption and identity formation among youth, but they do not sufficiently address how mediated fandom produces collective sacredness (Hisham, 2021; Hisham, 2024). Gammon's work on Hallyu spaces in urban Hanoi shows how Korean culture reshapes urban and cultural landscapes, yet its focus remains on spatial hybridity rather than the sacralisation of fandom communities (Gammon, 2025). Harris's study on Hallyu in classroom contexts highlights pedagogical affordances, but frames Hallyu mainly as cultural capital and a learning resource rather than as an affective-spiritual structure (Harris, 2025). Studies on Hallyu consumption, tourism, and soft power similarly tend to emphasise market behaviour, national branding, cultural diplomacy, or identity expression (Hernández and Lee, 2021; Lee, 2021; Luo, 2024; Tang, 2024). The present study departs from these approaches by arguing that Hallyu fandom also functions as a site of post-religious meaning-making.

This argument does not claim that Hallyu is religion in the theological or institutional sense. Rather, it shows that Hallyu produces religion-like functions within digital youth culture: it offers symbolic figures of devotion, provides emotional refuge, creates collective belonging, legitimates sacrifice, and generates moralised defence of idol figures. The gap addressed by this study therefore lies not only in the lack of research on Hallyu and religiosity but in the limited theoretical vocabulary available to explain how secular popular culture can perform sacred functions without becoming formal religion. The concept of cultural religiosity becomes important because it allows fandom to be read as a symbolic and affective system that reorganises the boundaries between entertainment, spirituality, identity, and collective attachment (Crome, 2023; Inayatussahara, 2023; Yoo, 2023).

The proposed Post-Religious Collective Affect (PRCA) Theory emerges from this theoretical and empirical gap. PRCA argues that sacredness in digital culture does not disappear with secularisation; it relocates into affective systems mediated by platforms, idols, algorithms, and fandom communities. Within this model, emotional devotion provides the affective foundation, material and social sacrifices validate loyalty, and algorithmic repetition sustains the circulation of sacred attachment. PRCA therefore extends Durkheim by relocating collective effervescence from ritual gatherings to hybrid digital fandom ecologies and extends Hall by showing that decoding is not only textual but also affective, material, and algorithmically intensified. Sacredness is no longer maintained primarily by doctrine or institutional authority but by the continuous renewal of emotional intensity within participatory media culture (Durkheim and Zemskova, 2018; Hall, 2023; Chung, 2024; Triansyah, 2025).

Table 7
Mechanism of the Post-Religious Collective Affect (PRCA) Theory

Dimension	Explanation	Empirical Example
Affective Devotion	Emotional attachment to symbolic figures becomes a source of comfort, motivation, and existential orientation	Fans position idols as moral inspiration, emotional companions, or figures of symbolic guidance
Material Sacrifice	Financial and social sacrifices validate loyalty and transform fandom from preference into commitment	Fans buy albums, collect merchandise, attend concerts, join fan projects, or defend idols despite social criticism
Algorithmic Rituals	Platform-based repetition sustains emotional proximity and collective visibility	Fans engage in streaming, voting, hashtag mobilisation, and coordinated digital participation

Negotiated Sacredness	Sacred meaning remains unstable because fans interpret fandom through dominant, negotiated, or oppositional positions	Some fans treat idols as deeply meaningful, others set boundaries, while others reject excessive idol devotion

Source: (Data Processed by the Researchers, 2025)

The PRCA model explains Hallyu fandom as a circular system in which emotion, sacrifice, algorithmic repetition, and audience negotiation mutually shape post-religious sacredness. Emotional devotion draws fans toward idols, sacrifice validates the seriousness of attachment, algorithms intensify repeated exposure, and audience negotiation determines whether such attachment becomes sacred, recreational, or rejected. This model strengthens the study's contribution by moving beyond descriptive claims about fanaticism. It offers a theoretical explanation of how digital popular culture can produce sacred meaning in societies where formal religion remains publicly important, yet affective belonging increasingly emerges through mediated cultural figures. In this sense, the paradox of Hallyu lies not in the disappearance of religion but in the relocation of sacred functions into the emotional, material, and algorithmic structures of contemporary fandom (Hisham, 2024; Choi, 2024; Yoo et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Hallyu fandom constitutes an alternative space of meaning resembling cultural religiosity. Quantitatively, the combination of Material and Social Sacrifices, Emotional Fanaticism, and Ritual Commitment explains 89.2% of the variance in the Alternative Space of Meaning, with material–social sacrifice emerging as the dominant driver and emotional attachment as a significant enhancer, while ritual has a non-significant effect. Qualitatively, sacredness is produced through emotional devotion, sacrificial validation, and negotiated symbolic practices, reflected in the spectrum of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional receptions. The synthesis of these findings reinforces the Post-Religious Collective Affect (PRCA) Theory, which posits that in the digital era, sacredness migrates from faith to emotion, from God to algorithm, and from morality to loyalty, positioning fandom as an institutionless spirituality sustained by affective intensity.

Practically, these findings encourage fandom communities to maintain a balance between emotional engagement and personal well-being, provide educators and policymakers with new insights into the aspirations of digital youth, and invite religious institutions to reflect on the emergence of alternative spiritual spaces. The study's limitations lie in its single geographical focus and small qualitative sample. Future research should expand to multiple locations, employ longitudinal designs to monitor changes in audience reception, and test the generalisability of the PRCA Theory across fandoms and cultures to strengthen its explanatory and predictive power.

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