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Hallyu marketing in Japan: a configuration approach to K-brand image

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ABSTRACT

Since cultural community factors shaping the Korean brand (i.e. K-brand) image are rarely discussed, this research identifies the key community elements shaping the K-brand image in Japan where favourable attitudes towards Hallyu (i.e. Korean wave) can occur online. Drawing on the community cluster framework for cultural branding, we employ a configuration approach using Fuzzy-Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to uncover the critical cultural community factors and their combinations influencing the K-brand image. Our findings reveal two distinct paths shaping the K-brand image. This paper proposes theoretical and practical insights to strengthen the K-brand image.

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Hallyu; cultural branding;
Japan; K-brand image; fsQCA

1. Introduction

The commencement of the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, has broadened South Korea's international limelight or status, fetching inimitable global standing for Korean culture (Brassier 2023). Because of increasingly favourable consumer attitudes attributed to the 'Korean Wave' encircling Korean Pop Music (K-pop), creations, motion pictures, cuisine, etc., firms in South Korea have focused on improvements in their cultural branding strategies, which capture iconic brands with shared identity rather than functional categories (Oh and Kim 2023). According to Oh, Brassier, and Lopes (2024), cultural branding underlines building cultural and symbolic narratives for consumer's attention. Thus, cultural branding studies can be characterized by 1) identifying or grasping cultural communities, 2) the pop culture mediums and 3) iconic myths or ideological narratives. Regarding studies in Hallyu marketing for the Japanese context, compared to the pop culture mediums (e.g. K-pop) and ideological narratives (e.g. consumers' needs and identities), little is known about the role of grasping cultural communities (Carah 2014; Oh 2009, 2011). Hence, based on the community cluster framework for cultural branding (e.g. Oh, Brassier, and Lopes 2024), this study examines links between cultural community factors and the Korean Brand (K-brand) image through a configuration approach.

In the extant literature on Hallyu marketing, different marketing strategies were suggested to be discussed for enhancing global audience engagement, such as

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cultural branding, emotional branding for brand personality, etc (Alvarado-Karste and Guzmán 2020; Oh and Kim 2023). Nevertheless, Oh, Brassier, and Lopes (2024) have underscored cultural branding as a key strategy where cultural communities can be constructed or activated in line with iconic myths, providing an escape from reality (e.g. Holt 2016). Albeit it is implied that grasping cultural communities can help facilitate sustainable brand images, the link between them is rarely discussed in the Hallyu marketing context. In addition, it appears that consumers' attitudes and purchasing intentions have been mainly discussed as an outcome rather than brand images (Malabanan et al. 2022; Zhang et al. 2020). When contemplating Hallyu 3.0 (i. e. mainstream), it is inevitable to comprehend the link between cultural community factors and K-brand image for the continued success of Hallyu and its marketing in a competitive market, compared to the national image of South Korea (Chae, Park, and Ko 2020).

Regarding the Japanese context, along with China and Taiwan, Japan is regarded as one of the first nations where Hallyu began (Oh 2009). However, around 30% of people in Japan had a pessimistic viewpoint towards Hallyu in 2021 owing to diplomatic conflicts with South Korea (Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange 2023). Nonetheless, it is implied that people in Japan believe Hallyu is still popular in many industries due to its community clusters and its powerful cultural content, including beauty, drama, fashion, music, food, etc. Following the United States (US), South Korean culture is the second most popular one in Japan. In addition to K-pop, people in Japan (around 83%) have experienced Korean food, where the largest Hallyu can be found nowadays (Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange 2023). According to Oh (2009), Hallyu can be deemed a transnational phenomenon, not just a short-term social phenomenon, particularly in Japan. This is because Hallyu can fulfil the desire for participation, a sense of belonging and enhancing social brand value through online communities (Oh, Brassier, and Lopes 2024). Notably, this study focuses on the Japanese context where favourable attitudes towards Hallyu can be uniquely formed online, which helps marketers realize the importance of cultural communities for Hallyu marketing.

Concerning the research gap, as stated earlier, for Hallyu marketing, little is known about the role of cultural community factors and K-brand image compared to the national image of South Korea in the Japanese context. When considering the Japanese context (e. g. online community cluster) and Hallyu 3.0 (e.g. mainstream), the link between cultural community factors and K-brand image should be addressed for the continued success of Hallyu and its marketing. To address this gap, a research question is raised: based on a configuration approach, what combinations of cultural community factors can lead to a K-brand image?

Concerning the research method, through the online survey, survey data sets were collected in Japan, particularly in the Kanto region. By employing Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), we identified core cultural branding factors and their combinations leading to the K-brand image. fsQCA can help identify logical connections between conditions and a result, which is appropriate for not merely inductive but also deductive reasoning, even with a small sample size (Pappas and Woodside 2021).

In summary, for Hallyu marketing, compared to the pop culture mediums and ideological narratives for cultural branding studies, the role of grasping cultural communities has rarely been discussed in the Japanese context. Hence, based on the community

cluster framework for cultural branding, this study newly examines links between cultural community factors and the K-brand image in Japan through the analysis of fsQCA.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural branding and community clusters

Cultural branding, regarded as symbolic capital, theoretically highlights shaping cultural and symbolic narratives to be cultural icons in societies (Holt 2004; O'Reilly 2005). It is said that cultural branding strategies may heavily rely on the performance of a myth (e.g. sponsoring extreme sports to be an iconic brand for passion and sports). That is to say, beyond selling products, firms can focus on aligning their values with consumers' iconic values (i.e. cultural branding) (Cayla and Arnould 2008; Daldanise 2020). According to Oh and Kim (2023), cultural branding is distinctive to mind-share branding for functional values, emotional branding for interactions with consumers and viral branding for the core role of lead customers. Particularly for K-pop industries, cultural branding studies were suggested by discussing the myth of female universalism underpinned by elements of gendered, racial and postcolonial melancholia (Oh, Jang, and Lim 2023). In addition to the performance of a myth, in the cultural branding context, cultural community engagement should be covered due to the importance of discovering and aligning diverse consumers' values and needs. Compared to brand clusters (e.g. little interaction between consumers), community clusters concern active interactions in the sub-groups (Oh, Brassier, and Lopes 2024).

As a core facilitator for the cultural communities of Hallyu, technological developments along with different social media channels help to facilitate interactions in smaller interconnected groups (Lee et al. 2020). Interestingly, the community cluster framework indicates that the most engaged members (i.e. influencers) can reinforce the promotion of brands (Oh, Brassier, and Lopes 2024). Thus, beyond the cultural branding context, the role of cultural communities can be vital in online marketing in general (Lee and Hsieh 2022). Particularly in the Japanese context, cultural communities become crucial in promoting K-brands as it is deeply rooted compared to North American and European markets (Kim 2015). On the other hand, when contemplating female universalism and the possibility that women can experience gendered melancholia in patriarchal societies, many female Hallyu fans in Japan are eager to participate in the cultural communities of Hallyu (Oh, Jang, and Lim 2023). Beyond female fans, Hallyu communities offer a space for both men and women to express narrative identities and escape from suppressed feelings, which has led both male and female Hallyu fans in Japan to engage in the online communities of Hallyu.

Based on the community cluster framework, our theoretical framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

2.2. Cultural community factors

This study underlines four different cultural community factors as causal conditions comprised of 1) active participation, 2) passive participation, 3) celebrity and influencer and 4) social brand value based on the community cluster framework. It is expected that

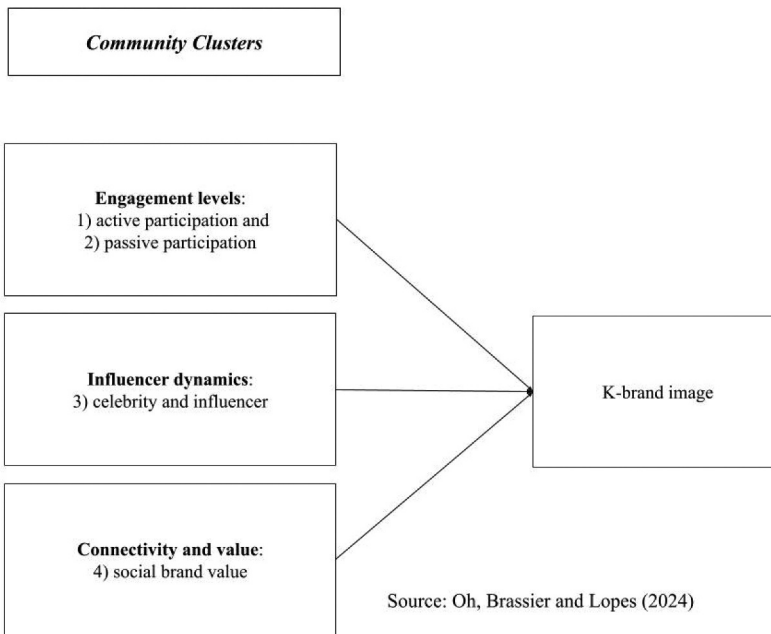


Figure 1. Cultural community framework.

compared to the brand cluster framework, affirmative outcomes such as satisfactory brand images can be found when stressing shared identities between followers and influencers in the community cluster framework (Daldanise 2020).

In line with engagement levels of the community cluster framework, active participation and passive participation online are covered in this study. While active participants can cover sharing or uploading posts relevant to Hallyu and its products, passive participants underline watching or reading Hallyu and its goods (Farmaki, Olya, and Taheri 2021). Understanding consumer engagement or participation can help ascertain the level of brand trust or loyalty (Santos et al. 2022). Celebrity and influencers, in line with the influencer dynamics for the community cluster framework, capture life priorities towards celebrities and influencers who share similar identities with fans (Halim and Kiatkawsin 2021). Moreover, in line with connectivity and value for the community cluster framework, this study captures social brand value which denotes the perceived value when interacting with either other users or Hallyu fans (Thai, Wang, and Nguyen 2022). It is expected that comprehending cultural community factors can help facilitate the K-brand image related to purchasing intentions, which can apply to different cases (e.g. European markets where community clusters become predominant) (Yoon and Zamorano 2023).

2.2.1. Active participation

Based on the community cluster framework, engagement levels of participation may vary. However, as Hallyu and its online communities become popular, active participation can be easily found online or on social media (Kim 2019). It is said that due to the prevalence of social media platforms, Hallyu fans may be more actively engaged than passively engaged (Chung and Jeong 2024). Moreover, it is implied that active participation on

social media may play a pivotal role in facilitating the activation of cultural communities supporting the progression of individual and collective identities. Through active participation, members or followers reinforce the informational value and reduce the uncertainty of brand identities (Lee and Hsieh 2022; Liao et al. 2021). Active participation can be rooted in social purpose and measured through behaviours such as engagement in events and support for other community members (Kaur et al. 2020). Collective engagement in cultural communities allows members to sustain, create, share, or reinterpret brand meanings, fostering a sense of community (Pedeliento, Andreini, and Veloutsou 2020). The brand itself embodies informational value, while interactions with other brand consumers serve as a valuable source of information (O'Reilly 2005; Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo 2021). On the other hand, the concept of active participation in brand communities can refer to a member's desire to build relationships within the community through ongoing participation and information exchange (e.g. posting and sharing) (Farmaki, Olya, and Taheri 2021; Veloutsou and Black 2020).

2.2.2. *Passive participation*

In addition to active participation, this study considers passive participation as a core element contributing to the K-brand image (Farmaki, Olya, and Taheri 2021). Similar to active participation in Hallyu communities, passive participation, whether online or offline, can positively influence the perceived K-brand image. To assist consumers in identifying or expressing their social identity or uniqueness within Hallyu communities, the passive participation of consumers (e.g. watching and reading mostly online) can be required as an initial stage. Considering the importance of the Japanese market where Hallyu began, it is crucial to seek both passive and active participation. Nonetheless, encouraging passive participation in Hallyu communities can help bridge cultural differences and reduce potential misunderstandings concerning cultural branding strategies (Oh, Jang, and Lim 2023). Addressing potential misunderstandings and minimizing misinterpretations can promote more effective communication between Japanese Hallyu consumers, thereby narrowing the existing knowledge or identity gap between firms and consumers for reinforcing cultural branding strategies (Barker 2016; George et al. 2018).

2.2.3. *Celebrity and influencer*

Based on the community cluster framework, this study considers celebrities and influencers as one of the key elements shaping the K-brand image. Compared to brand clusters, in cultural community clusters, influencers may attract audiences or participants who can create other smaller groups in a larger community cluster (Oh, Brassier, and Lopes 2024). On the other hand, it is implied that celebrity attachment attributed to parasocial interactions plays a significant role in consumer behaviour, particularly in influencing brand perceptions, purchase intentions and preferences (Aw and Labrecque 2020). The emotional affinity that consumers develop for celebrities can lead to a desire to emulate their lifestyles and preferences, thereby shaping consumption patterns and purchasing decisions (Özer et al. 2022). The strength of celebrity attachment can vary significantly, with some individuals forming deep emotional connections with celebrities despite a lack of direct interpersonal interaction (Thomson 2006). Interestingly, Hallyu fans in cultural communities tend to develop strong emotional attachments to the celebrities, which fosters a desire to interact with other sub-groups who have similar focus and topics, such

as celebrities or influencers; such a phenomenon may reinforce perceived national images of South Korea (J. H. Kim et al. 2022). That is to say, emotional attachment to celebrities not only deepens connections with other fans in communities but also shapes consumer behaviour, encouraging the purchase of products and services associated with Hallyu (Chen, Yeh, and Lee 2021).

2.2.4. Social brand value

The concept of social brand value in this study is defined as the perceived value derived from exchanges and interactions with other brand users within a community (Tajvidi et al. 2020). Consumers view brands as a means of social connection and a source of social capital relevant to social brand value (Alvarado-Karste and Guzmán 2020). Consumers are mostly aware of these values and information, which may attract them to brands and motivate their willingness to pay a price premium (Diallo et al. 2021). It is implied that social brand value significantly influences consumers' readiness to pay higher prices and engage in brand communities, which can be closely tied to the perceived image of the brand (Tajvidi et al. 2020). It is said that social brand value, particularly the way it reflects social identity, can impact consumers' perceptions of a brand image (Thai, Wang, and Nguyen 2022). Moreover, Hwang, Oh, and Lopes (2023) proposed that values of social brand or symbolic capital should be emphasized over purely commercial value in the Hallyu context.

Through interactions with others in cultural communities, a sense of community helps consumers establish an emotional bond in cultural communities rooted in shared interests, practices and traditions tied to a specific brand (Yang et al. 2023). On the other hand, as individuals identify with a community and cultivate a sense of belonging, the social brand value that underpins social identity becomes crucial (Valmohammadi, Taraz, and Mehdikhani 2023). Consumption behaviours tied to community relevance are seen as expressions of membership and personal identity (Cova 1997). Therefore, the collective mindset within a community is critical to grasping consumption behaviours, while an individual mindset reflects how individuals form their traits and build connections with others, which is relevant to establishing the collective mindset.

2.3. The K-brand image

In theory, the K-brand image can be understood as 'a consumer's perception of a brand as a reflection of the associations that exist in the minds of consumers' (Mahri et al. 2024, 247). Since perceived brand images or attitudes can significantly influence customer satisfaction, it may be essential to explore different types of determinants for brand images (Suh and Yi 2006). For instance, consumers' attachment to a brand and involvement in the community can be proposed. Once involved in community clusters, even without a direct focus on the brand itself, consumers can develop strong attachments, which in turn shape their perception of the brand image (Büyükdag and Kitapci 2021; J. Kumar and Kumar 2020; C. T. Lee and Hsieh 2022). On the other hand, it is found that perceived brand image is highly linked to sustainable consumer behaviour (e.g. eco-friendly decisions) (Nguyen and Özçaglar-Toulouse 2021). It is also implied that optimistic brand images attributed to cultural branding can lead to sustainable or competitive brand positions within international markets (Ruth and Simonin 2003). Therefore, grasping brand images is growing in importance.

To strengthen the K-brand image in Japan, albeit direct marketing messages are less effective, it was stated that marketers should adapt culturally sensitive messages to resonate with local audiences, thereby improving comprehension and fostering favourable reactions relevant to brand images (Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange 2023; Taylor, Franke, and Maynard 2000). By carefully considering culturally sensitive messages, preferences, and expectations, marketers can craft communications that bridge cultural divides while preserving the core elements of Hallyu culture (Oh, Jang, and Lim 2023). This approach not only helps overcome cultural differences but also positively impacts the K-brand image across various products, including fashion, food, and other general items (Jin, Yang, and Kim 2021).

2.4. A configuration viewpoint

Based on the community cluster framework for cultural branding, this study categorizes cultural community factors as causal conditions (i.e. independent variables), including 1) active participation, 2) passive participation, 3) celebrity and influencer and 4) social brand value, regarded as elements shaping the K-brand image (i.e. dependent variable). When contemplating cultural community factors in this study, it is expected that consumers in cultural communities can enhance understanding and interpretation regarding the crucial role of community clusters for Hallyu, ensuring clearer communication and more effective identity expression. This strategic adaptation (i.e. Hallyu community clusters) can enable a more accurate interpretation of Hallyu relevant to the K-brand image, thereby improving the overall success of Hallyu marketing campaigns.

Figure 2 illustrates the study's model covering conditions (independent variables) and outcome (dependent variable) in alignment with fsQCA.

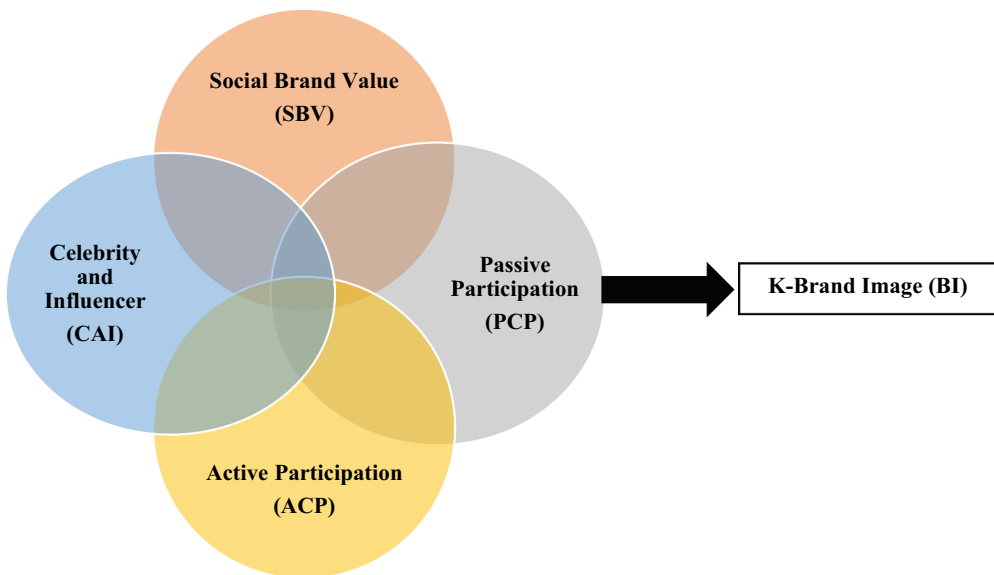


Figure 2. Research model (fsQCA).

3. Method

3.1. Data collection

This research examines the relationship between cultural community factors and the K-brand image in Japan for Hallyu marketing. Using the snowball sampling method (e.g. Baltar and Brunet 2012), an online survey link was distributed to Hallyu fans in Japan for the snowball sampling purpose to collect more data sets who are actively involved in or exposed to unique Japanese communities, such as social media groups (e.g. Facebook, Instagram and YouTube). As data accessibility for Hallyu communities is limited and rarely studied, a snowball sampling approach based on a network design was employed to access the online community and its network (G. M. Kim 2019).

By early October 2024, 36 samples were collected; after the initial screening process (currently, neither fans nor engaged in communities), 27 samples were used for the analysis in this research. As fsQCA is designed for grasping causal complexities towards an outcome and is employable for exploratory studies, the use of a small sample size can be acceptable (Pappas and Woodside 2021). However, as pointed out by Rutten (2022), the study's large sample size may furnish more conditions or in-depth case knowledge. However, as this study is aligned with an exploratory nature, a small number of cases can also provide initial practical insight into configurations of conditions of cultural community factors towards the K-brand image (Kusa, Duda, and Suder 2021).

Overall, the participants' characteristics are shown in Table 1.

3.2. Measures

By contemplating construct validity for factor analysis and the theoretical foundation for Hallyu marketing, this study refers to existing studies to find and measure each factor. For example, social brand value (i.e. perceived social recognition through brand engagement) was assessed using items developed by Thai, Wang, and Nguyen (2022). Participation, which includes both active and passive involvement in the consumer community, was measured with items from Farmaki, Olya, and Taheri (2021). The influence of celebrities and influencers was measured using items from Halim and Kiatkawsin (2021). The K-brand

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Category		Frequency (Number)	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	5	19
	Female	22	81
	Total	27	100
Age	20s	20	74
	30s	4	15
	40s	2	7
	50s	1	4
	Total	27	100
	Kanto	27	100
Region	Other	0	0
	Total	27	100
	Yes	27	100
Engaged in Hallyu and its communities	No	0	0
	Total	27	100

image was assessed based on the brand image construct from Mahri et al. (2024). All variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, with detailed items provided in Appendix.

3.3. Research technique (fsQCA)

Compared to the regression analysis, the fsQCA technique relies on a set-theoretic methodology to explore the interactions of different combinations of factors and their impact on the outcome (Cheng et al. 2022; Gligor and Bozkurt 2020). The fsQCA approach identifies sufficient and necessary conditions to explain the outcome (i.e. dependent variable), revealing whether a specific configuration is sufficient or necessary for the solution (Pappas and Woodside 2021; Roh et al. 2024). Marketing literature has strived to grasp the factors leading to consumers' perception of brand image using traditional regression analysis (Nandan 2005). However, it was difficult to capture the comprehensive insight. The use of fsQCA can capture a comprehensive insight into consumers' perceptions owing to the results of multiple solutions for the same outcome, complex interactions across conditions and considerations of asymmetrical relationships (Cheng et al. 2022). Although fsQCA is often seen as bridging the gap between quantitative and qualitative research approaches, it is more closely aligned with quantitative methods due to its data collection and analysis procedures (S. Kumar et al. 2022). Given its ability to provide comprehensive insights and its compatibility with theoretical frameworks such as the community cluster framework, fsQCA is appropriate to use for this research.

4. Findings

4.1. Reliability and validity

According to Jang et al. (2023), reliability and validity should be evaluated before performing the fsQCA analysis. For checking the reliability and validity of data sets, a structural equation modelling protocol is used for this study. Both Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values should be 0.70 or higher (Hair et al. 2019). Furthermore, for convergent validity, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) should be higher than 0.5 and indicator loadings should be greater than 0.6. In Appendix, all indicator loadings are higher than 0.6. For discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion is assessed in this study. The square root of each factor of the AVE value should be greater than the correlations with other variables (Hair et al. 2019). Overall, Table 2 (reliability and convergent validity), Table 3 (the Fornell-Larcker criterion), and Appendix (indicator loadings) demonstrated the constructs' reliability and validity in this research.

Table 2. Constructs' reliability and validity.

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE
ACP	0.877	0.958	0.907	0.71
BI	0.901	0.926	0.919	0.594
CAI	0.922	0.93	0.938	0.718
PCP	0.895	0.897	0.95	0.905
SBV	0.909	0.929	0.942	0.845

Table 3. The Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Constructs	ACP	BI	CAI	PCP	SBV
ACP	0.842	0.518	0.71	0.758	0.775
BI	0.518	0.771	0.72	0.475	0.551
CAI	0.71	0.72	0.847	0.735	0.836
PCP	0.758	0.475	0.735	0.951	0.782
SBV	0.775	0.551	0.836	0.782	0.919

Table 4. Percentile approach.

	ACP	BI	CAI	PCP	SBV
5 th (Fully out)	1	1.05	1	1	1
50 th (Crossover)	1.75	3	3.4	2.5	3
95 th (Fully in)	4.57	4.05	4.65	4.5	4.86

4.2. Data calibration

In fsQCA, it is crucial to perform a data calibration process to form fuzzy sets (Pappas and Woodside 2021). Fuzzy sets can be understood as a mathematical concept extending crisp sets to have a degree of membership ranging from 0 to 1. To establish fuzzy sets with values of factors ranging from 0 to 1, the thresholds for direct calibration should be set up (Cheng et al. 2022). From 0 to 1, a case with a fuzzy membership score of 1 means a full member of a fuzzy set (i.e. fully in the set). 0 refers to a full non-member of the set (i.e. fully out of the set). 0.5 means a case capturing a member of the fuzzy set and a non-member (i.e. crossover) (Pappas and Woodside 2021). To determine the three thresholds using the Likert scale data, the percentile approach can usually be utilized by business and marketing researchers for robust and generalizable results in similar situations. Hence, the 95th, 50th and 5th percentiles approach is employed in this paper, such as fully in, crossover and fully out. Overall, Table 4 provides thresholds for direct calibration utilizing the percentiles approach.

4.3. Necessity analysis

In this stage, conditions of variables deemed necessary for the K-brand image should be discovered. In the necessity analysis, a necessary condition determines whether the presence of a specific variable is needed towards an outcome; however, it cannot be sufficient for the outcome. When a consistency score is at least 0.9, necessity can be confirmed or determined. On the other hand, coverage stands for the importance of the relationship; the preferred value is greater than 0.75. 'The lower the relationship, the smaller the number of cases to which the identified relationship applies' (Nikou et al. 2024, 1539).

In this research, Table 5 illustrates that celebrity worship is the highest value (i.e. 0.837), but not necessarily towards the outcome.

Table 5. Necessity analysis.

Outcome: BI	Consistency	Coverage
SBV	0.762	0.841
Not SBV	0.620	0.588
ACP	0.660	0.819
Not ACP	0.630	0.546
PCP	0.775	0.764
Not PCP	0.502	0.531
CAI	0.837	0.858
Not CAI	0.537	0.544

4.4. Sufficiency analysis

To evaluate if the combination can lead to the outcome (i.e. K-brand image), it is vital to check if the configuration is sufficient towards the outcome based on sufficiency analysis, which can help grasp if a specific condition can be sufficient to shape a particular result. To examine causal relations in fsQCA, sufficiency and necessity should be checked. For presenting sufficiency analysis, the truth table is constructed, based on two criteria such as frequency (i.e. the number of cases) and the complexity of causal conditions (Ragin 2009). Owing to the smaller samples in this paper, the minimum frequency (i.e. frequency cut-off) of 1 was applied. Moreover, in terms of consistency cut-off (i.e. appropriate consistency score), the consistency cut-off value of 0.923 was applied in this study. When interpreting solutions, ‘the value of consistency quantifies the extent to which a given configuration “agrees” (cooccurs) with the high/low values of the outcome variable’ (Nikou et al. 2024, 1540). Thus, researchers should obtain and check the consistency value and its solution value for sufficiency analysis; the solution consistency value should be higher than 0.75 for configurations to be consistent. In addition, it is worth noting that while raw coverage indicates the relative effect size between an antecedent set and an outcome, unique coverage implies whether the outcome is exclusively explained by each particular configuration (Pappas and Woodside 2021).

The application of fsQCA can yield three distinct solutions, including parsimonious, complex and intermediate (Ragin 2009). In practice, the intermediate solution, which serves as a balance between the parsimonious and complex solutions, should be underlined due to its alignment with the observed cases (Cheng et al. 2022). Table 6 furnishes the results of the sufficiency analysis in Japan. While the black circle means the presence (●), the barred circle denotes the absence (⊖). On the other hand, the blank cells imply cases where the presence or absence of it doesn’t influence the outcome (Jang et al. 2023).

Table 6. Sufficiency analysis.

Solutions	SBV	ACP	PCP	CAI	Raw Coverage	Unique Coverage	Consistency
1a	●		●	●	0.704	0.397	0.909
2a	⊖	⊖	●	⊖	0.338	0.056	0.956
3a	●	●	⊖	●	0.307	0.046	0.973

Solution coverage: 0.820

Solution consistency: 0.904

5. Discussion

Based on the extant literature, the question was raised: based on a configuration approach, what combinations of cultural community factors can lead to a K-brand image? Concerning our findings, when considering the consistency value for each solution, 2a and 3a (i.e. higher than the cut-off value: 0.923) can positively lead to the K-brand image, while 1a implies the importance of the combination, such as Social Brand Value (SBV), Passive Participation (PCP) and Celebrity and Influencer (CAI).

Regarding 2a, when the absence of SBV, Active Participation (ACP) and CAI, the presence of PCP can lead to the K-brand image. To facilitate the K-brand image, this study newly highlights that passive participation, particularly in online Hallyu communities, can be pivotal in Hallyu marketing.

Regarding 3a, although the absence of PCP occurs, the presence of SBV, ACP and CAI can lead to the K-brand image in Japan. Hallyu consumption represents a complex, multilayered landscape that reflects diverse social values within the Japanese context (Oh 2009, 2011). This study reveals that the combination of SBV, CAI and ACP is underlined as a critical factor in reinforcing positive consumption value, based on the community cluster framework; that is to say, this combination is viewed as essential for enhancing the K-brand image.

The sustained success of Hallyu marketing, particularly in Japan, hinges on the integration of social identity values for certain social groups by considering local preferences. Moreover, when reflecting on female universalism relevant to gendered melancholia in patriarchal societies, many female Hallyu fans in Japan have engaged in online cultural communities (Oh, Jang, and Lim 2023). In addition to female fans, online Hallyu communities offer a space for both men and women to express their narrative identities. Interestingly, despite the pessimistic viewpoint towards Hallyu reported in Japan, online cultural communities for Hallyu have become predominant (Oh and Lee 2014). Thus, understanding the features of online communities for Hallyu in Japan is inevitable with business perspectives. This study reveals the importance of CAI; in addition to the role of influencers in cultural communities who attract more group members or consumers, this study posits that emotional attachment to celebrities and influencers deepens connections with other fans in communities, which in turn shapes the K-brand image. Interestingly, this study newly reveals that the combination of SBV, ACP and CAI can ensure the K-brand image that relates to both effective communication and sustained brand loyalty.

6. Theoretical implication

First, this study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on the K-brand image by introducing cultural community factors as key drivers. This research newly highlights the social brand value, celebrity and influencer, active participation and passive participation as important determinants of the K-brand image, to the best of our knowledge, by applying the fsQCA approach. Grounded in the community cluster framework, this study not only underlines passive participation but also underscores the synergistic combination between social brand value, celebrity and influencer, and active participation in shaping the K-brand image, particularly within the Japanese context where Hallyu

communities and female universalism have been gaining prominence (Oh, Brassier, and Lopes 2024).

Second, this study provides new theoretical insights into the community cluster for cultural branding for Hallyu marketing to the best of our knowledge. By delving into consumers' communities, this study has covered celebrities and influencers, social brand value, active participation and passive participation. Moreover, in line with engagement levels discussed by Oh, Brassier, and Lopes (2024), two different levels (e.g. active and passive participation) have been newly suggested. Although community clusters are distinct from celebrity-driven communities, this research highlights that emotional attachment to celebrities and influencers deepens connections with other fans in communities, which in turn shapes the K-brand image.

Third, this research extends the existing literature on Hallyu marketing in Japan. As this study relies on the community cluster framework related to cultural branding, as highlighted by Oh and Kim (2023), this research underlines that cultural branding theory or framework can be more suitable for Hallyu marketing than mind-sharing branding, emotional branding and viral branding, which in turn leads to the continued success of Hallyu marketing.

7. Practical implication

First, marketers can leverage our findings to develop a strategic long-term plan to strengthen Japan's K-brand image. Our research highlights that passive participation itself can play a key role in shaping the K-brand image. Moreover, the combination of 1) active participation, 2) social brand value and 3) celebrities and influencers can also play a vital role in shaping the K-brand image. Such findings are particularly important as researchers and practitioners have been interested in understanding how consumers or audiences interact with each other or are involved in Hallyu communities (Farmaki, Olya, and Taheri 2021). While it was said that there needs to be a shift from passive to active participation, this study provides specific conditions and contexts in which both active and passive participation can be effectively leveraged to enhance the K-brand image.

Second, owing to the importance of community clusters (i.e. cultural community factors) towards the K-brand image in our findings, both business leaders and marketing practitioners should cooperate to understand different online Hallyu communities (e.g. age groups on different platforms). When considering the Hallyu pathway in Japan from 2003 (e.g. Hallyu 1.0), offline communities for senior fans can also exist (Chae, Park, and Ko 2020). Therefore, in addition to online communities or social media channels (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, etc.), it is said that the desires and needs of consumers from either offline or online communities should be addressed (Hargitai, Grósz, and Sas 2023). When referring to our findings, being involved in conversations in communities becomes vital from consumers' perspectives. Hence, if business leaders own their brand communities, according to Imran et al. (2020), the use of artificial intelligence (AI) can effectively optimize community communication channels for consumers and social media strategy, which can help analyse the trends of active and passive participation of consumers in Japan.

Third, given that celebrities and influencers are a core element towards the K-brand image, which could also be accompanied by social brand value and active

participation, it is worth understanding the crucial role of influencers in cultural communities who can attract potential audiences or consumers who can create sub-groups (Oh, Brassier, and Lopes 2024). Moreover, managing celebrity attachment is crucial in fostering high levels of audience involvement within the Hallyu context (Halim and Kiatkawsin 2021). Marketers must carefully consider celebrity images and control the pace of celebrity attachment to strengthen the K-brand image (S. Kim, Jeon, and Yi 2024). It is suggested that a moderate level of attachment, along with mature plans, is particularly beneficial for enhancing the K-brand image and the Hallyu wave in Japan (Oh, Jang, and Lim 2023).

As a result, this study suggests that expanding Korean brands into the Japanese market requires a deliberate marketing strategy that utilizes cultural communities. In line with the importance of combinations among social brand value, active participation and celebrities and influencers for the K-brand image, marketers can facilitate community involvement for social engagement (Bowden and Mirzaei 2021). First, marketers can attract potential consumers to brand communities using strategies that rely on celebrities and influencers; or marketers can access Hallyu communities that are highly interested in Korean celebrities and influencers. Second, regarding social brand values, a brand's values or social mission can be updated by marketers to help community members interact with each other. Third, consumers aligned with a K-brand's values and interacting with other members online can contribute by spreading the brand's message. For instance, in the food industry, stressing the health benefits and traditional heritage of Korean cuisine by celebrities or influencers can reinforce its appeal to cultural communities in Japan, which facilitates social brand value and active participation in online communities. Similarly, in the beauty industry, underlining scientific integrity and engaging content with celebrities or influencers on social media can foster community interactions between consumers centred around self-care (i.e. social brand value) and active participation of consumers in communities. Such a phenomenon can lead to a willingness to purchase products (Halim and Kiatkawsin 2021).

8. Limitation

Albeit the use of fsQCA provides comprehensive insights between cultural branding factors and the K-brand image in Japan, some limitations can be seen. First, this study has regarded the K-brand image of general items, including fashion, food, etc. Depending on different industries, even products, consumers' perceptions can vary (Park and Yi 2023). Thus, further studies can specify a certain industry for the K-brand image to broaden the knowledge of Hallyu marketing (Halim and Kiatkawsin 2021). Second, a longitudinal study can be contemplated to elicit sophisticated Hallyu marketing strategies in Japan (Ju and Ha 2019). Third, our research scope is limited to the Kanto region. To reinforce the generalizability of the Japanese context, data samples in the different areas, along with demographic diversities, should be collected or considered for further studies (Oh 2009). Fourth, to gain in-depth knowledge, qualitative research such as interviews can be conducted to identify key patterns that shape the K-brand image in Japan (G. M. Kim 2019). Fifth, by contemplating national cultural dimensions such as uncertainty avoidance fit for the Japanese context, national cultural factors that reflect cultural dimensions can be considered for the cultural community dimension (Steenkamp, Ter Hofstede, and Wedel 1999). Last but not least, albeit fuzzy calibration is applied in this research,

collecting additional data samples can be helpful to reinforce the validity of our findings from fsQCA due to the variability of the phenomena in social science (Pappas and Woodside 2021). For cohesive causal inferences, future studies can rely on larger sample sizes, which could provide deeper insights into cultural community factors shaping the K-brand image in Japan. More comprehensive case knowledge can be obtained through fsQCA when relying on a larger sample size after referring to the initial step of findings based on a small sample size (Rutten 2022).

9. Conclusion

Many Hallyu fans have shifted their viewpoints, now recognizing Hallyu as a means of cultural branding rather than focusing on mind-sharing branding linked to functional values. Studies on cultural branding are underpinned by three key elements: 1) understanding cultural communities, 2) exploring pop culture mediums, and 3) examining iconic myths or ideological narratives. While the pop culture mediums and iconic myths were well addressed, the link between cultural community factors and the K-brand image in Japan remains unknown. Thus, this study uniquely fills that gap by examining how cultural community factors lead to the K-brand image, employing a configuration approach of fsQCA. Our findings indicate that when PCP is absent, the presence of SBV, ACP and CAI lead to the K-brand image. In addition, when SBV, ACP and CAI are absent, PCP can influence the K-brand image. Hence, when considering the complex nature of Hallyu consumption affected by Hallyu online communities in Japan, this study suggests further studies with a larger sample size, furnishing valuable theoretical and practical insights for marketers and scholars interested in Hallyu marketing.

Disclosure statement

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

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix 1. Measurement items

Constructs	Item description	Indicator loadings	Reference
Social Brand Value	SBV1: I often exchange new information or trends in Korea with those who have similar interests	0.884	Thai, Wang, and Nguyen (2022)
	SBV2: I would seek a sense of belonging by communicating with those with similar interests in Korean trends	0.902	
	SBV3: I would establish and maintain relationships with those who have similar interests in Korean trends	0.954	
	SBV4: I would post Korean trends or brand content on social networks	0.832	
Active Participation	ACP1: I often post Korean trends or brand content on social networks	0.794	Farmaki, Olya, and Taheri (2021)
	ACP2: I often like Korean brand content on social networks	0.819	
	ACP3: I often share posts about Korean trends or brands on social networks	0.778	
	ACP4: I often leave comments on Korean trends or brand content on social networks	0.912	
Passive Participation	PCP1: I often watch photos or videos published by Korean influencers or brands	0.885	Halim and Kiatkawasin (2021)
	PCP2: I often read the comments of other followers on the pages of Korean influencer channels or brands	0.885	
	CAI1: One of the main reasons I maintain an interest in my favourite Korean celebrities or influencers is that doing so gives me pleasure and a temporary escape	0.895	
	CAI2: I enjoy watching, reading, listening and comprehending my favourite Korean celebrity or influencers	0.902	
Celebrity and Influencer	CAI3: I love to talk with others who admire my favourite Korean celebrities or influencers.	0.849	Mahri et al. (2024)
	CAI4: It is enjoyable just to be with others who like my favourite Korean celebrity or influencers	0.861	
	CAI5: Keeping up with news about my favourite Korean celebrities or influencers is an entertaining time	0.837	
	BI1: I can recognize brands, products and services originated in Korea	0.793	
	BI2: Made in Korea is a key motivator that always leads to purchase activity	0.626	
	BI3: I can consume Korean products to resolve my daily needs	0.784	
	BI4: South Korean branded products can fulfil the desires that are in the minds of consumers	0.695	
	BI5: South Korean branded products or services contain a certain level of uniqueness	0.787	
Brand Image	BI6: I use South Korean branded products or services because I believe it is reliable	0.874	Mahri et al. (2024)
	BI7: The level of fun is high when using Korean brand products, services and community	0.727	
	BI8: Comfort level is high when using Korean brand products and services	0.696	