

The Influence of the Korean Wave on Culinary Tourism Development in Myeongdong, Seoul in 2020

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the influence of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) on culinary tourism interest in Myeongdong, Seoul, focusing on the “K-drama food pilgrimage” phenomenon and its evolution during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Methodology: A qualitative descriptive approach was applied using literature review and secondary data analysis. Data sources include academic publications, Korea Tourism Organization reports, and documented culinary tourism trends in Myeongdong.

Results: Findings show that *Hallyu* significantly increased international tourists’ interest in Korean cuisine, particularly through media-driven food experiences. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a severe decline in culinary tourism, with an 85% drop in international visitors and a 31% increase in shop vacancies in Q3 2020, while also accelerating digital transformation and business innovation among food entrepreneurs.

Conclusions: The Korean Wave plays a central role in shaping culinary tourism demand in Myeongdong and demonstrates resilience through adaptation and digitalization during crisis conditions.

Limitations: This study relies on secondary data and lacks primary empirical validation from tourists or business actors, which may limit contextual depth.

Contributions: This research contributes to culinary tourism literature by explaining the intersection of cultural soft power and crisis-driven digital adaptation in a global tourism destination.

Keywords: *Culinary Tourism, COVID-19, Hallyu, Korean Wave, Myeongdong*

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1. Introduction

The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) refers to the global resurgence of South Korean cultural and economic influence through the spread of Korean popular culture entertainment, music, television dramas, and film which has expanded internationally since the late 1990s. The phenomenon has evolved from popular entertainment into a complex instrument of cultural diplomacy with substantial economic impact ([Seunghye & Soo-Kyung, 2020](#)). In 2018, K-pop music alone became one of South Korea's largest exports, generating USD 9.5 billion through merchandise sales, music downloads, and ticket sales equivalent to 0.3% of national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ([Korea, 2021](#)). This scale demonstrates how Korean cultural power has successfully penetrated international markets with significant economic consequences, including for the culinary tourism industry ([Lee, 2019](#)).

The Myeongdong, as Seoul's commercial centre receiving approximately 2 million visitors daily before the pandemic, has been transformed into a culinary tourism destination by the popularity of Korean media content ([Park & Kim, 2020](#)). What was originally known as Seoul's premier shopping and fashion district has evolved into an international culinary tourism destination offering Korean gastronomic experiences inspired by popular media content. This transformation illustrates how cultural diplomacy through cuisine can influence travel choices and tourist consumption preferences.

Previous studies have examined the *Hallyu*-tourism relationship from several angles. [Park and Kim \(2020\)](#), using panel data from the United States, China, Japan, and Hong Kong, found that Korean Wave content exports had a significant positive effect on inbound Korean tourism demand, measured through GDP, Consumer Price Index (CPI), exchange rate, and tourism arrival data. [Jin et al. \(2024\)](#), employing a big data methodology using Baidu Index as a proxy for *Hallyu* exposure (keywords: "Korean drama," "Korean movie," "Korean music," "Korean entertainment"), demonstrated strong positive correlations between Korean media consumption and consumer interest in Korean products, including food and culinary tourism destinations.

However, specific research on *Hallyu*'s impact on culinary tourism in Myeongdong particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 remains limited in the academic literature. Previous studies primarily addressed the macro-level impact of *Hallyu* on Korean tourism as a whole, without analysing specific district-level transformations or pandemic-period culinary industry impacts. This study addresses that gap by examining Myeongdong's transformation as a *Hallyu*-driven culinary tourism destination, focusing on changes in tourist consumption patterns and the adaptive strategies of culinary businesses during the 2020 crisis.

2. Literature Review

The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) has emerged as a significant form of cultural soft power that strengthens South Korea global influence through the dissemination of popular culture, including K-pop, K-drama, and Korean food culture. *Hallyu* is not only a cultural phenomenon but also an economic strategy that contributes to national branding and tourism development ([Kim, 2023](#)). The global expansion of Korean cultural content has reshaped international perceptions of Korea and increased interest in visiting the country as a cultural destination ([Jin, Kim, Choi, & Yoo, 2024](#)). In this context, *Hallyu* functions as a catalyst that connects cultural consumption with tourism demand, particularly by creating emotional attachment between international audiences and Korean cultural products. This phenomenon has become increasingly relevant in explaining changes in global tourism behavior toward Korea.

In relation to tourism behavior, *Hallyu* significantly influences tourists' intentions to visit South Korea through exposure to media content such as K-dramas and K-pop performances. Research indicates that cultural exposure generates emotional engagement, which subsequently translates into travel motivation and destination preference ([Bae, Chang, Park, & Kim, 2021](#)). One of the most notable impacts of this phenomenon is the emergence of culinary tourism behavior, where tourists are motivated to experience Korean cuisine directly after seeing it in media representations. The visualization of Korean food in dramas creates sensory imagination and curiosity, which strengthens demand for authentic food experiences in Korea ([Cha & Lee, 2025](#)). Therefore, *Hallyu* plays a crucial role in shaping both cognitive and affective dimensions of tourism decision-making.

The Myeongdong, as one of Seoul major commercial districts, has transformed into a leading culinary tourism destination influenced strongly by the Korean Wave. Previously known as a shopping center, Myeongdong now attracts tourists primarily through its street food culture and its frequent appearance in Korean media content ([Lee, 2022](#)). The area has become a symbolic space where cultural representation and tourism experience intersect, allowing visitors to physically engage with foods and environments previously seen in K-dramas. This transformation reflects how cultural globalization can reshape urban tourism landscapes, where media exposure directly influences spatial consumption patterns. As a result, Myeongdong has evolved into a central hub of Korean culinary tourism that integrates culture, entertainment, and gastronomy.

The COVID-19 pandemic further influenced the development of culinary tourism in Korea by accelerating digital transformation across the tourism and food service industries. Restrictions on mobility significantly reduced international tourist arrivals, but simultaneously increased reliance on digital platforms for cultural consumption and tourism promotion ([Suh, Kang, & Moon, 2022](#)). Social media platforms became essential tools in maintaining global interest in Korean food culture by disseminating visual content, food trends, and virtual experiences. In addition, digital adaptation strategies such as food delivery services and online marketing helped culinary businesses sustain operations during crisis periods. These developments demonstrate that digitalization has become a critical factor in maintaining the resilience of culinary tourism under external shocks such as pandemics.

Furthermore, the relationship between *Hallyu* and culinary tourism is increasingly reinforced by social media influence and experiential tourism behavior. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube enable the rapid diffusion of Korean food trends and encourage tourists to engage in what is known as “food pilgrimage behavior,” where individuals travel to specific locations featured in dramas or online content. This phenomenon highlights the integration of cultural consumption, digital interaction, and physical travel experience. Culinary tourism is no longer driven solely by food quality but also by symbolic meanings, emotional connections, and media exposure ([Wullur, Worang, & Tumewu, 2023](#)). Overall, the literature suggests that *Hallyu*, digital media, and pandemic-driven transformation collectively shape modern culinary tourism dynamics in Myeongdong as a globally recognized cultural destination.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology using the literature review and descriptive analysis methods. Qualitative research, as defined by [Busetto et al. \(2020\)](#), studies the characteristics of phenomena to answer questions about why something is observed or not, assesses complex interventions with multiple components, and focuses on intervention improvement. In this study, qualitative methodology analysed individual experiences, opinions, and behaviours through analysis of words and texts collected from multiple sources.

Data were collected from primary and secondary sources published between 2016 and 2025, including: academic publications on Korean Wave impacts on tourism and culinary behaviour; official reports from the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) and Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, including tourism statistics and Myeongdong visitor data; and content analyses related to Korean culinary trends on social media and digital platforms. Data analysis applied a descriptive analytical approach with thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes emerging from the literature review. The analytical process comprised data coding and categorisation by research theme, triangulation across multiple sources to ensure information validity, comparative analysis to identify pattern changes before and during the pandemic period, and result synthesis to address the research questions.

4. Result And Discussions

4.1 *Hallyu Trends and Myeongdong as a Culinary Tourism Destination*

4.1.1 *Hallyu Development in 2020 and Its Impact on South Korean Tourism*

The *Hallyu* phenomenon encompassing K-pop, K-drama, film, and cuisine has expanded rapidly globally since the early 2000s. In 2020, despite COVID-19 restricting physical mobility, consumption of Korean digital content surged sharply, reinforcing South Korea's image as a dream destination particularly for K-pop and K-drama enthusiasts. The South Korean government actively supported culture-based entertainment and tourism industries, converting drama filming locations and music video settings into popular tourist destinations. This directly affected the tourism sector, with tourists increasingly motivated to visit South Korea to directly experience the culture they consumed through media ([Sarajwati, 2020](#)).

Following pandemic recovery, South Korean tourism demonstrated strong resilience, driven by growing global interest in Korean culture ([Lee, 2024](#)). Enthusiasm for K-pop, K-drama, and popular

culture drew back international tourists, directly increasing tourism exports. The government and industry actively promoted cultural initiatives and developed facilities, positioning Hallyu as a key strategy for economic recovery and enhancement of South Korea's tourism appeal ([Lemon, 2024](#)).

The South Korean government launched the "K-Culture Training" visa programme, providing *Hallyu* fans from various countries the opportunity to directly study Korean arts including dance, acting, and music in South Korea. This policy both strengthened cultural ties and drove tourist visits. Cultural promotion was further extended through collaborations with global platforms including Netflix, which distributed K-drama and K-film content to international audiences. This strategy successfully attracted more international tourists while strengthening *Hallyu's* position as a tool of cultural diplomacy and tourism driver ([Lemon, 2024](#)).

4.1.2 Myeongdong's Transformation into a Popular Culinary Tourism Destination

Myeongdong, once known primarily as a premier shopping and fashion district in Seoul, has undergone a significant transformation into a highly popular culinary tourism destination. The area frequently appears in various K-drama and Korean variety shows, which indirectly enhances its appeal as a cultural and gastronomic tourism destination. This media influence has made Myeongdong more than a commercial area it has become a place reflecting Korean lifestyle and popular culture trends ([Anna, 2024](#)).

Vendors in Myeongdong have intelligently adapted to Korean cultural trends: offering food and beverages frequently featured in Korean dramas, and even wearing costumes or masks characteristic of K-drama characters. This creates a unique experience for tourists particularly Korean culture enthusiasts who feel immersed in the world of their favourite dramas. Myeongdong has consequently developed into a "foodie haven" and a site where the reality of Korean culture can be directly experienced ([Anna, 2024](#)). The area's culinary offering encompasses authentic street food including *Hotteok*, *Tteokbokki*, and *Kimchap*, alongside legendary Korean fried chicken restaurants consistently crowded with visitors.

4.1.3 Visitor Statistics: Pre-Pandemic and 2020 Comparison

In 2019, before COVID-19, South Korea recorded approximately 17.5 million international tourists. Of these, approximately 1.1 million (7.4%) visited specifically due to interest in Korean popular culture *Hallyu* tourism including K-pop, K-drama, and Korean celebrities. Additionally, approximately 8.5 million visitors showed interest in Korean food and culture more broadly, indicating that *Hallyu* played a major role in attracting tourists and strengthening Korea's image as a global cultural destination ([Mahmoud, 2024](#)).

The 2020 pandemic caused international tourist arrivals to Korea to plummet to approximately 2.5 million a decline of more than 85% from the previous year, due to international travel restrictions, lockdowns, and virus-spread concerns ([Jay, 2020](#)). Myeongdong as a shopping and culinary tourism centre was severely impacted: in Q3 2020, the shop vacancy rate in the area rose to approximately 31%, indicating the scale of business closures unable to sustain operations without tourist flow ([Yunkyung, 2024](#)). The pandemic thus produced a severe short-term economic shock for Myeongdong's culinary sector, even as the *Hallyu*-based digital content consumption that underpins tourist demand for the destination was simultaneously growing globally.

4.1.4 The Relationship Between Korean Media Consumption and Culinary Tourism Interest

K-drama and K-pop do not only provide entertainment but also indirectly promote Korean cuisine through dining scenes or references to iconic foods such as ramyeon, kimchi, and Korean fried chicken. The visual presentation of food in these media frequently triggers curiosity and desire among fans to directly try the dishes they see on screen. Consequently, many fans seek authentic Korean culinary experiences when visiting South Korea or attempt to recreate the foods in their home countries ([The, 2025](#)).

According to a Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) survey, 55.3% of tourists arriving due to *Hallyu* interest also showed strong interest in Korean food and culture. This confirms that *Hallyu's* attraction

extends beyond music or drama to encompass lifestyle and cuisine dimensions. Food has become a highly effective cultural element in enriching the tourism experience, simultaneously constituting one of the primary motivations for tourist visits to Korea ([Jay, 2020](#)).

4.2 Social Media's Influence on Tourist Culinary Choices

4.2.1 K-Drama and Variety Show Influence on Specific Food Popularity in Myeongdong

K-drama and Korean variety shows have exerted significant influence in popularising specific Korean foods, both domestically and globally. Itaewon Class introduced *sundubu jjigae* (spicy tofu soup) to international audiences, Squid Game made *dalgon*a candy viral globally, Crash Landing On You popularised *chimaek* (Korean fried chicken and beer combination) as a romantic culinary experience; and Vincenzo contributed to the rising popularity of *tteokbokki* (spicy rice cakes) ([Bradley, 2024](#)). These examples demonstrate that Korean food has become not merely a story supplement but an important component of cultural narratives capable of generating audience motivation to try the dishes.

Communal dining scenes frequently depicted in K-drama and variety shows sharing *tteokbokki*, *kimbap*, or Korean fried chicken create a compelling, authentic impression of Korean lifestyle. These depictions function as effective culinary promotion, shaping imagination about taste and cultural experience in the audience's mind. Consequently, many international fans feel compelled to directly taste the food they saw on screen when visiting South Korea. Myeongdong, as Seoul's renowned street food and culinary tourism centre, has become the primary destination for tourists seeking to experience directly the dishes they previously watched in their favourite dramas ([Korea, 2024](#)).

4.2.2 The Emergence of the "K-Drama Food Pilgrimage" Phenomenon

The "K-drama food pilgrimage" phenomenon refers to the tendency of K-drama fans to deliberately visit culinary locations featured in their favourite dramas. This activity resembles a pilgrimage not for religious purposes, but as an expression of emotional attachment to beloved content. Fans visit eateries in Myeongdong that appeared in popular K-dramas, seeking to recreate the atmosphere experienced by the story's characters. This practice not only strengthens the bond between fans and Korean culture but also contributes to local tourism and culinary sector growth ([Yunkyoung, 2024](#)).

One concrete example is the "*Woo Young Woo Gimbap*" restaurant featured in Extraordinary Attorney *Woo*, which became a highly popular culinary destination and attracted large crowds after the drama gained popularity. This phenomenon illustrates how Korean pop culture does not only inspire visually but also drives real engagement in the form of location-based culinary tourism ([Korea, 2024](#)).

4.2.3 Social Media's Role in Spreading Culinary Trends in Myeongdong

Social media's role in spreading culinary trends in Myeongdong is substantial, functioning as the primary channel through which tourists and influencers share their experiences visually and rapidly. Through attractive photos, short videos, and food reviews, social media users can easily introduce Myeongdong's signature cuisine to global audiences. This content frequently goes viral and generates new trends, stimulating curiosity and interest among others to try the same experiences. This is evidenced by studies showing that 72% of tourists rely on social media as their primary information source when seeking Korean culture-based tourism destinations ([Pratama, 2025](#)). Social media thus functions not only as a communication tool but also as the primary driver in shaping perceptions and tourist traffic to culinary areas like Myeongdong.

4.3 Changes in Tourist Consumption Patterns in Myeongdong

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the demographics and volume of visitors to Myeongdong. International travel restrictions reduced foreign tourist arrivals to Myeongdong significantly, with South Korea's total international tourist arrivals falling 85% to approximately 2.5 million in 2020 ([Jay, 2020](#)). South Korea's effective pandemic management enabled domestic tourism to partially compensate for lost international visitor income ([Gurung, 2021](#)). Domestic Korean tourists became the primary visitor demographic, replacing international visitors particularly those from Southeast Asia and China who had previously dominated Myeongdong visits. Changes in visitor volume simultaneously altered tourist preferences and expectations regarding culinary experiences.

Domestic Korean tourists, possessing deeper familiarity with local culinary culture, still sought Instagram-worthy unique experiences. This drove culinary businesses to develop marketing strategies more focused on the domestic market while maintaining international appeal as global tourism recovered. The result was an adaptation of services, menus, and restaurant ambience toward local Korean culture and preferences ([Lemon, 2024](#)).

4.3.1 Shift in Tourist Culinary Preferences in Myeongdong

Many tourists visiting South Korea particularly Myeongdong have shifted focus from cosmetics shopping (previously the primary attraction) to experiencing authentic Korean street food that frequently appears in dramas. Foods such as *tteokbokki*, *gimbap*, *hotteok*, and *odeng*, showcased in various K-dramas, attract tourists to taste them directly at their authentic origins. This phenomenon reflects a change in tourist preferences, where the pull of Korean popular culture particularly drama content has transformed consumption habits and positioned culinary tourism as an important component of the travel experience ([Lemon, 2024](#)).

4.3.2 Foods Experiencing Popularity Growth Through Hallyu

The surge in popularity of several Korean signature foods *tteokbokki* (spicy rice cakes), *hotteok* (sweet stuffed pancake), *gimbap* (rice rolls), and *Myeongdong* style Korean fried chicken constitutes a direct consequence of the *Hallyu* phenomenon. These foods are frequently featured in various Korean television programmes including K-drama and variety shows, attracting international viewers' attention ([Korea, 2024](#)). The repeated visual exposure generates audience motivation to personally try these foods when visiting Korea ([Antara, 2021](#)). As a result, these foods are not only popular among local communities but have also become primary targets for tourists seeking to directly taste the culinary experiences they previously witnessed on screen ([Anna, 2024](#)).

4.3.3 Differences in Consumption Patterns Between Hallyu-Influenced and Non-Influenced Tourists

Tourist consumption patterns show clear differences between those exposed to Korean popular culture and those who are not. Tourists exposed to Korean pop culture K-drama or K-pop tend to actively seek culinary experiences similar to what they observed in Korean media, deliberately visiting restaurants or eateries that appeared in favourite content and sharing those experiences on social media as a form of cultural interaction. In contrast, tourists not influenced by *Hallyu* more typically choose traditional foods based on general recommendations or travel guides, without attachment to viral trends. This difference demonstrates how *Hallyu* influences not only entertainment preferences but also concretely shapes tourist consumption behaviour ([Pratama, 2025](#)).

4.3.4 Food Vendor Adaptation to Tourist Interests

Food vendors in Myeongdong demonstrate high adaptive capacity to tourist interests and evolving trends particularly those driven by K-drama and variety show content. Vendors actively update menus with new flavour variants, enhance presentation aesthetics to be more visually appealing for social media, and introduce currently viral food items from screen content. Vendors also leverage social media as an effective promotional tool to attract global tourists, presenting appetising food photos and videos. This strategy not only enhances Myeongdong culinary attraction but also strengthens its position as a dynamic culinary tourism destination that is responsive to Korean popular culture ([Pratama, 2025](#)).

4.4 COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Myeongdong's Culinary Tourism in 2020

4.4.1 Changes in Tourist Visits During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the demographics and volume of visitors to Myeongdong. International travel restrictions reduced foreign tourist arrivals to Myeongdong significantly, with South Korea total international tourist arrivals falling 85% to approximately 2.5 million in 2020 ([Jay, 2020](#)). South Korea effective pandemic management enabled domestic tourism to partially compensate for lost international visitor income ([Gurung, 2021](#)). Domestic Korean tourists became the primary visitor demographic, replacing international visitors particularly those from Southeast Asia and China who had previously dominated Myeongdong visits. Changes in visitor volume simultaneously altered tourist preferences and expectations regarding culinary experiences.

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4.4.2 Culinary Business Adaptation Strategies During Pandemic Restrictions

Culinary businesses in Myeongdong undertook various strategic adaptations to maintain operations amid travel restrictions and strict social distancing protocols. Restaurant dining activities were effectively restructured into three channels: dine-in restaurant visits, delivery services, and takeout orders demonstrating business model diversification in response to changed customer behaviour and operational constraints ([National, 2022](#)).

The most prominent adaptation strategy was development of digital infrastructure and contactless services enabling restaurants to operate in compliance with health protocols. Many Myeongdong restaurants invested in online ordering systems, mobile applications, and delivery platforms to serve customers unable or unwilling to dine in-person ([National Defense University Press, 2022](#)). Additionally, new operational standards implementing strict health protocols including employee mask requirements, hand sanitiser provision, and table distancing arrangements increased customer confidence. Menu adaptation emphasising Korean foods popularised through the Korean Wave became a key strategy for attracting domestic customers increasingly drawn to *Hallyu*-driven culinary trends ([Park & Kim, 2020](#)).

4.4.3 Digital Platforms' Role in Sustaining Culinary Tourism Interest

During the pandemic, digital platforms were critical in sustaining Myeongdong culinary tourism appeal, functioning as a bridge between businesses and customers separated by physical restrictions. Social media platforms including Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube evolved into primary tools for creating virtual experiences capable of partially substituting for physical restaurant visits. The surge in digital content consumption during the pandemic as people sought entertainment and culinary inspiration online supported this phenomenon ([Suh, Kang, & Moon, 2022](#)).

Digital technology application extended beyond marketing to encompass delivery systems and customer engagement. Myeongdong restaurants utilised delivery platforms including *Baedal Minjok*, *Yogiyo*, and *Coupang Eats* to reach customers throughout Seoul and surrounding areas. New trends of streaming cooking classes and virtual food tours enabled restaurants to maintain connection with global audiences including Korean Wave fans across multiple countries. E-commerce marketing of culinary products also expanded significantly: many restaurants began selling cooking sauces, instant foods, and meal kits, enabling customers to enjoy Myeongdong flavours in their own homes ([Suh et al., 2022](#)).

4.4.4 Comparison of Culinary Tourist Interest Before and After COVID-19

The comparison of culinary tourist interest patterns before and after COVID-19 reveals significant changes in consumer preferences, behaviours, and expectations regarding culinary experiences in Myeongdong. Before the pandemic, tourists tended to focus on dining in well-known restaurants with vibrant atmospheres and intense social interaction, with the communal aspect of shared dining constituting an important part of the eating experience ([National, 2022](#)). Post-pandemic, a major shift occurred toward preference for authentic Korean food consumed through diverse channels delivery and take-out alongside demand for more intimate and health-conscious dining experiences ([Ministry, Sports, & Tourism, 2024](#)).

Consumers now demonstrate heightened awareness and expectation of hygiene and safety protocols in every dimension of the culinary experience. When visiting restaurants, customers consider cleanliness standards, health protocols, and the establishment's reputation for pandemic management. Interest in socially shareable culinary experiences has evolved from simple food photography to comprehensive documentation of safe and responsible culinary encounters. A shift from mass tourism to specialised culinary tourism is also evident, with customers demonstrating greater interest in unique and

distinctive culinary experiences compared to mainstream crowded culinary destinations ([Seunghye & Soo-Kyung, 2020](#)).

4.5 Economic and Social Impact of the Hallyu Phenomenon on Myeongdong's Culinary Sector

4.5.1 Economic Impact on Myeongdong's Culinary Businesses

The Hallyu phenomenon has generated highly significant and sustained economic impact on Myeongdong culinary sector. In 2018, *Hallyu* contributed USD 9.5 billion to Korea economy, largely through tourism and consumption of Korean cultural products including culinary experiences a central component of the Korean Wave (Korea foundation for international cultural exchange). Although COVID-19 presented significant challenges in 2020, *Hallyu* strong economic foundation enabled rapid recovery, with tourism exports increasing 55% from the preceding year ([Korea, 2021](#)).

One economic impact of *Hallyu* on Myeongdong culinary industry is a significant revenue increase from sales of traditional Korean food and fashion products popularised through Korean drama and music. Restaurants successfully integrating *Hallyu* elements into their business concepts experienced significant sales growth, particularly from younger tourist demographics drawn to the Korean Wave (Korean Foundation for international cultural exchange). Multiplier effects were evident among local food suppliers, packaging manufacturers, and various support services experiencing increased demand. Premium location values within Myeongdong near renowned Korean restaurants or *Hallyu*-concept businesses increased, reflecting the positive economic impact of *Hallyu* ([Parc, 2021](#)).

4.5.2 Emergence of New Employment Opportunities and Culinary Innovation

The *Hallyu* phenomenon generated numerous new employment opportunities in Myeongdong culinary environment that combined culinary elements with Korean pop culture. Industries including cosmetics, fashion, and tourism were all influenced by *Hallyu*, including the culinary industry which experienced major transformation in workforce structure and skill requirements ([Parc, 2021](#)). Culinary innovation became essential to meet the expectations of tourists and local consumers exposed to Korean culture through diverse media, creating demand for professionals who understood both Korean pop culture and culinary dimensions.

New professions that emerged include food content creators and social media specialists for Korean culinary content; Korean food consultants and recipe developers creating authentic menus appealing to *Hallyu* enthusiasts; cultural food tour guides providing cultural context within culinary experiences; and digital marketing specialists in the restaurant and food industry with Korean Wave expertise ([Seunghye & Soo-Kyung, 2020](#)). Korean culinary instructors became highly sought-after, teaching not only cooking techniques but also cultural contexts behind each dish, providing culinary enthusiasts with a comprehensive learning experience ([Park & Kim, 2020](#)).

4.5.3 Myeongdong's Culinary Transformation as a Response to Hallyu

Myeongdong culinary transformation in response to the *Hallyu* phenomenon demonstrates the strategic adaptation of business operators in integrating Korean pop culture elements into modern, authentic culinary experiences. Restaurants and cafes in the area began utilising K-drama and K-pop-inspired concepts to create thematic dining experiences satisfying *Hallyu* enthusiasts' desire for proximity to their idols or favourite dramas, alongside culinary satisfaction. Restaurant interior design, menus, service, and even music playlists underwent significant changes as a result of this transformation ([Park & Kim, 2020](#)).

One of the most compelling innovations is the development of menus inspired by food appearing in popular Korean dramas. Restaurants create dishes similar to or inspired by memorable dining scenes from well-known Korean dramas. New standards in interior design that integrate modern Korean style with minimalist elements, warm lighting, and Instagram-worthy decor have emerged ([Park & Kim, 2020](#)). Collaborations with K-pop merchandise to create unique dining environments have also developed, with restaurants now featuring posters, albums, or exclusive merchandise from popular K-pop groups. Authentic Korean culinary experiences that remain appealing to global audiences exposed

to the Korean Wave are produced by combining traditional Korean cooking methods with modern presentation techniques ([Ministry, Sports, & Tourism, 2024](#)).

4.5.4 Sustainability of Hallyu-Driven Culinary Trends in Myeongdong

The sustainability of *Hallyu*-driven culinary trends in Myeongdong shows highly positive long-term prospects, supported by a strong cultural foundation and systematic support from diverse stakeholders. Although the culinary industry integrating *Hallyu* faced COVID-19 challenges in 2020, the sector demonstrated that this trend constitutes a sustainable systemic transformation rather than a temporary phenomenon. Supported by industry innovation and consumer feedback from around the world, Korean culinary trends continue to evolve and adapt to changing times ([Park, 2023](#)).

This trend's sustainability is also influenced by strong government support for Korean cultural promotion through various programmes and initiatives. Food is one of the most effective diplomatic tools of the Korean Wave, actively promoted by the Korean government as cultural soft power diplomacy ([Korea, 2021](#)). As Korean dramas, K-pop, and other Korean cultural products continue to grow in global popularity, world interest in Korean lifestyle and cuisine continues to increase creating an expanding market for Myeongdong culinary industry. Culinary education programmes integrating Korean culture also ensure the availability of talented and enthusiastic employees to develop this sector in the future ([Korea, 2021](#)).

A comprehensive analysis finds that, while COVID-19 had adverse short-term effects on the tourism and culinary sector, the *Hallyu* phenomenon provides a strong foundation for sustained recovery and growth of Myeongdong culinary sector. The pandemic-accelerated digital transformation, combined with growing global appreciation for authentic Korean culinary experiences and cultural tourism connected to the Korean Wave, is essential for sustaining long-term growth in the post-pandemic era. Technology, culture, and cuisine work together to create a robust and flexible business model capable of addressing various future challenges ([Parc, 2021](#)).

4.6 Discussions

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) plays a central role in shaping culinary tourism development in Myeongdong, Seoul, by transforming the district into a globally recognized gastronomic destination. The popularity of K-drama and K-pop has created strong cultural consumption patterns, including the “K-drama food pilgrimage” phenomenon, where tourists intentionally visit locations and try foods featured in Korean media. This aligns with previous studies showing that *Hallyu* content significantly influences tourism demand and culinary interest by creating emotional attachment and experiential motivation among international audiences ([Park, & Kim, 2020](#); [Jin, Kim, Choi, & Yoo, 2024](#)). As a result, Myeongdong has evolved beyond a commercial shopping district into a symbolic space of Korean cultural identity, where culinary experiences are directly shaped by media exposure, tourism behavior, and global cultural flows.

However, the study also highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic created a major structural disruption in 2020, severely reducing international tourist arrivals and negatively impacting the culinary sector in Myeongdong. Despite an 85% decline in visitors and high business vacancy rates, the industry demonstrated resilience through digital transformation, delivery systems, and social media-based marketing strategies. These adaptive responses indicate that *Hallyu*-driven culinary tourism is not only culturally influential but also highly flexible and resilient under crisis conditions. Furthermore, the shift toward domestic tourism and online engagement reflects a broader transformation in consumer behavior, where digital platforms have become essential in sustaining culinary tourism demand. This supports the argument that the sustainability of *Hallyu*-based tourism depends on continuous innovation, government support, and integration of digital ecosystems in post-pandemic recovery strategies ([Suh, Kang, & Moon, 2022](#); [Korea, 2021](#); [Jin, Kim, Choi, & Yoo, 2024](#)).

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

Based on the research findings, the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) phenomenon has significantly influenced the development of culinary tourism in Myeongdong, Seoul. The global popularity of K-dramas and K-pop has enhanced Korea's cultural attractiveness and contributed to the emergence of the "K-drama food pilgrimage" phenomenon, where tourists visit culinary locations featured in popular media. This has strengthened Myeongdong's position as a leading gastronomic tourism destination, driven by emotionally engaging and culturally immersive food experiences. The increasing consumption of signature Korean dishes featured in media further demonstrates the strong linkage between popular culture and culinary tourism growth.

5.2 Research Limitation

Despite these positive developments, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 severely disrupted Myeongdong's tourism and culinary sector, with international tourist arrivals declining by more than 85%. Many culinary businesses faced closures and operational difficulties during this period. Although the industry showed resilience through digital transformation and adaptation to online platforms, this study is limited in its ability to fully capture long-term structural recovery patterns and post-pandemic behavioral shifts among international tourists.

5.3 Directions and Future Study

Future research should examine long-term post-pandemic recovery trends in *Hallyu*-driven culinary tourism, particularly focusing on changes in international tourist behavior and digital consumption patterns. Comparative studies between different Korean tourist destinations may also provide deeper insights into regional competitiveness. Additionally, future studies should explore the role of emerging digital platforms, such as short-form video media and AI-driven tourism marketing, in sustaining and expanding culinary tourism demand in the post-pandemic era.

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Author Contributions

LU contributed to the conceptualization of the study, development of the research framework, and preparation of the original manuscript draft. SDRJ was responsible for data collection, literature review, and formal analysis of findings related to *Hallyu* and culinary tourism dynamics. ADM supervised the research process, validated the analytical results, and contributed to critical revisions and final editing of the manuscript. All authors have read, reviewed, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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