

KOREAN WAVE AS A DRIVER OF VIRAL FASHION TRENDS: INSIGHTS FROM CROCS IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

Muammar Revnu Ohara^{1*}, Agustedi²

¹ Indonesia School of Economics, STIESIA Surabaya, Indonesia

² Indonesia School of Economics, STIESIA Surabaya, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: Ohara@unilak.ac.id

Abstract: The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has influenced not only music and drama consumption but also fashion trends worldwide. One remarkable case is the viral popularity of Crocs among Gen Z consumers, driven by Korean dramas in which the footwear is featured in hospital settings. This study explores how Korean Wave contributes to viral marketing of fashion products, with a qualitative approach focusing on Gen Z university students in the urban city of Pekanbaru. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 students and observation of digital media. Findings show that Crocs' popularity is strengthened by both cultural exposure (K-Drama) and digital marketing strategies, creating a lifestyle symbol among youth. The research highlights practical implications for local brands seeking to adopt similar strategies by leveraging cultural influences and social media.

Keywords: Korean Wave, digital marketing, Crocs, viral fashion, Gen Z, Pekanbaru

1. Introduction

The rise of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) has reshaped consumer behavior in Asia and beyond. Korean dramas (K-Dramas) not only entertain but also influence consumer preferences, from food to fashion (Lakshmy, 2023). One phenomenon is the viral trend of Crocs, a once-ordinary sandal, which gained renewed popularity after being frequently spotted in K-Dramas, particularly among medical characters such as doctors and nurses.

In Indonesia, Gen Z represents the most dynamic consumer segment, highly engaged in digital platforms and cultural trends. Pekanbaru, as one of the emerging urban cities, provides a unique setting to understand how global cultural trends shape local consumer behavior. This study investigates the role of Korean Wave in driving viral fashion trends and analyzes how digital marketing strengthens this effect, with Crocs as a case study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Korean Wave and Consumer Culture

The Korean Wave has been studied as a driver of cultural consumption, shaping global perceptions of Korea and its products (Yoo, 2022). K-Dramas influence not only language learning but also fashion and lifestyle choices among young viewers.

2.2 Digital Marketing and Viral Trends

Digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram play a critical role in shaping viral fashion trends (Zamiri, 2021). Viral marketing leverages user-generated content, influencer endorsements, and cultural storytelling to amplify consumer engagement.

2.3 Crocs as a Fashion Symbol

Originally criticized as unfashionable, Crocs have undergone a transformation into a lifestyle product associated with comfort and uniqueness. Recent studies show Crocs are increasingly embedded in K-Pop and K-Drama fashion contexts (Lee, 2024), influencing youth preferences worldwide.

Table 1. Thematic Coding of Gen Z Interviews in Pekanbaru

Theme	Sub-theme/Code	Sample Quote	Interpretation
Exposure to Korean Wave	K-Drama influence	<i>"I saw doctors wearing Crocs in Korean dramas at the hospital. They looked practical and stylish."</i> (I3, Female, 20)	K-Drama as indirect marketing channel
Perception of Crocs	Image transformation	<i>"I used to think Crocs were ugly, but now all my classmates wear them."</i> (I7, Male, 22)	Shift in brand image
Digital Marketing	TikTok trend	<i>"I first saw Crocs trending on TikTok, with lots of funny content."</i> (I9, Female, 19)	Social media drives virality
Gen Z Behavior	Peer influence	<i>"When my friends on campus started wearing Crocs, I felt I also had to buy a pair so I wouldn't be left behind."</i> (I5, Male, 21)	Fashion as social pressure
Implications for Local Brands	Strategy replication	<i>"If local brands want to go viral, they should collaborate with artists or create campaigns on TikTok."</i> (I11, Female, 23)	Cultural leveraging for local brands

Sources: Interview data (2025), processed by authors

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach.

- Participants:** 12 Gen Z university students (aged 18–23) in Pekanbaru.
- Sampling:** Purposive sampling, focusing on students who consume K-Dramas and are active on social media.
- Data Collection:** In-depth interviews and digital media observation.
- Analysis:** Thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with categories including *Korean Wave exposure*, *Crocs perception*, *digital marketing influence*, *consumer behavior*, and *local brand implications*.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Exposure to Korean Wave

Most informants reported watching K-Dramas regularly, especially medical dramas. They noticed details of lifestyle and fashion portrayed by characters.

"I saw doctors wearing Crocs in the hospital in dramas. They look practical and cool, too."
(Informant 3, Female, 20 years old)

This aligns with Lakshmy (2023), who highlights K-Drama as a medium of indirect marketing.

4.2 Perception of Crocs among Gen Z

Crocs are perceived ambivalently: initially “weird” or “unfashionable,” but now seen as trendy and stylish.

"I used to think Crocs were ugly, but now all my college friends wear them. So I'm following suit to stay on top of the trend." (Informant 7, Male, 22 years old)

This transformation reflects Lee's (2024) observation of cultural power reshaping brand image.

4.3 Role of Digital Marketing and Social Media

Almost all informants first encountered Crocs' viral trend via TikTok, Instagram, or influencers.

"I first saw Crocs trending on TikTok, and lots of people were making cute content, so I was curious and eventually wanted to buy them." (Informant 9, Female, 19 years old)

This supports Zamiri (2021), showing that viral marketing thrives on user-generated content (UGC) and peer sharing.

4.4 Gen Z Consumer Behavior

The motivation to purchase Crocs is largely driven by lifestyle identity and peer influence rather than functional needs.

"If my friends on campus are already using it, I feel like I have to have one too so I don't get left behind." (Informant 5, Male, 21 years old)

Crocs thus become not just footwear but a lifestyle symbol among Gen Z.

4.5 Implications for Local Brands

Informants noted that local brands can replicate Crocs' success by integrating cultural narratives with digital marketing strategies.

"Kalau brand lokal mau viral, coba kolaborasi sama artis atau bikin campaign di TikTok. Jangan cuma jualan biasa." (Informant 11, Perempuan, 23 tahun)

This echoes Yoo (2022) that leveraging cultural industries can enhance global competitiveness.

5. Conclusions

The Korean Wave functions as a cultural driver of viral fashion trends, with Crocs as a notable case. Through exposure in K-Dramas and amplification via digital marketing, Crocs has become a lifestyle symbol among Gen Z in urban Indonesia. Local brands can learn from this phenomenon by adopting strategies that combine cultural storytelling and digital platforms to achieve virality.

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