Harnessing Cultural Soft Power: A Study of South Korea's Global Influence through the Korean Wave

S. Sunyogita [a*]

[a] II M.A English Language and Literature, Madras Christian College, India.

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Review Article

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the global proliferation of Korean culture, known colloquially as the "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu," has significantly influenced contemporary culture, particularly in the realms of music, film, and digital media. This phenomenon has not only bolstered South Korea's economy but has also elevated its status as a major cultural hub in Asia. Leveraging platforms such as social networks, video-sharing services, and over-the-top (OTT) media, South Korea has effectively utilized its cultural exports, including K-Pop and K-Drama, to showcase its rich and diverse heritage to audiences worldwide. This paper explores the multifaceted impact of the Korean Wave, examining its role in shaping global perceptions of Korean culture and lifestyle. Specifically, it delves into the psychological benefits of consuming Korean dramas during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting their role in providing entertainment, stress relief, and emotional support to viewers, it discusses how South Korea has utilized various media channels to promote aspects of its culture beyond entertainment, such as cuisine (K-Foods) and beauty (K-Beauty). Through a comprehensive analysis of the various elements comprising the Korean Wave, including K-pop music, Korean dramas, films, fashion, and cuisine, this research aims to elucidate the mechanisms behind South Korea's successful harnessing of cultural soft power. Additionally, this research explores the implications of South Korea's cultural soft power for its diplomatic relations, economy,

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*Corresponding author: E-mail: yogita04032001@gmail.com;

and national identity. Through this investigation, we aim to provide valuable insights into the significance of cultural diplomacy in the contemporary global arena and offer recommendations for countries seeking to leverage their cultural assets for enhanced soft power projection. Through a comprehensive analysis, this paper aims to elucidate the strategies employed by South Korea to enhance its soft power and economic vitality through cultural diplomacy.

Keywords: Pop culture; K- Pop and K- Drama; soft power; culture; and economy.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Korea, officially known as the Republic of Korea, is situated in East Asia and occupies the southern portion of the Korean Peninsula. With a population nearing 51 million, it stands as one of the most densely populated regions globally, boasting the fourth most populated metropolitan city worldwide. Seoul, the capital of South Korea, accommodates nearly half of the country's inhabitants, while other prominent cities include Incheon, Daegu, Jeju Island, and Busan [1-3]. The geographical landscape of Korea is characterized by mountains and uplands, contributing to its picturesque beauty, which has earned it the epithet *"Rivers and Mountains embroidered on silk"* in Chinese literature, reflecting its cultural significance [3-4].

The religious landscape of South Korea is diverse, with Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism being the predominant faiths practiced by its populace [3,5]. Since the division of Korea in 1948, South Korea has pursued a distinct cultural trajectory, diverging from its northern counterpart, North Korea. While influenced by Chinese culture to some extent, South Korea's culture has evolved uniquely, incorporating elements of its rich heritage and contemporary influences.

Economically, South Korea has established itself as a powerhouse, with its economy predominantly reliant on electronic goods and technology. As the thirteenth largest economy globally, South Korea is renowned for its rapid internet connectivity and boasts one of the strongest military forces in the world. Its prowess extends to international trade, with significant imports and exports contributing to its economic vitality [6-8]. The early 20th century marked a period of significant growth for South Korea, particularly in industries such as automobiles, smartphones, beauty, and food, fueled by industrialization, westernization, and urbanization, notably in Seoul.

The emergence of South Korea as a cultural force on the global stage has been propelled by the phenomenon known as the "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu." This cultural wave, characterized by the widespread dissemination of Korean popular culture, including music, television dramas, and movies, has been instrumental in inducing globalization, regionalization, and localization [9,10] Coined by the Chinese, the term "Hallyu" encapsulates the fervent enthusiasm for the Korean lifestyle among youth. From its initial success in Southeast Asian countries, the Korean Wave has garnered recognition worldwide, leveraging mass media to cultivate soft power and enhance South Korea's global image [11,12].

The significance of the Korean Wave in bolstering South Korea's economy, culture, and international standing cannot be understated, with estimates suggesting its contribution to nearly 30-40% of the country's GDP. The Korean Wave, facilitated by mass media, has catalyzed processes of globalization, regionalization, and localization, underpinning South Korea's soft power strategy. The concept of soft power, as conceptualized by Harvard scholar *Joseph Nye*, in his work "*Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Power*".

"The second face of power." A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries-admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness-want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions" (Jr 5).

Finds resonance in South Korea's cultural diplomacy efforts, exemplified by former U.S. President Barack Obama's acknowledgment of the Korean Wave during his visit in 2012, Korea underscores its strategic importance as a diplomatic tool. This paper aims to delve into the multifaceted dimensions of the Korean Wave, examining its socio-economic impact and cultural implications, while shedding light on South Korea's evolving role in the global arena.

2. POPULAR CULTURE

John Storey is a professor of Cultural studies and Associate Director of the Center for Research in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Sunderland UK his famous book called *"Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction"* gave a straightforward understanding of popular culture. One of the definitions of pop culture in Story's.

"Popular culture is often supported by claims that popular culture is mass-produced commercial culture, whereas high culture is the result of an individual act of creation. The latter, therefore, deserves only a moral and aesthetic response; the former requires only a fleeting sociological inspection to unlock what little it has to offer" (Storey 6).

In the book, he discussed briefly Popular culture by applying it to every structuralist modernism, and postmodernism theory. The term culture has different meanings the joining of the word Popular with culture makes a different meaning. Culture means "way of life for the entire society", culture is an umbrella term that includes social behavior, norms, and institutions found in human society, culture is also marked to be a set of patterns of human activity within a community.

According to Oxford, Popular culture is a set of practices, beliefs, and objects that embody the mostly shared meanings of the social system. It includes mass media and other things Storey states that popular culture is simply a culture that is widely favored or well-liked by many people or meets the approval of many people. To know whether a particular event is popular or not Storey gives the plan to examine the sales of books, CDs, or DVDs, we can also analyze it through the number of people attending concerts, sports events, and festivals. These counts undoubtedly help us to record the hype of the culture. *Graeme Turner. "Postmodernism and popular culture."* He addresses the concept of popular culture as.

"This is of course to make popular culture a profoundly political concept, Popular culture is a site where the construction of everyday life may be examined. As an attempt to understand a process or practice-it is also political, to examine the power relations that constitute this form of everyday life and thus reveal the configurations of interest its construction serves (Turner 6)".

John's discourse presents six distinct definitions of popular culture. Initially, he characterizes popular culture as an amorphous conceptual construct, susceptible to multifaceted interpretations contingent upon contextual factors and the preferences of a given populace or demographic. The primary delineation portrays popular culture simply as a culture widely embraced or favored by a significant portion of society, constituting a quantitative measure of popularity. In the subsequent definition, popular culture is framed as residual to high culture, denoting a mass-produced entity in contrast to the individually crafted artifacts of high culture, a shift emblematic of the transformation of cultural valuation from intrinsic worth to economic and elitist paradigms. Raymond Williams' assertion that "culture is ordinary" underscores the mundane ubiquity of popular culture, contrasting with notions of cultural elitism.

A third perspective defines popular culture as synonymous with mass culture, typifying a commodified landscape engineered for widespread consumption, devoid of substantive distinction and characterized by formulaic manipulation. This conceptualization intersects with the historical phenomenon of "Americanization," reflecting America's pivotal role in the global dissemination and theorization of popular culture. Contrarily, the fourth and fifth definitions emphasize popular culture as emanating from the grassroots, rebuffing narratives of cultural imposition from dominant hierarchies. Antonio Gramsci's notion of "hegemony" elucidates how dominant factions secure the allegiance of subordinate groups through intellectual and moral influence, shaping popular culture within a framework of ideological consent.

Lastly, the sixth definition engages with postmodern perspectives, collapsing the traditional dichotomy between high and popular culture. In this paradigm, popular culture is rendered a site of ongoing debate and negotiation within the fluid and fragmented landscape of postmodernity. Through these multifaceted interpretations, John offers a comprehensive exploration of popular culture's diverse dimensions and its intricate entanglement with broader socio-cultural dynamics.

An example of the supposed interpretation of commerce and culture, the best example given by Storey is when a growing artist's song

appears in a television commercial, one of the questions is what is being sold song or product? The answer is both.

Finally, all these definitions, have one thing in common popular culture is a culture that emerged to follow industrialization and urbanization. Popular culture depends on there being in place a capitalist market economy, Popular culture has now entered all corners of the world, and the development and availability of technology and the internet, made easier for the development of K-pop culture.

The development of the Korean culture industry has been shaped by a confluence of socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors. Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the Korean government underwent a comprehensive reevaluation of its modernization trajectory. Confronted with limited natural resources, Korea strategically leveraged technology and cultural exports to bolster its global presence. Initially spurred by private sector initiatives, the phenomenon known as the Korean Wave gained significant traction through substantial government support, leading to a remarkable expansion of Korea's media and cultural productions. This transformative growth has earned Korea the moniker "Hollywood of the East," as its entertainment output garners widespread acclaim and adoration across the globe.

At the heart of the Korean Wave are television dramas, K-pop music, films, and online games, which have evolved into formidable cultural exports in the digital age, transcending geographical boundaries to captivate audiences in America, Europe, and the Middle East. Notably, Korean television dramas have emerged as a primary driver of the Korean Wave, contributing substantially to the nation's economic prosperity. While initially tailored for a domestic audience, these dramas inadvertently garnered international attention, particularly through the export of Korean TV dramas.

The industry's success can be attributed in part to the establishment of prominent broadcasting networks such as MBC, KBS, and SBS, which produce compelling mini-series spanning approximately 16-24 episodes. The pinnacle of the Korean Wave's influence in Western Asia was epitomized by the 2004 sensation *"Winter Sonata,"* a poignant romance drama that captivated audiences with its portrayal of unconditional love amidst tragedy. This series struck a chord with Japanese viewers, particularly women in their 30s and 50s, who were drawn to its sensitive depiction of emotions and intense romantic narrative.

The unparalleled popularity of *"Winter Sonata"* was underscored by former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's acknowledgment that the drama's male protagonist eclipsed his own fame in Japan. Furthermore, the global appeal of Korean television dramas was exemplified by the widespread success of *"Jewel in the Palace,"* a historical drama that achieved unprecedented viewership across Hong Kong. This captivating narrative, centered on the ascent of a royal physician from humble origins to prominence amidst palace intrigue and Confucian values, resonated deeply with audiences worldwide, cementing Korea's position as a cultural powerhouse on the global stage.

Amidst the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Korean dramas (K-Dramas) experienced a notable surge in popularity, attaining a zenith in their global influence. The pandemic, marked by widespread lockdowns, social distancing measures, and heightened anxiety, engendered a profound yearning for escapism and solace among individuals worldwide. In this context, the consumption of K-Dramas emerged as a significant coping mechanism for many, offering a reprieve from the harsh realities of the pandemic The immersive storytelling, emotional depth, and captivating characters characteristic of K-Dramas render them particularly adept at fulfilling this escapist function.

Moreover, the heightened global consumption of K-Dramas during the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the far-reaching impact of Korean culture on a global scale. Academic analyses delve into the mechanisms underlying the globalization of Korean popular culture, examining factors such as digital streaming platforms, transnational fan communities, and strategic cultural diplomacy initiatives. Through these lenses, scholars interrogate how K-Dramas serve as conduits for disseminating Korean cultural values, aesthetics, and narratives across diverse sociocultural landscapes.

During the Hallyu 2.0 wave, South Korea's cultural influence burgeoned into a formidable soft power, with K-dramas playing a pivotal role

in this phenomenon. Adaptations of Japanese manga, such as *"Boys Over Flowers" (2009)*, achieved widespread acclaim globally, even finding a platform on India's Doordarshan. Notable productions like *"Coffee Prince," "My Love from the Star," "Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo," "Moon Embracing the Sun," "Descendants of the Sun," "What's Wrong with Secretary Kim," "The Heirs,"* and *"The Legend of the Blue Sea"* were instrumental in catapulting K-dramas to international fame. One of the prime reasons, why K-Dramas have gained significant attention among youth audiences aged 16-25, is largely due to their captivating cinematography, compelling musical scores, and the presence of visually appealing actors. K-Dramas are renowned for their visually stunning cinematography, characterized by vibrant colors, picturesque scenery, and meticulous attention to detail. These visual elements serve to create immersive viewing experiences that resonate with the aesthetic sensibilities of youth audiences. Furthermore, the inclusion of handsome actors in leading roles adds a layer of appeal, drawing viewers into the narrative through visual allure and romantic intrigue.

In addition to visual aesthetics, the musical score of K-Dramas plays a pivotal role in shaping the emotional resonance of the storyline. Comprising a diverse range of musical genres, from poignant ballads to melodic instrumentals, the soundtrack enhances the mood and atmosphere of each scene, eliciting a heightened emotional response from viewers.

The advent of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon, and Rakuten Viki further propelled the global dissemination of K-dramas, with popular titles like *"Crash Landing on You," "Squid Game," "Glory,"* and *"Vincenzo"* garnering widespread attention.

The economic and cultural impact of K-dramas on South Korea is profound, as they serve as effective vehicles for promoting sponsored products, ranging from mobile phones to beauty products and culinary delights. For instance, the drama *"Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha"* showcases the scenic beauty of Jeju Island, while *"Once Upon a Small Town"* offers a glimpse into rural life in Huidong village. Additionally, supernatural dramas like *"Goblin"* and *"The Tale of the Nine-Tailed Fox"* delve into mythical narratives that resonate with audiences both domestically and internationally. K-Drama captures the minds of youth from the age 16-25, the splendid cinematography and musical score, which youth crave for aesthetics.

As K-dramas gain popularity, they serve as platforms for product placement, with scenes featuring sandwich shops, coffee houses, clothing boutiques, and automobile companies. This integration of branded merchandise not only enhances the viewing experience but also generates lucrative revenue streams for participating businesses. Furthermore, K-drama actors are commodified as marketable entities, with their personas driving consumer interest in related merchandise and promotional campaigns.

The global dissemination of Hallyu culture has sparked heightened interest in South Korea, fostering tourism, culinary exploration, and consumption of K-beauty and fashion brands among international audiences. This cross-cultural exchange not only bolsters South Korea's global standing but also fosters greater understanding and appreciation of its rich cultural heritage on the world stage.

3. KOREAN POP MUSIC

The emergence of K-pop, epitomized by *PSY's* viral hit *"Gangnam Style,"* has propelled South Korea's cultural influence to unprecedented heights, surpassing even the widespread popularity of K-dramas. K-pop's distinctive blend of catchy melodies, dynamic choreography, and energetic rap performances bears a resemblance to American music, capturing the attention of global audiences. Behind the polished façade of K-pop artists lies a rigorous training regimen encompassing singing, dancing, and social skills, with trainees selected from various countries including China, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Thailand. These trainees undergo arduous "spartan training," leading highly regimented lives in pursuit of perfection.

Leading K-pop acts such as *BTS, Black Pink, Seventeen, Stray Kids,* and *TXT* dominate the global entertainment landscape, captivating audiences from the United States to the United Kingdom. Key entertainment companies like SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, HYBE Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment play pivotal roles in nurturing and promoting these talents. Platforms like YouTube play a crucial role in K-pop's global dissemination, allowing artists to showcase their music and spread Korean culture worldwide.

K-pop's cultural significance extends beyond its musical elements, as evidenced by Black Pink's incorporation of traditional Korean instruments like the *Geomungo* in their song *"Black Venom,"* highlighting the richness of Korean cultural heritage. With K-pop now permeating every corner of the globe, including prestigious events like the Grammys, artists embark on global tours, further solidifying their international appeal. Notably*, BTS* stands out as one of the most influential K-pop groups in history, with hits like *"Dynamite," "Butter,"* and *"Permission to Dance"* resonating globally.

Beyond music, K-pop artists serve as powerful ambassadors for Korean brands and culture, leveraging their immense popularity to endorse products ranging from automobiles to consumer electronics. BTS members, for instance, hold ambassadorial roles for global luxury brands like Dior, Louis Vuitton, Celine, Yves Saint Laurent, Gucci, Parada, and many more, amplifying Korea's presence in the global marketplace. Major Korean corporations such as Samsung, LG, and Kia capitalize on the influence of K-pop artists to bolster their brand image and attract consumers.

South Korea's soft power extends beyond commercial endeavors, with K-pop artists actively engaging in global issues and advocacy. Notable instances include *BTS* delivering speeches on Sustainable Development Goals at the UN General Assembly, *Black Pink* addressing climate change at the UN Climate Change Conference, and *Seventeen* addressing the importance of Education in the UNESCO Youth Forum. These engagements underscore the significant influence wielded by K-pop artists in shaping international discourse and highlight the current status of South Korean soft power on the global stage.

4. K-MOVIES AND ONLINE GAMING

The Korean film industry reached its peak in 2001. Korea has a vibrant potential in the film industry that challenges Hollywood films in the local markets. The dominance of Korean film is that it has its domestic market within Asia. South Korean films have been heavily influenced by events and forces such as the Japanese occupation of Korea, the Korean War, The Business sectors, Globalization, and democratization

Major corporations such as Hyundai, Samsung, and Daewoo are investing in the production of movies. One of the blockbuster films called *"Shiri" (1999)* which was hugely funded and broke the Titanic Korean box-office record, is a love story between a female secret agent from North Korea and a male secret agent from South Korea. *Joint Security Area (2000) is* another action blockbuster about the illicit friendship between North and South Korean soldiers in the demilitarized zones. *Train to Busan (2016)* is another highest-grossing film in South Korea. *Parasite (2019) was* the first film in South Korea to get global acclaim. It received six nominations at the Academy Awards, it won Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Original Screenplay, as well as the first film not in English ever to win the Oscar for best picture. The Korean film industry rose during the late 19th century, which greatly contributed to the Korean wave.

The hallyu has created a great wave in the minds and hearts of youngsters by watching K-dramas people are attracted to the culture and their way of life. The Government makes use of people attending and they capitalize and globalize to increase their economy, by publicizing the products used by the celebrity. The Subway sandwiches, Tteokbokki, Kimchi, Bibimbap, Samgyeopsal, Gimpab, Korean fried chicken, jajangmeyon, deokgabli, donkatsu, bulgogi, japche, manduguk, Sundubu-jjigae, and Kbbq. The culture of having soju (alcohol) with co-workers and elders is one of the traditional cultures in Korea. Since the emergence of K-Drama showing K-foods and Soju (alcohol) the K-food craze has spread into other countries, where Korea began to export fast food around the globe. K- Beauty products are a very big sensation for women, in K-Drama the female lead uses various beauty products, such as sheet masks, night creams, serums, and lip tints, which show the power of K- beauty. The South Korean cosmetic company, "Amorepacific", which sponsored *"My Love from the Star", has increased its sales since the infamous drama aired.* The recent drama, *"True Beauty"* which was adapted from a webtoon, shows the commercialization of the makeup product, *"Colorogram".* The demand for K-beauty products increased around the world, thus it has become part of the Korean wave.

Korea is the e-sport capital of the world, it is currently the 4th largest market in the video gaming market. South Korea is known for its hi-tech technology and high-speed internet and internet access everywhere, with the rise of the IT field the gaming field has risen. Soon enough

PC rooms have sprung up across the country, with food and water supply inside the PC center. Over 50% of Korea's population plays games on their smartphones and this number has been increasing since COVID-19. Korea even do Broadcasting of Esports matches live and stadiums for these Esports events look very similar to a pay-per-view boxing match. Korea even has its own association called the Korean Esports Association (KeSPA) which was created in 2000. It is a part of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism and it manages 25 of Korea's top Esports games. Some of these games include. Dal Yong Ji in his "*Korea's online gaming empire*" examines the rapid growth of this gaming industry from a political economy perspective, online gaming has become a mode of socializing and a channel for human relationships. Online gaming has its own global marketplace in the Korean economy. Professional gamers and game fans emerging from West dominance develop the Korean gaming field *Starcraft II, League of Legends, and DOTA 2.*

5. CONCLUSION

Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer introduced the concept of a refined version of popular culture, termed the "culture industry," encompassing standardized cultural productions such as films, radio programs, and magazines. They contended that the consumption of these cultural commodities contributes to the homogenization and non creative nature of mass society. Adorno and Horkheimer's critique replaced the term "culture industry" with "mass culture," highlighting the pervasive influence of various digital technologies that facilitate the dissemination of entertainment industries accessible to all.

In contrast, Raymond Williams proposed a different perspective, asserting that the primary function of culture is to signify, represent the country and its liberation struggles. Williams viewed popular culture as a site of public fantasy, serving as a dream world for individuals. He emphasized the inherently political nature of popular culture, positioning it as a space where power relations and everyday life constructions are examined.

Further expounding on this notion, Turner (2003) posited that popular culture is a profoundly political concept, reflecting the construction of everyday life and revealing the power dynamics

inherent in its formation. Popular culture, therefore, is not merely a product of the culture industries but rather what people actively make of it, engaging with and reshaping commodified practices to suit their own ends.

The phenomenon of Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, exemplifies this dynamic interaction between culture industries and audience agency. The strategic planning and government support behind Hallyu, evidenced by initiatives from the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Sports, have cultivated various iterations of the Korean Wave, each tailored to different cultural and geopolitical contexts. South Korea stands as a prime example of soft power, demonstrating how mass media can significantly influence a country's economy and global standing.

However, alongside the positivity of cultural dissemination, there are concerns regarding its impact on individuals, particularly the youth demographic. The immersive nature of K-dramas and K-pop, coupled with their themes of escapism and romanticization, may lead to excessive consumption and obsession among fans. This phenomenon, while providing moments of joy and entertainment, can also disrupt real-life routines and contribute to mental health issues.

In navigating the complexities of cultural consumption, it is imperative for individuals to strike a balance between engagement with popular culture and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Korean dramas like "*My Liberation Notes, Summer Strike, Reply 1988, and When the Camellia Blooms*, talk about our mental health, healthy lifestyle, coping up with problems, etc.. K-pop music also surrounds the theme of *BTS- Love yourself.* While recognizing the cultural, knowledge, and happiness that popular culture can provide, it is essential to approach it critically and responsibly, mindful of its potential effects on personal well-being.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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