
SOFT POWER ANALYSIS THROUGH KPOP IDOL IN PRESEVATION AND CULTURAL PROMOTION

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ABSTRACT

Pop culture is a phenomenon that emerged as a result of globalization. This phenomenon is very diverse and often changes over time. It is influenced by rapid advances in technology and mass media, which facilitate its spread in society. One prime example of the spread of popular culture through soft power is Korean Pop (K-pop), which has attracted global attention and spread to various countries worldwide, creating the Korean Wave phenomenon. This research uses qualitative methods with a descriptive approach to analyze literature data from multiple online and offline sources, including articles, journals, photos, and videos related to the Korean Wave through K-pop. The theory used in this analysis uses the soft power theory proposed by Joseph S. Nye Jr. and the visual image theory by Walter Lippmann. The analysis results show that in its efforts to preserve and promote its culture, South Korea implements an imaging strategy involving various levels of society. K-pop idols play an essential role by integrating traditional Korean elements into their music videos (MV). These conventional elements include backgrounds in the form of royal buildings, the use of Hanbok, and aspects of traditional South Korean music. This strategy succeeded in packaging conventional elements in an attractive and modern context without losing their essence, strengthening the image of Korean culture and increasing K-pop's global appeal.

Keywords: Kpop idols, soft power, visual image, Korean wave

I. INTRODUCTION

Popular culture is one of the cultural phenomena resulting from globalization. Derived from Spanish and Portuguese, it means that culture originates from the people and is related to everyday problems. A culture that enters the world of entertainment tends to place popular elements, and this culture will gain its strength through mass media, which is then used by people in everyday life (Hong in Sari, 2018: 2; Yoon and Zamorano, 2023).

Definitions of popular culture vary widely. According to Mukerji, popular culture refers to beliefs, practices, and objects widely spread in

society. Popular culture refers to beliefs and practices and objects through which they are organized that are widely shared among a population. This includes folk beliefs, practices, and objects generated by political and commercial centres (Cicchelli and Octobre, 2021; Mukerji in Adi, 2011: 100).

This cultural phenomenon is very diverse and often changes over time. The changes that occur are influenced by the rapid advances in technology and mass media, which facilitate societal growth and development. Judging from the distribution of existing information, it contains various articles about the lifestyles of other nations, including

photos, for example, about clothing models, knickknacks, ways of speaking, ways of appearing, and other things that tend to influence someone's behaviour in following them.

Popular culture can be spread through soft power, which is considered very effective and efficient without using political, military and economic pressure by prioritizing cultural elements in diplomatic activities. One example of the spread of popular culture using soft power is the Korean Wave. This term developed in South Korea in the 1990s and has spread worldwide in recent years.

Various Korean cultural products, including dramas, films, Korean pop (K-pop), fashion, and lifestyle industries, are starting to colour people's lives worldwide. Through cultural content that has spread to various countries, South Korea can communicate to the people of other countries about its character. Likewise, Korean pop (K-pop) culture has also spread to multiple countries, including Indonesia, and is packaged so that it can captivate the hearts of its fans.

K-pop is a music genre from South Korea that most teenagers and young people in the world are very lovely. K-Pop has a unique style that is different from others, so, it has succeeded in conquering the hearts of today's teenagers and young people, especially women. In the 1930s, pre-modern Korean pop music first appeared due to the entry of Japanese pop music, which also influenced the early elements of this music. Japan's colonization of Korea was one of the reasons why the Korean music genre could not

develop just following the development of Japanese pop culture at that time. In the 1950s and 1960s, the influence of Western pop music began to emerge with many musical performances by the United States military bases in South Korea (Simbar, 2016: 10–11; Ciccheli and Octobre, 2021b).

According to Park Jung Sun, the journey of modern Korean music, K-Pop, spread internationally at the same time as the spread of Korean popular culture (Hallyu), which in Indonesia.

The spread of culture is supported by the government, non-state actors such as business people, society, celebrities such as K-pop idols, and the media. South Korea implements a strategy by building an image, one of which is through K-pop idols. Regarding image building, it is considered essential to create interest from other countries in establishing and strengthening their bilateral relations and their position in international forums.

They try to introduce and popularize traditional Korean culture in a modern way that keeps up with the times, like for example, the use of the Hanbok, has been modified into a more modern and contemporary form, including traditional instruments and musical instruments in music videos or songs, without losing their essence. Thanks to this, this promotional activity seems exciting, which positively impacts the development of various sectors in Korea.

The phenomena described above, the spread of Korean Wave popular culture using soft power through K-pop idols has been very successful

worldwide. In this article, the question to be answered is how soft power through K-pop idols by including traditional elements adapted to current conditions help preserve and promote South Korean culture.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The method is a qualitative approach carried out descriptively by analyzing various kinds of literature data obtained through various offline and online references, such as articles, journals, photos, and videos related to the Korean Wave through K-pop idols, to promote traditional Korean culture.

Then, the theory underlying the analysis uses the soft power theory put forward by Joseph S. Nye Jr., a former dean of the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. According to him, soft power is the ability of a country to achieve its goals by using attraction rather than coercion and payment. One of these attractions can be the culture of a country. Soft power depends on a country's ability to set the political agenda in a way that is a choice for other countries, one of which is through attractive cultural appeal, ideology, and institutions. In contrast to economic and military power, which forces other countries to change their views or positions, soft power emphasizes a country's ability to achieve interests over other countries using cultural influence, political values, and foreign policy.

Then, it is seen through Visual Images; according to Water Lipman (Rehy, 2015), visual images are built through 4 stages: (1) perception, where all

stimuli that enter the human brain are built by experience and knowledge; (2) cognition, beliefs that arise from the stimuli received, (3) motives, things or circumstances that encourage humans to do something; and (4) attitude, the tendency to understand objects, act, or think. According to Piliang and Jaelani (Nurhablisyah & Susanti, 2020; Muhyi and Sinha, 2025), images exist because human experiences with media create cultural transformation so that they can change knowledge, experience pleasure, and experience fantasy. According to Ruslan (1998) and Rehy (2015), an image is an abstract thing that cannot be measured systematically. However, according to the target, its form can be assessed as positive or negative.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. K-pop as South Korean Popular Culture

South Korea is known as a developed country that still maintains and preserves its culture. Apart from traditional culture, South Korea has also developed its popular culture. Popular culture in South Korea, also known as the Korean Wave, has succeeded in attracting the international community's attention, as evidenced by the spread of content to various countries worldwide, resulting in the Korean Wave fever phenomenon. One of them is Korean pop (Kpop), which includes songs, music videos, fashion, merchandise, and skincare related to Kpop idols, which are very popular in the market in South Korea and other countries. The success of K-pop idols, known to have fans (fans clubs) from all over the

world, can be attributed to various sectors in South Korea. Examples include Bigbang, TVXQ, Super Junior, 2NE1, and SNSD. Until now, those still active include EXO, BTS, Blackpink, Seventeen, Twice, NewJeans, Ive, and Treasure.

As a form of popular culture, which is mass culture, K-pop is enjoyed by many people. This can be seen from the many concerts, fan signs, and becoming brand ambassadors for local and international brands that use K-pop idols in their promotions. Apart from many K-pop-themed events, South Korea also has music shows with weekly awards broadcast nationally and annual awards shows, usually held in Japan, China and Thailand. Apart from that, K-pop fans also hold many events outside South Korea, such as in Indonesia. Fans gather together on idol birthdays, dance and singing competitions, anniversary events, and art exhibitions about idol groups. This shows that South Koreans and people from many other countries can enjoy K-pop.

B. Image and Formation of Cultural Identity

The concept of image was developed by social scientists who discussed a person's psychological variables about their environment. Image is everything an individual has learned and relates to a situation and the actions that can occur. This image helps to find subjectively acceptable reasons why things are the way they are, based on political preferences or otherwise. Imagery comes from within but is assessed by outsiders regarding whether

an image is improving. For example, an assessment or response from a country or society can give rise to respect and a good and favourable impression of the image of a country, where the image is usually based on the values, beliefs or culture of a developing society.

Aleksius Jemadu stated that the meaning of imaging is a nation's effort to define itself both to its people and in international relations by highlighting the superiority of its cultural values. The aim is to create the international influence necessary for achieving foreign policy goals and diplomacy in general (Jemadu Aleksius, 2008; Yoon, 2022b).

The image a country has successfully built is essential and helpful for implementing its foreign policy. Because it will be easy to attract the attention of other countries by viewing and assessing that country. The image formed is the initial capital for a country to establish bilateral relations to achieve national interests. The aim is not only to build an image from a negative impression to a positive one but also to maintain and improve the positive image that a nation already has. The image was deliberately created to have a positive value. A positive image is essential for a nation; with a good image, the country will be respected and trusted to increase cooperation with other countries, strengthen its competitive position in global politics, and quickly achieve its national interests.

This image building is not only a national agenda and is carried out by the foreign affairs department, but is also carried out by all levels of society and is,

of course, assisted by the role of the media in forming public opinion and determining image. In this context, South Korea's self-image efforts are manifested through its popular culture, namely the Korean wave with K-pop idols as soft power in promoting its culture. Image is also essential for countries to market their products worldwide and invite investors from other countries to invest to support a country's economic growth. Image building can also generate public interest and trust in different countries to collaborate with South Korea.

C. Analysis of Soft Power through K-Pop Idols by South Korea in Cultural Preservation and Promotion

According to Joseph S. Nye Jr., one of the soft powers is a country's cultural attractiveness, such as popular culture. South Korea has the potential for K-pop popular culture, which can utilize soft power to promote traditional culture packaged according to current developments without losing its essence (Nye, 2004; Yoon, 2022; Sagolsem, 2023; Kohout, 2023).

The South Korean entertainment industry agency, which is the home of this boy group or girl group, always has a mature and clear concept for each artist. The image you want to show to the public is, for example, retro, girl crush, dark, futuristic, high teens, or flower boy. They commonly include traditional cultural elements in musical instruments, song instruments, and clothing when making a comeback. This method makes this promotional

activity not seem dull. Idols use music and video media to carry out promotions, which are not carried out directly but covertly. They package this promotional activity with various exciting and educational content. So, fans worldwide voluntarily support and promote it and indirectly help promote Korean traditional culture. The K-pop idol seen promoting traditional culture in an attractive package is Blackpink during the promotion of "How You Like That" in 2022.



Figure 1. The Modern Hanbok Costume Worn by Blackpink in "How You Like That" Become a World Trend.

(Source: <https://www.wowkeren.com/berita/tampil/00319161.html>, 2020)

Blackpink made a comeback by releasing the song on June 26, becoming a hot topic and attracting much public attention in various countries. Apart from the music, which is highly anticipated by fans, all the performances from the members (Jennie, Jiso, Rose, and Lisa) stole attention, especially the part where they wore hanbok costumes or traditional Korean clothing modified to make them modern, which received a positive response, especially in the United States. In particular, Blackpink made headlines when appearing on NBC's online broadcast "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon" wearing a hanbok with the traditional pattern.

In the music video for "How You Like That," which earned multiple Guinness World Records titles as the most-watched video, music video, and K-pop video on YouTube in 24 hours, Blackpink members dance in "modern hanbok" cheerfully with colours and bold prints. The costumes were modernized and reformed so that the members were comfortable enough to dance while still maintaining the traditional characteristics of hanbok. Blackpink members are globally recognized fashionistas. They have proven their impeccable fashion sense by becoming the faces of luxury fashion houses: Jennie is a Chanel ambassador, Rose is a global ambassador for Saint Laurent, Jisoo is a Dior Beauty ambassador, and Lisa is an inspiration for Celine to be the right choice in promoting Korean culture.

Quoting Allkpop, Danha, the designer of Blackpink's hanbok, stated, "I never imagined that I would target overseas markets when I started my own business two years ago. I thought this was an opportunity to tell the world about the charm of our traditional clothing."

The reinvented hanbok gained popularity and became a trend both among fellow idols and society at large, domestically and abroad, along with the increasing popularity of Blackpink. Today, Koreans wear hanbok, known for its elegant lines and bright colours, on special occasions. However, it has become a trendy fashion item among the younger generation and foreign tourists thanks to K-pop and K-drama stars who played a role in spreading the beautiful costume. Other Kpop idols who use modern

hanbok in song promotions or comebacks include Mino in the MV "Fiance in 2018", Agust D in the MV "Daechwita in 2020", BTS in the promotion of Idol at Fallon in 2020, Bigbang in the MV "BAE BAE in 2015", Mamamoo at the KBS Song Festival performance in 2020, A.C.E in the MV "Favorite Boys in 2020", Oh My Girl at the Golden Disk Award performance in 2021.

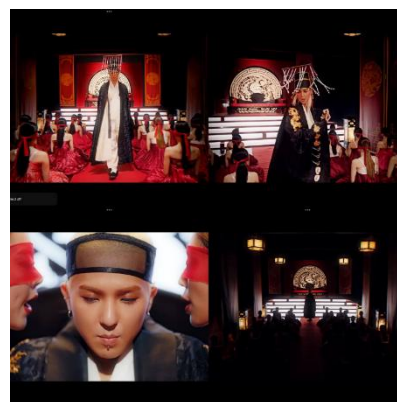


Figure 2. Footage of several scenes in Mino's MV "Fiance"
(Source: <https://youtu.be/NY8VGNft-Zc>, 2018)

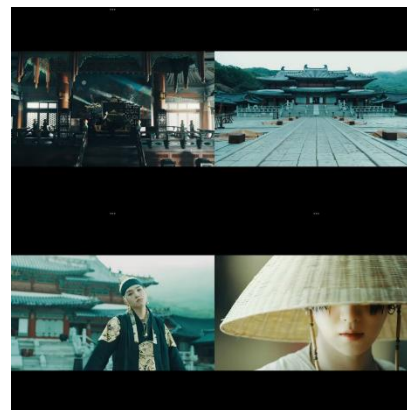


Figure 3. Footage of several scenes in Agust D's MV "Daechwita"
(Source: <https://youtu.be/qGjAWJ2zWWI>, 2020)

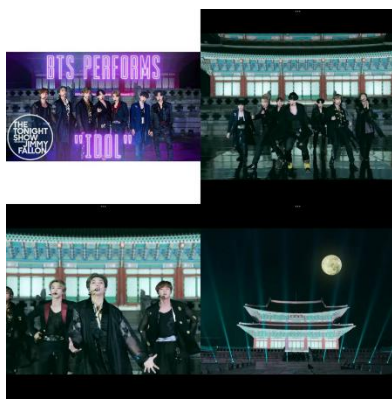


Figure 4. Footage of several BTS appearances on Jimmy Fallon in 2020
(Source: <https://youtu.be/MXFkjMNXfpY>, 2020)



Figure 5. Footage of several scenes in the Bigbang MV "BAE BAE"
(Source: <https://youtu.be/TKD03uPVD-Q>, 2015)



Figure 6. Footage of several scenes in A.C.E's MV "Favorite Boys"
(Source: <https://youtu.be/P416UUDVs>, 2020)

In pictures 2, 3, 4, and 6, all of the music videos prominently feature traditional Korean clothing, particularly hanbok, which is either presented in its original form or with contemporary modifications.

For instance, Mino's music video for "Fiancé" (2018) and Agust D's "Daechwita" (2020) use traditional hanbok along with traditional Korean musical instruments in their intros, creating a fusion of historical and modern elements. These videos also include backgrounds styled with South Korean royal aesthetics, such as thrones and regal palace settings, which enhance the traditional theme. BTS's performance of "Idol" on Jimmy Fallon in 2020 similarly embraced a traditional theme, with a stage set designed to reflect conventional South Korean architecture and featuring modern Hanbok that blends traditional and contemporary styles. In Bigbang's "Bae Bae" (2015), hanbok is prominently featured in scenes with the character TOP, who appears alongside other members dancing with ladies-in-waiting, all dressed in hanbok. Additionally, A.C.E.'s music video for "Favorite Boys" (2020) incorporates a traditional theme by showcasing royal-style settings and modern hanbok, merging historical elements with a contemporary presentation.



Figure 7. Footage of several Mamamoo performances at the 2020 KBS Song Festival
(Source: <https://youtu.be/RXyU0R6-w6s>, 2020)



Figure 8. Footage of some of Oh My Girl's performances at the 2021 Golden Disk Award
(Source: <https://youtu.be/zKY6uZeL5OM>, 2021)

Both performances from popular girl groups, namely Mamamoo and Oh My Girl, at this year-end awards ceremony prominently featured themes that integrated traditional South Korean elements. Their appearance features modern hanbok clothing combined with contemporary designs and combines elements of traditional culture in various aspects. For example, apart from Hanbok, which gives a touch of Korean culture, the intro and several parts of their songs feature traditional South Korean musical instruments, such as the Gayageum and Janggi. The use of these instruments adds a historical dimension to their performance, creating harmony between cultural heritage and modern innovation. By combining traditional elements in a fresh and exciting context, Mamamoo and Oh My Girl celebrate the richness of Korean culture and promote it effectively to a broader audience in a prestigious awards atmosphere.

IV. CONCLUSION

K-pop idols have become powerful agents of soft power, effectively promoting South Korean culture worldwide through the global spread of the Korean Wave. Their influence extends beyond entertainment, fostering international recognition and excitement for Korean culture (Cicchelli and Octobre, 2021c). This success is supported by strategic collaboration between the South Korean government and society, which bolsters the entertainment industry and benefits the national economy. K-pop also plays a vital role in cultural preservation by blending traditional elements—like hanbok and traditional instruments—with modern music and performance, captivating global audiences. As fans engage and share these cultural expressions, K-pop becomes a dynamic form of cultural diplomacy, enhancing South Korea's international image and promoting its heritage on a global scale.

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