KOCCA strategy for expanding South Korean cultural content to global audiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many nations to execute a large-scale social restriction which subsequently inhibited socio-economic growth and impeded the development of other sectors. South Korea, on the other hand took advantage of the outbreak as a catalyst to strengthen its economy and national image through public diplomacy. Effort was made by the South Korean government following the increase of consumption for Hallyu digital contents among international audiences during lockdown and social distancing measures. This article examines how the South Korean cultural content expanded to global audiences and have significant high-rise of exports during COVID-19 pandemic. This paper argues that the pandemic has created challenges for business industries including the ones related to cultural promotions. Nevertheless, the Korean government through the Korean Cultural Agency (KOCCA) continue to push the export of their cultural resources. Through the theory of public diplomacy, this paper discusses about the strategy of Korean government which is important behind the success of Korean cultural expansion. Our study found that South Korea has aggressively facilitated supports for the influence of Hallyu, particularly within the digital promotions of Korean cultural contents which is increasingly peaking and simultaneously carrying the nation's identity. Eventually during the pandemic, South Korean contents has proven to become the nation’s all-time highest export in 2021. Using the qualitative approach, all findings regarding the phenomenon will be compiled within one study.

1 Introduction

The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has been a major support to the development of South Korea’s social and political economy. The nation started to become the world’s leading cultural exporter when the government successfully took the advantage of globalization that carries the phenomenon of Hallyu across the world. The popularity of Hallyu has skyrocketed even more starting in 2020 especially when the COVID19 pandemic has forced people around the world to spend more time at home to avoid the spread of the deadly virus. During the lockdown and social distancing measures, people rely on digital home entertainments including the Korean contents. The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism reported that the consumption of Korean contents not only stayed strong amid the COVID19 pandemic, but also gained even bigger online viewers [1]. With the emergence of global online streaming or Over-the-top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix, Viu, Disney Plus, and other global OTT services, Korean content is able to be distributed to people’s digital screens very easily [2]. Interests towards Korean content portrayed how it can achieve top of the entertainment charts in many countries of the world. For example, the 2021 South Korean Netflix original series ‘Squid Game’ has ranked first in at least 90 different countries for the first time ever, beating the common English-language shows [3]. After the boom of ‘Gangnam Style’, the first ever Korean language film ‘Parasite’ to win the best picture at Oscar, K-pop idols who dominated global entertainments, South Korea's cultural export has shown a massive growth since then [4]. Do Hyoung Lee, the general director of broadcasting at Korean Cultural Agency KOCCA once mentioned the ongoing demand for its nation’s cultural export amidst the COVID19 pandemic. “The popularity of Korean drama has continued globally this year, just as it did in 2020,” he says. “As competition has been getting more fiercer between domestic and foreign online streaming services, such as Disney+, Netflix, TVing and Wave, demand for Korean drama has increased and there has been higher investment in production. This trend has stimulated the diversity of Korean dramas.” The mobilization restriction policies to stop the spread of coronavirus across the globe has allowed more people to discover Korean contents for the very first time. People started to spend lots of time-consuming online shows and binge-watching Korean high-quality contents through OTT platforms which further led foreign streaming services to put more investment towards Korean production [5].

Although there is a surge of demand on Korean contents, the coronavirus outbreak on the other hand has simultaneously prevented content creators from selling their productions to international buyers. It has been confirmed by the general director of the global business division at KOCCA, Park Seung Ryong that
transactions are usually enforced through face-to-face events including expos and content fairs but due to the pandemic, it created certain barriers especially to small companies and individual creators. COVID-19 pandemic suddenly has given South Korea a chance to widen its market but in return, has also cut off opportunities for their creators to make the most out of the new demand [6]. The case given above raises a particular research question, on “How does the KOCCA supported the expansion and capitalization of South Korean Cultural content to the global audience amidst COVID19 pandemic?” To answer the query posed by the research problem, this investigation employed the following conceptual framework: First, the report analyzed the factors that led to the explosion of the Korean wave and the high demand for Korean cultural products from citizens across the globe, especially amidst the pandemic. Second, the exposure of the South Korean government’s role, primarily through the Korean Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), in exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to further promote and escalate markets for Korean cultural contents. Particularly, KOCCA will be discussed as a component of a government agency that has been very proactive in sustaining Korean cultural content exports. Taking a deeper analysis, this paper will examine the mentioned phenomenon in greater detail through the strategies and practices of public diplomacy, focusing primarily on the export of the cultural sector and how the KOCCA’s attempted to execute their ambitions to satisfy the global demand for Korean contents. In the light of COVID-19 pandemic, this study will investigate the Korean culture abroad and finds out the significance of KOCCA as a government sector in sustaining Korean cultural expansion to the global audience amidst COVID19 pandemic. Therefore, it will contribute to the studies of international relations by adding more knowledge regarding government strategy and the processes underlying the unprecedented globalization of culture.

2 Theoretical framework

Transnationality of South Korean Drama has been generalized by a popular term known as The Korean Wave or Hallyu. The term refers to the international phenomenon of Korean popular culture including dramas, pop music, cuisines, games, fashion, and animation [7]. Ju (2018) stated that Hallyu was first described as an unexpected popularity and success of the South Korean Television Dramas (K-Drama) to other countries especially China and Japan [8]. Alongside with the 1997 financial crisis, Kwon & Kim (2014)mentioned that South Korean government have started to enact the liberalization of economic policies in order to encourage the aspects of creativity and entrepreneurship. The journal also added the point that Hallyu was made on purpose to become the nation’s primary economic export and in addition to that, the South Korean government attempted to invest heavily to their entertainment industry in order to avoid the worst impact from IMF bailout demand during the crisis. Based on the government’s huge ambition towards its cultural economy, Korean wave industry eventually gained global influence since then [9].

Youna Kim in a book entitled “The Soft Power of Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS, and Drama” proved the major expansion of Korean cultural contents. Taking a deeper look, Kim highlighted how people in the Western countries are very familiar with K-Dramas, as it is estimated that there are 18 million people who have watched Korean TV Dramas on a regular basis in 2014. The US ranked first among other top leading countries with the highest search for K-Dramas and the demand even grew, reaching up to 66% in 2019 [10]. Furthermore, the research mentioned about the South Korean government’s presence behind this international success which started from the attempts of popularizing the Korean Wave decades ago. The government in accordance with the private sectors seek to push on political power as well as economic success that can be received through popular culture, knowledge, and technological industry [10]. Kim (2020) highlighted that indeed, the non-state actors are part of Hallyu promoters, and is the one who provides aid, funds, or grants to local and international organizations, communities, and enterprises that take participation in introducing the culture of South Korea. The role of the government can be seen over 20 years ago, when the government designed a framework of the future of South Korea, with its culture loved by many people in the world. Thus, the widespread influence of Korean culture has played an important role in enhancing national identity which is utilized as the source of nation’s public diplomacy tools that also refers to South Korea’s soft power [11].

As part of the soft power instrument, Nye (2008) asserted three dimensions in the practice of public diplomacy. First, daily communication which refers to the management of media to explain state’s decisions on foreign policy. Second, strategic communication which focuses in utilizing the power of entertainment related resources to carry the globalized political values. Third, building long-term relationships through events made by government such as cultural festivals, educational events, and any other related support programs to foster mutual understanding, trust, and people’s attention. These three dimensions of public diplomacy practices will be utilized as the framework to explain South Korean government’s strategy in expanding their nation’s image through cultural contents, particularly amidst the COVID19 pandemic [12].

3 Methodology

This research is conducted in a qualitative approach which is one of the approaches utilized to indicate correlation and logic between findings and relevant theory [13]. The paper further describes about the phenomenon of Korean cultural expansion amidst COVID-19 pandemic and supported through data collected from South Korean governmental reports, official websites, journals, news, and other credible sources. Therefore, this research will produce an objective and coherent argument.
4 Findings and discussion

4.1 Factors Behind the Success of Korean Culture amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

Immense global sensation of the Korean wave has already begun since late 1990s and onwards, not only has the culture been absorbed by several Asian countries, but it also penetrated to European and North American countries. As stated by Lee & Nornes [14], the year 2000s became the start where Hallyu got distributed through the growth of social media and eventually came across outer parts of Asia. It is when the Korean government keeps on raising up their country’s exports from their cultural industries. For more than 20 years, the Korean government has maintained their cultural contents that are central to their economy, and which later refer to the emergence of a set of policies to support the cultural industries [9]. The growth of cultural export has been showing an increase as the total market value of entertainment culture reached 6.8% in 2020 and climbed up by 57.8% as per 2021 [15]. This high amount of exports has been shown during the year when the COVID19 pandemic hit the shore and has caused many industries to stop operating. There was a serious economic downturn during that time mainly due to social restriction and lockdown policies in several countries in order to stop the spread of coronavirus, but instead it has given more benefits to the South Korean cultural exports. During the pandemic, people’s consumption and interest for the Korean contents has arisen. They tend to spend their time at home to consume digital entertainment especially the ones made by the Korean content industry. This is shown by the evidence of higher number of Korean Wave content users including television, film, music, games, fashion, animation, beauty, food, and publication which has a total 8,500 content users from 18 different countries all around the world. This number is speculated to have more future expansion as analyzed by the Culture Ministry and the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange through Hallyu Survey released in 2021 [1]. During the 2020 massive lockdown, people has found their way to cope with the social restriction with Hallyu contents. South Korean dramas, TV shows and films were the most demanded contents as they provide enchanting escape from the reality of pandemic [16].

Despite the COVID19 Pandemic downturn on several aspects, KBS World reported that South Korea’s cultural contents has hit its highest point even since the start of the outbreak [17]. It has been proven that the creative content sales went up 7% in the first half of the year [18]. When the Netflix’s exclusive Korean Drama ‘Squid Game’ went viral, and the first non-English movie Bong Joon Ho’s ‘Parasite’ won series of category at the Oscar Academy Awards, indeed has created a sense of how strong South Korea can deliver their cultural resources to the globalized world [19]. The year 2019 was the first time that cultural content exports surpassed $10 billion, which almost doubled the volume from the $5.27 billion exported in 2014. The increase was also pushed by the rise of over-the-top (OTT) media services during prolonged social distancing protocols that simultaneously helped the Korean contents continuous growth especially K-Dramas. It also further nudged overseas studios to reach out to Korean content production companies for potential collaborations following the rapid demand [20]. The overall Korean cultural content exports driven by dramas, films, popular musical acts, webtoons, and games have increased by 16.3% in 2020 [21]. Netflix has also reportedly saw an 370% increment of Korean content viewership especially during 2020 lockdown [16].

The Korea Herald also reported that the Korean contents reaches new heights of popularity, marked by the survey which involved 8,500 people from 18 countries (China, Taiwan, Thailand, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, India, Indonesia, Australia, the US, Brazil, the UK, France, Argentina, Russia, Turkey, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates), there are 58.5% citizens who consumed more Korean contents in 2020, and 61.1% in 2021 [22]. The appeal of Korean contents to universal audiences is obtained through how the contents are designed to be more digestible and can relate to everyday lives. For example, Korean dramas are infused with urban middle-class scenes and embrace more to the alternative modernity and Confucian tradition. Korean pop stars and artists are also strictly trained to create a perfect role model for younger generations. These cultural resources would further influence people all over the world to consume Korean products that are distributed from Hallyu [23]. Other factors that contributed to these successes come from the soft power aspect that reflected South Korea’s motivation to overcome negative past, government aggressive strategy to promote Korean wave across the industry, and the technological factors that helped the larger outspread of Korean cultural contents [19]. Furthermore, the current influence of the paradoxical sense of ‘Koreanness’ as explained by Kim (2023) also strengthens the export of Korean wave which existences become primary [24]. Under the theory of cultural hybridization, Ryoo (2009) examined that the Korean wave has currently been included as part of everyday lifestyle for global citizens, making it an important agenda in the Korean government policy context [25].

The Korean creative economy is overseen by a number of government ministries and agencies. Over the years, South Korea has built distinctive government parts which would support the exports of their cultural resources [26]. Back in 2001, the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) was established in order to oversee and coordinate the promotion of the content industry [27]. Notably, KOCCA is being placed as the key government agency responsible for developing and implementing direct support programs including free consultations for legal, providing marketing or promotional assistance, localization strategies and giving financial support. Furthermore, it mainly focuses on expanding the Korean cultural contents to meet the needs of global markets [26].
4.2 The Role of Government (KOCCA) in Public Diplomacy and Cultural Practices

4.2.1 News management
KOCCA stands at the forefront of the globalization of Hallyu. Each of KOCCA’s localized websites feature details and the latest news regarding trends in K-dramas, television broadcasting formats, K-pop, mobile gaming, webtoons, and films [28]. Since the COVID19 cases started to arise, KOCCA has also been very proactive in declaring a clear direction of their foreign policy approach towards the Korean wave to manage the global audience’s hope towards the continuation of the distribution of South Korean cultural contents. As correlated with the concept of public diplomacy, news management is very important to carry out diplomacy through the media. This first dimension of public diplomacy can be seen through one of South Korean media reports that highlighted KOCCA’s decision to strategize the maximization of their cultural exports. Korea JoongAng Daily, a South Korean English-Language media which associated with western media The New York Times, published that KOCCA has provided the three-step plan to help content creators in establishing business overseas through assistance for online transitions, hosting the online K-Content expo, and adding new feature to WelCon, the agency’s content marketing platform [6]. Based on the news highlight, South Korea has declared to the world that they would even be more aggressive in promoting their cultural contents. By taking advantage from the growth of technology and information, they use the media to attract people’s attention and announce their ability through news, which is brought globally using the English language.

4.2.2 Strategic communication
The second dimension of the practice of public diplomacy underlines the importance of strategic communication, mainly asserts on the global political agenda propagated through their cultural resources. Regarding this, the Korean government is utilizing the global influence of Hallyu to promote the image of South Korea as a “safe country”. They also emphasize on consuming Hallyu contents as an ideal activity to stay indoors, promoting the nation’s campaign called “K-culture closeness” [29]. As the cure to COVID19 pandemic, every nation has also attempted to push to have all their citizens vaccinated. However, the world has struggled to gain people’s trust towards the quality of the newborn COVID19 vaccines. Regarding that, South Korea has taken the spotlight in influencing people’s mindset by engaging their Hallyu superstar, BTS as a plug for vaccine importance during pandemic. In September 2021, through their global popularity, BTS was introduced by President Moon Jae In to speak at the United Nations to encourage people around the world to receive the vaccine following the members that were already vaccinated against the coronavirus [30].

4.2.3 Relationship building
Moving to the third dimension, the practice of public diplomacy is also fulfilled through relationship building in order to directly connect with the citizens outside from their own country. To grab the spotlight, the government has created promotional activities through ways such as conferences, seminars, training, festivals, and others.

The annual Hallyu-related festival known as ON: Hallyu is one of the examples of events held by KOCCA in a purpose to give overseas opportunities for Korean content business seekers. The event was held online through the Virtual Reality program and undertakes promotion on new Hallyu exports to the global market including television, games, comics, story and other immersive content [31]. There is also MU:CON, an international music fair held since 2012 to engage musicians and music business owners so that they may have the opportunity to secure recording contracts and build collaborative creations with international producers [32]. During the pandemic, MU:CON was maximizing the use of online systems and proceeding the international music fair through KOCCA’s YouTube channel [33]. Other events are made more focused to each category including Broadcast World Wide (BCWW) for Broadcasting, WelCon, K-Content Online Business Meeting, and K-Content Expos which was held in several countries [27].

Significantly during the pandemic, KOCCA has strived to develop various online businesses to meet the needs of global consumers and help sectors that were forced to halt offline sales during the COVID19 outbreak. They have expanded support to further diversify target markets through online programs that would enlarge content sales overseas. In 2021, KOCCA made adjustments to participate virtually in leading international media content conferences that were formally held offline. Online media outlets have also been utilized in major regions including US (The Hollywood Reporter), Latin America (TVLATINA), Europe (C21Media), and the Middle East (Broadcast Pro) [34]. In 2022, the agency have made contracts of K-Content promotions which were signed to more than 100 countries and made promotional efforts in six overseas broadcast film markets including the Hong Kong International Film and TV Market, the Dubai International Content Market in the United Arab Emirates, the MIPTV in France, while also, creating new programs to help small-medium sized production companies to excel the international market [17].

Showing a great amount of support within the Korean government, KOCCA initiatives have given South Korea a big chance to compete on the global market and to expand the reach of its creative industries to a wider global audience as their target markets. Throughout the pandemic, the creative industry has contributed quite a significant amount of economic value as it is proven by the increment of their total content export which has hit all-time high of $12.4 billion in 2021 [35]. This number is far more than any other South Korea’s exports including home appliances ($8.67 billion), secondary batteries ($8.67 billion),
electric vehicles ($6.99 billion) and display panels ($3.6 billion), making the cultural content industry as a major source of the state revenue [36].

5 Conclusion

The COVID19 pandemic in other ways was very noteworthy to the growth of South Korea’s cultural content exports. It is the time when people around the world began to access more digital content due to social restrictions that keep everyone online at home. Fortunately, South Korea was utilizing the momentum as a kick to maximize their cultural transmission to other continents during the difficult times. As Hallyu was popularized since the 90s and beyond, the government continued to aggressively distribute their cultural contents mainly through digital platforms, online events, and other technological advancements. Through KOCCA, South Korea has simultaneously strengthened their national image through soft power which is carried out by the practices of public diplomacy. Having their culture loved and familiarized by many, South Korea eventually attained their all-time highest number of cultural content exports in 2021. This study has achieved a thorough elaboration on the support of South Korean government for their cultural industry which has become an exemplification of the soft power application towards the development of a nation’s public diplomacy. Hence, all findings within this study hopefully will add more knowledge to the cultural strategy and contribute to the exploration of the study public diplomacy and soft power. Through that, may this paper could inspire more academics and become source of reference for the next research study.

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