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K-pop as Soft Power: Influencing Fiske's Warmth-Competence Perceptions Among Diaspora Immigrants

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Abstract

How does K-pop influence perceptions about the broader Korean diaspora? Since the start of the Hallyu Wave of the 1990s, Korea has gained global visibility and risen in the soft power rankings through its cultural exports. This paper uses qualitative content analysis to assess a diverse set of K-pop artifacts, framed by Susan T. Fiske's Stereotype Content Model and Joseph Nye's soft power theory. The ostensible increase of Korean soft power extends to the diaspora living in the United States, subsequently increasing perceptions on the warmth dimension. However, this comes with the caveat of catering to Western hegemonic paradigms, consequently granting Korean-Americans marginal insider status. This study expounds on the evolving perceptions of Korean-Americans through South Korea's cultural exports, demonstrating that attempts to improve group position may result in the unintended repercussions of perpetuating the Western gaze.

Keywords: *South Korea, soft power, warmth-competence, K-pop*

South Korea's ascent as a global soft power phenomenon, epitomized by the cultural exports of the Hallyu Wave (1990s–present), including K-beauty, K-pop, and K-cuisine, has significantly influenced the international image of the nation, particularly in the United States, the country with the largest population of the Korean diaspora at 2.6 million (M) (Overseas Koreans Agency, 2023). As Korea gains visibility in the global community through these soft power tools, particularly through K-pop, or the “Korean popular music” genre, which originated in South Korea, the culture has attracted increasing appeal. This may aid in enhancing perceptions of warmth on Fiske's Stereotype Content Model. However, this improvement in warmth could come at the expense of catering to superficial stereotyping of the in-group, host demographic, thus reinforcing the otherization of the Korean people group through self-exoticization and reduction of culture in order to appease the gaze of Western audiences. The consequences of attempting to appease U.S. consumers include the erosion of cultural identity, the perpetuation of Orientalist stereotypes, and the blurring of boundaries of hybridization and appropriation.

Literature Review

Hallyu and Soft Power

Korea's recent upsurge in global soft power has immensely contributed to the increased interest in K-industries, including beauty, entertainment, cuisine, technology, and fashion. This concept of “soft power” in South Korea manifests most saliently in the form of music and film, such as K-pop and K-drama, leading to other popularized cultural products such as K-beauty and Korean food. The exportation of Korean culture emerged in the 1990s with *Hallyu* or the Korean Wave, initiated by the international popularity of the Korean dramas of that time (Seo et al., 2020, p. 601). Moreover, the second wave, *Hallyu 2.0*, is currently led by K-pop idols from the most successful entertainment companies, Korean shows like *Squid Game*, the perpetual climb of K-beauty skincare and cosmetic exports, and even the transnational visibility of Korean cuisine.

The international attraction of the prevailing Hallyu Wave's cultural exports could contribute to South Korea's global soft power. A concept coined by Joseph Nye in 1990, soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.

It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies” (2004, p. x).

This is distinguished from hard power, which is achieving desired outcomes through coercion, such as leveraging a nation's military strength or economic might. For instance, in the carrot-stick approach to public diplomacy, both would be categorized as hard power tactics, with the carrot representing incentives and the stick representing threats. On the other hand, soft power employs persuasion in lieu of coercion by augmenting the attractiveness of a nation's culture, policies, or political ideals. Its primary objective is to gain allies, not eliminate enemies (Nye, 2004).

However, according to Nye, the two criteria of soft power are the source and the desired outcome (Nye as cited in Watanabe et al., 2015). Due to the source being a tangible marker of soft power, such as the attractiveness of specific aspects of a culture or policies, it is often conflated with the nation possessing soft power itself. Yet, without the outcome of fulfilling a political objective, a nation is not exercising power. This misconception of measuring power through visible resources is called the “vehicle fallacy,” building on the analogy that power is not concrete but carried through concrete vehicles (Nye as cited in Vuving, 2009, p. 4). An example of this fallacy can be illustrated by the United States, which has consistently held the top ranking in global soft power (with the exception of 2020) (*Brandirectory*) and is the originating home to the internationally popular Coca-Cola brand. However, the measurable act of foreigners drinking Coca-Cola does not necessarily indicate that they will adopt American policies and values (Nye, 2004). Nye analogizes this to the poker table: possessing the winning hand (the source) is not enough to win (the desired outcome) without playing strategically. It is also important to isolate the variable that affects a nation's soft power through awareness of preference and context. In his seminal book, “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics,” Nye discusses how critical it is to know one's prior preferences to measure whether soft power has made an impact, remarking that without this knowledge, one is just as causally deceived as a rooster who believes his crow makes the sun rise. Second, power relies on the context of the relationship, as a dictator executing a dissenter who intended martyrdom can spark an unintended revolution (Baldwin, 1979, as cited in Nye, 2004). Nye's argument emphasizes this underrated power of endearing others to one's nation

by compelling them to subscribe to an ideology without explicit threats or payments.

However, Walter Mead argues for a division of Nye's hard power into two categories: "sharp power," including military strength, representing the "stick," and "sticky power," referring to economic incentives, representing the "carrot" (2004, p. 48). In this conceptualization, sticky power possesses components of both hard power coercion and soft power attraction. For instance, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provides foreign aid through disaster relief, healthcare, and economic development, while also promoting U.S. foreign policy and democracy ("Office of Inspector General," 2025). The United States foreign aid does not fit neatly into soft or hard categories, which Ernest Wilson (2008) suggests as "smart power" (p. 111): the strategic incorporation of hard and soft powers, similar to sticky power but not limited to economic power. One critique of Nye's framework is the rigid binary he establishes between hard and soft power (Noya, 2006). Mead and Wilson's concepts of sticky and smart powers offer more inclusive alternatives, and scholars such as Alexander Vuving suggest a one-dimensional continuum with hard and soft on opposite ends and sticky falling in between (2009).

Due to the elusive nature of soft power in relation to hard power, there are some barriers to quantifying it in a nation, including hidden metadata, inconsistency between methodologies, and limited year range coverage. Three promising entities, Brand Finance, the International Monetary Fund, and the Soft Power 30, have generated indices in attempts to measure and rank global soft power. However, Brand Finance's research has only collected data from 2019-2025, while the Soft Power 30 report spans from 2015-2019, making it impossible to compare nation rankings of even a single year. Further, the discrepancies among methodologies factor into the shifting definition of soft power. For example, according to Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index, soft power is measured through a combination of the three Key Performance Indicators (KPI)—Familiarity, Reputation, and Influence—and the eight soft power pillars, which examine the different sectors where soft power operates such as Business & Trade, Education & Science, and Media & Communication (Woods, 2025). The KPI and soft power pillars each make up 50% of the weighting, with Influence carrying triple the weight of Familiarity and Reputation (30-10-10). Among the 173,602 partici-

pants in 102 markets, the KPI evaluated the participants' knowledge of a given nation, their positive regard for that nation, and their perception of the nation's influence. While Brand Finance covers an expansive range of data, it also prioritizes certain markets. On the other hand, the International Monetary Fund has created a Global Soft Power Index (GSPI) with a longer range of 1990-2021 (Cevik, 2024). Their methodology includes 29 indicators across six dimensions to measure global soft power: Commercial, Culture, Digital, Education, Global Reach, and Institutions. Their scoring system ranges from -0.59 to 1.68, with a median value of 0 and a standard deviation of 0.49. Additionally, the Soft Power 30 provides a methodology comprised of 65% weighted objective data and 35% weighted subjective data (previously 70-30). The six sub-indices of the objective data are enterprise, culture, digital, government, engagement, and education measured through reputable third-party sources ("Methodology," 2019).

One nation that serves as a template for the successful execution of soft power is Japan (Watanabe et al., 2015). Despite the nation's poor global reputation from its wartime past, such as the memory imprinted in China, Taiwan, and Korea during Japanese imperialism and the conflict with the United States during World War II, Japan is currently ranked 4th in Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index and has consistently ranked within the top five soft power nations from 2019-2025 (*Brandirectory*); the International Monetary Fund ranks Japan 2nd in 2021 (Cevik, 2024). This rebrand began in the 1980s and 90s and was ratified through the government campaign "Cool Japan" in 2013, which was a strategy intended to disseminate Japanese popular culture (Daliot-Bul, 2009). Outside of cuisine and gastrodiploacy, Japan utilized the attraction of its cultural exports with respect to intellectual property that marked it as distinctively Japanese. For instance, anime, manga, J-pop, Neo-Japonism fashion trends in the late 20th century (Fukai, 1996), and traditional arts all contributed to rehabilitating Japan's former reputation in history (Daliot-Bul, 2009).

In South Korea's case, the attraction of their cultural exports such as the K-pop industry or Korean skincare products parallels Japan's earlier model. Yet, the growth of Korean cultural exports in Hallyu only fulfills the first criterion of soft power: the source of attraction that fosters a "positive image in world affairs that endears nations to other nations" (Gallarotti, 2011, p. 9). The

second step is whether the attractiveness of K-culture achieves the desired objective, such as rebranding the nation from before its rapid economic industrialization. As a by-product, this endearment may also lead to the increased warmth of South Koreans as a social group. In 2025, South Korea ranked 12th in Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index, "emerg[ing] as the fastest-improving nation among those ranked in the top 100" (Jagodzinski, 2025, p. 41). A substantial catalyst behind its +2.2 point increase in 2025 is improvements in the Familiarity KPI, alongside more tangible growth in six of the eight pillars. Additionally, South Korea ranked 1st in IMF's index in 2021, largely due to its high score in the Commercial Prowess dimension (along with Japan), despite its low score in Culture (Cevik, 2024).

Fiske's Warmth-Competence Scale

According to Susan T. Fiske's research on the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), in society, the perception of social groups is measured by two dimensions: warmth and competence. While warmth "captures traits that are related to perceived intent, including friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness and morality," competence reflects "perceived ability, including intelligence, skill, creativity and efficacy" (Fiske et al., 2007, p. 77). One of the groups they identified as possessing low warmth and high competence (alongside "Jews" and "career/feminist women") is the monolithic "Asians" category (Fiske et al., 2002, p. 878-879).

Representing over 20 nations, the Asian American pan-ethnicity was formed from the racialized Yellow Peril stereotype of early immigration, which is the Western fear of invasion by Asian immigrants portrayed in late 19th-20th century media (Tessler et al., 2020), and the alliances between ethnicities for increased political power (Lee, 2019). Despite encompassing a diverse range of cultures, the impressions of distinct identities can be conflated within the Asian American category. For example, Chinese Americans, the largest and "perhaps most visible Asian-origin group" (p. 8), had a disproportionate influence on shifting perceptions of Asian Americans from the Yellow Peril to the Model Minority (Ibid.). For Korean Americans, I anticipate that cultural exports from the Hallyu Wave will both shape perceptions of the broader Asian social group and be influenced by narratives projected onto other dominant Asian ethnicities. For instance, the association of COVID-19 with China proliferated in the media, bringing to light

negative sentiments extended to the broader Asian American group. This is shown through the increase in anti-Asian hate activities, with 1,500 reported incidents in the one-month period in March–April of 2020 (Tessler et al., 2020) and a total of 1,087 anti-Asian hate crimes reported in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting program from 2020-2021 (TAAF, 2024). Compared to 2019, the 16 largest cities in the United States experienced a 145% increase in hate crimes against the Asian population (Han et al., 2023). As members of an out-group, the emotion associated with the Asian stereotypic warmth-competence combination is envy, as "the positive stereotype of their competence justifies the overall system but acts jointly with the negative stereotype of low warmth to justify the in-group's resentment of them" (Fiske et al., 2002, p. 879).

However, evidence indicates that the warmth dimension precedes competence in chronology and consequence (Fiske et al., 2007). This may be explained, in part, by human evolution where "the primacy of warmth is fitting because another person's intent for good or ill is more important to survival than whether the other person can act on those intentions" (Ibid., p. 77). Thus, in America, model minority stereotypes reinforce the low warmth-high competence of Asians as "too competent, too ambitious, too hardworking, and, simultaneously, not sociable" (Hurh & Kim, 1989; Kitano & Sue, 1973; Sue & Kitano, 1973; Sue, Sue, & Sue, 1975, as cited in Fiske et al., 2002, p. 880). Based on the social structure hypothesis, out-groups such as Asians must have one negative association with a dimension in order to balance the positive dimension; so, in order to have high warmth, an out-group must not compete with the in-group, and if an out-group has an impression of high competence, they are respected for their success but envied and subsequently disliked in the warmth dimension (Fiske et al., 2002).

Methodology

This paper proceeds through qualitative content analysis of a diverse set of artifacts (Schreier, 2017), incorporating a coding frame derived from the combination of the Stereotype Content Model and soft power theories, configuring salient K-pop data within Fiske's and Nye's frameworks. This includes the contribution of Black American GIs to the genre's genesis, an analysis of the growing use of English lyrics, the reinforcement and reframing of Orientalist motifs through female idols

and the “Flowerboy” (꽃미남) persona (Hu, 2023, p. 267), and the statements made by BTS to extend symbolic capital to Asian Americans.

Qualitative content analysis is particularly suited to this paper because it enables the flexible analysis of a variety of qualitative material with room for interpretation beyond the surface-level text. Additionally, while informed by existing frameworks, rather than imposing predefined categories, this analysis allows themes to emerge organically through the iterative engagement with the materials. This project systematically applies Margrit Schreier’s qualitative content analysis to inductively evaluate Korean cultural export material, coding the data into unit themes informed by linked theories that carve a new, nuanced argument.

K-Pop

As a product of Western popular culture influences and Asian modernity, K-pop has manifested as a distinctly hybridized result. This hybridization emerged from South Korea’s incorporation of post-World War II U.S. culture in the spheres of music, cinema, and fashion (Seo et al., 2020, p. 603). It aligns with what postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha terms “the mimicry,” wherein colonized subjects imitate aspects of the colonizer’s culture, language, and behavior in recognition of their subjugation (p. 127). While the United States never directly colonized South Korea, its influence was established through cultural imperialism in the entertainment industry (Yong Jin, 2007), fostering an analogous Oriental power relationship that evoked the imitation of Western popular culture.

The Birth of K-pop

In 1989, the genesis of the K-pop genre was cultivated in a hip-hop nightclub called Moon Night in Itaewon, Seoul. Located in close proximity to the Yongsan Garrison, which has served as the U.S. military headquarters since 1957 (Baik, 2022), nightlife in Itaewon catered to American soldiers, particularly Black GIs. The dance club Moon Night became the cultural nexus for Korean pop entertainers of the first Hallyu Wave, shaped by the influence of hip-hop imparted by Black American soldiers, as the “integrated club scene blossomed in the 1990s” (Bora, 2023, para. 5). As the Black GIs taught the Korean locals dance moves to American hip-hop songs, the club was a launchpad for numerous pioneers of the burgeoning K-pop genre, including Seo

Taiji and Boys, Kang Won Rae of CLON, and Hyun Jin Young (Park, 2023), each of whom brought hip-hop to the Korean music industry. Additionally, Moon Night functioned as a venue for the music producers who formed the “Big 3” K-pop entertainment companies: SM, YG, and JYP (Ibid.).

Enduring African American Motifs

This birthplace of modern K-pop left cultural imprints on the genre that can be glimpsed today from the prevalence of rap and African American Language (AAL) in lyrics (Garza, 2021, as cited in Schneider, 2023), the backstage Black American K-pop songwriters and producers (de Luna, 2020), the central role of a rapper in each idol group (Oh, 2024), and even aesthetic appropriation, such as ATEEZ’s Hongjoong styled in cornrows or MAMAMOO’s Hwasa wearing a durag (Bora, 2023). K-artists have also consistently collaborated with Black American musicians such as Missy Elliot, Usher, Snoop Dogg, Megan Thee Stallion, and Doechii (Bora, 2023; Mitchell, 2025; Sims, 2024). From its inception to its sustained practice, the K-pop genre has fostered a hybridized culture with Black American music influences stemming from United States Forces Korea (USFK) troops stationed in Yongsan. These “asymmetrical power relations formed in neocolonialism, including the style and aesthetics of Black American performers,” position Korean musicians’ incorporation of U.S. popular music through mimicry as a precondition for career survival (Oh, 2024, p. 28). This mimicry within the Korean music industry obscured Korean cultural expressions of identity in favor of adhering to dominating U.S. popular culture (Kim, 2021, p. 14, as cited in Oh, 2024). Beyond simple mimicry, however, the K-pop industry’s rooted and prevailing appropriation of Black American music conventions appears to leverage the high warmth attributed to the Black social group (Fiske et al., 2007) to increase the nation’s soft power appeal.

Integration of Western Pop Conventions

Further, the resemblance of K-pop girl group aesthetics with general Western pop conventions, as seen in music videos, blends with localized femininity to create a “K-pop pastiche,” where conventions of MTV are combined while eschewing “outright imitation, homage, [n]or parody” (Unger, 2015, p. 27). In pursuit of consumer appeal, these familiar traces of U.S. pop conven-

tions in pastiche music videos and hip-hop influences make K-pop more familiar and thus palatable as a global export (Seo et al., 2020). According to worldwide statistics, the U.S. has the second-highest number of national streams of K-pop videos, totaling 9.2 billion in 2023 (KOCIS). The West's mere presence as a substantial consumer audience influences how the K-pop industry portrays and markets itself.

Another mechanism of attracting consumer audiences is the increasing integration of English lyrics in K-pop songs. While statistics on this data are sparse, 41.3% of K-pop girl group lyrics on the Circle Chart's Digital Chart Top 100 were English in 2023, which is 18.9% higher than in 2018 (Yoo, 2023). Additionally, a study was conducted on 58 singles from BTS, BLACKPINK, TWICE, and Itzy, each of whom has surpassed 6 million monthly listeners on Spotify, a platform where 80% of users are from Europe or the Americas (Schneider, 2023). The quantitative results showed statistically significant positive correlations between English types and the chronological release dates of songs by BTS, BLACKPINK, and TWICE (Ibid.). While Itzy's correlation did not reach statistical significance, their median English types fall at 38.46%, second only to BLACKPINK, indicating their lack of correlational significance is due to their 2019 debut at a higher moderation threshold (Ibid.). Additionally, twelve tracks released before 2018 versus only one track released after 2020 contained fewer than 25 English types, demonstrating the incorporation of English in K-pop songs (Ibid.). Schneider also mentioned the prevalence of homophones and code ambiguity in lyrics, such as Itzy's "DALLA DALLA" song, in which the eponymous lyric contains the double meaning of uniqueness in Korean and money ("Dollar, dollar") in English (Ibid.).

Asian Archetypes in Hollywood

However, within K-pop performance, there is also a hypervigilant awareness of Western consumer audiences that reconfigures ethnic expressions. The K-pop infantilising motifs, such as schoolgirl uniforms and performing aegyo, and objectification, including sexualized choreography and upshots of leg imagery, navigate between the Lotus Blossom and Dragon Lady dichotomy in Western representations of Asian women (Shimizu, 2007; Unger, 2015). On the other hand, Asian men in Hollywood were historically placed into asexual categories: the capable and principled mentor, such as

Mr. Miyagi in *Karate Kid*, the "geek" (i.e. Data in *The Goonies*), or a comedic reframing of an actor, such as Jackie Chan, who was an ideal for masculinity among Asian audiences abroad but portrayed in "cute, comic asexuality" for Western audiences (Prasso, 2006, p. 108). This stereotype of emasculated and asexual Asian males in the West stems from the early perception of Chinese long silk gowns, jewelry, and braided hair between the cultures as effeminate (Ibid.), which has proliferated stereotypes that have persisted today. However, while Hollywood rejected that "femininity" as inherently asexual and incapable of romantic interest, the K-pop industry has leaned into soft masculinity branding in male idols with the popularity of the "Flowerboy" (꽃미남) persona that surfaced in the late 1990s alongside the first Hallyu Wave, which is characterized by wholesomeness, gentleness, personal grooming, and a slightly androgynous (by Western standards) appearance (Hu, 2023, p. 267). While one might not envision men as the subjects of Orientalist fetishization, marketing Flowerboy idols as objects of lust in K-pop invites a similar hypersexualization to female idols, each of the entertainment companies' own design. Catering to its substantial Western audience, the K-pop industry has capitalized on performing these Orientalist stereotypes to appeal to global expectations, making this foreign music industry more readily consumable.

This can lead to an internalization of the Western gaze visible in the realm of K-pop, as investigating racial representations translates to the way it is consumed for a global audience (Oh, 2014). For instance, in Shimakawa's *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*, she discusses the weight of Orientalist fantasies and projections resulting in an exoticizing gaze that perceives the Asian body through the lens of Orientalist assumptions, welcoming them through K-pop as a site for sexualized desire (2003). Accordingly, K-pop idols modify their performances to align with stereotypes for their Western audience's gratification and enrichment (Oh, 2014). It is a reformulated presentation of Korean identity for profit, which results in altered perceptions of the larger Korean people group.

Blumer's Group Position Status

In Blumer's conceptualization of group position status, the process of racial image forming is collective, enacted through the public media (1958). The abstract image of the subordinate racial group as a collective is

constructed in the remote, public arena, which attracts considerable attention from the dominant group; a “big event” of significance to racial discourse, far from the everyday, interpersonal encounters; the public figures that characterize the subordinate group, such as elites, leaders, and celebrities; and the subordinate group’s drive to frame perceptions to their strategic advantage (Ibid., p. 6). K-pop possesses all four implications as a venue for creating an abstract image on behalf of Korean subjects: the global scope and substantial Western, specifically U.S., audience of K-pop makes it a remote, public arena. It also serves as a recognizable “big event” through its branding as a national phenomenon (Unger, 2015) in the most ethnically homogenous country, with 96.6% of the population being of Korean heritage (Santander). The public figures are embodied in K-pop idols as global celebrities and have even been instrumentalized as public diplomats to promote South Korean international relations. For example, EXO performed at the 2018 Winter Olympics, Red Velvet performed for Kim Jong-un in North Korea, BTS met U.S. President Joe Biden and also gave a speech at the United Nations (Shafie, 2025). This leveraging of non-state actors through K-pop for diplomacy illustrates South Korea’s intent to “predetermine interpretations favorable to their interests” (Blumer, 1958, p. 6).

This abstract image formation is exemplified in the South Korean government’s strategic capitalization of the global star power of the K-pop group BTS, the most recognizable K-pop group worldwide (Reginato, 2024). Their celebrity glamour serves as “the source” for achieving various political soft power “outcomes” (Nye, 2004). For instance, after President Moon Jae-in’s appointment of BTS members as presidential envoys to the UN, over one million people internationally tuned in to watch their speech live in 2021, in which they endorsed the new COVID-19 vaccine and announced their vaccination status (Oh and Lee 2021, as cited in Shafie, 2025). Focusing on the context of the United States, following the 145% Asian American hate crime increase from 2019 to 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Han et al., 2023), this decision to employ BTS to support vaccination could have given discriminated Asian Americans access to their symbolic capital, the extension of influence (Bourdieu, 1989). The intended soft power “outcomes” at play here could include 1) The South Korean government projecting its voice on an international stage, filtered through the mouths of the

BTS members, 2) The U.S. political utilization of BTS’s warmth to diffuse anti-Asian tension and serve as a “big event” to overtake the reemerging Yellow Peril narrative, and/or 3) BTS, as public figures for Koreans and Asian Americans, leveraging their warmth from celebrity in pursuit of their desire to achieve a strategic advantage.

Both the second and third intended outcomes are visible in President Biden’s 2022 White House invitation to BTS, where they discussed anti-Asian hate during Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Month. During their visit and conversation on anti-Asian hate, they conferred their capital as public figures not only to their nation as South Korean citizens, but also to the ethnically Korean diaspora within the larger Asian American racial group. According to Fiske, the low warmth/high competence combination typically elicits passive association under ordinary circumstances and active harm during societal breakdown (Fiske et al., 2007). During a period of upheaval, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, active harm is elicited from societal fissures, where Othering stereotypes resurface from early Asian immigration, such as the Yellow Peril narrative of invasion and threat. This feeling of being threatened communicated through the Yellow Peril stereotype reflects the low warmth/high competence combination and associated emotion of envy (Fiske et al., 2002). However, leveraging warmth from BTS in order to mitigate anti-Asian hate during COVID-19 can work to counteract this longstanding Yellow Peril stereotype, either through eclipsing racial narratives as a new “big event,” lending their symbolic capital to the Asian diaspora, or both. At the same time, the warmth effects of BTS’s stardom in this instance are not uniformly applied but siloed to specific K-pop audience demographics.

Soft Power and the SCM

In the soft power equation, K-pop serves as the source for multiple intended outcomes theorized above. The Western influence of hip-hop and pop, the performance of Orientalist stereotypes, and the soft power effects from K-pop to U.S. audiences that extend to the Korean diaspora suggest an increase in the warmth dimension of Fiske’s Stereotype Content Model. However, out-groups such as Asians are typically ambivalent with one low dimension and one high dimension, and the only social groups that have been perceived as high in both warmth and competence are the in-group, its allies, and those who fit the category of a “cultural default,” since these

demographics are culturally hegemonic (Fiske, 2002, p. 881). Within the current model, the Korean ethnic group may only gain marginal insider status via allyship to hegemonic Western culture. This appeal to allyship can be glimpsed from the mimicry and the self-Orientalizing marketing of idols in the K-pop enterprise. Nevertheless, despite the industry's growing popularity, in-group status will not be fully achieved since Korean people, along with Asian Americans, are not a dominating social group in the United States. While these catering efforts may increase perceptions of warmth through soft power, it is not enough to grant the Korean diaspora in-group status, eluding retypification on the SCM and the associated emotions of pity (from high warmth/low competence out-groups) and admiration (from high warmth/high competence in-groups), most likely remaining in their fixed social perception of envy with low warmth and high competence (Fiske et al., 2002).

Discussion

Overall, as South Korean cultural exports earn more recognition internationally, it increases the familiarity of the culture as an instrument of soft power and a symbol of warmth on the Stereotype Content Model. The growth of the K-pop industry may be specifically inspected as a salient soft power tool that forms a new big event for Asian Americans' racial image formation. With the rooted cultural hybridization present from the inception of the K-pop music genre, these Black American influences remain visible today. For instance, the African American Language (AAL) in lyrics, the designated rapper role for idol groups, and the aesthetic cultural appropriation in stage fashion each denote K-pop as both a mimicry born from American cultural imperialism and the leveraging of warmth ascribed to Black Americans to enhance soft power.

Additionally, Orientalist gender stereotypes are played into in K-pop idol portrayals; the women in girl groups embody the combined innocent Lotus Blossom and seductive Dragon Lady, while the male idols repack-age the asexual stereotype into a similarly sexualized Flowerboy persona. This catering to Western consumers, especially given the significant U.S. K-pop audience, demonstrates the intersection of internalized Orientalist fantasies with the drive for global profit.

Applying this to Blumer's group position theory, the popularity of K-pop can also contribute to an intentional presentation in racial image formation for both Korean nationals and its extension to Asian Americans. K-pop fits all four of Blumer's conditions of racial images as 1) a public arena given the global nature of the industry, 2) a big event attached to the Hallyu Wave, 3) containing public figures in the celebrity of K-pop idols, and 4) strategic framing of these idols for public diplomacy. The navigation of this fourth point is vital in connecting global soft power with the warmth attributed to Asian Americans. This suggests an active attempt at negotiating social positions, illustrated by the diplomatic activism of K-pop groups like BTS. While it may be difficult to definitively identify the actors behind these strategic framings, it appears that both Korea-based entertainment companies and politicians capitalize on the influence of the Hallyu Wave. The effect of this is the apparent fulfillment of both soft power criteria: K-pop functions as the source of power, while the output includes speaking on behalf of their group members, Asian Americans, and endorsing vaccination. Through the Hallyu Wave, the popularity of K-pop also seems to enhance warmth incrementally based on Fiske's research of the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) on the warmth-competence scale. However, this may be a double-edged sword, as the K-pop music industry is subject to both losing its cultural identity and Orientalist projections from its Western consumer audience. Additionally, the soft power gained from these cultural exports may increase the warmth dimension to a limited degree, but it is not to the extent that it grants the Korean social group in-group membership governed by hegemonic dominators.

Further, the minute increases in the warmth dimension granted by K-pop, like BTS's public diplomacy history, may aid in diffusing Korean American treatment, as members of the envied group, but they are also subject to "passive association and active harm" (Fiske et al., 2007, p. 81). This indicates the conditional nature of warmth-competence stereotypes, demonstrating regression to old fears and stigma during moments of societal breakdown. For instance, Fiske mentioned the 1992 Los Angeles riots in Koreatown as a salient example of this phenomenon (2007), in which Korean American business owners profited from passive association during

stable periods, yet were the subjects of violence and looting in times of unrest. Similarly, during COVID-19, a period of societal breakdown, the broader Asian American group bore the brunt of hostility, shown through the uptick in anti-Asian attitudes and hate crimes.

Therefore, in the process of leveraging K-pop's soft power, profit, and warmth, Orientalist stereotypes are reinforced, and African American culture is appropriated, leading to self-exoticization and cultural erosion. Despite these concessions, Korean and Asian Americans appear to be granted only marginal insider status, as shown in the active harm propagated during times of societal breakdown.

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