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BTS, Pop Culture, and Soft Power

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Pop culture plays a significant role in the daily lives of citizens as sources of entertainment and gossip to bring up in conversation with friends and family. Yet, when a particular pop culture phenomenon grows to be embraced on the national level and is used to represent the country as a whole, then pop culture influencers' clout can translate into soft power. But how much influence do pop culture influencers have on foreign policy and how is that translated into soft power? And does this relationship differ among different countries?

Pop culture influencers do have a significant effect on a country's soft power in the international realm as understood by the political theorists Alexander Wendt and Joseph Nye. Indeed, the significance of the pop culture influencers on a nation's soft power depends on the relationship between the country's government and the specified cultural phenomena. Examining the case of South Korea and BTS, helps to demonstrate the translation of pop culture into soft power based on these two theoretical definitions. Pop culture phenomenon and influencers can have a significant impact which is then translated into soft power.

Theoretical Analysis

In Wendt's variation of Constructivist theory, he highlighted the importance of shared ideas – knowledge – in international relationships.¹ According to Wendt, “socially shared knowledge is knowledge that is both common and connected between individuals” and that “the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces.”² Furthermore, Wendt argues that actors are categorized into four different identities: (1) person or corporate, (2) type, (3) role, and (4) collective.³ Person or corporate identity is comprised of self-organizing, homeostatic structures that differentiate actors from other entities while the type identity is for individuals who have one or more similar characteristics regarding their appearance, attitudes, values, experiences, historical similarities, knowledge, opinions, etc.⁴ Role identity is dependent on the culture and not intrinsic attributes.⁵ Lastly, collective identity is unique in the sense that it is a combination of role identity and type identity, having a causal factor which causes actors to view the interests of others as part of their own self-interest.⁶ Thus, actors with collective identity possess altruism.⁷ It is also identity which defines interest;

1 Jackson, Robert H., and Georg Sørensen. *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Jackson, Robert H., and Georg Sørensen. *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.



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national interests change according to changes of identity.⁸ The type of identity which most relates to the cases I will introduce later in the paper is collective identity.

As for the different international system cultures that are created on the basis of the different nature of interaction between countries, Wendt describes three – Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian. In Hobbesian culture, states have no shared ideas and are invariably enemies.⁹ Moreover, the four features which make up this understanding of cultures include that military power is treated as the most critical and that decision-making tends not to consider the potential consequences of actions, failing to prepare for the worst situation in the future.¹⁰ Another feature of Hobbesian culture is that states tend to take strong actions to change the status quo and treat each other as enemies, destroying or conquering their adversaries if possible.¹¹ Lastly, if a war breaks out, the state actors involved would fight with perceived enemies, using violence without any limitations.¹²

On the other hand, in Lockean culture as described by Wendt, states may have shared ideas with others but will treat other states as rivals. Four characteristics also make up this definition, one being that no matter what conflicts exist between states, actors involved must adhere to each other's sovereignty in the current status quo.¹³ Additionally, as competitors understand that other actors may use force, relative military power is still important.¹⁴ However if the conflict would lead to war, state actors would limit the violence they inflict.¹⁵ The last trait of Lockean culture is the nature of rational behavior. In other words, states do not always have to escalate tensions as the mutual respect of sovereignty allows for lower risks of violence from adversaries.¹⁶

Kantian culture is the last which Wendt asserts in his theory. According to this type, if one state treats another as a friend, these states will develop shared institutions between them.¹⁷ Unlike Hobbesian and Lockean culture, there are only two rules for Kantian culture: (1) non violence - state actors cannot use war or the threat of war to settle disputes, (2) mutual help - state actors will fight as a team when one of them is threatened by a third party.¹⁸ All three of these cultures defined by Wendt are demonstrated in the translation of pop culture in China, South Korea and Japan into soft power as I will describe in this paper.

Nye's Soft Power

According to Nye, there are two different types of power. Hard power is "the ability to get others to act in ways that are contrary to their initial preferences and strategies" which includes using coercion through threats and inducements.¹⁹ On the other hand, soft power is "the ability to get others to want the outcomes that you want" and more specifically, it is "the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion."²⁰ Nye makes the argument that soft power is as important as hard power and is even more so in international politics.²¹ He explains this is so as soft power enables a change of behavior in others by using persuasion

8 Ibid.

9 Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. University Press, 1999.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. University Press, 1999.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Nye, Joseph S. *The Future of Power*. PublicAffairs, 2011.

20 Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs, 2004

21 Nye, Joseph S. *The Future of Power*. PublicAffairs, 2011.

and attraction without any need for competition or conflict to occur.²² Furthermore, unlike hard power, which in this day and age, would be more costly both financially and politically, soft power is “free” in the sense that it does not require substantial resources and has limited consequences in the case of failure.²³ Nye also points out the importance of style in utilizing soft power. Behaving arrogantly might be counterproductive and bring about repugnance rather than attraction as soft power is a matter of seduction²⁴. Additionally, he notes that soft power has not always been used for good purposes and “it is not necessarily better to twist minds than to twist arms.”²⁵ For instance, propaganda is a form of soft power.

BTS and South Korea

Bangtan Sonyeondan or Bulletproof Boy Scouts when translated into English is the complete name of the seven-member Korean pop group we know more commonly as BTS who has racked in awards like the American Music Award for Favorite Duo or Group Pop/Rock and the Billboard Music Award for Top Social Artist over the years after breaking into the American music industry. BTS debuted in 2013 under Big Hit Entertainment, borne out of CEO Bang Si Hyuk’s desire to create a group that could withstand social pressures and serve as a voice for the younger generation.²⁶ BTS’



BTS at the White House May 2022

ability to strike deep on a number of intensely relatable concepts have made them universally appealing.²⁷ This includes their debut song, “No More Dream,” calling out young people without dreams of their own, challenging societal academic expectations for Korean youth in the process as well as their album trilogy Love Yourself which focused on a message of self-love.²⁸

However, their thematic messages throughout their discography does not stay confined. In a speech to the United Nations in 2018, RM, the leader of the group, spoke about the importance of loving and speaking for oneself, asserting his own struggles with his “many faults and...many fears” and encouraging young people all over the world to “speak yourself” no matter “where you’re from, your skin color [or] your gender identity.”²⁹ This was not the only moment in which BTS demonstrated its reputation as one of the most socially conscious groups in Korea. Their lyrics have touched on subjects like mental illness, consumerism and issues in the school system as mentioned in “No More Dream.” They partnered with UNICEF for an anti violence campaign called “Love Myself” in November 2017, a year before their speech to

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Haasch, Palmer. “How Korean Sensation BTS Became the Most Popular Boy Band in the World.” Thrillist, www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/who-is-bts-korean-boy-band-explained.

27 Haasch, Palmer. “How Korean Sensation BTS Became the Most Popular Boy Band in the World.” Thrillist, www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/who-is-bts-korean-boy-band-explained

28 Ibid.

29 “We Have Learned to Love Ourselves, so Now I Urge You to ‘Speak Yourself.’” UNICEF, 30 Apr. 2021, www.unicef.org/press-releases/we-have-learned-love-ourselves-so-now-i-urge-you-speak-yourself.

the UN.³⁰ BTS and ARMY were successful in raising \$1 million for the campaign and UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta H. Fore thanked them, stating that this stood as “proof that young people around the world can come together and make a difference.”³¹

BTS has also participated in other philanthropic causes relating to a variety of issues around the world. Two of the most prominent were that related to the coronavirus pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. BTS’s scheduled tour date in South Korea were cancelled due to concern over COVID-19 and fans have been helping with relief.³² Following the news of the cancellation of the April concerts, ARMY who had gotten tickets for the sold-out shows began a movement to use their refunds to instead donate to help with relief and prevention efforts.³³ This was seen with the Hope Bridge Korea Disaster Relief Association which saw an uptick in thousands of dollars with some donating in the name of BTS or ARMY as a fanbase itself.³⁴ The charitable movement took major inspiration from Suga’s reported donation of 100 million Korean won (about \$83,000) to Hope Bridge.³⁵ As for the BTS’ inspired philanthropy regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, the kpop group donated \$1 million to the cause – which their fans rushed to enthusiastically match within 25 hours.³⁶ The reasoning BTS gave as to why they chose to contribute was that “prejudice should not be tolerated,” with Suga asserting that they want to voice the fact that “it’s the right of everyone to not be subject to racism or violence” and J-Hope stating that “whether through [their] music or charity,” they want to do what they can to “make it a better world.”³⁷

The rise of BTS has been linked to explicit strategies on the part of the South Korean government.³⁸ The role of Hallyu – “Korean Wave” referencing the phenomenal growth of Korean culture and popular culture ranging from music and movies to online games and Korean cuisine – in economic policy was first mentioned in 2001 in an address by South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung, who termed it a “chimney-less industry” and an engine of economic development that creates high added value with relatively little investment of resources compared to industrial development.³⁹

As seen in the diagram below, BTS as a group itself, was surprisingly on the same playing field as corporate giants including Samsung, Hyundai, LG Electronics, Kia and Korean Air in 2018 in regards to their contribution to South



30 Kelley, Caitlin. “BTS Deliver Speech At United Nations Urging Young People To ‘Find Your Voice.’” *Forbes*, *Forbes Magazine*, 25 Sept. 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/caitlinkelley/2018/09/25/bts-deliver-speech-at-united-nations-urging-young-people-to-find-your-voice/?sh=3b5d9bf7142d.

31 Ibid.

32 Benjamin, Jeff. “BTS Fans Inspired to Donate Concert Ticket Refunds to Coronavirus Relief.” *Billboard*, 9 Mar. 2020, www.billboard.com/articles/news/international/9324851/bts-army-donate-tickets-refunds-coronavirus-relief-suga.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Davis, Rebecca. “BTS on the Decision to Donate to Black Lives Matter: ‘Prejudice Should Not Be Tolerated.’” *Variety*, *Variety*, 3 Oct. 2020, variety.com/2020/music/news/bts-black-lives-matter-donation-1234789434/#!

37 Davis, Rebecca. “BTS on the Decision to Donate to Black Lives Matter: ‘Prejudice Should Not Be Tolerated.’” *Variety*, *Variety*, 3 Oct. 2020, variety.com/2020/music/news/bts-black-lives-matter-donation-1234789434/#!

38 Suntiikul, Wantanee. “BTS and the Global Spread of Korean Soft Power.” – *The Diplomat*, *For The Diplomat*, 4 Mar. 2019, thediplomat.com/2019/03/bts-and-the-global-spread-of-korean-soft-power/.

39 Ibid.

Korea's GDP at \$4.65 billion.⁴⁰

Moreover, during the administration of President Roh Moo-Hyun from 2003 to 2007, the declared prime nation objective was to become one of “the world's top five content powers in 2010” and the Korea Creative Content Agency was founded in 2009 to promote and support the production of Korean popular culture content.⁴¹ The map of the agency's strategic bases for overseas business signifies the very much supported spread of Korean culture by the government.



BTS and Soft Power

South Korea and BTS best illustrates Wendt's constructivist culture and Nye's soft power. Furthermore, it exemplifies the cultural identities described by Wendt, particularly the “collective” identity. This is clearly displayed in the philanthropic contributions by ARMY to support causes like the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the relief and prevention efforts regarding COVID-19 to which BTS has donated. As Wendt asserts, an individual who has a “collective” cultural identity views the interests of others as their own.

Another aspect of the case of South Korea is the fact that it demonstrates two of Wendt's culture types – Kantian and Lockean. As Wendt describes Kantian culture, if one actor treats another as a friend, these actors will develop shared institutions among them and for South Korea, this is demonstrated in the act of the UN working with BTS to create the UNICEF campaign love yourself. On the other hand, the aspects of Lockean culture as described by Wendt, includes that the states must adhere to the sovereignty of each other at the status quo despite any conflicts they might have as well as the nature of rational behavior. This was demonstrated when BTS acknowledged the shared sacrifice of Americans and Koreans when they received the Korea Society's James A. Van Fleet Award, named after a U.S. general during the Korean War.⁴²

In response, Chinese social media was outraged having perceived the message as a slight against Chinese soldiers in the war. China's state-owned tabloid, the Global Times, lambasted the group for its “one-sided attitude” that “negate[d] history,” but this media offensive against the kings of K-pop barely lasted two days.⁴³ Global Times quietly deleted its articles criticizing

40 The Contrarian. “The Economics of BTS.” The Contrarian, The Contrarian, 23 Sept. 2020, www.thecontrarianco.com/post/the-economics-of-bts.

41 Ibid.

42 Park, S. Nathan. “China Backs Off From Fight With K-Pop Fans.” Foreign Policy, 20 Oct. 2020, foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/20/china-south-korea-bts-kpop-nationalism-soft-power.

43 Ibid.

BTS and the negativity against the group in Chinese social media also faded quickly.⁴⁴

The case of BTS and South Korea also best exemplifies Nye's definition of soft power as "the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion." Instead of using a carrot and stick, South Korea has gained new soft power potential in 2020 as a result of BTS's rise that has relied on positive associations with South Korean culture, foreign policy and political virtues to attract others to its cause.⁴⁵ If used correctly, this newfound tool will enhance South Korea's influence on the international stage.⁴⁶ Furthermore, what South Korea has demonstrated in its case is cultural diplomacy, which soft power is the foundation of, mobilizing cultural resources.⁴⁷

The promotion of soft power through cultural diplomacy is the shared purview of both governmental and nongovernmental actors, as illustrated in the complementary roles of the South Korean government, which incentivizes the production and diffusion of Hallyu content through its policies and directives, and the private enterprises that produce and promote the content, such as the entertainment company Big Hit Entertainment, which manages BTS.⁷⁷ South Korean President Moon Jae-In also praised the success of BTS in spreading Korean culture around the world in a 2019 address.⁴⁸

Beyond such official promotional measures of governments and corporations, the case of BTS also demonstrates the power of grassroots "people-to-people" diplomacy in spreading soft power.⁴⁹ People-to-people diplomacy happens when positive feelings about a nation or culture are spread through shared experiences between individuals across cultural divides.⁵⁰ The enthusiastic dedication of the global BTS fanbase is a pivotal factor in the bottom-up facilitation of the band's meteoric rise to international success, as the universality of themes featured in the band's lyrics that offer listeners solace in the face of personal struggles and encourage them to love themselves and speak for themselves.⁵¹

Conclusion

Generally, popular culture is not considered as something which would affect politics. However, as many have said in the past, everything is political. Any action we take or behavior we adopt achieves a goal based off a certain set of norms, values, and assumptions. It is clear that though it is possible for pop culture influencers to have a significant impact on a country's soft power. Furthermore, the relationship between the influencer and the government is significant in translating pop culture into soft power as seen with BTS.

44 Ibid.

45 Lee, Chung Min, and Kathryn Botto. "The Case for South Korean Soft Power." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 Dec. 2020, carnegieendowment.org/2020/12/15/case-for-south-korean-soft-power-pub 83406.

46 Ibid.

47 Suintikul, Wantanee. "BTS and the Global Spread of Korean Soft Power." – The Diplomat, For The Diplomat, 4 Mar. 2019, thediplomat.com/2019/03/bts-and-the-global-spread-of-korean-soft-power/.

48 Suintikul, Wantanee. "BTS and the Global Spread of Korean Soft Power." – The Diplomat, For The Diplomat, 4 Mar. 2019, thediplomat.com/2019/03/bts-and-the-global-spread-of-korean-soft-power.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.