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De/Constructing the soft power discourse in Hallyu

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the discourse surrounding the transnational flows of South Korean popular culture, known as Hallyu (the Korean Wave), and its relationship to the country's soft power through a discourse analysis of Korean news and social media. Specifically, the study explores how Hallyu was addressed as Korea's soft power tool during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it gained even greater popularity overseas through digital means. The study questions how local cultural intermediaries, such as journalists, critics and YouTubers, have engaged with the Hallyu phenomenon. Although Hallyu is often considered a core component of Korea's soft power, aimed at increasing its influence in overseas reception points, there is a lack of studies on the meanings of Hallyu as a discursive construct in the Korean mediascape. Therefore, this study explores how Korean news and social media perceive and represent the global circulation of their local cultural content.

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Introduction

The transnational circulation of South Korean (Korean hereinafter) popular culture, often referred to as the Korean Wave or Hallyu, has overcome scepticism. In response to the initially unexpected rise of Korean TV shows, known as K-dramas, in Asia since the late 1990s and the global surprise of Psy's Gangnam Style in the early 2010s, there have been lingering concerns about Hallyu's sustainability (e.g. Seo, 2013). However, contrary to those who predicted the premature demise of the phenomenon, mega-hit Korean content, such as *Parasite* (2019), *Squid Game* (2021) and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022), and Korean celebrities, such as BTS and Blackpink, have increased Hallyu's global visibility. This rise continued during the COVID-19 pandemic; people's limited physical mobility due to the pandemic increased remote and digital communication created an opportunity for Korean media industries to accelerate their outbound flows (Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange [KOFICE], 2021). This study focuses on discourses around Hallyu during the COVID-19 pandemic period because the further growth of Hallyu during the period may signal a new phase in transnational flows of Korean popular culture. In particular, social distancing during the pandemic has reinforced, and contributed to, Korean content's global dissemination through extensive integration into digital platforms. This tendency may be differentiated from the earlier periods of Hallyu.[1]

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Hallyu's influences have not been limited to cultural markets, which can be measured by the size of content sales and audiences. Arguably, this cultural wave has made transnational impacts in various realms – from tangible, economic sectors to relatively intangible sectors, such as culture and politics. In particular, in terms of Hallyu's intangible impact on international relations, Korean cultural content is recognised for its ability to enhance the national image and brand power of its origin country, sometimes referred to as soft power. Popularised by political scientist Joseph Nye, the term soft power means a nation-state's cognitive, affective and/or normative power to attract others in international relations (Lee, 2011; Nye, 2008). Although originally developed in the United States (US)' foreign policy context, soft power has been applied to other contexts – including more recently to Korea's Hallyu-driven international influences.[2]

Some studies of Hallyu have increasingly depicted this popular cultural flow as an instrument for Korea's global power (e.g. Kim, 2022; Valeriano & Nissen, 2022). Meanwhile, major overseas media have explicitly identified Hallyu as a major source and trigger of Korea's soft power. For example, The Guardian (2022) newspaper printed an editorial on Korea's soft power which humorously noted that soft power is South Korea's nuclear weapon (para 2). Especially for Western media, soft power appears to be appealing rhetoric through which the effects and contribution of Korean popular culture can be conveniently stereotyped. That is, multifaceted and complex meanings of Hallyu are attributed to be the origin of the country's national power.

Discourses about Hallyu as Korea's soft power have also been observed from within the country. In particular, the Korean government has increasingly described the country as a 'strong soft power nation' (*sopeuteupawo gangguk*), referring to the global recognition of Korean cultural content (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2022). The government's public relations documents have emphasised the country's position as a soft power leader while promoting the government's role in enhancing Hallyu-driven soft power (Won, 2021). During the pandemic, the government's celebratory commentaries on the country's Hallyu-driven soft power have frequently appeared in its public relations outlets, such as *Korea Policy Briefing* (www.korea.kr).[3]

Meanwhile, Korean news media have begun to use the term soft power to address the country's enhanced cultural influence, especially after the global success of Korean content and artists, such as *Parasite* and BTS. Moreover, discourse about Hallyu and soft power has been circulated among the public, as can be observed in user-generated content and online comments.

Overall, the soft power discourse has increasingly been incorporated into the popular discourses about Hallyu in Korea during the pandemic. This process through which 'Hallyu as soft power' is constructed as a discourse may affect how various stakeholders and audiences of Hallyu interpret and practice this new cultural flow. While the soft power discourse on Hallyu influences overseas audiences and industries, it also exerts domestic ideological effects on the Korean public and media by entailing (a) changes in the way Koreans perceive their popular culture and collective identity and (b) the enhancement of nationalistic sentiments and ethnocentric cohesion (Lee, 2009). This implies that gaining a comprehensive understanding of the discourse about the soft power of Hallyu requires examining both the cultural wave's international and national effects. However, a focus on the international effects of Hallyu and soft power has tended to dominate existing studies.

This study addresses the understudied area of Hallyu's discursive effects on the Korean mediascape by exploring how Hallyu has been perceived as a soft power resource in cultural intermediaries – mainstream Korean news media and user-driven social media. Cultural intermediaries – referring to various stakeholders in between the phases of the creation and reception of a cultural product (Khaire, 2017) – play an important role in the meaning-making process concerning Hallyu. Among different cultural intermediaries, this study focuses on Korean news and social media because they reveal how Hallyu is discursively constructed in Korea, which may also influence and be influenced by global meanings of the cultural wave. By examining the national discourse on Hallyu-driven soft power in the mainstream and grassroots realms, we can better understand how the rapid transnational circulation of Korean culture, Hallyu, may reshape Koreans' collective self-perception and self-representation.

Contextualising the soft power of Hallyu

Inspired by Nye's (2008) soft power thesis, according to which a nation can gain and increase its non-coercive power to attract and influence other nations through its cultural practices, the existing studies on Hallyu as soft power have emphasised the role of popular culture in international relations (Kim, 2022). However, the soft power thesis has been criticised for its limitations and biases, as numerous critics have raised theoretical and empirical questions against Nye's initial idea and its variations (Bakalov, 2020; Hayden, 2012). Most of all, many critics point out that the definition is too simplistic to capture complex processes of the ways in which a country's influence on others is constructed and negotiated in international relations (Fan, 2008). The analytical pitfalls of the soft power thesis have also been revealed by numerous empirical case studies (Stuenkel, 2016; Szostek, 2014).

Among other issues, the soft power concept's cultural biases may be highly troubling when the concept is incorporated into discourses about Hallyu. Indeed, according to critics, Nye's soft power thesis seems to draw on a strongly Western-centric position from which US-style liberal democracy is set as an ideal soft power model (Fan, 2008; Keating & Kaczmarska, 2019). Thus, it may not fully explain but rather stereotype the ways in which various transnational flows of culture, such as Hallyu, evolve. As Fan (2008, p. 151) aptly noted, it is important to ask: 'to *whom*, is it soft power?' For example, non-Western cultural content has begun to be named 'soft power' when Western critics and media began to recognise it.

Despite the problems with the soft power concept, for the past few decades, numerous national governments and industries have deployed the soft power thesis to justify and promote their strategic instrumentalisation of cultural resources. For example, especially in the 21st century, East Asian countries (Korea, Japan and China) have increasingly applied the concept to their policy and industry discourses (Chua, 2011; Lee & Melissen, 2011). According to Lee's (2009) analysis, Korea was 'not interested in developing and applying soft resources to produce influence in the region and on the global stage' at least during the first decade of the Korean Wave – that is, until the mid-2000s (p. 216). It was not until the 2010s that the concept was extensively incorporated into the discourse surrounding the Korean Wave. Thus, Lee's (2009) study on soft power in Korea concluded with the following

suggestion: 'Now Korean leaders need to recognise the importance of soft resources and soft power for Korea and invest more in the development of Korea's soft power through national and systematic efforts' (p. 216). This statement may not be surprising given that the Korean Wave itself began with rather unexpected overseas attention to Korean popular cultural content in the late 1990s and found solid audiences outside Asia only in the 2010s.

Several early studies suggested that Korea's soft power strategies and initiatives were behind those of neighbouring East Asian countries – especially Japan, which has been known for its Cool Japan initiatives since the 2010s (Lee, 2009; Lee & Melissen, 2011), and China, whose government has tried to soften its national image since the mid-2010s (Edney, Rosen, & Zhu, 2020). In comparison, more recent studies have claimed that the Korean government's policies regarding its soft power were neither developed later than those of other Asian countries nor did they simply imitate their earlier counterparts, such as those of the Japanese government (Jin, 2021).

A view that acknowledges the unique trajectory of Korean soft power strategies has been articulated only in relatively recent studies of Hallyu (e.g. Jin, 2021; Nye & Kim, 2013; Y. Kim, 2021; Lee, 2019). In particular, Lee (2019) asserted that Hallyu as a soft power resource evolved through a unique model of a 'new patron state' in which 'democratic, neoliberal and globalists agendas have been actively articulated within the statist policy framework' (p. 4). According to Lee (2019), within Korea's soft power strategies, the state and the market are not in opposition but, in fact, support each other. Consequently, Korean society 'quickly embraced an economic consensus of culture that justifies the government's application of state-led industrial strategies to the field of culture' (p. 5).

Indeed, compared to neighbouring countries, Korea seems to have intensively cultivated its cultural realm as the core of its soft power (Kim, Kim, & Connolly, 2016). However, there have been few in-depth studies on how Hallyu has been represented as soft power in Korea's mediascape. That is, apart from the government's increasing interest in utilising and supporting Hallyu, little is known about how the Hallyu phenomenon is represented in the public discourse in Korea. Except for several analyses of Korean news coverage of Hallyu (e.g. Jung, 2019), the discourse analysis of Hallyu as Korea's soft power resource remains an understudied area in the flourishing Hallyu studies. The existing studies on Hallyu and soft power have analysed the cultural wave as a public diplomacy instrument, focusing on a 'top-down and unilateral approach by governmental actors to enhancing national prestige abroad, underpinned by the institutional legacy of a "developmental state" model of governance' (Kang, 2015, p. 444). In doing so, they have failed to explore non-governmental actors' role in making meaning of transnational cultural flows.

To address the lacunae of these existing studies and to explore the ways in which meanings of Hallyu-driven soft power are created in public, the present study focuses on cultural intermediaries, including critics, news outlets, and online influencers in the Korean mediascape. While both overseas and domestic discourses about Hallyu as a soft power resource are worth researching, this study focuses on its Korean discourses. In doing so, it can explore how the Western coinage of soft power is incorporated into, and influences Koreans' perception of the unforeseen global dissemination of their national cultural content.

A few studies conducted prior to the pandemic examined Korean newspapers' coverage of Hallyu (Hwang & Park, 2020; Jung, 2019). For example, Hwang and Park (2020) identified five thematic categories in Hallyu-related news – culture, economy, education, political environment and area (e.g. Asia) – and suggested that Korean media's coverage of Hallyu was highly influenced by external events. However, these earlier studies focused only on mainstream news media without addressing grassroots responses. Thus, the present study aims to address mainstream news and user-driven social media. In doing so, it explores both mainstream and grassroots practices of discourse about Hallyu as soft power. The study will reveal the cultural politics of *national* discourses about a *transnational* cultural phenomenon (i.e. Hallyu). That is, this project aims to explore the meanings behind the soft power discourse of Hallyu, rather than measuring or analysing Korea's soft power per se. As discussed earlier, it may be fair to state that soft power is not yet a sufficiently theorised concept but rather a rhetoric utilised in various realms to link Hallyu with the origin country's international status. The present study offers an early foray into the much-needed analyses of ideological effects and meaning-making around the soft power discourse in the time of Hallyu.

Research methods

To explore how Hallyu has been discursively constructed in Korea's mediascape, especially in relation to the soft power concept, this study analyses the narratives of cultural intermediaries, including *mainstream* news media and *grassroots* (user-generated) YouTube videos. In particular, it offers an examination of the discourse on Hallyu as soft power in the latest phase of the Korean Wave through an analysis of narratives emerging in six major Korean broadsheets and popular user-generated videos on YouTube, published between January 2020 and March 2023. This period, which overlaps with the COVID-19 pandemic, is important for understanding the Hallyu-soft power discourse especially because the term soft power began to appear more frequently during this period in which Korean media content gained remarkable global recognition and Korea's pandemic control was acclaimed by overseas media. The discourse circulated during the pandemic may reveal how a new phase of Hallyu is perceived, interpreted, and negotiated.

To explore how Hallyu is signified in relation to Korea's national position and power, the study examines domestic discourses around Hallyu as soft power through narratives of major news media and user-generated social media content. This study draws on a critical discourse analysis of the two sets of Korean texts that include 'Hallyu' and 'soft power' (*sopeuteupawo* as a loanword in Korean) as their keywords. First, to examine mainstream news media's representation of Hallyu as soft power, major national newspapers with relatively sizeable national circulations were analysed – namely, *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, *Hankyoreh*, *Kyunghyang Shinmun* and *Hankook Ilbo*. Among these six newspapers, the former three are considered the major conservative newspapers, whereas the latter three are regarded as relatively liberal.[4] The materials were collected through the largest Korean news database, the Korea Integrated Newspaper Database System (KINDS). News reporting was analysed as it is an important genre of discourse involving 'a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to

a socially constructed set of categories' (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, p. 53).

Second, to explore grassroots discussions of Hallyu and soft power, the 10 most popular Korean YouTube videos (at least 100,000 views) concerning Hallyu and soft power were analysed. Owing to the study's aim of exploring user-generated content, a video on a mainstream broadcast channel on YouTube that met the above criteria was excluded. The videos belong to several popular Korean YouTubers/channels – K-Culture Video (3 videos), China_News (2 videos), DJ_Channel (2 videos), Chopsticks (1 video), Ko-realism (1 video) and Canada Korean Broadcast (1 video). These amateurish channels, each of which has a sizeable subscriber base (between 96,000 and 325,000 as of March 2023), tend to continuously produce many videos on Korean culture. They appear to be amateurish in terms of their production quality as the images and subtitles are not professionally designed and there are frequent typographical errors in their titles, subtitles and texts. Along with the 10 most watched videos, all viewer comments on those videos (between 100 and 2,000 comments per video) were scraped and analysed using an online software tool, Netlytic. Although the study's small sample size may preclude drawing generalisations from the findings, the 10 most popular user-generated commentaries and other users' responses to them will reveal some aspects of a salient grassroots discourse around Hallyu as soft power.

The deployment of critical discourse analysis is intended to explore the ideological implications of the seemingly 'normal' or 'neutral'. By denaturalising the discourse around the soft power of Hallyu, this study aims to identify what is salient, absent or taken-for-granted in this discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The two sets of discourses are selected because they represent respectively mainstream commentaries (i.e. newspapers) and grassroots commentaries (i.e. user-generated content). These two sets of discourses may reveal ideological contestation around a new cultural phenomenon of Hallyu and its meanings.

Findings and discussion

Mainstream news media: discourse about Koreanness

Korean newspaper articles have been covering Hallyu and soft power (together) in the 2020s. These keywords first emerged in the six major Korean newspapers in the mid-2000s[5] and appeared especially in 2021 and 2022. Therefore, it appears that soft power was gradually incorporated into the public discourse on Hallyu in Korea during the pandemic period. Between 2021 and 2022, three conservative newspapers with relatively large circulations (compared to their liberal counterparts) each produced 10 to 30 articles addressing Hallyu and soft power. However, after excluding the articles that only briefly mentioned the terms Hallyu and soft power rather than focusing on them, 30 articles in total were ultimately deemed relevant for the analysis of Hallyu as a soft power resource.

While the three relatively liberal newspapers rarely addressed Hallyu and soft power during the period (1–2 articles per year), the three conservative newspapers continued to cover the achievements of Hallyu by introducing the concept of soft power. The relatively frequent coverage of soft power and Hallyu in conservative news outlets may be explained, at least partly, by the tendency that Hallyu is addressed especially in relation

to its national economic effects in those outlets (Jung & Hwang, 2015). In comparison, the discourses of Hallyu as soft power were nearly absent in the liberal newspapers. Exceptionally, a few opinion pieces proposed the equity-seeking or infrastructure-focused development of soft power in Hallyu (e.g. Do, 2022; Lee, 2022). For example, an article in *Kyunghyang Shinmun* warned about the rapid commercialisation of Hallyu content and suggested that the newly elected president should prioritise decreasing cultural inequalities for building a strong soft power country (Do, 2022). In this manner, the liberal newspapers' coverage of Hallyu as soft power was limited in quantity and otherwise presented views different from those of the conservative media, which are relatively celebratory of the discourse of Hallyu as soft power.[6] The difference between conservative and liberal outlets implies that the soft power concept is not yet fully incorporated into public discourses. Moreover, news media – especially liberal outlets – may have some reservations in supporting the instrumental understanding of Hallyu as a tool for promoting Korea's international power – a view that has been pursued by the government (Kim & Jin, 2016).

In the three major conservative newspapers, overseas (especially U.S.) news and expert analyses were often presented as evidence of Hallyu-driven soft power. In particular, the newspapers favourably reported on major U.S. news outlets' coverage of global acclaim for *Parasite*, *Squid Game* and BTS between 2020 and 2022. For example, shortly after *Parasite* won four Oscars in 2020, *Donga-A Ilbo* published an in-depth article claiming that Hallyu had gone mainstream worldwide. The article cites favourable comments on Korean culture in major foreign news media to suggest that 'K-culture's quantum jump' has just occurred (Lee, Kim, & Yoon, 2020).

Moreover, all three conservative newspapers published reports on a U.S. conference (Center for Strategic & International Studies' conference, Beyond Security: South Korea's Soft Power and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance in a Post-Pandemic World, 5 October 2021) at which Joseph Nye delivered a keynote speech on Korea's soft power (J. M. Kim, 2021; P. G. Kim, 2021; Lee, 2021). The articles primarily summarise and introduce Nye's talk, in which he referred to Korea as a great success story of soft power, especially compared with China, which he classified as an unsuccessful example of soft power despite the government's heavy investment. In the following year, one of the newspapers also published an 'exclusive' interview with Nye (Im, 2022). In this relatively short, written interview, Nye emphasises the importance of soft power and highly evaluates that of Korea. However, his analysis barely addresses Hallyu, except for the rather general statement that 'Korea has an open social structure, great artists, and entrepreneurs willing to adventure. Its cultural products are dynamic and interesting' (Im, 2022, p. 2). Neither in the keynote speech nor in the exclusive interview does Nye present sufficiently detailed knowledge of Hallyu, yet he reiterates the soft power thesis by briefly mentioning Korea as a case study.

In citing Western experts, especially Joseph Nye, and other major foreign media, the conservative broadsheets began to consider Hallyu as a successful example of culture-driven soft power. Nye's evaluation of Korea as a successful soft power, especially in contrast with the seemingly unsuccessful case of China, was subsequently incorporated into the broadsheets' reports, including their own opinion pieces. By adopting the Western discourse on soft power, the Korean news media defined Korea as global soft power and described neighbouring Asian countries (Japan and China)

as left behind or backward-looking competitors. A *Dong-A Ilbo* article contrasts the global achievement of Korea's *Parasite* with Japan's domestic-oriented media industries (Lee, Kim, & Yoon, 2020). An article published in *JoongAng Ilbo* states that Korea has emerged as a leading cultural power of Asia, surpassing Japan (Na, 2020). The same article depicts China as a backward-looking neighbour that has not only restricted the import of Korean cultural content (*hanhallyeong*) but also serves as a model of unsuccessful soft power (or an imbalance between strong hard power and weak soft power). A column in *Chosun Ilbo* (27 October 2021) even claims that the Chinese government's ban on imports of Korean cultural content[7] is a 'blessing' because interaction with China would only restrict the creativity of Hallyu. Moreover, an earlier article from the same newspaper critically reports on a Chinese university's censorship of a lecture on Korean soft power and BTS (Lee, 2020).

Korean news media gradually introduced the soft power concept in its reporting on Hallyu. News reports on Korea as a leading soft power repeatedly cite 'authoritative' Western experts' views to confirm the country's soft power status. They also compare Korea's soft power with the soft and hard powers of neighbouring Asian countries (e.g. military, hard power-oriented China and old soft power Japan). In doing so, the Korean news media – especially mainstream conservative outlets – portray Korea as a digital- and pop culture-driven soft power that attracts Asia and the West. However, the Korean news media's tendency to report on Hallyu in 'a highly favourable tone without much fact-checking' – noted in Jung's (2019, p. 373) analysis of Korean media coverage of Hallyu – also appeared in the present study. In particular, the newspaper reports do not seem to provide sufficient information about how they judge Korea to be one of the world's strongest soft powers. In most articles, the term soft power appears to be associated with Korean culture, especially Hallyu, without necessarily being defined; only two articles briefly define soft power. The term soft power in the mainstream Korean news media tends to be adopted to describe Korea as a culturally advanced country – as a metaphor rather than an articulated conceptual tool. The cultural intermediaries introduced Hallyu as a soft power resource and, in doing so, contributed to shaping the public discourse about Hallyu and, more widely, Koreans' cultural characteristics. For example, a newspaper article identifies 'dynamism' and 'strength in detail' as key elements of Korean culture (Lee et al., 2020).

Whether favourable news reports rely on sufficiently solid evidence or not, media coverage may influence how Korean stakeholders and the broader public perceive Hallyu (Jung, 2019). The news media's representation of Korea as a soft power equipped with an influential popular culture has implications for the ways in which the domestic discourse around Hallyu has evolved. The Hallyu-soft power discourse in Korean news outlets has been circulating more frequently since the early pandemic period, during which Korea was acclaimed for its effective control of the COVID-19 virus and quality media content, such as *Squid Game*. This global recognition (often amplified by major Western media) was accordingly celebrated and reproduced by Korean news media. Consequently, a relatively positive self-image and recognition of Korea increased in the Korean mediascape. Not only mainstream news outlets but also audiences engaged with the emerging meanings of Korea as a soft power. As examined in the next section, ordinary content creators on YouTube and other social media have addressed Hallyu as Korea's soft power

instrument. Some of them have explicitly expressed jingoism and xenophobia while circulating absurd fake news to sharply contrast Korea's soft power with other countries' decreasing influence (Yang, 2022).

Social media: negotiating gukppong

Due to the rapid popularisation of YouTube as a daily go-to online space for many Internet users, user-generated content has been playing an increasingly important role in the public discourse surrounding Hallyu. Popular YouTubers have attracted a large number of viewers and accordingly influenced mainstream media and public opinion. Among the various genres of YouTube content in Korea, extremely nationalistic content has flourished since the late 2010s. So-called *gukppong* channels/content tends to exaggerate the superiority of Korean culture even by disseminating false information (Kim, 2020). Gukppong is a popular slang term that means being intoxicated with Korean nationalism. The videos analysed in the present study may not be gukppong content per se, as their perspective does not seem to involve explicitly fake news, which is considered a key element of gukppong YouTube channels. However, as discussed below, some viewers have accused these channels of expressing exclusionary jingoism and gukppong sentiments.

Similar to the news media, the 10 examined videos favourably address Korea in comparison with other countries.[8] The format of these videos is similar in presentation and content. The videos are relatively amateurish and 7–16 minutes long. In terms of the audio-visual presentation, most of the videos are under 10 minutes long and present relevant moving images (e.g. excerpts from TV documentaries) along with the narrator's voice-over. The narrator/YouTuber does not appear in the videos, except in two videos created by YouTuber Doksinnam (i.e. a man reading German newspapers for you), in which the presenter is visible in the corner of the screen throughout the video. These videos focus on commentary rather than providing opportunities for interactive and sensory entertainment that are common in many popular Korean YouTube video genres, such as mukbang (eating show). The videos, narrated mostly by men,[9] have somewhat extreme, and thus eye-catching, titles and subtitles that emphasise Hallyu's influence on other countries: for example, 'Korean dramas are governing Taiwan' (Video 2); 'Korea, conquering the world through its soft power' (Video 6).

The videos tend to share salient themes which overlap with those of the aforementioned news media – a nationalistic view, involving xenophobia, drawing on the eclectic use of foreign media reports. The 10 examined videos cite overseas news coverage of Hallyu as soft power in China (Videos 1, 8 and 9), Taiwan (Video 2), the United States (Videos 3, 4 and 10), Australia (Video 5), Spain (Video 6) and Germany (Video 7). According to these videos, the overseas news media have been celebrating the rapid rise of Korean culture across diverse genres, such as pop music, fine art, literature and baseball, during the pandemic. Moreover, similar to the news media's coverage, the videos tend to compare Korea's soft power with that of other countries, especially China. Such comparisons present not only the YouTuber's own view but also that of overseas news media cited in the videos (Videos 1, 5 and 9). China is addressed in several videos; interestingly, China is also a frequent keyword in viewer comments (see below).

Most videos tend to reinforce their own celebratory views on Korea's soft power by highlighting extremely positive, albeit conveniently selected, accounts from foreign media. They emphasise essentialised Koreanness, while portraying China negatively. The videos do not seem to critique the overseas sources but rather summarise them or otherwise eclectically utilise them to justify their own argument for Hallyu-driven Korean soft power and its global visibility. This tendency is explicitly illustrated in the most viewed video, titled 'Why Korea can do yet China cannot' (Video 1). In the video, the narrator emphasises 'Korean DNA', inherited from ancestors over 'the course of 5,000 years'. While this unique Koreanness is also addressed partly in the aforementioned news media, this YouTube video more explicitly presents a quasi-teleological narrative in which Korea is destined to thrive globally. It also eclectically introduces Chinese netizens' opinions that acknowledge a large gap between Korea and China in the quality of popular cultural content and the fact that Korean pop culture already surpassed that of Japan and Hong Kong in their heyday.

Among the nationalistic videos, a video created by YouTube channel K-Culture Voice, shows a relatively critical perspective in examining diverse references (Video 10). For example, this video that introduces U.S. media's account of Hallyu as Korea's soft power resource questions the Western-centric view implied in the news coverage. After briefly introducing the U.S. news media's favourable evaluation of Hallyu, the YouTuber states, 'While reviewing U.S. news media, I personally thought they interpret Hallyu by the norm of the soft power that they think they have' (Video 10, 1:00). In this manner, this video presents, albeit briefly, a critical view on the concept of soft power. However, neither this video nor all the other videos examined in the present study articulates the definition and relevance of soft power to understanding Hallyu.

YouTube viewers' comments are also important components of the discourse around Hallyu as soft power. The examined videos have attracted various viewer comments, most of which appear to strongly support the videos' content and claims. The most popular comments ('top comments' in YouTube terms) express pride in being Korean, often along with criticism of China and Japan. One of the most-liked comments on the aforementioned most-viewed video that compares Korea with China (Video 1) states, 'Korea is the only country that can unite the world. I am proud^^ (i.e. emoticon representing a smile)'. Some comments explicitly disapprove of Chinese cultural power. For example, some comments on this video claim that the inclusion of Chinese members in K-pop idol groups should be avoided for the further advancement of K-pop. These commenters show high regard for BTS's all-Korean composition, unlike several other K-pop groups (e.g. SM Entertainment-produced groups such as EXO and NCT). Such ethnocentric and xenophobic comments are just some examples among many similar comments on this video.

Of course, there are more critical viewer comments. Depending on the video, roughly 1–10% of the comments appear sceptical or disapproving of the video's nationalistic view. One interesting keyword commonly observed in the disapproving comments is gukppong. The commenters on these videos use this term to criticise the video's nationalistic approach. For example, someone commenting on Video 8 states, 'The Hong Kong cinema failed because of China's taking over Hong Kong, and Japanese culture has failed because of its Galapagos syndrome. Our culture may fall by China's taking over or Galapagos syndrome due to gukppong'. The commenter does not simply

disagree with the video's endorsement of Hallyu as soft power but warns about being immersed in the strong self-acclamation of gukppong. Such warnings are observed in several other comments. For example, a comment on Video 1 humorously notes, '(In this video), gukppong seems to exceed a lethal dose. Let's come down'. In reaction to the same video, a commenter laments the video 'having too much gukppong sentiment' and suggests, 'Although gukppong content may increase viewer counts, it would attract more low-quality viewers. We can be sufficiently proud of our country even if we draw only on facts (without exaggerating)'. Several other comments on the same YouTube channel's video (Video 2) explicitly point out the content's bias by describing the channel as a 'cancerous' 'gukppong channel'.

Overall, these most viewed videos draw on the views expressed in overseas news media to celebrate the rise of Korean pop culture as soft power in international relations. However, most videos and their viewer comments neither question the definition of soft power nor investigate the validity of overseas new media accounts. Rather, most videos, and many viewer comments, present jingoism, which is often accompanied by hostility to neighbouring Asian countries. In this regard, they may share some characteristics with gukppong YouTube channels. However, according to these video channels' own descriptions, they aim to share up-to-date information about Hallyu and the global recognition of Korean culture rather than promote a nationalistic discourse. That is, these YouTubers seem to characterise their content as balanced rather than blindly nationalistic, distinguishing their content from highly nationalistic gukppong content.

The discourse analysis of YouTube videos and user comments reveals how Hallyu is represented as soft power to reinforce Koreans' self-recognition. While most videos and viewer comments endorse the nationalistic discourse concerning Hallyu as soft power, some viewer comments express critical views that challenge the essentialisation of a unique Koreanness, which is often accompanied by xenophobia.Although limited in quantity, the critical views offer a potential counter-narrative against the dominant discourse of Hallyu as an instrument for national power.

Conclusion

Through a discourse analysis of mainstream news and social media, this study explores how the Hallyu phenomenon has been nationally imagined and represented in Korea – the origin country of Hallyu. The analysed data of news media and social media show similarities rather than sharp differences. First of all, they reveal a nationalistic and ethnocentric view. In particular, several popular YouTube videos and their numerous viewer comments enthusiastically celebrate Korea as a global soft power and even argue that the country has been destined to be a soft power. This nationalistic sentiment is often presented along with an exclusionary attitude towards neighbouring Asian countries, especially China. The news media (especially conservative newspapers) and social media frequently exhibit disapproval of China's potential to be a soft power, claiming that China has adversely affected the evolution of Hallyu. The Korean mediascape's discursive practice of celebrating Korea as a cultural superpower may resonate with the Korean government's ongoing desire to affirm its status as an advanced country, which was explicit in its celebratory discourse during the pandemic (Yi & Lee, 2020).

Moreover, the Hallyu narratives in news and social media, as well as in government documents, often rely on (Western) media's claim of Korea's Hallyu-driven soft power. This self-representation through the (Western) other's view may risk seeking recognition through gaining powerful countries' approval. Indeed, coverage of Hallyu as a soft power resource by major Korean newspapers (especially conservative ones), often citing Western experts' views, may at least partly reproduce the ongoing techno-Orientalist view in which Asia is imagined by the West as a technologically advanced, postmodern site. Though this new mode of Orientalism may reverse the previous Orientalist framework, it still essentialises Asia through stereotypes – a futuristic, fetishised imaginary this time, compared to the previous Western imaginary of Asia as a backward-looking, inferior other (Morley & Robins, 1995; Steinberg, Mukherjee, & Punathambekar, 2022). Given that the soft power concept itself has evolved partly as a strategy to revibrate US-oriented international relations (Bakalov, 2020), the Western-centric cultural biases implicated in the concept may need to be critically reconsidered. However, the mainstream and grassroots discourses around Hallyu in the Korean mediascape have increasingly adopted the term soft power as evidence of 'global' recognition of Korean culture. In the mainstream and social media discourses analysed in this study, the Western-centric nature of the soft power thesis is not questioned except for a few cases. The existing ambiguities and biases of the soft power thesis may explain why liberal Korean newspapers are relatively reluctant to use the term soft power, compared with conservative newspapers' increasing use of the term, which seems aligned closely with the developmentalist state ideology that entails the instrumentalisation of cultural resources for national development (Park & Lee, 2022).

Overall, Korean mainstream conservative media and YouTube influencers' discourses similarly consider Hallyu as an instrument for improving Korea's global influence. This narrative seems to resonate with the Korean government's initiatives on soft power and public diplomacy, which weaponise culture to enhance national power in international relations (Y. Kim, 2021). The instrumentalisation of culture is not a new trend; it has been facilitated by national and local governments as well as industries across the globe (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). The perspective has also been increasingly observed among non-governmental cultural intermediaries, including critics, news media, and netizens. As examined in this study, Hallyu is represented as a crucial component in improving the nation-state's soft power not only by the government but also by actors in cultural intermediaries.

Hallyu as a transnational phenomenon still remains ongoing and open to further evaluation. To understand how Hallyu exerts international and national influences, increasingly referred to as soft power in mainstream discourses, we need to critically explore complex processes of meaning-making around Hallyu. As a preliminary project, this study is an initial step towards addressing the national imagination of Hallyu by examining the soft power discourse about Hallyu in Korea. The discourse about Hallyu as a soft power resource is increasingly incorporated into not only the government's policy documents but also conservative news media's narratives. The soft power concept's increasing currency reveals that it may serve to conveniently capture an instrumental potential of culture as an element of national power. This view of instrumentalizing culture for a nation-state may reflect the lingering developmentalist state ideology in

Korea (Park & Lee, 2022). Moreover, the Western-centric term may be conveniently used by Korean mainstream media to affirm how Western discourses 'approve' Korea's effort to globalise its cultural industries – or to re-engineer its economy to be aligned with a 'global standard', to rephrase in a neoliberal term.

Increasing discourses about Hallyu as a soft power resource in international relations have been influenced by, and have influenced, the ways in which the cultural wave is signified both in local and global contexts. By initiating an exploration of the increasing discourses of soft power in Korean mainstream and social media's engagement with Hallyu, this study has addressed a lacuna in the existing research on Hallyu – a lack of discussion about Hallyu as a discursive construction process through which different modes of Koreanness are imagined and negotiated. The study suggests that *transnational* Hallyu is not separated from its *national* discursive constructions.

Notes

1. Critics have periodised the development of Hallyu by distinguishing between its early phase in the intra-Asian context (until the late 2000s) and its later period of social media-driven global expansion (since the late 2000s) (Jin, 2016). The pandemic period may offer another turning point for Hallyu especially in terms of the scale and channels of cultural flows. While the periodisation of Hallyu is not a key research question of this article, further research on the distinctive characteristics of Hallyu during the pandemic will benefit a historical understanding of this cultural wave.
2. This framework is already a few decades old. Originally, in response to commentary on the decline of the United States' economic and military power during the post-World War 2 era – especially in the 1980s, Nye (1990) proposed the soft power concept to suggest that the US' international power remains strong because the country still possesses significant, albeit seemingly intangible, power to attract other countries.
3. The conservative Yoon Suk Yeol administration (2022 – Present), newly elected in the middle of the pandemic, has continued to use the soft power concept to celebrate Korea's global status as an advanced nation-state, following up on the precedent liberal Moon Jae-In administration (2017–2022)'s frequent use of soft power in the government discourse. Compared with the predecessor, the Yoon administration appears to utilise the soft power concept explicitly to affirm its market-oriented approach to the development of cultural sectors as shown in the president's speeches. For example, the Yoon administration invited the soft power scholar Nye as the moderated discussant at the president's talk at the Kennedy School of Harvard University in April 2023 (Institute of Politics Harvard Kennedy School, 2023). The retired Harvard professor and soft power guru asked the president what was being done for increasing Korea's 'already impressive soft power'. The president responded that Korea's emerging soft power was led primarily by private sectors and markets and thus soft power might not be 'something the government can take the helm of'; for him, the role of the government in soft power development was to deregulate and thus facilitate free markets for industries to grow. While highly regarding the role of free competition in industries in cultural flows of Hallyu, he emphasised, "I will get rid of all that [i.e. any regulatory measures that restrict US companies' entrance into the Korean market]. Smiling, Nye responded, 'I would say that is a perfect answer. You would get an A at Kennedy School' (Institute of Politics Harvard Kennedy School, 2023, 36:35–38:00). This conversation between President Yoon and Professor Nye reveals how the Yoon administration utilises the soft power concept as a symbolic instrument to re-engineer Korea as a neoliberal nation-state that is aligned with the Western-centric, liberal-democratic world order in which the original soft power thesis is based.

4. *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, and *Dong-A Ilbo* are considered the 'big three' newspapers as they are dominant in media markets and take a conservative and right-leaning stance on socio-political issues (e.g. right-wing nationalism, anti-immigration, and anti-communism; Hundt, Walton, & Lee, 2019; Jeon, Kim, & Woo, 2022; Moon, 2022). These highly circulated newspapers have maintained their influence for decades and have owned their nationwide cable TV networks (referred to as general programming channels) since the 2010s. In comparison, the other three newspapers analysed for the present study – *Hankyoreh*, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, and *Hankook Ilbo* – are known for their relatively liberal stance. *Hankyoreh* and *Kyunghyang Shinmun* are considered explicitly liberal or progressive, whereas Hankook Ilbo is considered to be modestly liberal or centrist. In this regard, Reporters Without Borders (2022) has identified the latter as 'centrist' in comparison to *Hankyoreh* and *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, categorised as 'liberal' media outlets.
5. According to the BIGKINDS database, from 2005 to 2011, the keywords appeared in 2–10 articles (in all six newspapers) each year.
6. While two recent big data studies have revealed that the Hallyu phenomenon is reduced to its economic effects in Korean news discourses (Hwang & Park, 2020; Park & Lee, 2022), this tendency seems to be evident in major conservative newspapers (Jung & Hwang, 2015).
7. In protest of Korea's deployment of the U.S. missile defence system (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, also known as THAAD), the Chinese government banned Korean media content in 2017. Accordingly, Korean TV shows disappeared from China's broadcast media until 2022 (Yonhap News, 2022). China's hostility to Korea in the late 2010s has been considered an ideological pursuit of national identity through the creation of external enemies (e.g. demonising Japan in the early 2010s and Korea in the late 2010s; Rozman, 2020).
8. Information on the 10 videos is available in the References section.
9. Only one video out of the 10 analysed videos is narrated in a female voice; however, as this particular video's narration is dubbed by an artificial intelligence (AI) program, the YouTuber's gender is not identifiable. The other nine videos are not narrated by an AI program but by the channel creators.

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List of YouTube Videos (channel name, published date, title, viewer count, and URL)

Video 1:
China_News. (2021, November 5). Why Korean can do yet China cannot (1.55 million views). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghYxn7gLVGc
Video 2:
China_News. (2023, January 23). Taiwan's reaction: Taiwanese people watch K-drama for 216 days per year (390K views). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8co9lZKNWpw
Video 3:
Korealism. (2020, May 15). WSJ states,' 'Global recognition of Korea's soft power'; impressive overseas responses (229K views). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-9Uj6oYU0A
Video 4:
K-Culture Voice. (2022, May 4). The age of Korea has unexpectedly emerged (141 K views). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=en3oV1Orb_A
Video 5:
K-Culture Voice. (2022, January 29). Australia envious of Korea's growth. (131K views). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SR9PSE2t0oY
Video 6:
Canada Korean Broadcast. (2021, December 11). Korea's world conquest through soft power (129K views). Korea's World Conquest. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvsU_2kvwpU
Video 7:
DJ Channel. (2021, December 26). Hallyu as soft power leading Korean economy (126K views). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL7XAnW-zPU
Video 8:
Chopsticks. (2022, December 22). China: Wants to tackle. . . Survey results on Korea's cultural power compared to G7 countries (119K views). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNlxzy3R7ow
Video 9:
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