

Thumbnail Image:

Image not found or type unknown



From Korean Wave to Cultural Diplomacy: Proposing the Cultural Anchoring Model for Identifying Global Publics ^[1]

In 2025, Netflix's animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* emerged as a global cultural phenomenon, illustrating the expanding influence of Korean popular culture in transnational media markets. The film's soundtrack further reinforced this impact, achieving notable success on the Billboard Hot 100 and underscoring the capacity of K-pop to shape global cultural flows.

The popularity of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* exemplifies how global audiences increasingly consume and appreciate Korean culture, as seen previously with artists such as BTS, NewJeans, and PSY. This widespread recognition and successful dissemination of Korean cultural products beyond national borders is commonly referred to as the 'Korean Wave,' or *Hallyu* in Korean. As a cultural phenomenon, *Hallyu* highlights Korea's growing soft power and its ability to influence global cultural trends (Chon, M.-G., & Kim, J., 2025).

Classifying Foreign Publics for Cultural Diplomacy

An important question, then, is how this cultural popularity translates into the realm of cultural diplomacy and how it can be strategically leveraged as a tool of public diplomacy?

The global popularity of Korean cultural products exemplifies soft power, which works through attraction and shared values to shape international perceptions of Korea and foster favorable attitudes toward the nation. Understanding this linkage is essential for analyzing how cultural phenomena such as the Korean Wave, or *Hallyu* in Korean, can be mobilized to advance Korea's public diplomacy activities.

Cultural diplomacy, which employs cultural resources to foster relationships and enhance international engagement between nations, requires careful identification of key foreign publics who are actively engaged with cultural products. Recognizing these publics is essential for designing effective campaigns and developing strategic messages that resonate across cultural contexts. By understanding who these audiences are and how they engage with culture, practitioners can more effectively align cultural diplomacy initiatives with broader diplomatic goals.

According to the concept of public relations research, a single issue can generate multiple types of publics—such as active, aware, or latent—depending on individuals' perception levels regarding a given issue (Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T., 1984). Public segmentation, thus, is considered a critical strategy for organizations, as it allows for the more efficient allocation of resources—such as time and financial capital—and enhances communication effectiveness by focusing efforts on strategically important publics (Grunig, J. E., & Kim, J.-N., 2017). This public segmentation can also be extended to the realm of cultural diplomacy by shifting the

unit of analysis from organizations to nations, thereby enabling governments to identify and engage specific foreign publics in a more targeted and impactful manner.

"The popularity of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* exemplifies how global audiences increasingly consume and appreciate Korean culture, as seen previously with artists such as BTS, NewJeans, and PSY."

The global popularity and successful dissemination of Korean culture beyond Korea's borders is widely recognized as the Korean Wave. From the perspective of public sector organizations in South Korea, segmenting foreign publics who engage with or perceive the Korean Wave is a valuable strategic approach. By identifying and categorizing these foreign publics, organizations can develop targeted communication strategies and policies that leverage the Korean Wave as a key instrument of soft power. This segmentation not only enhances cultural diplomacy efforts but also supports broader national goals, such as improving South Korea's international reputation, strengthening bilateral relationships, and promoting cultural exports.

Summation Method in Strategic Communication Scholarship

The summation method (Kim, J.-N., 2011), based on the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), has been widely applied to segment publics into four types (Chon & Kim; 2025; Kim et al., 2021; Perez et al., 2021).

STOPS posits that individuals' communicative behaviors increase as they become more engaged in problem-solving processes, which are influenced by three key situational variables: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition (Kim & Grunig, 2011). These variables help identify four distinct public types—active, aware, latent, and non-public—based on their perceptions and motivations regarding a specific issue. While this approach is effective for analyzing public engagement in problem-driven contexts, it is less applicable in non-problematic or opportunity-based situations, such as understanding how individuals engage with foreign cultures like the Korean Wave.

Therefore, there is a need to reconceptualize the three situational variables to better capture audience segmentation and predict communication behaviors in contexts where engagement is driven by cultural interest rather than problem resolution.

Cultural Anchoring Model to Identify Foreign Publics

The Cultural Anchoring Model is designed to classify foreign publics based on how psychologically rooted or 'anchored' they are to culturally significant content (e.g., Korean Wave). Anchoring is determined by three perceptual variables: perceived cultural salience, perceived involvement, and perceived accessibility. The model results in four public types—nonpublic, latent, aware, and active—based on the combination of these perceptions, using a summation method which is based on survey research.

The Cultural Anchoring Model evaluates how strongly individuals are rooted in a foreign culture like Hallyu by considering three dimensions.

Perceived cultural salience captures whether people see Korean popular culture as socially important and influential in shaping global trends and cross-cultural connections.

Perceived involvement reflects the extent to which individuals feel personally and emotionally tied to Korean culture, integrating it into their identity, values, and lifestyle.

Perceived accessibility gauges how easily people can engage with and participate in Hallyu, from availability of content to supportive environments that make cultural participation seamless.

Together, these dimensions reveal how deeply foreign publics are anchored to Korean culture and how this anchoring translates into varying levels of engagement.

In conclusion, the Cultural Anchoring Model offers a strategic framework for identifying and segmenting foreign publics whose engagement with Hallyu extends beyond casual consumption into meaningful cultural anchoring. By incorporating perceptions of salience, involvement, and accessibility, this model advances beyond problem-centered approaches to capture the dynamics of cultural diplomacy in opportunity-driven contexts. In doing so, it provides practitioners and policymakers with a more precise tool to leverage the Korean Wave as a vehicle of soft power, strengthening Korea's ability to cultivate lasting international relationships and enhance its global reputation.
