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Proposing K-Culture Global Influence Index (K-CGI) ^[1]

BTS's March 2026 comeback was not just the return of a global music group. It was a cultural event on an extraordinary scale. After nearly four years away as a full group, BTS returned on March 20 with their new album *Arirang* and lead single "SWIM," and the response was immediate and overwhelming. Both the album and the single debuted at No. 1 in their respective charts, showing that the group's influence had only grown stronger during their time apart.

What made this comeback especially impressive was the way it brought together music, media, and global fandom at an unprecedented level. Netflix livestreamed BTS's Seoul performance to 190 countries in its first global live concert broadcast, drawing 18.4 million viewers worldwide, while promotional events quickly gained momentum and stadium tour dates across North America, Europe, and the U.K. sold out rapidly (NPR, 2026). More than a successful return, BTS's comeback showed once again that the group is far more than a popular music act. They remain a global cultural force that continues to shape media attention, fan participation, and the worldwide reach of K-pop.

Growing K-Culture

K-pop has been considered as more than entertainment. Rather than treating K-pop solely as a music genre, it is a broader cultural formation within *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) through media industries, fandom networks, and soft power. Korean culture including K-pop has become far more than a passing trend. For example, it is now a global cultural force that appears across many areas of everyday life, including music, television dramas, film, food, and beauty. Its influence can be seen in the way people around the world consume media, explore new products, and engage with Korean cultural content as part of their regular routines.

One of the most important features of this phenomenon is that Korean culture is no longer confined to a single entertainment category. Instead, it has grown into a broader lifestyle influence and an important part of Korea's international image. What began as strong interest in popular entertainment has expanded into wider cultural engagement, shaping tastes, preferences, and consumer behavior in multiple sectors.

The global scale of Hallyu is also evident in the continued growth of fan communities across countries and regions. These communities do more than support artists and shows. They help circulate cultural content, introduce Korean trends to new audiences, and build sustained interest through online and offline participation. In this way, fans play a major role in strengthening the visibility and continuity of Korean culture worldwide.

Overall, the current popularity of Korean culture can be understood as broad, data supported, and well established. Its influence is driven not only by famous artists and successful shows, but also by growing fan networks, cross cultural consumption patterns, and increasing interest

in Korean food, beauty, and media as part of global popular culture.

K culture is increasingly treated as a strategic cultural asset, but the way we measure it, both in academia and in policy, has not really caught up. Most indicators still fall into a few familiar lanes: exposure metrics that track what people watch, stream, or listen to; engagement proxies like fandom size; and broad soft power or national brand rankings where “culture” is only one small component.

Why K-culture influence should be measured

K-culture is clearly visible around the world, but visibility alone does not tell the whole story. Influence is about far more than simple popularity or viral attention. What really matters is whether Korean cultural content changes how people think, how they feel, how deeply they engage, and whether that interest leads to real-world behavior. Does it raise awareness of Korea? Does it shape attitudes toward Korean people, products, or values? Does it inspire people to watch more, buy more, travel, learn the language, or build a lasting connection? These are the kinds of questions that matter if we want to understand the true power of K-culture. Without measurement, we can say K-culture is everywhere, but we still cannot clearly explain how it matters, why it matters, or what kind of impact it is making.

What existing indicators do well – and why they are not enough

The current ecosystem for measuring K-Culture already contains several strong building blocks. To start, direct cultural experience is tracked through large-scale surveys such as the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE)’s Overseas/Global Hallyu Survey, which reached 26,400 respondents across 28 countries and mapped Hallyu across 12 domains, including drama, film, music, webtoons, games, fashion, beauty, food, and Korean language. Cultural scale and mobilization are also partially reflected in fandom-based indicators, such as the Korean Foundation (KF)’s global fandom statistics, which reported 225 million fans worldwide in 2023, with detailed regional and country-level breakdowns. At the national level, comparability comes from widely cited soft-power and nation-brand indices. Brand Finance’s Global Soft Power Index includes a “Culture & Heritage” component covering 193 countries, while the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (NBI) incorporates “Culture” as one of its six core dimensions.

Those tools are helpful, but they don’t add up to a full picture. They make it hard to compare cultural domains consistently across countries and over time, to separate casual attention from real influence, or to turn the numbers into decisions policymakers can use. Most capture exposure or perception at a single point in time, and few account for how culture spreads through social media ecosystems. To move forward, K-Culture measurement needs to go beyond simple “frequency of exposure” and evolve into a multi-layered index that captures perception, attitudes, and meaningful behavioral change.

Conceptualizing K-Culture Global Influence Index (K-CGI)

The K-Culture Global Influence Index (K-CGI) is intended to assess how foreign publics engage with Korean culture across five key domains: entertainment content, lifestyle and consumer culture, language and knowledge, heritage visitation, and fandom and participatory culture. It measures both the level of engagement in these domains and the effects of that engagement as it moves from perception to behavior. K-CGI also captures the diffusion of K-

culture by examining how initial exposure generates broader ripple effects beyond the original point of contact. Thus, the K-CGI is a multidimensional index that measures the global influence of K-culture by capturing both its social diffusion across foreign publics and its cultural internalization within them, from exposure and engagement to communication, participation, learning, and action.

To be conceptually useful, the K-Culture Global Influence Index (K-CGI) should define global influence not simply as the frequency of exposure to Korean cultural content, but as a multidimensional process through which foreign publics move from exposure to engagement, internalization, and eventually action. In this sense, influence is not limited to visibility or popularity; rather, it refers to the extent to which K-culture generates meaningful psychological, social, and behavioral effects among global audiences.

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The K-CGI is designed to capture this process by integrating survey-based measures with digital trace data and analytic tools capable of processing both structured indicators and unstructured text at scale. Surveys remain essential because they measure attitudes, emotions, motivations, and self-reported behaviors in ways that are conceptually clear and interpretable. At the same time, digital data make it possible to observe patterns of circulation, discussion, participation, and diffusion in near real time. Together, these approaches allow the K-CGI to assess both the subjective and observable dimensions of K-culture's influence.

This framework also recognizes the contemporary information environment in which cultural influence circulates through at least two interconnected markets. The first is the primary information market, in which K-culture is distributed institutionally through media companies, streaming platforms, broadcasters, and major news or entertainment outlets. The second is the secondary information market, in which content is reproduced, reinterpreted, and circulated through social media, peer networks, online communities, and interpersonal communication. K-culture's global influence emerges from institutional distribution as well as from networked reproduction by audiences themselves.

Conceptually, the K-CGI is structured along two distinct but related axes: a horizontal axis of social diffusion and a vertical axis of cultural internalization. Together, these axes capture both the breadth and depth of K-culture's influence on foreign publics.

The horizontal axis, or the social diffusion dimension, refers to the outward expansion of K-culture across communication networks, interpersonal relationships, and collective communities. This axis captures how influence spreads from individual reception to broader public circulation and collective participation. It reflects the ripple effect of K-culture as it moves through increasingly social forms of engagement.

The first level on this axis is exposure. At this stage, foreign publics encounter K-culture through television, film, music, online platforms, news coverage, and interpersonal contact. Measurement at this level focuses on the frequency, channels, and types of K-cultural content encountered. The second level is affective engagement. Here, foreign publics move beyond mere awareness and begin to enjoy K-culture with emotional interest, curiosity, and repeated attention. K-culture becomes more than content that is seen; it becomes content that is liked, followed, and emotionally valued. The third level is communicative diffusion. At this stage, individuals actively share, discuss, recommend, repost, and interpret K-culture through personal networks and digital platforms. Influence becomes visible through communicative behavior, as audiences themselves function as carriers and amplifiers of Korean cultural content. The fourth level is collective participation. This stage reflects involvement in fandom, online communities, cultural events, and other organized forms of shared engagement. At this point, K culture operates as an object of personal interest and as a basis for collective identity, coordinated activity, and community membership.

The vertical axis, or the cultural internalization dimension, refers to the inward deepening of influence within foreign publics over time. Whereas the horizontal axis captures the spread of influence across networks and communities, the vertical axis captures the degree to which K-culture becomes psychologically meaningful, culturally informative, and behaviorally consequential for individuals.

The first stage on this axis is initial awareness, in which foreign publics are simply exposed to K culture without substantial reflection or attachment. In terms of exposure, this stage is similar to the first stage on the horizontal axis, which captures the outward expansion of K culture. The second stage is cultural curiosity, in which repeated engagement leads individuals to seek more information about the meanings, values, aesthetics, or social context associated with Korean culture. The third stage is cultural learning, in which individuals pursue deeper understanding through learning the Korean language, exploring Korean history, or becoming interested in Korean society and traditions. The fourth stage is behavioral internalization, in which influence is translated into concrete intentions or actions, such as visiting South Korea, participating in Korean cultural activities, building relationships with Korean communities, or adopting Korea-related practices into everyday life.

Importantly, these stages should not be treated as a rigid or universal sequence through which all individuals must pass in the same order. Rather, the framework assumes that greater exposure to K-culture increases the likelihood of deeper engagement, broader diffusion, and stronger internalization, while recognizing that different publics may follow different pathways. Some individuals may remain at the level of enjoyment, whereas others may move toward language learning, travel, fandom participation, or broader forms of Korea-related affinity. The K-CGI therefore measures not a single linear route, but a patterned range of influence outcomes.

Taken together, the K-CGI provides a multidimensional framework for assessing how K-culture influences foreign publics across both social breadth and cultural depth. The horizontal axis explains how K-culture diffuses outward through sharing, networks, and collective participation, while the vertical axis explains how it becomes inwardly meaningful through curiosity, learning, and behavioral commitment. This approach makes it possible to move beyond conventional measures of exposure or popularity and instead evaluate whether K-culture generates sustained forms of engagement, social circulation, cultural learning, and

tangible behavioral impact.

In this sense, the K-CGI offers a more comprehensive account of global cultural influence. It captures not only whether K-culture is being consumed abroad, but also whether it is being emotionally embraced, socially transmitted, culturally internalized, and translated into meaningful action.
