

# Corea del Sur, la reconstrucción de la masculinidad como imagen de marca de la diplomacia económica del estado

## South Korea in Reconstructing Masculinity as Brand Image of the State's Economic Diplomacy

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**Resumen:** Aplicando la teoría de la diplomacia económica de Rana y Chatterjee, la diplomacia pública de McClory y la identidad estatal de Maxym Alexandrov, el objetivo principal de este estudio fue analizar las razones detrás de la promoción de la masculinidad suave en Corea del Sur a través de sus medios de diplomacia pública, tales como K-Pop y dramas coreanos. Particularmente en Corea del Sur, las ideas sobre cómo verse bien como "un hombre" están cambiando las actitudes y también influyen en el mundo. El estudio ha aplicado metodología de la fenomenología y métodos de investigación cualitativos para comprender el fenómeno de las relaciones internacionales contemporáneas que son la masculinidad suave y la diplomacia económica. La unidad de análisis examinada como tema es el "gobierno de Corea del Sur" y la unidad de explicación fueron los factores

**Abstract:** By applying the theory of Economic Diplomacy by Rana and Chatterjee, Public Diplomacy by McClory and State Identity by Maxym Alexandrov, the main purpose of this study was to analyze the reasons behind South Korea's promotion of soft masculinity through their means of public diplomacy, such as K-Pop and Korean drama. Particularly in South Korea, ideas about how to look good as 'a man' are changing attitudes and also influencing the world. The study has applied phenomenology methodology and qualitative research methods to understand the contemporary international relations phenomenon which are soft masculinity and economic diplomacy. The unit of analysis examined as the subject is 'South Korean government' and the unit of explanation were the driving factors of why South Korea promotes soft masculinity. The data were taken from the secondary sources such as various books, journals, reports, as well as documents from different relevant

impulsores de por qué Corea del Sur promueve la masculinidad suave. Los datos se tomaron de fuentes secundarias como varios libros, revistas, informes, así como documentos de diferentes sitios web relevantes y se aplicó un análisis integral y sistemático. Se encontró que la masculinidad suave como imagen que se promueve a través de la herramienta de diplomacia pública de Corea del Sur, como el K-Pop, crea el atractivo del país hacia la audiencia global ya que es una rareza. Corea del Sur se ha convertido en el líder de la masculinidad suave al incorporar la imagen a través de su diplomacia económica. Esta investigación revela además que Corea del Sur promueve la masculinidad suave en su producto K-Pop porque el país está utilizando la singularidad de la masculinidad suave como imagen de marca para mejorar su diplomacia económica para su industria cosmética.

**Palabras Clave:** Masculinidad suave, Pop coreano (K-Pop), Diplomacia económica, Corea del Sur

websites and a comprehensive and systematic analysis were applied. It was found that soft masculinity as an image that is promoted through the public diplomacy tool of South Korea, such as K-Pop creates the appeal of the country towards the global audience as it is a rarity. South Korea has become the front liner of soft masculinity by incorporating the image through its economic diplomacy. This research further reveals that South Korea promotes soft masculinity in its K-Pop product because the country is utilizing the uniqueness of soft masculinity as its brand image to enhance its economic diplomacy for its cosmetic industry.

**Keywords:** Soft masculinity; Korean Pop (K-Pop); Economic diplomacy; South Korea.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

South Korea is one of the countries that succeed in utilizing its entertainment industry as a tool for soft power diplomacy by its infamous cultural phenomenon of *Hallyu* or also known as the Korean Wave. The term *Hallyu* was coined in the 1990s after the liberalization of South Korean media. The phenomenon of *Hallyu* is used to describe the sentiment shared among Asian countries that enjoy the Korean pop culture. *Hallyu* has started in the last two decades ago, however the turning point of K-Pop itself started in the 2000's. According to International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook Database, South Korea has become the 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world and it is accredited towards its ability to utilize soft power as a foreign policy tool (Romano, 2018).

During the post-Cold War, South Korea began to reform its democratic government which was followed by the lightening in its control over the television censorship in 1987. Prior to that, the television show and music are strictly traditional and patriotic; no pop, American-influenced music allowed until a pop-rock band called Seo Taiji and Boys emerged on television. To this day, there are three powerhouse music agency that produce K-Pop groups which consist of SM Entertainment, JYP and YG Entertainment which consistently and exponentially led the birth of *Hallyu* and sustained its growth and popularity in and abroad.

The growth of *Hallyu* also helped South Korea to boost the potential of market expansion of the Korean brands. Following the footsteps of Japan, South Korea has made an incredible progress in establishing a high technology, industrialized nation with the popularization of Samsung, LG, Hyundai and Kia. Thus, South Korea is ranked among the world leaders in the production of consumer electronics, smartphones and LCD television with annual exports worth 483 billion US Dollars with 15 South Korean companies are found in the list of Fortune Global 500 (Schoettli, 2019).

The South Korean entertainment industry continues to thrive, following its agenda to conquer the market in the United States after their success in maintaining their foot in the Asia continent. In the recent years, there is a significant increase on the encouragement of soft masculinity among the global society to oppose the hyper-masculinity that is projected in the status quo. One of the main actors that helped the popularization of this phenomena is male artist of Korean pop music industry. Male Korean artist is infamous for their image as *kkotminam* (flower boys), which is portrayed to softer imagery in contrast to the hegemonic imagery of masculinity that believe male have certain expected gender roles to achieve social acceptance.

During the old era, actors in international relation is assumed as genderless due to the idea that every individual is allowed to participate in the diplomacy and negotiation process. Compared to other disciplines, International Relations is one of the last fields that started to open up with the feminist perspectives (Wibben, 2004). However, through the emergence of the feminism and gender theory along with its development in the modern era, it becomes clear that international relation is actually "gendered". Traditional scholars of International Relations rarely use gendered term and it creates the assumption that the actors are genderless, although it is generally known as a male-dominated field. Based on the explained research background, thus the author would like to explore the answer of "*Why does South Korea promote soft masculinity in its K-Pop product?*".

The structure of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 discusses the Literature Review, showing the characteristics of Masculinity as the New Norm, Soft Masculinity as Brand Image in the Economic Diplomacy of South Korea. The description of the Material and Methods is given in Section 3. The results are discussed in Section 4. Finally, conclusions are presented in Section 5

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Masculinity as the New Norm

Sun Jung has introduced that the concept of soft masculinity popularized by the Korean Wave is product of “transcultural amalgamation” which she refers as *chogukjeok*. Jung argued that the reconstruction of South Korean masculinity is reinforced in order to attract global audiences by following process of modernization and capitalism that lead South Korea to its success in the various global markets. The term of *kkotminam* (literal meaning: flower boys) is stated to replace the pre-existing image of tough and macho South Korean men.

One of the significant actors in introducing *kkotminam* is Bae Yong Joon, which starred in a Korean drama called Winter Sonata that happens to be the start of Korean Wave phenomena in neighbouring East Asia countries along with Southeast Asia countries (Jung, 2011). This imagery of *kkotminam* is later further popularized and developed into television series and Korean boy groups. Male Korean pop figures surfaced in the scene of entertainment industry and trademarked to dress well, have a delicate features and beautiful skin, wearing makeup and even to the extent of undergoing beauty surgery (Lovley, 2018).

In the same year, Jo Elfving-Hwang published “Not So Soft After All: Kkonminam Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Popular Culture” that argued the representation of soft masculinity in the Korean popular culture is a process of renegotiation towards the existing hegemonic construction of masculinity in the social structure and that it is beyond the cosmetic shift. Elfving-Hwang writes that the emergence of *kkotminam* does not share the similar meaning to the erasure of hegemonic masculinity nor effeminization of men (Elfving-Hwang, 2011).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is closely related with the word muscle, which means physical power or to accomplish by strength according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary. The etymology for masculine derived from the Latin word of *masculus* or *masculus* that means having the appropriate qualities of the male sex, mentally and physically and also related to the words manly, virile and powerful. The association of masculinity with power allows the marginalization and subordination of female. The Latin word *femininus* in its literal meaning is “to suck” and the characteristic of female is represented as the sex that bears children, as opposed to male that is positioned as a husband and a father that become the protector and provider in a family.

In contrast, soft masculinity is the concept of male ways of treating other people in a more subtle and gentler way (Louie, 2017). It also implies to the concept of masculinity that focuses less on physical power and strength which is attributed to male traits. This construction of masculinity portrays lack of aggressiveness and dominance of men over women significantly. Yoo Sang-Cheol in his book, *The Secret of Hallyu*, argue that the key for South Korea's regional success is the "uniqueness" of their popular culture (Yoo, 2005). The following table will show the comparison of hegemonic masculinity and soft masculinity in characteristic wise.

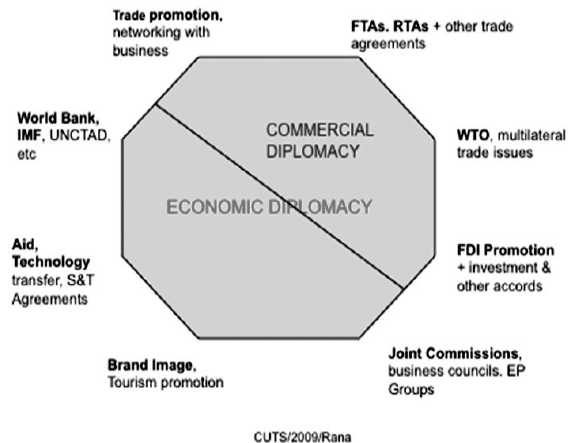
**Table 1. Comparison between hegemonic masculinity vs. soft masculinity**

Indicator	Hegemonic Masculinity	Soft Masculinity
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muscular, buffed body</li> <li>• Tanned skin</li> <li>• Defined facial feature</li> <li>• Thick facial and body hair</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lean, sculpted body</li> <li>• Fair skin</li> <li>• Soft facial feature</li> <li>• Lack of facial and body hair</li> </ul>
Mentally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of emotion</li> <li>• Dominant</li> <li>• Aggressive</li> <li>• Focus and physical strength</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More emotional</li> <li>• Less dominant</li> <li>• Gentle</li> <li>• Focus on intelligence and mental strength</li> </ul>

**Source: Proceed by author (2020)**

## **2.2. Soft Masculinity as Brand Image in the Economic Diplomacy of South Korea**

Economic Diplomacy introduced by Kishan S. Rana and Bipul Chatterjee state that its origin is the exchanges of products and services between the resident of one habitations, regions, and city-states to another. Rana & Chatterjee argue that a positive image of a country facilitates trade exchanges because its profile contributes to the brand reputation and it is influenced by how international society perceive the reputation. Throughout the world history, trade has become the initiative for inter-state relations and agreements, even to the extent of becoming the driving force of war and conquest. In his previous research, Rana illustrated an octagonal chart that shows the characteristics and differentiation of economic diplomacy and commercial diplomacy, as the following (Rana & Chatterjee, 2011):

**Figure 1. Economic and commercial diplomacy**

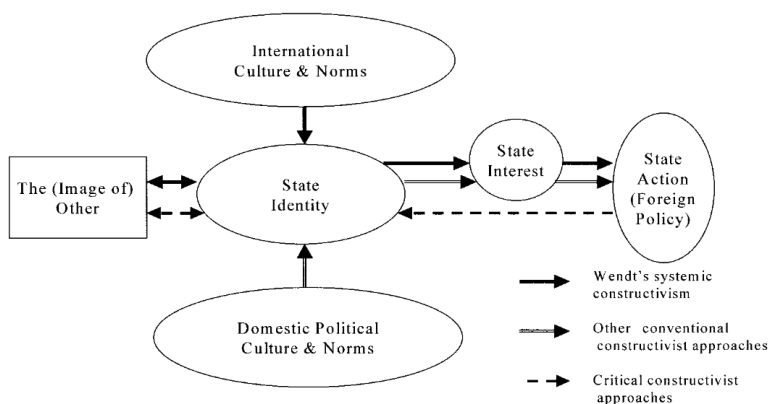
**Source: Rana (2009)**

Economic diplomacy is closely related with the nation-state brand due to the trade and investment destination profile that the country contributes to and is influenced by. Brand image of the home country becomes the core of the diplomatic activities. The most important key is to use a main idea that is powerful and simple which able to apprehend the country's unique quality. According to Pollins, the study of international political economy recognized that nation-states use the tools of diplomacy to obtain their economic interest that includes the establishment and expansion of trading relations (Patterson & Choi, 2018).

In analysing this case, the theory of Constructivism will be the core framework. It emphasizes on "intersubjective understanding and institutionalized norms, ideas, beliefs and values" which guide the international politics. Thus, the actors are not only state but expands into international organization, non-governmental organization, individual and others because idea and norm could be distributed from anywhere. The world is constantly changing because ideas and norms change over time, therefore the international relations is dynamic and is not permanent as contrary to what realism and liberalism believe. The adopted norm, idea, value and belief will shape the identities of the actors. The identity of the actor will influence their interest. Actor's interest will eventually become the reasoning of a certain act or behaviour that they took. However, when a

social construct has been maintained, actors can also deconstruct the norm, value, idea and belief that was adopted. In this research, the author will use State Identity by Maxym Alexandrov as one of the constructivism models to explain how the norm and values could shape the behaviour of the state (Alexandrov, 2003).

**Figure 2. Model of State Identity**



**Source: Alexandrov (2003)**

Joseph S. Nye argue that soft power is the ability to influence others in order to obtain advantages that a country wants through attraction rather than threat or sanction. He addressed that soft power lies within the country's culture, values and policies. Nye explained that soft power produces resources largely from the values expressed by an organization or the country itself through internal practices and policies (Nye, 2008).

Public diplomacy appears as the tool to mobilize these values towards the public of other countries by communication such as broadcasting, subsidizing cultural export, arranging exchanges and so forth. The message that the country's deliver through this public diplomacy plays an important role in building the soft power. The broadcasted value has to be attractive to bring the public's interest or otherwise the soft power will not appeal.

While there have been many researches on the uniqueness of South Korean concept of masculinity and the success of Korean Wave, few researchers have taken the impact of South Korean soft masculinity to the cultural and economic diplomacy into consideration. the previous researches solely focus on how the global audiences could accept the idea of soft

masculinity and it may not be adequate to understand how South Korea utilize soft masculinity in the expansion of its economic diplomacy strategy. There is a lack of robust research on the relation of how Korean male celebrities started to promote soft masculinity by becoming brand ambassadors of Korean cosmetic and skincare brands in the recent years towards the increase of South Korea's export, especially in cosmetic and skincare regimen. Therefore, this research is conducted to bring a new perspective in viewing the utilization of soft masculinity in South Korea's economic diplomacy strategy and further investigate the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of masculinity.

### **3. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

This theoretical research uses the qualitative method that aims to understand the contemporary International Relations phenomenon which are soft masculinity and economic diplomacy. The unit of analysis that will be examined is South Korean government as the subject and the unit of explanation in this thesis will be the driving factors of why South Korea promotes soft masculinity).

The data and information in this research are obtained from the secondary source consisted of the literature review from previous relevant research on the topic of masculinity in South Korea and its economic and public diplomacy that were written in various books, journals, reports, as well as documents from website. The author gathered the existing data and information and comparing each from different sources to create a comprehensive and systematic analysis.

### **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **4.1. The Increase Demand of South Korea Export in Cosmetic and Skincare**

South Korea has shown rapid economic growth since the 1960s and it is made possible with various incentives from the government to promote exports. The export of Korean pop culture in general has contributed significantly to the growth of the national economy of South Korea. The popularity *Hallyu* in general gained from the global society is a great example of how a country proliferate its contemporary culture into "soft power" as a foreign policy. The authors found that in addition to the global purchase of music, merchandise and concert tickets, *Hallyu* is also



responsible in increasing tourism and other products of the country such as beauty and cosmetics, fashion, culinary, and others.

South Korea has shown commitment to flourish its export-led economy in order to enhance its national development and soft power. According to the 2018 Diplomatic White Paper released by South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one of the country's six policy task priorities is "To strengthen economic diplomacy and development cooperation to advance national interest" (Task No.99) in order fulfil the national vision by the State Affairs Planning Advisory Committee, "A Nation of the People; A Just Republic of Korea" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). The government established Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) in order to support national brand and company brand promotion overseas.

South Korea recently emerged as one of the top drivers for global economic and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industries that inspired many new trends in other countries. According to Euromonitor, an international market research, South Korea started to diversify its market and not only focused on its telecommunication market, although Samsung, LG and KT&G still leads the national brand. On the 6<sup>th</sup> rank, there is AmorePacific Corp, which is a company that focus on beauty and personal care products that successfully embark into the global market by establishing market share in more than 18 countries and competing with big brands such as P&G and Unilever. To be placed among companies that focus on technology and communication, proves that skincare and cosmetic company like AmorePacific succeed to compete in the global market. Amorepacific is listed under Forbes list as one of world's most innovative companies with the creation of cushion compact. Its first innovation on cushion is through IOPE brand in 2008 (Chung, 2015).

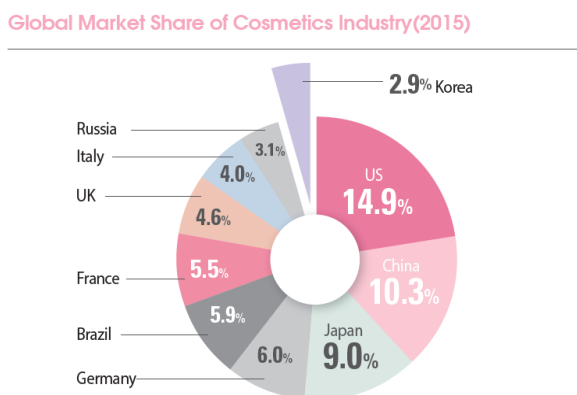
**Figure 3. Top 20 largest South Korean FMCG companies and share of international share**

Company Name	Global sales	South Korea %
Samsung Corp	125,771	6
LG Corp	48,147	11
KT&G Corp	9,408	88
Lotte Group	8,945	50
Hite Jinro Co Ltd	8,486	93
AmorePacifc Corp	3,963	77
LG Household & Health Care Ltd	3,350	86
E Land Group	2,369	25
Nong Shim Co Ltd	1,942	78
Namyang Dairy Products Co Ltd	1,251	100
CJ CheilJedang Corp	1,232	95
Maeil Dairies Co Ltd	1,193	100
Fila Holding SpA*	1,156	39
Seoul Dairy Cooperative	1,119	100
Crown Confectionery Co Ltd	1,096	98
National Agricultural Cooperative Fe	1,069	100
Muhak Co Ltd	1,030	100
Ottogi Foods Co Ltd	939	95
Cheil Industries Co Ltd	839	100
Binggrae Co Ltd	825	100

**Source: Euromonitor (2016)**

The beauty industry of South Korea has become one of the country's growth accelerators due to its lucrativeness. The Korea Health Industry Development Institute reported that the beauty industry has reached annual average growth rate at 10.8 percent, its growth potential gradually increases the amount of exports and production over the years since 2012. Korea's cosmetic market has transformed from a domestic market-oriented to an export-oriented industry and the export has grown by 28.6 percent annually since 2010 that attributed to the rise of exports to the U.S., Europe, ASEAN region along with China, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Korea's Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, 2019).

**Figure 4. Global market share of cosmetic industry in 2015**



*Source: Korea's Trade-Investment Promotion Agency Report (2019)*

**Figure 5. Korea's export trend of cosmetics**

Export Trend of Cosmetics (USD million, %)

Destination	Export		
	2010	2016	CAGR
Global	781	3,971	31.1
China	321(41.1)	1,450(36.5)	28.6
Hong Kong	61 (7.8)	1221(30.7)	64.8

*Source: Korea's Trade-Investment Promotion Agency Report (2019)*

The size of South Korea's cosmetic market continuously increases over the year. In the 2014, South Korea is ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the global market share and then ranked as 8<sup>th</sup> in 2018. As an exporter, South Korea became the world's 5<sup>th</sup> largest cosmetics exporter after France, the United States, Germany and Singapore according to its export amount. South Korea aims to become No. 3 by 2020.

#### 4.2. Redefining Masculinity through the Promotion of Male Brand Ambassador in the Beauty Industry

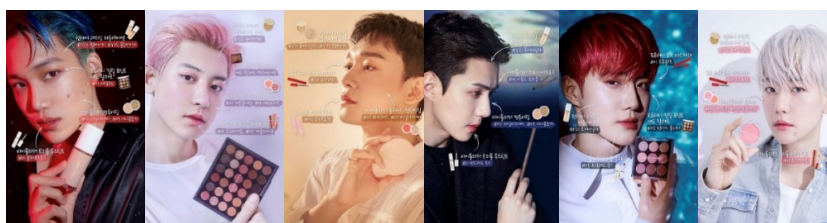
The authors found that the achievement of South Korean cosmetic and skincare product is also attributed to the marketing campaigns and strategies.

The use of brand ambassadors in marketing campaigns is important and South Korean brands start to hire Korean celebrities to increase brand awareness, shape or strengthen brand image and also to achieve brand differentiation that makes the product outstanding in comparison of other brands. Although brand ambassadors do not directly define the whole brand, but it is important to shape the perception of the consumers.

For a long time, the cosmetic industry in South Korea was dominated by women that shows preference towards women ambassadors, but there has been a recent trend in the industry to feature male K-Pop idols as the brand ambassador considering the success of K-Pop and evolving norms of masculinity. Several popular Korean skincare and cosmetic brands that hire male idols as their ambassadors are VT Cosmetics (BTS), Nature Republic (EXO, NCT), Some by Mi (BTOB Sungjae and EXO Sehun), The Saem (Seventeen), Nacific (EXO Chanyeol), Tony Moly (Monsta X) and more.

Men's skincare and cosmetic is a promising industry to be ventured. According to Euromonitor International, the market of cosmetic products in South Korea receive revenue of US\$ 495 million (KR₩ 549 billion) in total from Korean men in 2018, which contributes to the 21 percent of global sales and per capital terms categorized as top spenders. The Korean beauty and skincare market customized for men was estimated to gain 1.19 trillion KR₩ in 2018 (Lee, 2019).

**Figure 6. K-Pop boyband “EXO” in nature republic cosmetic line advertisement 2020**



**Source: Nature Republic (2020)**

When it comes to male grooming products and regimen, it comes to no surprise that South Korea is leading. South Korean men ranked in the highest where per capita spending on men's skincare is concerned which is US\$45 average annual spending. This is how companies started to develop products that specifically targeted at men or creating a brand that manufacture unisex brands. Today, there are many South Korean brands that

release men's line to fulfil the market demands. It includes Mamonde, Laneige, Sulwhasoo, Hera, Hanbang Skin Solutions, Esthe Twin and others (Lim, 2018).

The popularity of *kkotminam* as an image is highly influenced by K-Pop idols, according to the director of the Korea Institute at The Australian National University, Roald Maliangkay. The Korean male idols are becoming the norm entrepreneur of soft masculinity and its impact could be seen on the amount of local young men in the country that try to emulate the typical look sported by the idols because there is a social construction of lookism that influence the everyday life of the society in South Korea and these celebrities become the role model for others. Male idols in South Korea openly use and promote their own beauty regime, from skincare to makeup which could influence the consumer's decision making in buying a product. This is a business opportunity in the country which deemed unmarketable in the Western because it seems to effeminate men. However, South Korean does not see male beauty phenomenon as effeminacy (Rapp, 2020).

In the other part of this world, cosmetics and skincare used to be seen as women's product and men who do as much as using the product will be seen as less masculine than the others. The activity of make-up and grooming among men usually lead into the label of homosexual, queer or even trans people's activity. However, this is not the case in South Korea and it becomes the uniqueness of the country that the industry in other countries are looking up to and eager to collaborate with.

Due to the market opportunity in South Korea, many global brand products seek the country as a test bed for their development. Global luxury brands such as Chanel, Giorgio Armani and Givenchy are utilizing the market of South Korea to release their new products for the first time. According to Jane Jang, senior beauty analyst at Mintel, Western brands are looking towards South Korea for product inspiration and seeks to adapt popular beauty product of the country for their Western consumers (Mintel Press Team, 2017).

South Korean brands such as Biotherm Homme (named as global No.1 men's skin-care brand) and SK-II Men are currently leading at the forefront of men's beauty development and launching of new products in Korea. Thus, it comes to no surprise that global companies started to make direct investment in South Korea. Success cases of major foreign-invested companies, including Kolmar Korea, Shinsegae-Intercos Korea, Stylenanda and HAVE&BE (Korea's Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, 2019).

More global luxury brands hire South Korean male idols to become their brand ambassadors. For instance, Lee Dong-wook, a South Korean actor becomes the face of Boy de Chanel, the men's beauty line of the French brand that releases lip balm, brow products and others and its product initial release is no other than in South Korea. Followed by Givenchy that announced Kang Daniel as the official brand model for the beauty line joining Liv Tyler who has been the brand's ambassador for some years and it makes him the first male celebrity as the front of a beauty campaign for makeup by Givenchy. Last June 2019, Giorgio Armani followed the trend by hiring Jackson Wang, a K-Pop male idol from GOT7 as one of the faces for Armani Beauty (Haddad, 2019).

**Figure 7. Lee Dong-wook as beauty ambassadors for global luxury brands, Chanel**



**Source: Leigh (2018)**

Image-conscious male consumers exist outside of South Korea and it drives the global market to develop products that could fulfil the market demands. Euromonitor International predicts that the sale of men's skincare in the United States will grow by 8.8% and the section of men's haircare will grow by 6.8%. This will also be flourished with the generational shift where the demand from younger generation will continue to grow just like the case in South Korea. A survey from YouGov in late 2016 confirmed that there is a significant difference between younger consumers compared to those who ages 55 or over. Almost half of the younger consumers stated their acceptance over men wearing makeup.

### **4.3. The Role of South Korean Men as Norm Entrepreneur of Soft Masculinity and the State's Brand Image**

The pop-culture of South Korea has become the country's most unique and interesting strategy to increase awareness of the Korean products and lifestyles among the global audiences. The manufacturers are also

catching up with the global recognition that the country's artists have been receiving, from the hit song of South Korea's group like BTS and EXO to the latest popular drama series, by asking them to model as the company's brand ambassador. This approach has helped the government of South Korea to set up companies and brands to succeed in other countries as the consumer demand already globalized (Euromonitor International, 2016).

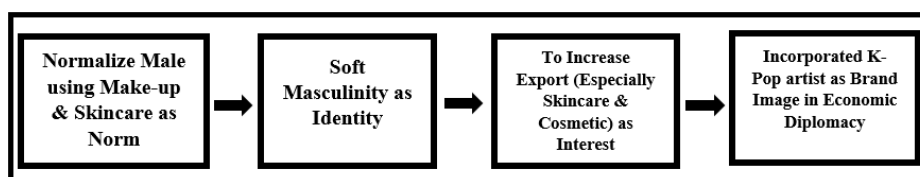
The culture index of South Korea's soft power highly relies to its entertainment industry and in 2019 its rank dropped due to the scandal happened in the industry. The scandal involved numerous high-profile K-Pop idols and it decreased the favour of the global audience to the Korea's music industry. In an overview, the scandal is about allegations of underage sex trafficking and violent sexual abuse of women taking place at Burning Sun, a club co-owned by Seung-ri, a former member of infamous K-Pop band Big Bang (McClory, 2019). This shows that the audience does not only look up to the artistic value of the idols but also to their moral value. The action by those certain celebrities involved in the scandal does not portray the gentleness that soft masculinity offers and therefore receive backlash from their targeted audience. In contrast, male K-Pop idols who show good deeds and portray gentleness will receive favourable reaction from their fans. The Korean Business Research Institute released monthly brand reputation rankings for idol groups in the country which is based on the analysis of consumer participation, media coverage, interaction and community awareness indexes of 100 K-Pop groups. The latest Brand Reputation Rankings put BTS in the first place, followed by EXO, Super Junior, SF9 and SEVENTEEN and this is reflected on the image of the groups (Soompi, 2020).

Most of the classic approaches to the study of international relations prioritize and put more value on material power, such as military and economic capabilities. However, the theory of constructivism considers the importance of ideas and beliefs of the actors in international relations. It stated that the system of world politics is influenced by the ideas, rather than material forces. In result, aside from hard power, the modern international relations recognize soft power and its influence in enabling smaller and middle-sized power states to gain more political leverage in the global sphere. The rising influence of non-state actors, along with digital revolution and urbanization works as the key factors of the current rapid change in the global affairs which are enabled through globalization. Culture is definitely at the centre of the process of soft power building because it consists of

thought and ideas that are able to capture the identity of the country (McClory, 2019).

South Korea is trying to prevail its leverage as a cultural superpower, especially in Asia. South Korea is placed on 2<sup>nd</sup> for The Asia Soft Power 10 after Japan. Meanwhile, the country is ranked 19<sup>th</sup> in The Soft Power 30 and its performance is the highest since 2015. South Korea's greatest strength lies within its digital index and it proves that the government actively engage the citizen by improving access to information and public services in the digital world. The government recognized that national interest and the people are "inseparably intertwined" and thus it placed a great focus on protection of and communication with the people by implementing Participatory Diplomacy to consolidate its vision to reflect the views of the people in foreign policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

**Figure 8. Model of social construction in the case of soft masculinity in South Korea**



Source: Amended from Alexandrov (2003)

#### **4.3.1. Norm: Normalize Male Using Make-Up and Skincare**

The society of South Korea has normalized the idea of male using make-up which is seen as abnormal in the hegemonic masculinity perspective that will lead into the questioning of one's masculinity and even his sexuality. Make-up is considered as women's thing and due to its relevancy to femininity, men who wear make-up is assumed to be less manly or even gay. However, in South Korea, it is not an oddity to encounter men who wear make-up on the street. South Korea is considered as a trendsetter in men's beauty culture (Asher, 2018).

#### **4.3.2. Identity: Soft Masculinity**

The norm of normalizing male's consumption to skincare and cosmetic then allows the transition of identity from hegemonic masculinity to soft masculinity that allows the freedom of men's expression through their appearance. The imagery of pretty boy and gentle male in the media,



especially through K-Pop and K-Drama has influence the way general public views masculinity. Before the K-Pop male artist who breakthrough the industry with their unique appearance that involves make-up and fashionable clothes, the masculinity of South Korean male is still rigid and rely on the idea that being masculine have to be owning “muscle”, as they are required to go through mandatory military service.

**Figure 9. Members of EXO, a famous K-Pop group, getting their makeup done**



Source: SMTOWN and STORE (2019)

#### **4.3.3. State Interest: To Increase Export (Especially for Skincare and Cosmetic)**

Previously, beauty market is exclusive for women to fulfil their needs to look beautiful and rarely create male's product. This progressive way of viewing what it means to be masculine, allowing market diversification and create market opportunity for male's beauty product in the country to fulfil the market demand.

#### **4.3.4. Action: Incorporated K-Pop Artist as Brand Image in Economic Diplomacy**

Seeing the opportunity, the skincare and cosmetic companies hire K-Pop male artists to become their brand ambassador that fit into their brand personality and therefore the K-Pop male artist becomes the front-liner of the soft masculinity imagery. The male artists are portraying gentle and kind behaviour along with good appearance that symbolize their image as *kkotminam*. The government also started to invite K-Pop artists to its diplomatic meetings. Such action is deemed necessary due to the influence of K-Pop popularity abroad and the artists are utilized as supporting role in the diplomacy to introduce South Korean culture.

**Figure 10. K-Pop Artist in Diplomatic Meetings: EXO in the Blue House Dinner Banquet with Donald Trump.**



**Source: Yonhap News Agency (2019)**

## 5. CONCLUSION

The success of South Korean beauty market abroad is accredited not only to the development of technology, but also to the brand ambassadors and its brand value and philosophy. South Korean beauty products added elements that makes it interesting and desirable to the consumer through fun packaging and smart choice of ambassador. The fuelling demand overseas for the beauty product imported from South Korea is through the utilization of famous K-Pop idols and actors as the brand's image as the company's marketing strategy. The country's beauty industry employs Korean celebrity endorsements and product placements in the country's drama series to attract consumers seeing the rise of *Hallyu* phenomenon globally.

As stated, the objective of the author in writing this research is to find out the reasons behind the promotion of soft masculinity from South Korea in its product. Although, it is clear that the government does not explicitly state that the country does promote soft masculinity, but the brand image of the country with the society that portrays *kkotminam* means that the country is embracing this appeal to attract global recognition to their brands. South Korean government has built the export-led system of economy in the country by encouraging local brand and company to develop and it flourished, not only in terms of economic development but also global image.

Soft masculinity as an image that is promoted through the public diplomacy tool of South Korea, such as K-Pop creates the appeal of the

country towards the global audience because it is a rarity. South Korea becomes the front liner of soft masculinity by incorporating the image through its economic diplomacy. The key to economic diplomacy itself is the brand image and thus this new concept of masculinity becomes the appeal that brought other actors, especially global brands to collaborate and cooperate with South Korean brands. The norm in South Korea that normalize the usage of skincare and make-up among men is creating the market opportunity in the country and abroad. Although at first it is deemed as unmarketable in many countries, but the data showed that there is a slight increase in the demand for men's skincare and cosmetic domestically and globally.

The participation of other global brands to create men's line in skincare and beauty means that South Korea is able to influence other's behaviour through its values, norms, objectives. The act of skincare and makeup consumption among men is only one of the few indicators of soft masculinity but it is a sign that there is current renegotiation in defining what it means to be masculine. This is important in changing the culture of violence that is related towards masculinity. Soft masculinity opens up the idea that men does not have to be aggressive and rigid in behaviour to be called masculine and therefore it could reshape the idea that men does not have to be violent. It will take years to finally deconstruct the norm of patriarchy and uphold gender equality but this baby steps that South Korea take hopefully can change the world's perspective in the near future.

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