

# Digital Geopolitics and Globalization: A Comparative Study of TikTok and K-pop

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## Abstract

In the context of the deep integration of globalization and digital technology, digital culture has become an important carrier of national soft power competition. This paper takes China's TikTok social platform and South Korea's K-pop culture industry as research objects, and systematically compares the differences between the two in the process of globalisation and the digital geopolitical logic behind them from the perspective of four dimensions: the production body, the path of dissemination, the strategy of cultural adaptation, and the transformation of business models. The study finds that K-pop relies on the government and large brokers to build a highly organised idol economic system, and realises foreign cultural penetration through 'cultural technology', while TikTok takes algorithms as the core driving force, and promotes cross-border flow of content through decentralised UGC and platform-led recommendation mechanism, realising a technological platform for cross-border flow of content. K-pop emphasises industry chain integration and fan sentiment economy, while TikTok embodies the Web 2.0 platform value logic of 'users as products. Although both of them have enhanced the influence of their respective countries in global culture, their dissemination mechanisms and political embeddedness show significant differences, reflecting the different strategic cultural export paths of China and South Korea in the digital geopolitical landscape. This paper aims to provide theoretical support and case references for understanding the national strategy, platform logic and cultural translation in digital culture going overseas.

**Keywords :** TikTok; K-pop; Digital culture; Soft power; Digital geopolitics; Globalization paths

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## Introduction

With the deepening of the fourth industrial revolution, emerging forces represented by artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, big data and other technologies continue to merge, pushing human society into a new stage of intelligence, networking and greening. Compared with the previous three industrial revolutions, the fourth industrial revolution not only continues the basic characteristics of manufacturing as the core, supported by education, science and technology and human resources, but also highlights the systemic changes formed by the deep integration of digital technology and culture.<sup>1</sup>

Against this background, digital culture has emerged as a typical product of the integration of culture and technology. Existing studies generally regard digital culture as an important phenomenon that encompasses the dimensions of "cultural digitization" and "digital culturalization". The former reprocesses and reconstructs traditional cultural resources through digital technology, giving rise to diversified cultural forms such as online video, digital animation, online literature, virtual broadcasting, e-sports, etc., significantly expanding the boundaries of the dissemination of cultural content; according to the "Annual Research Report on China's Digital Culture Going Overseas (2022)", digital cultural products and services have become a typical product of the integration of culture and technology, and have become an important part of China's cultural development. "Going out" an important force in market expansion, content refinement and main body strengthening. 'Generation Z' focus and other four major aspects of new progress, showing new signs, and has achieved the attention and recognition of overseas circles.<sup>2</sup>

The latter points to the extensive embedding of digital technology in social life, reshaping the logic of interaction between people and people, and between people and technology while constructing cyberspace, and promoting the generation of a series of cultural and ethical paradigms and behavioural norms that are compatible with the digital ecology.<sup>3</sup> For example, social media such as microblogging, WeChat, Twitter, Facebook and other social media, self-media culture, rice circle culture and other cultural phenomena in the digital age, Wikipedia, Baidu Encyclopaedia and other forms of socialised knowledge production, all of which reflect the changes in the cultural structure and the cultural ecology of the digital age, and give rise to adjustments to the traditional cultural structure and transformations of the cultural landscape.<sup>4</sup>

The global dissemination of digital culture has given rise to the important topic of 'culture going overseas'. Cultural export is not only a manifestation of the enhancement of national cultural soft power, but also a strategic practice under the competitive pattern of cultural globalisation.<sup>5</sup> In this process, the digital platform has become the core carrier. TikTok under ByteDance, for example, as the international version of Jitterbug, has been officially launched since 2017, relying on the algorithm-driven decentralised content distribution mechanism and highly localised operation strategy, and has rapidly

accumulated a huge user base around the world. According to data, the number of registered users in the United States has reached about 170 million, and the simultaneous layout of cross-border e-commerce business, becoming a representative case of digital culture 'going out'. Unlike platform-led communication models such as TikTok, South Korean K-pop presents a star-making and output system supported by the cultural industry. K-pop has been popular in East Asia since the beginning of the 21st century, and Psy's 'Gangnam Style' in 2012 propelled it into the global limelight. Through a strict training system, full-process industrial operation, and the integrated expression of music, dance and visual narrative, K-pop has formed a highly commercialised and globalized cultural product form, which has had a wide impact in Asia, Europe, America and even the Middle East, and has provided a strong support for the shaping and export of the country's cultural image.<sup>6</sup>

To sum up, in the context of increasingly fierce global cultural competition and the widespread rise of digital platforms, exploring the modes, mechanisms and impacts of digital culture going to the sea not only helps to deeply understand the evolutionary path of digital culture's global dissemination, but also has important practical significance and academic value for how China's digital culture can go to the world more efficiently and enhance the country's cultural soft power.

## **Literature review**

In 2017, TikTok was dubbed a 'Chinese short-video app' <sup>7</sup> and faced resistance from South Korean society and the government. This complicated its entry into the Korean market, which favours domestic goods and services. Despite these initial tensions, TikTok has since introduced a new language into popular culture, stimulating the digital economy in South Korea.<sup>8</sup> Also driving innovation in digital technology<sup>9</sup> TikTok is gradually becoming a new trend among Korean youth groups<sup>10</sup> Specifically, TikTok has seamlessly integrated into South Korea's digital ecosystem and expanded its reach as the country's digital infrastructure has evolved, such as music streaming services.<sup>11</sup> and e-commerce<sup>12</sup> and other areas. Outside of Korea, TikTok has facilitated the cultural export of Korean products globally, including the promotion of K-pop and the broader Korean Wave phenomenon through TikTok emoticons and the K-pop TikTok Dance Challenge Netizens and their fans have also used TikTok as a space for cultural exchange and fusion, <sup>13</sup> highlighting unique elements of traditional Korean culture while incorporating international trends. This includes showcasing culinary traditions, providing language tutorials, offering geopolitical insights, and showcasing tourism content that celebrates Korea's rich culture.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, TikTok resonates strongly with young Koreans, reflecting and shaping national, cultural, social and economic dynamics consistent with Korea's vibrant digital environment.<sup>15</sup> in addition to entertainment and trends, TikTok facilitates the participation and dissemination of news, social movements and political discourse related to Korea.<sup>16 17</sup> It provides a digital arena for civic engagement and discussion of social issues and serves as a catalyst for shaping public opinion and mobilizing communities for social and political causes.<sup>18</sup>

In a study by Crystal Abidin and Jin Lee, it was shown that TikTok 'localised the platform' with K-pop, and that TikTok's early entry into the Korean market was difficult, as it was seen as a 'cheesy Chinese app', but during the outbreak, the 'TikTok Stage' series of events was used to collaborate with the K-pop industry, using 'promotional labour' from celebrities and fans. During the epidemic, TikTok successfully gained a foothold in the Korean market through the 'TikTok Stage' series of events, in collaboration with the K-pop industry, and by leveraging the 'promotional labour' of celebrities and fans, such as non-contact interactions, live chats, sharing of testimonials, and fan support. The study reveals that the K-pop industry has been a major player in the Korean market. The study reveals that the K-pop industry is moving towards a 'virtual shift', with more artists releasing new works through TikTok live streaming, and other platforms copying the 'K-pop TikTok' model, resulting in fierce competition.

To sum up, although existing studies have revealed the communication strategies and cultural influence of the K-pop culture industry model and the TikTok platform localization path respectively, there is a lack of systematic exploration of the differences in the communication logics between the two in the global dissemination of digital culture in the perspective of side-by-side comparisons. At the same time, there is also a lack of in-depth analysis on how platform algorithms reconfigure the selection mechanism of cultural content, as well as the synergistic communication logic between platforms and content. Therefore, this paper takes K-pop and TikTok as cases for analysis, compares the similarities and differences in the strategies of the 'industry-led' and 'platform-driven' paths of cultural exportation, and explores the communication strategies embodied by the two in the process of global digital culture dissemination. In the process of global digital culture dissemination, we will explore the differences in communication strategies, cultural logic and audience participation, and then reveal the new changes in the structure of culture dissemination in the digital era.

Therefore, according to the previous research, this paper puts forward the research question: What kind of strategic differences and communication logic do K-pop's traditional industrialisation-based cultural overseas mode and TikTok's algorithm-driven new media platform path respectively show in the global dissemination of digital culture?

## **Theoretical Foundations Conceptual Definition and Analytical Framework**

### ***From traditional geopolitics to digital geopolitics***

With the deep integration of globalisation and digital technology, the research scope of geopolitics has been expanding, presenting new theoretical paradigms. Geopolitics in the traditional sense was first introduced by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (Rudolf Kjellén)<sup>19</sup> Introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it centres on analysing how geography affects patterns of power in international relations. On this basis<sup>20</sup> Rana Danish Nisar further argues that geopolitics is the study of how geography and power relations are intertwined in international politics, focusing on the ways in which factors

such as geographic location, natural resources and topography shape national political and economic policies and analysing the ways in which these policies, in turn, reshape the international geopolitical landscape.

As a highly interdisciplinary field of study, geopolitics integrates the perspectives of political science, geography, history and economics, and aims to systematically understand the deeper impact of geography on international relations.<sup>21</sup> Firstly, it has led to the reorganisation of multiple spheres of social life around digital communications and media infrastructure; secondly, it has created new sources of value and revenue through the reshaping of business models; thirdly, digitalization as a process of structural change is profoundly altering organisations' operations, product processes and management through information and communications technology (ICT).<sup>22</sup>

On this basis, <sup>23</sup>Huskaj developed the concept of Digital Geopolitics, which emphasises the importance of information systems - systems that create, process, store, retrieve, and disseminate information and build global cyberspace through networks and interconnections - in influencing the world's political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure (PMESII) systems. The concept of Digital Geopolitics emphasises that information systems - those that create, process, store, retrieve, and disseminate information, and that build global cyberspace through interconnections - have become a major force influencing the world's political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure (PMESII) systems. The ubiquity of cyberspace makes it not only a new field of global governance but also a new frontline of state competition. Therefore, digital geopolitics can be defined as the strategic behavior of a country to expand its international influence through the dissemination of information, the guidance of public opinion and the export of culture by means of digital technologies and platforms.

In contemporary digital cultural communication, China's TikTok (Shake Tone International) and South Korea's K-pop (Korean Wave) constitute two representative cases of digital geopolitics: TikTok, a global short-form video platform launched by the Chinese technology company ByteDance, has realized the dissemination of cultural content and the construction of user stickiness globally through an algorithmic-driven content distribution mechanism; and K-pop has created a highly recognisable cultural brand through a strong cultural industry system, including idol groups and music variety shows, and a fan economy. K-pop, on the other hand, relies on a strong cultural industry system and has created a highly recognisable Korean culture brand through idol groups, music variety shows and fan economy. These two represent the typical modes of 'platform-type algorithmic communication path' and 'industry-type cultural output path' respectively, and both have become important manifestations of countries' soft power in the digital era.

### ***Analytical Framework***

This paper takes TikTok and K-pop as the objects of study, and focuses on four core dimensions for comparative analysis: differences in production bodies, differences in dissemination paths, cultural adaptation strategies, and commercial transformation modes. By systematically sorting out the similarities and differences between the two in terms of cultural production and dissemination mechanisms, we will explore the cultural logic and geopolitical connotations behind them, and further analyze their far-reaching impacts in the Asian and global cultural landscape. In the course of the study, we will take into account specific cases, such as K-pop representative groups BTS and BLACKPINK, as well as the popular challenges and Netflix culture on TikTok, to reveal how digital cultural communication has become an important tool for national cultural competition and identity construction.

## **A study of the globalisation paths of Tiktok and K-pop**

### ***Differences between TikTok and K-pop Production Subjects***

The main body of K-pop (Korean pop music) production is dominated by professional entertainment agencies (e.g. SM, YG, JYP, HYBE, etc.). These companies are responsible for the discovery, training and production of idols, forming a highly centralized production system. Idols are selected from their teenage years and undergo years of rigorous training before making their official debut. The entire production process involves careful design of music, image, dance and many other aspects, reflecting the pursuit of professionalism and quality. This model not only reflects the 'factory logic' of the Korean entertainment industry, that is, the mass production of stars and works through an industrialized process, but also reflects how the Korean government promotes the globalisation of the creative industries through policy support and financial investment. The government has provided tremendous policy and financial support for the expansion of K-pop through the introduction of relevant laws and regulations, such as the Basic Law for the Promotion of Cultural Industries and the Cultural Industries Support Fund. The Korean government uses K-pop as a key tool to enhance national soft power, through which it strengthens national influence and promotes cultural diplomacy.<sup>24</sup> The success of K-pop lies not only in the marketing of the entertainment industry, but also in the fact that it has become an important part of Korea's national image. BTS, for example, is not only a globally renowned idol group, but also relies on Hybe Corporation's (HYBE) elaborate training system, marketing strategy, and close cooperation with the government; BTS's global fan group, ARMY, embodies the fanatical fan culture behind K-pop, which further promotes the idol's global influence through support, charting, and other forms. BTS's global fan group 'ARMY' embodies the fervent fan culture behind K-pop, a culture that further promotes the global influence of idols through support and chart-topping.<sup>25</sup> K-pop is also an important tool for the Korean government's cultural diplomacy, which has been promoted through the appointment of BTS as 'presidential envoys' to the UN General Assembly and the participation of groups such as BLACKPINK in diplomatic events.<sup>26</sup>

Against the backdrop of intensifying global competition in digital culture, K-pop is not only a symbol of the South Korean entertainment industry, but has increasingly become an important part of the country's national strategy, diplomatic resources, and soft power output. From the perspective of techno geopolitical theory, K-pop's producers - mainly large agencies and the

South Korean government - have jointly constructed a highly institutionalized, platformed and nationalized cultural production system, which has significant geopolitical implications for the reshaping of the global cultural communication landscape. Its reshaping of the global cultural map has significant geopolitical implications.

This carefully crafted production of content conforms to a cultural logic of perfectionism and strives for global recognition. The South Korean government, as the administrator of K-Pop, has made K-Pop part of the national project, supported K-Pop's exportation through cultural policies, and shaped its confident national consciousness with K-Pop's successful exportation, thereby resetting its role in Asian geopolitics.

In contrast, TikTok's production body is extremely decentralised and diverse. The platform's content is mainly created by ordinary users around the world (UGC), supplemented by some professional creators or organizations' (e.g. PGC provided by media numbers, brands, etc.) Through its innovative algorithms, TikTok makes it easy for users to create and publish content, which is then pushed to users around the world through the platform's algorithmic recommendation system. Each user is not only a creator of content, but also a distributor. The success of the platform does not depend on a single professional organization or company, but on the co-creation of content and interaction between users around the world. TikTok's production model embodies the cultural logic of the democratization and decentralization of creativity, which means that cultural production is no longer dominated by large organizations' alone, but that everyone participates, and that anyone has the opportunity to be a content creator.<sup>27</sup> This interaction has accelerated the flow of culture across borders globally, allowing local content to quickly penetrate other countries and regions, making TikTok an important platform for global cultural dissemination, and exemplifying how digital platforms can change the traditional paths of cultural dissemination through decentralization. 'The 'Digital Silk Road' strategy is an important initiative put forward at the Belt and Road Forum for International Co-operation, which aims to promote digital connectivity and cultural interaction between China and the world through digital technologies and platforms.<sup>28</sup> ByteDance, as a Chinese tech company, has leveraged TikTok to bring China's technological capabilities and cultural output to the world. Although TikTok has adopted a relatively independent globalisation strategy in its operations, it still cannot be separated from the indirect support of the Chinese government behind it, including policy frameworks, market opportunities and cultural export strategies.

From the perspective of digital geopolitics, TikTok is not just a commercial platform behind it, but it also represents China's soft power output in the global digital culture sector. The global spread of TikTok is not only a process of cultural and entertainment export, but also part of China's global competitiveness in terms of economy, technology, and culture. TikTok is not just a product of ByteDance, it is closely related to the The Chinese government's digital strategy is closely related to TikTok, especially in the process of promoting Chinese culture and technology to the world, TikTok has become an indispensable tool.

Dimension	K-pop (South Korea)	TikTok (China)
<b>Production Subject</b>	Mainly led by large entertainment agencies (e.g., SM, YG, HYBE)	Mainly global users; content production is decentralized (UGC-based)
<b>Content Production</b>	Highly professionalized; idols are carefully trained and promoted by agencies	User-generated content dominates; platform offers creation tools and algorithmic recommendations
<b>Cultural Logic</b>	Industrialized process; branded and globalized star culture	Democratized creation; everyone has the chance to become a content creator
<b>Government Support</b>	Government provides policies, funding, and cultural diplomacy support	Indirect support through national digital culture "going global" strategy
<b>Global Influence</b>	Exports Korean culture through idol fandom, enhancing national soft power	Promotes Chinese culture via platform data and user-generated global content
<b>User Interaction</b>	Strong fan culture; fans actively promote content (e.g., chart boosting, fan support)	Users spread content on the platform and participate in cultural consumption and creation
<b>Political &amp; Geopolitical Impact</b>	Government uses K-pop for cultural diplomacy and nation branding	Government faces scrutiny over data and national security; digital platform becomes a site of geopolitical tension

**Table 1: The Main Differences in Production Subjects between TikTok and K-pop**

**Made by author**

## Summary

K-pop and TikTok show significant differences in the production of cultural content, which profoundly reflects the different characteristics of the two in terms of the path of cultural dissemination and the mode of output's-Kpop's content production is dominated by large local entertainment companies, which have constructed a complete industrial chain from selection, training,



production to marketing. The government plays an active role, not only providing policy support, but also embedding K-pop into the national soft power strategy through cultural diplomacy, forming a highly organised and institutionalized cultural industry ecology.

Unlike this, TikTok, as a globalised short video platform, has a highly decentralised content production body. The content is mainly generated by ordinary users (UGC), but also includes some professional creators (PGC). The platform redistributes the content through an algorithm-driven recommendation system, relying on the user's behavioural data and interest preferences to achieve personalised content pushing, thus promoting the dissemination and reproduction of culture on a global scale.

In the context of digital geopolitics, these two models represent the different strategies of China and South Korea in the competition for global soft power: TikTok embodies China's path of expanding its cultural influence and technological discourse by relying on technological platforms and based on data-driven and algorithmic logic; while K-pop embodies South Korea's path of strengthening its global cultural influence through a centralized and industrialized mechanism of cultural export, and through policy guidance and image management at the national level. K-pop, on the other hand, embodies South Korea's efforts to enhance its visibility and recognition in the global cultural landscape through a centralized and industrialized cultural export mechanism, as well as national policy guidance and image management.

The differences between the two in terms of content production structure, dissemination mechanism and expression of cultural sovereignty not only reveal the diversity of cultural export modes in the digital era but also reflect the strategic orientation and governance logic adopted by different countries in the digital geopolitical landscape.

### ***Differences in dissemination paths: TikTok and K-pop***

The K-pop model: organised dissemination and fan promotion: in the traditional K-pop dissemination model, the dissemination path of cultural content has the dual characteristics of official channels + fan networks. At the initial stage, idol content was mainly disseminated through traditional media: local Korean music programmes, variety shows, radio stations, and cable channels in East Asia were the core channels of K-pop's early dissemination, followed by the rise of global platforms such as YouTube, where entertainment companies began to upload music videos and other content on official accounts for global distribution. At the same time, agencies often collaborated with overseas distributors and record labels to bring content to national markets through these established channels, and SM Entertainment founder Lee Soo Man once proposed the concept of 'cultural technology' to systematize K-pop's global distribution strategy. The theory emphasises the internationalization of K-pop content through standardized selection, training, production and management processes, combined with collaboration with overseas companies. For example, SM's collaboration with Japan's AVEX for the release of a Japanese-language album and Columbia Records in the United States for digital distribution is a manifestation of this strategy.<sup>29</sup>

It has also been pointed out that the global dissemination of K-pop not only relies on official channels,<sup>30</sup> but also benefits from the active participation of fan culture. Fans re-create and disseminate content through social media, fan websites and other platforms, forming a huge unofficial communication network. This 'fan-driven' mode of communication complements official channels, and together they have contributed to the globalisation of K-pop. For example, BTS's fan group 'ARMY' organizes social media campaigns that not only increase the idol's exposure but also spread K-pop content globally.<sup>31</sup>

From the above, it can be seen that K-pop's global dissemination model embodies a three-way synergistic cultural dissemination mechanism between the state-industry-fans, which is deeply embedded in the technological logic of the competition for national soft power in the digital era in the organisation, distribution and governance of cultural content. From the perspective of techno geopolitical theory, K-pop is not a mere cultural entertainment product, but a 'strategic cultural project' that extends cultural influence through media infrastructure, platform deployment and community mobilization. It not only implements controlled output through official media and platform infrastructure but also creates cultural penetration through non-nationalized dissemination of global fan communities. It not only carries out controlled output through the official media and platform infrastructure but also forms cultural penetration through the non-nationalized dissemination of global fan communities, thus realising the organic extension of the country's soft power in the global cultural space.

TikTok has constructed a new cultural content dissemination mechanism in the digital platform ecology, the core of which lies in the algorithm-led distribution logic. Unlike the traditional communication model that relies on creators to accumulate an audience base and actively push out content, TikTok relies on the platform's algorithms to automate the screening and dynamic distribution of content, thus reconfiguring the path of dissemination and audience relations.

Specifically, for each newly uploaded video, the platform first conducts a test push among a small range of users, and evaluates the content based on early user interaction data (such as completion rate, number of likes, frequency of retweets, etc.). If the feedback is positive, the platform will expand the recommended range accordingly to achieve exponential exposure and dissemination, i.e. the so-called 'For You' recommendation mechanism; if the user response is lukewarm, the content will be quickly 'downgraded' or stop spreading. As a result, whether the content can be distributed no longer depends on the creator's own influence or the size of his or her fans, but on whether it meets the criteria of 'high interactivity' identified by the platform's algorithm.

This mechanism achieves a high degree of personalization and automation in the distribution of content, giving the process of dissemination a 'viral' dynamic diffusion characteristic. The platform algorithm not only assumes the function of

information screening and scheduling but also controls the flow of attention and the visibility of cultural content, signaling a shift in the power of cultural dissemination - from the content creators to the platform system itself.<sup>32</sup>

The algorithm-led cultural communication mechanism constructed by TikTok has profoundly reshaped the logic of content generation, distribution and dissemination in the digital era. Its influence is not only reflected in the organizational model of user behavior within the platform, but also in the geopolitical logic of how national technological platforms are embedded in the global communication system, reconfiguring cultural sovereignty and information order.

Dimension	K-pop Communication Model	TikTok Communication Model
<b>Communication Channels</b>	Official media channels (music shows, variety shows, radio stations, etc.) + fan social media	Algorithm-driven viral recommendation; content pushed directly to users by the platform
<b>Main Communication Agents</b>	Entertainment companies leading + fans' voluntary promotion	User-generated content primarily; platform-led content recommendation
<b>Communication Mechanism</b>	Relies on traditional channels and fan interaction for global dissemination	Utilizes platform algorithms to rapidly scale globally
<b>Cultural Logic</b>	Highly organized; pursues professionalism and global appeal	Decentralized; content-centric; emphasizes creativity and participation
<b>Globalization Features of Cultural Communication</b>	High flexibility; breaks cultural barriers through fan power	Instant globalization; content precisely pushed to global users via algorithms
<b>Geopolitical Impact</b>	A "strategic cultural project" that extends cultural influence through media infrastructure, platform deployment, and community mobilization	The geopolitical logic of how national tech platforms embed into global communication systems and reshape cultural sovereignty and information order

**Table 2: The Main Differences in dissemination paths**

**Made by author**

To sum up, K-pop and TikTok constitute two representative paths of contemporary digital culture dissemination, and their differences are not only reflected in the technological logic and organizational forms, but also in the different strategic orientations adopted by the state in the pattern of global cultural governance. The K-pop model relies on the synergistic mechanism between the state, enterprises and fan communities, and constructs a highly organised mode of cultural export with explicit state intentions through an institutionalized content production system, international platforms, cooperation and emotional mobilization strategies. Through institutionalized content production systems, international platforms and emotional mobilization strategies, the K-pop model has constructed a highly organised and controllable mode of cultural output with explicit national intentions. Its communication path integrates traditional media and digital platforms, reflecting a communication structure that promotes 'cultural technology' and national soft power in parallel.

In contrast, TikTok embodies the logic of content distribution with the platform algorithm as the core, and its dissemination mechanism is based on real-time capture of user behaviour data and personalised recommendation, realising the automation and decentralization of content dissemination. Under this framework, the visibility of cultural content is no longer directly controlled by the producers, but is dynamically scheduled by the platform algorithm based on interactive indicators, thus constituting a new type of 'platform governance logic'. From a geopolitical perspective, TikTok is not a neutral technological tool, but rather a strategic information infrastructure embedded in the national technological system and global communication structure, embodying a new form of digital sovereignty, data control, and the export of cultural influence.

The difference in their structural characteristics suggests that K-pop represents a 'system-community' oriented national cultural strategy, while TikTok embodies a 'platform-algorithm'-driven digital penetration logic. TikTok embodies a 'platform-algorithm'-driven logic of digital penetration. Both re-organize the global cultural communication space from the level of industrial system and technological platform respectively, constituting a dual paradigm of cultural soft power competition under the current digital geopolitical landscape. This comparison reveals how different countries participate in the reconstruction of global cultural power by means of the media technology system and cultural production mechanism under the background of digital globalisation, in terms of path differentiation and strategic layout.

### ***Comparison of the differences in cultural adaptation strategies between K-pop and Tiktok***

In the process of cultural dissemination, K-pop has demonstrated a highly proactive ability of cultural integration and localisation. Faced with the cultural contexts of different countries and regions, the Korean entertainment industry system has gradually formed a set of mature 'localisation+globalisation' strategies to achieve the effective landing and continuous expansion of K-pop content. This strategy embodies a multi-dimensional cultural adaptation path in terms of language, personnel composition, music style, visual concept and community interaction.

First, in terms of language strategy, Korean entertainment companies actively promote multilingual content production. For example, in order to expand into the Japanese market, Korean songs are often released in Japanese; in the early expansion of

the Chinese market, some Korean groups also recorded Chinese songs. In addition, a large number of K-pop productions include English phrases in their lyrics to lower the barriers to cross-cultural acceptance and enhance the emotional connection with global audiences.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, in terms of the composition of idol members, K-pop has pursued a 'multi-national strategy' to accurately cover its international fan base by bringing in members of foreign nationalities or mixed races.<sup>34</sup> For example, BLACKPINK's Lisa is from Thailand, which is highly popular in Southeast Asia; EXO has set up two sub-groups in Korean and Chinese for the Chinese and South Korean markets; the NCT series includes members from Japan and the United States, which reflects the global configuration of the idol group's composition.<sup>35</sup>

K-pop also actively localizes fan interactions through social media platforms during global communication. Idol groups use multiple languages (e.g. English, Japanese, Thai, etc.) in their interactions with fans, and switch languages in public to adapt to different cultural situations. In the case of BLACKPINK, for example, its members frequently use English and Korean in international interviews, and Lisa also uses Thai to communicate with Thai media, demonstrating multilingual communication skills and respect and affinity for regional cultures.

From the perspective of digital geopolitical theory, K-pop's global communication is not only an act of cultural expansion, but also a highly strategic and flexible cultural penetration. Through cross-cultural adaptation, emotional implantation, and community participation, K-pop effectively reduces the resistance of target countries to foreign cultures and enhances the acceptability of Korean culture on a global scale. In times of political tension between countries, K-pop often serves as a 'non-government channel' of cultural diplomacy, playing a buffering and connecting role. For example, against the backdrop of diplomatic tensions between China and South Korea triggered by the SAD incident, K-pop quickly adjusted its focus to Southeast Asia and other regions with higher acceptance of the Korean Wave, despite the restrictions on its presence in China, reflecting the high degree of flexibility and geographic adaptability of its communication strategy.<sup>36</sup> To sum up, K-pop has constructed a cross-cultural communication logic centered on 'cultural affinity' through a series of strategies such as the multilingualization of cultural products, the internationalizations of idol members, the hybridization of content styles and the localisation of social interaction. This 'gentle' cultural penetration not only promotes the global extension of Korea's soft power, but also shows a 'low sensitivity, high penetration' cultural export path in the geopolitical dimension, which is a successful model of cultural globalisation in the digital era.

As a globally operated digital platform, TikTok's cultural adaptation strategy embodies a characteristic architecture of 'unity in technology and diversity in content'. Unlike the traditional cultural export mode led by the state or institutions, TikTok does not promote cultural integration through explicit content unification in its global dissemination process, but relies on the algorithmic mechanism and creation tools provided by the platform to prompt users to spontaneously reconstruct global popular content in local cultural contexts, thus forming a 'decentralised, bottom-up' cultural adaptation mode. A 'decentralised, bottom-up' model of cultural adaptation.<sup>37</sup> From the level of content generation, TikTok Global Edition basically maintains functional consistency across countries, i.e., it provides a unified short video production tool, recommendation algorithm and interface experience. However, users from different cultures often take the initiative to make localised interpretations when faced with the same popular trend. For example, when the dance challenge of an English pop song is introduced to the Middle East, local users may participate in the interpretation by wearing traditional costumes; in Japan, creators may re-create the challenge by combining it with local anime elements. Similar phenomena have been observed across multiple cultural regions, making TikTok a platform for ongoing dialogue between global pop culture and local culture.

At the heart of this mechanism is the fact that the platform does not dominate the content adaptation process through any official force, but rather encourages user-generated content (UGC) and memetic communication, empowering creators to participate in the expression and interpretation of global topics in local contexts.<sup>38</sup> At the platform governance level, TikTok's geographic strategy reflects the institutional adjustments made by Chinese tech companies in their global expansion. The most typical approach is to systematically separate the domestic version of Jieyin from the international version of TikTok, which is developed by the same parent company but differs significantly in terms of content specifications, data storage, and recommendation logic. While Jieyin is geared towards mainland China and is more tightly regulated, TikTok follows international principles of content freedom to avoid the limitations of China's governance model on its global distribution. This 'institutional compromise' has effectively resolved the conflicts brought about by the differences between the Chinese and Western systems through the separation of technology and user portals, and has helped TikTok expand in the European and American markets. However, this separation has also raised questions about 'double standards', particularly in terms of data privacy, content censorship and platform neutrality, and has caused some countries to be wary of TikTok's potential for 'cultural infiltration'.<sup>39</sup> From the perspective of digital geopolitics, the mode of cultural dissemination represented by TikTok reflects the dual strategy of Chinese technology companies in the process of globalisation: on the one hand, through institutional separation and mechanism cession, it realises the platform's adaptation and integration of international rules; on the other hand, it relies on the algorithmic logic and the platform infrastructure to reconfigure the power structure of content circulation on a global scale. This model is different from the traditional state-led cultural export, which is a form of soft cultural penetration mediated by technological platforms, led by user participation, and dispatched by algorithmic mechanisms. Although this mode of cultural dissemination is less likely to directly trigger political friction, the issues of data power, information visibility and content discourse behind it are gradually becoming the focus of attention of the international community. Especially in the context of the increasingly sensitive Sino-American technological competition and information sovereignty, TikTok is not only a product of technological globalisation, but also the frontline of the soft power game in digital geopolitics.

Dimension	K-pop	TikTok
<b>Dominant Logic</b>	Led by the state and entertainment industry; content is centrally planned and distributed by agencies	Led by platforms and users; dissemination is driven by algorithms and user-generated content
<b>Cultural Adaptation Strategy</b>	Highly organized, pre-planned "localized fusion" (language, members, style)	Spontaneous localization and meme-based re-creations by users; platform encourages diverse interpretations
<b>Communication Path &amp; Power</b>	Top-down, controlled by companies and national cultural policies	Bottom-up, with communication power shifted to the algorithmic system of the platform
<b>Local Interaction Approach</b>	Cultural resonance achieved through fan communities and multilingual communication	Global participation and re-creation triggered by social features and recommendation mechanisms
<b>Platform Governance Logic</b>	Centralized management under the cultural industry model	Technology-driven governance; algorithmic and regionally adaptive policy management
<b>Global Adaptability</b>	Achieves targeted cultural export via multilingualism and multinational group members	Maintains uniform platform functions while encouraging localized re-creation for diverse expressions
<b>Soft Power Export Strategy</b>	Explicitly serves national cultural diplomacy; emphasizes shaping Hallyu's cultural image	Cultural influence is subtly exported through entertainment and user participation, enhancing national tech/platform image
<b>Geopolitical Sensitivity &amp; Response</b>	Highly sensitive; greatly affected by geopolitical events (e.g., shift to Southeast Asia post-THAAD)	Relatively less sensitive; faces Western strategic concerns over "cultural infiltration" and "data security"
<b>Institutional Adaptation Mechanism</b>	Relies on entertainment companies' overseas expansion and fan network mediation	Adopts a "Douyin-TikTok" dual system to achieve institutional compromise and local legal compliance

**Table 3 The differences in cultural adaptation strategies between K-pop and Tiktok**

**Made by author**

To sum up: K-pop's mode of dissemination embodies 'organised cultural export', which is a 'strategic cultural project' with cultural diplomacy intentions, through the synergy of South Korea's national policy, entertainment industry and fans to complete the global layout. TikTok, on the other hand, is a platform- and algorithm-based cultural penetration mechanism that does not rely on the construction of a national image, but rather promotes global cultural flows through user behaviour and technological logic, demonstrating a new path of decentralised, participatory, and modeled cross-cultural communication.

### ***Comparison of K-pop and Tiktok Business Transformation Models***

K-pop model: industry chain integration and fan economy: in terms of industrial value realisation, the K-pop model establishes a highly integrated idol economic industry chain, the core of which is dominated by brokerage companies. The company usually holds the artist's music copyright, portrait rights and other core commercial rights and interests, and effectively transforms the idol's popularity into economic gains through multi-channel realisation means such as music distribution, concert ticketing, brand endorsement, peripheral merchandise sales, and participation in variety shows and films. Take Bulletproof Teenagers (BTS) as an example, its subsidiary company Big Hit Entertainment (now HYBE) has achieved global commercial success through a standardized operation system; BTS has not only won a number of awards in the international market such as Billboard, AMA, MTV, etc., but has also been selected as one of TIME's '100 Most Influential People in the World' for a number of times, and has become one of the most influential people in culture. BTS has not only won many awards in the international market, such as Billboard AMA and MTV, but has also been selected as one of Time's 'Top 100 Influential People in the World' for many times, which has had a far-reaching impact on both culture and economy.

According to the Korea Creative Content Agency, Korean pop music exports reached \$496 million in 2019, of which BTS was a major contributor. Its 'Boy with Luv' music video, a collaboration with Halsey, surpassed 74.6 million views within 24 hours of its launch on YouTube, setting a record for the platform. In the same year, BTS's annual impact on the Korean economy totalled 5.56 trillion won (US\$4.9 billion), creating an unprecedented economic effect of the culture industry.<sup>40</sup>

At the level of cultural logic, the value capture mechanism of K-pop is deeply rooted in the highly emotional connection and identity between fans and idols. Fans' support for their idols goes beyond the consumption of cultural content itself, and is reflected more in their emotional investment in their idols' image and active participation in their fan communities. This fan-driven consumption pattern is particularly prominent in Asia, for example, Chinese fans purchase idol albums on a large scale



through supportive fund-raising and participate in social media ‘chart-topping’, while Japanese fans often buy physical records repeatedly to obtain additional benefits such as handshake coupons, which reflects a strong ‘emotional economy’ characteristic. This reflects a strong ‘emotional economy’.

On the geopolitical level, the K-pop industry has become an important part of South Korea's national soft power. According to data released by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of South Korea, the total amount of cultural content exported by South Korea has exceeded 14.3 billion US dollars in 2023, and is expected to grow to 25 billion US dollars by 2027. The rapid development of this industry has not only significantly enhanced Korea's position in the global cultural and economic landscape, but has also had a positive impact on the country's image building and the attractiveness of international tourists. The ‘nation branding’ strategy of using idol groups as a cultural vehicle has successfully established Korea as a major exporter of global pop culture.

However, there are structural imbalances in the value distribution structure under this model. Trainees are usually required to bear the training costs at the beginning of their career, creating a personal and financial dependence on the company; unless they reach the top level of popularity, most idols are unable to gain a voice and a reasonable share of the profits at the early stage. Although some top artists have increased their bargaining power in recent years by setting up their own studios or negotiating independently, on the whole, the money invested by fans mainly goes to the agencies and their upstream and downstream industries.

L-pop's value chain structure is centered on the company, which integrates artist training, content production, distribution and promotion, fan management and commercial realisation to create a closed and efficient industry system. BTS's global success has led to the rapid capital market expansion of its parent company HYBE, whose market capitalization once exceeded US\$10 billion, and a number of international acquisitions Entertainment, the company to which BLACKPINK belongs, has also capitalized on idols' success by leveraging the market capitalization of its parent company YG Entertainment. BLACKPINK's YG Entertainment has also made use of the idol economy to push forward its global layout. These cases show that through vertical integration of the value chain, the K-pop industry has achieved a double accumulation of cultural influence and economic benefits, and has further promoted a virtuous cycle of the Korean Wave's external dissemination. At the same time, this model reflects a high degree of synergy between fan participation, content diversification and global capital operation in the K-pop industry, and builds a ‘fan economy ecosystem’ driven by idols and audience co-creativity, which has become an important paradigm for the commercialization of the contemporary cultural industry.

M-The value capture under TikTok's algorithmic model presents a very different scenario from that of K-pop. As a platform-type medium, TikTok itself captures the main value by aggregating traffic and commercializing it: its business model is mainly based on advertisements (including infomercials and marketing campaigns such as brand challenges), as well as live streaming reward shares and micro-commerce. In short, TikTok relies on user scale and user hours to realize cash, while the direct producers of content - the millions of creators - can only get a very small amount of revenue.<sup>41</sup> Although TikTok has launched incentive programmes such as the ‘Creator Fund’ and invested hundreds of millions of dollars globally to provide subsidies to high-quality creators based on the number of video plays, its share is much lower than that of other platforms such as YouTube. According to some data, TikTok's average payment per 1,000 broadcasts is only about \$0.04 to \$0.05. This means that even if a video receives millions of views, the revenue that creators can get is still very limited. As a result, most ordinary creators find it difficult to make ends meet through the platform's traffic share. The top creators, on the other hand, mainly make money through commercialization outside the platform, such as receiving brand endorsements, inserting content, or diverting fans to more cash-friendly channels (e.g. YouTube, Instagram).<sup>42</sup> In addition, some head Netroots will transform their fame into actual income by launching personal peripheral products and holding offline meet-and-greet activities. Overall, under the TikTok model, there are two levels of value capture: on the one hand, the platform obtains huge advertising fees from advertisers by virtue of its ability to aggregate massive amounts of users and data; on the other hand, creators use their fame to obtain third-party commercial cooperation opportunities, thereby realising profits.

N-TikTok adverts start at a cost per thousand impressions (CPM) of \$10. A late 2019 report by Adage showed that TikTok's adverts cost between \$50,000 and \$120,000, depending on the format and duration of the advert. If the ads are successfully placed, the revenue to advertisers will certainly be much higher than the cost of placing them on TikTok. On the other hand, if the ads are not precisely targeted to the customer base, it is likely that they will have less impact on sales, but will increase the company's financial outlay.<sup>43</sup> Behind this pattern lies the typical Web 2.0 ‘user is the product’ cultural logic. tikTok, as a platform-type medium, provides users with entertainment space for free, and with the help of algorithmic mechanism and addictive design, it attracts users to continuously produce and consume content, and then sells the users' attention resources to advertisers to achieve commercial profit. Commercial Profit. In this process, although the creators can only obtain a very small part of the revenue, the model has a certain degree of exploitation of the creators; but it can not be ignored that it also greatly reduces the threshold of personal fame and participation in content creation. Essentially, it is an invisible contract in which creators exchange opportunity for value.<sup>44</sup>

Comparison Dimension	K-pop Model	TikTok Model
Dominant Force	Led by entertainment agencies	Led by the platform
Value Chain Structure	Vertically integrated: training–production–distribution–operation	Decentralized content production and algorithmic distribution

<b>Monetization Paths</b>	Diverse: albums, concerts, endorsements, merchandise, etc.	Primarily advertising (in-feed ads, branded challenges, livestream gifting)
<b>Revenue Distribution</b>	Company-dominated; limited earnings for artists (especially in early stages)	Platform maximizes profit; creators receive a small share
<b>Creator Status</b>	Contracted artists supported by professional training systems	Mostly independent creators relying on platform traffic rules
<b>User Roles</b>	Fans as both consumers and participants	Users as both content consumers and producers
<b>Incentive Mechanism</b>	Driven by fan-based emotional economy; no platform profit-sharing	Limited creator fund incentives; relies on off-platform revenue
<b>Cultural Logic</b>	Emotional attachment + idol identification builds fan economy	Attention economy + memetic (viral) communication
<b>Geopolitical Nature</b>	State-led export of cultural soft power	Global platform expansion + data capitalism driven
<b>Overall Characteristics</b>	Highly centralized, organized, and industrialized	Platformized, decentralized, low barriers to participation

**Table 4 Comparison of K-pop and Tiktok Business Transformation Models**

Summary: Dominant Force and Value Chain Integration Path

The K-pop model takes entertainment companies as the core and builds a vertically integrated industry chain from artist training and content production to market distribution and fan operation. By controlling all aspects of idol IP, the agency effectively transforms fans' emotional input into economic value, forming a highly centralized revenue structure. The main realisation paths of artist traffic include music sales, performance activities, advertising endorsements and co-branded goods, etc., and a highly viscous fan economic ecosystem is built through fans' emotional identification with the idols. In contrast, the TikTok model presents a decentralised structure dominated by the platform and assisted by creators. The platform aggregates traffic through algorithmic driving, and relies mainly on advertising (e.g. infomercials, brand challenges) and live streaming share to realize value capture. Although creators play a core role in content supply, most of the revenue is absorbed by the platform, and only a few headline creators obtain external revenue through brand cooperation and private domain traffic guidance, etc. The internal incentive mechanism of the platform (such as the 'creator fund') has a small coverage and limited amount, which makes it difficult to support the sustainable income of most creators.

From the perspective of revenue structure and distribution model, K-pop industry revenue is concentrated on the company side, and creators (idols) are often in a weak bargaining position in the early stage of their debut and need to accumulate popularity for a long period of time before they can gain the right to share the revenue. Although this model is somewhat oppressive, it also provides idols with a professional growth platform and systematic resource support.

TikTok, on the other hand, embodies a typical 'user as product' logic. The platform provides users with free space, extends their length of stay and induces content creation through technical means, and resells attention resources to advertisers for commercial realisation. While this model lowers the threshold of creation and increases individual participation, it also embeds an exploitation mechanism for users and creators, making the commercial value of creators largely dependent on the ecological rules of the platform.

Geopolitical analysis of the cultural logic of the two K-pop, as a state-led cultural industry project, has not only achieved industrialized integration of cultural values, but also shaped the image of the national brand through idol groups, becoming an important channel for the export of South Korea's soft power. TikTok, on the other hand, embodies the structural influence of platform capital in global cultural communication, and its value realisation relies on data aggregation and traffic operation, marking the typical ecology of the 'data-algorithm-capital' triad of Web2.0 platform economy.

## **From Idol Industry to Algorithmic Recommendation: How TikTok Reshapes K-pop's International Communication Structure**

From a digital geopolitical perspective, TikTok, as a globalised platform-type medium, has become an emerging communication channel for the expansion of K-pop cultural content. With its algorithm-driven content distribution mechanism and highly active global user community, TikTok has effectively helped K-pop music, dance, and other symbolic elements to go viral in a modalised form, significantly increasing visibility and participation, especially among the younger generation. This platform mechanism has helped K-pop cross linguistic and geographical borders and enter more non-traditional markets, expanding the breadth and depth of its cross-cultural communication. However, TikTok's communication logic also poses a

challenge to K-pop's original idol economic model. Unlike the specialized and organised content production system that K-pop has long relied on, TikTok takes user-generated content (UGC) as its core, and builds its communication path through a decentralised creation and algorithmic recommendation mechanism. Although this mechanism stimulates global cultural participation, it also weakens the controllability of K-pop's brand image and puts its original cultural expression at risk of fragmentation and reinterpretation. At the same time, users in different regions recreate K-pop content based on their own cultural contexts, which reflects cultural adaptability but may also result in the blurring and weakening of core cultural symbols.

Overall, the two paths of digital cultural globalisation represented by TikTok and K-pop demonstrate platform-driven and country-led communication paradigms respectively. This contrast not only reveals the diversity of strategies in digital geopolitics but also exposes the institutional divide and technological governance issues facing global cultural communication. K-pop content on platforms such as TikTok The process by which cultural content is imitated, morphed, re-created and rapidly disseminated on the Internet like a meme is a phenomenon known as 'modelling'. This phenomenon is called 'modelling', while 'fragmentation' refers to the process by which cultural content is broken down into short fragments in the process of dissemination on the platforms, thus removing it from its original context and complete narrative.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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