Journal of Social Studies (JSS), ISSN: 1858-2656 (p); 2721-4036 (e)
Vol. 22. No. 1 (2026), pp. 69-75 doi: https://doi.org/10.21831/jss.v22i1.98888

K-food as a soft power tool: gastronomy, identity, and Korean cultural politics in the digital age

AQILA TRISTIANTI
Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Email: aqilatristianti.2023@student.uny.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of K-Food (Korean cuisine) as an instrument of soft power in the context of cultural globalization in the digital age. Drawing on a sociological perspective, this paper analyzes how Korean food is understood not merely as an object of consumption, but as a medium for the construction of national identity, the production of cross-cultural emotions, and platform-based geopolitical power. Through a review of the literature and an analysis of seminar materials by Changzoo Song of the University of Auckland, it was found that the globalization of K-Food is not a process that occurs by chance, but rather the result of a convergence between the Korean diaspora, the Hallyu wave, digital media, and platform algorithms. Furthermore, the emergence of the concept of "Virtual Korea" demonstrates how a country's digital representation can selectively shape global perceptions. This article also discusses the implications of this phenomenon for Indonesia as a developing country with a rich culinary heritage that has not yet been fully optimized digitally.

Keywords: algorithms, culinary globalization, cultural identity, hallyu, K-Food, soft power, virtual Korea

INTRODUCTION

How can millions of people around the world "get to know" a country without ever setting foot there? This simple yet fundamental question served as the starting point for a study by Changzoo Song, a sociologist at the University of Auckland, in his seminar titled "Consuming the Virtual Korea: Gastronomy, Identity, and Soft Power Politics" (2026). The answer is becoming increasingly clear: through food, media, and algorithms. This phenomenon exemplifies the foundational concept of "soft power," wherein a nation cultivates global influence through cultural attraction rather than economic or military coercion (Nye, 2004). In the digital age, this attraction is strategically amplified through highly participatory, algorithmically driven ecosystems (Jin, 2016; Kim, 2013).

South Korea is the most striking example of this phenomenon. In less than a generation, a country that in the 1960s was still considered a poor, postwar nation has transformed into a global cultural powerhouse. K-pop dominates the world's music charts, Korean dramas flood streaming platforms, and Korean food—from kimchi to tteokbokki—is now available in various corners of the world, including

Indonesia. This success is not merely accidental but is driven by a highly organized cultural strategy that merges national identity with global digital platforms.

From a sociological perspective, food is never just food. It is a reflection of identity, social values, collective memory, and the way a nation presents itself to the world (Bourdieu, 1984; Mintz, 1996). Consequently, the strategic promotion of Korean cuisine (K-Food) functions as a potent form of gastrodiplomacy (Rockower, 2012; Pham, 2013). As K-Food successfully crosses geographical and cultural boundaries, it carries with it narratives about Korea: the value of togetherness, visual aesthetics, culture, and even claims to the history of civilization.

This article aims to: (1) analyze the characteristics of K-Food as a vehicle for Korean cultural identity; (2) examine the globalization of K-Food through the lens of cultural sociology; (3) explore the concept of "Virtual Korea" as a curated digital space of representation; (4) evaluate the transformation of soft power from a traditional model to a platform-based model; and (5) reflect on its implications for Indonesia.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a literature review approach based on qualitative-interpretive analysis. The primary source used is the seminar material by Changzoo Song titled "Consuming the Virtual Korea: Gastronomy, Identity, and Soft Power Politics" (2026), which was presented as part of the Eurasia Lecturer Series (a collaboration between the Eurasia Foundation [from Asia] and the Department of Sociology Education), Episode 10, on April 22, 2026, at Yogyakarta State University via Zoom.

Secondary sources include academic literature on soft power (Nye, 2004), gastronomy, cultural identity, and gastrodiplomacy (Bourdieu, 1984; Mintz, 1996; Rockower, 2012; Pham, 2013), Hallyu and the Korean Wave (Jin, 2016; Kim, 2013; Shim, 2006), as well as research on digital media and algorithms (van Dijck, 2013). The data were organized thematically by identifying relevant conceptual patterns and then analyzed using a framework drawn from cultural sociology and media studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Food as Culture, Identity, and Power

In sociology, food is understood to go far beyond its biological function. Bourdieu (1984) in *Distinction* shows that dietary preferences are markers of social class and habitus that are shaped through the internalization of cultural values. In line with this, Mintz (1996) in *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* emphasizes that food has historical and political dimensions inherent in every act of consumption.

Song (2026) emphasizes the same point: food is the intersection of culture, identity, and power. It tells us who we are, what we value, how we remember the past, and how a nation presents itself to the world. In this context, Korean food is not just about taste—it is a representation of a spirit of togetherness (the banchan culture of sharing side dishes), communal resilience (the kimchi fermentation tradition rooted in thousands of years of history), and the sophistication of civilization (the use of metal chopsticks, unique among East Asian cultures).

Another unique aspect of K-Food lies in its five distinctive features, which make it particularly well-suited for the social media era. The following table summarizes these features and their relevance to the virality of digital content:

Tabel 1. Distinctive Features of K-Food and Their Relevance to Social Media

Source: adapted from Song (2026)

Culinary Features	Characteristics	The Relevance of Social Media
Fermentation	Kimchi, doenjang, gochujang; unique, rich in probiotics	It's appealing because of its health benefits and exotic flavor
Banchan	Many small dishes are served together	An impressive visual sense of "abundance" in photos and videos
Bap-Guk System	Rice + soup + side dishes as a single meal	A culture of eating together that fosters a sense of warmth
Visual & Color	Strong color contrasts: red, green, white	Very photogenic, ideal for visual content
Taste Sensation	Spicy, savory, sweet; a complex combination (umami)	Spicy "challenge" and mukbang content have gone viral

1. The Globalization of K-Food: The Convergence of the Diaspora, the Media, and the Market

The spread of K-Food around the world is not a process that happens solely on its own. Song (2026) emphasizes that the globalization of K-Food is the result of the convergence of three major forces: migration (the Korean diaspora), the media (Hallyu, or the Korean Wave), and the market (restaurants, instant products, and e-commerce).

Korean diaspora communities in the United States, Australia, and Southeast Asian countries play an important role in introducing Korean food directly to local communities. Korean restaurants, which initially catered to immigrant communities, have gradually begun to attract the attention of non-Korean consumers. This process has been exponentially amplified by Hallyu (the Korean pop culture wave), which was sparked by the 1997–1998 economic crisis when the Korean government deliberately developed the content industry as a new economic engine Jin (2016).

In Korean dramas, eating scenes aren't just part of the story's backdrop—they're narrative devices that build emotion, relationships between characters, and cultural appeal. When viewers watch their favorite characters enjoy ramyeon late at night or tteokbokki on the side of the road, they feel a desire to experience it for themselves. Shim (2006) calling it "cultural proximity"—a sense of familiarity despite coming from different contexts.

At the same time, the South Korean government has not been sitting idly by. Since 2009, the South Korean Ministry of Agriculture has launched the Hansik Globalization program, with the goal of making Korean cuisine one of the top five most popular cuisines in the world. Investments in promotion, certification of Korean restaurants abroad, and research on adapting flavors to international markets are all part of a systematic soft power strategy Pham (2013).

1. Virtual Korea: A Curated Digital Representation

Song (2026) introduces the concept of "Virtual Korea" as a digitally mediated and globally consumed version of Korea. In this era, Korea is often seen before it is known, and watched before it is physically visited. A person's first experience with Korea may not come from a textbook, but rather from a TikTok algorithm recommending mukbang videos or from a Netflix series showcasing Korean food culture.

The mukbang phenomenon—live-streamed content featuring the consumption of large quantities of food—is the most prominent example of the transformation of food into digital entertainment. Originating in Korea around 2009–2010, mukbang has evolved into a global content genre that combines eating, entertainment, intimacy, and performance. Its popularity is driven by various psychological motivations: a sense of relaxation, social connection, curiosity, and vicarious enjoyment.

However, Song (2026) It is important to remember that "Virtual Korea" is a selective portrayal of Korea. The dominant image of Korea in the digital world is one of a young, urban, trendy, and creative nation. What remains largely unseen is rural Korea, poverty among the elderly, migrant workers, class disparities, and political conflicts. This is not a "fake" Korea; rather, it is a Korea that has been filtered through algorithms and market forces. As Song emphasized, "visibility does not equal representativeness"—visibility is not synonymous with representation.

2. The Transformation of Soft Power: From a Country to a Platform

Nye (2004) defines soft power as a country's ability to attract and influence others through the appeal of its culture, values, and policies, rather than through coercion or bribery. In the traditional model, soft power is managed by the state through cultural diplomacy, international broadcasting organizations, and tourism campaigns.

However, in the digital age, this model has shifted fundamentally. Song (2026) This shows that Korea's soft power is currently driven more by fans, influencers, and independent content creators than by the government. The algorithms of platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Netflix have become the new gatekeepers that determine which content receives global exposure. van Dijck (2013) In The Culture of Connectivity, it is explained that platform algorithms are not neutral; they are designed to maximize engagement, which means that content that is emotional, surprising, and visually appealing will always be prioritized. In the context of K-Food, this explains why spicy noodles, cheese pull, and street food performances dominate viral content, while everyday home-cooked meals and regional culinary traditions rarely make an appearance.Tabel berikut menyajikan perbandingan antara soft power tradisional dan soft power digital dalam konteks K-Food Korea:

Table 2. A Comparison of Korea's Traditional and Digital Soft Power Through K-Food

Sourcer: Adapted from (Nye, 2004; Song, 2026)

Dimension	Tradiotional Soft Power	Digital Soft Power (New)
Lead Actor	Government, embassies, official agencies	Fans, influencer, content creator
Channel	Tourism campaigns, official cultural diplomacy	YouTube, TikTok, Netflix, Instagram, algorithms
Control	Centralized, planned by the government	Widespread, viral, hard to control
Primary Content	Cultural heritage, history, formal promotion	K-pop, K-drama, K-food, K-beauty, mukbang
Velocity	Slow; requires long-term investment	It goes viral in a matter of hours
Audiens	Limited, chosen diplomatically	Global, cross-border, without geographical barriers
Example from Korea	The South Korean government's promotion of Hansik (2009)	Trend #KoreanFood on TikTok, mukbang global

Korea's successful soft power ecosystem, as explained Song (2026), built on the synergy between a robust entertainment industry, strategic government support, innovative private companies, and an active global fan base. The formula of K-pop + K-drama + K-beauty + K-food creates a mutually reinforcing synergy: watching dramas sparks a desire to try Korean food, which in turn drives purchases of beauty products, which then introduce viewers to Korean music. This is a form of soft power that isn't centrally planned but unfolds organically within the digital ecosystem.

3. Benefits, Risks, and Implications for Indonesia

The K-Food phenomenon as a form of soft power brings tangible benefits to Korea: increased tourism, growing food exports, and a broader understanding of other cultures. Meanwhile Song (2026) It also highlights the associated risks: stereotyping, excessive commercialization, "flattened identity," and dependence on foreign platforms that have their own business interests.

In the Indonesian context, this reflection is highly relevant. Indonesia boasts an extraordinary culinary heritage—for example, rendang, which has been named the world's most delicious dish by CNN Travel, as well as nasi goreng, satay, gado-gado, and warungs with their unique sense of community. However, this potential has not yet been fully realized in the digital realm, as South Korea has successfully done.

The critical question raised by Song (2026) It's worth pondering: Which Indonesian foods will the algorithm "select" to go viral, and which will be sidelined? The culinary diversity of various provinces, with their hundreds of sub-ethnic groups, presents both a wealth of possibilities and a challenge: how can we represent "Indonesia" through a single culinary image without reducing its complexity? Who will reap the economic and symbolic benefits of this process?

Lessons from Korea show that successful gastrodiplomacy requires more than just culinary richness; it requires strong digital presence, an active ecosystem of content creators, appropriate policy support, and critical awareness of algorithmic bias. Without a deliberate strategy, Indonesia's culinary richness risks being sidelined in the competition for global attention.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that K-Food has taken on a role that goes far beyond mere cuisine in the contemporary global context. K-Food has evolved into an instrument of national identity production, economic strategy, political influence, and algorithmic governance. In the digital age, nations are no longer merely "imagined communities" (to use Benedict Anderson's terminology), but are consumed, viewed, and ranked by algorithms.

Three points need to be emphasized. First, food is political; it carries narratives of power, identity selection, and economic interests that are not always apparent on the surface. Second, soft power in the digital age is driven by platforms; not only states but also fans and content creators have become key actors in contemporary cultural diplomacy. Third, algorithms selectively shape national imagery; what is seen globally is not a complete reflection of a nation, but rather a version that has been filtered and shaped by engagement.

For sociologists, critical awareness of these dynamics is essential: not merely to admire the beauty of "Virtual Korea," but also to question what remains unseen, who benefits, and how we can design more inclusive and equitable cultural representations—for both Korea and Indonesia.

REFERENCES

1. Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.
2. Jin, D. Y. (2016). *New Korean wave: Transnational cultural power in the age of social media*. University of Illinois Press.
3. Kim, Y. (Ed.). (2013). *The Korean wave: Korean media go global*. Routledge.
4. Mintz, S. W. (1996). *Tasting food, tasting freedom: Excursions into eating, culture, and the past*. Beacon Press.
5. Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.
6. Pham, M. J. (2013). Food as communication: A case study of South Korea's gastrodiplomacy. *Journal of International Service*, *22*(1), 1–22. https://thediplomatistdotcom.wordpress.com/2013/01/25/food-as-communication-a-case-study-of-south-koreas-gastrodiplomacy/
7. Rockower, P.S. (2012). Recipes for public diplomacy: The gastrodiplomacy of the Korean wave. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, 8*(3), 235–246. https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2012.17
8. Shim, D. (2006). Hybridity and the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia. *Media, Culture & Society*, *28*(1), 25–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443706059275
9. Song, C. (2026). *Consuming the virtual Korea: Gastronomy, identity, and soft power politics in the Age of Algorithms [Materi seminar pendidikan sosiologi, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta]*.
10. van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.