K-Pop and K-Car: The Underpinnings of 21st-Century Korean Cultural and Industrial Successes

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Abstract

Purpose: The 21st century has witnessed an explosive growth of both South Korean popular culture (K-pop) and automobiles (K-car) in Western societies. However, K-pop appears to maintain its success better than K-car. This paper will evaluate the origins of K-pop and K-car and determine the distinguishing factors that led to continued K-pop compared to K-car success.

Design/methodology/approach: Suggested claims of artistic/cultural and social/industrial traditions unique to South Korea as causes of the growth in K-pop and K-car success in literature will be evaluated based on historical growth in sales of both products in the US market. Factors of continued success will be evaluated based on how well both industries have been able to maintain their (perceived) brand authenticity, which emphasizes 'Korean' cultural values.

Findings: Unlike claims regarding the importance of traditional culture in shaping business success in emergent states, this paper shows that the success of Korean music and cars is not due to artistic/cultural values. Rather, while optimally identifying progress within industries such as digitization in music, South Korea's unique ability is to deploy its industrial machinery to transform bolder performances and designs originating elsewhere into inoffensive forms with broad cross-cultural appeal. Especially, K-pop's continued success can be explained through better attention to perceived authenticity, without distinguishing its products too much from known, Western perspectives. Results also indicate that Korean products do not perform well when companies attempt to take on a leadership role in the industry or develop bold new designs that deviate strongly from Western principles.

Originality/Value: The paper provides unique insights in the similarity of product design and branding, providing tools for evaluating perceived authenticity of a brand and its potential impact on sales. It shows that attention to traditional cultural values may not be a (sufficiently) appropriate strategy for international success. From a Central European perspective, lessons learned by the Korean car and culture industries may lead to new strategic uses of branding and marketing local products and of different forms of governmental/industrial structures to emerge out of the periphery.

Keywords: K-pop, Korean automotive industry, cultural industry, perceived brand authenticity, technology.

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Introduction

In 2020, the South Korean (hereafter Korean) movie *Parasite* (Korean: 기생충) was the first non-English speaking movie to win the Academy Award for Best Picture (Bicker, 2020). The movie had previously won the Palme d'Or at the 2019 Cannes film festival (Pulver, 2019). Along with the increased fame of Korean pop bands such as BTS (BBCNews, 2018a; Parc and Kim, 2020), it exemplifies how Western culture has embraced contemporary Korean products.

The growth and global appreciation of Korean popular culture (especially K-pop) started in the early 2000s, just after sales of Korean cars (hereafter K-cars) in the USA soared (CSB, 2020; Hyundai, 2020; KIA, 2020a). At that time, Korean automobile popularity showed a strong peak, which fell to similar sales increases compared to other car manufacturers by 2003 (Figure 1). Soon, Korean cars started following a similar sales increase profile to other car manufacturers, except perhaps for an earlier recovery from the global financial crisis in 2009 and a decrease in sales around 2017 (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
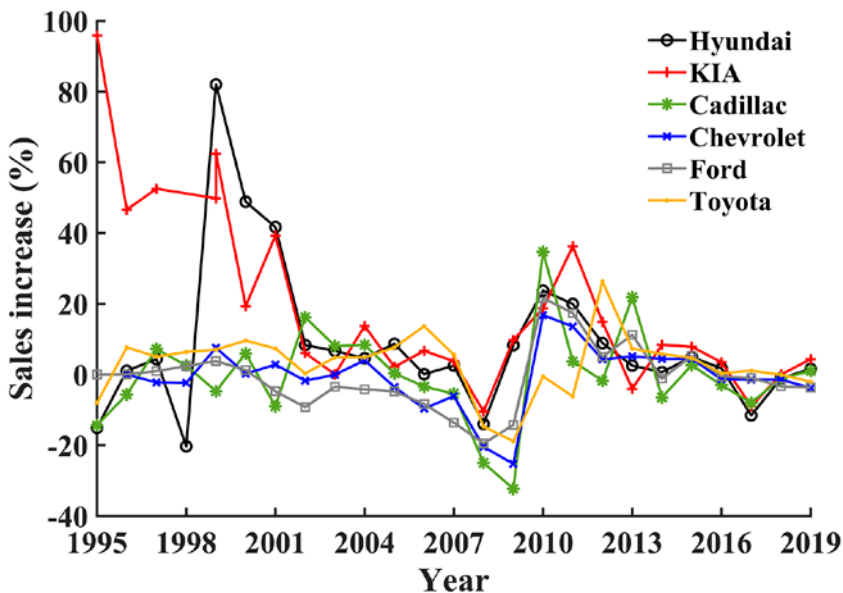
Source: own elaboration.

Although the first K-pop performers also entered the US market in the 2000s, K-pop's soaring sales started later, with the first peak for YG entertainment in 2016 (Figure 2).

Currently, K-pop's popularity continues to grow, with SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and BigHit Entertainment showing peaks in sales compared to international companies such as Universal Music Group and Warner Music Group (Figure 2). Therefore, it appears K-pop might not have reached its peak yet or that its popularity may be prolonged compared to that of K-cars (Benjamin, 2020; Messerlin and Shin, 2017).

Figure 2.
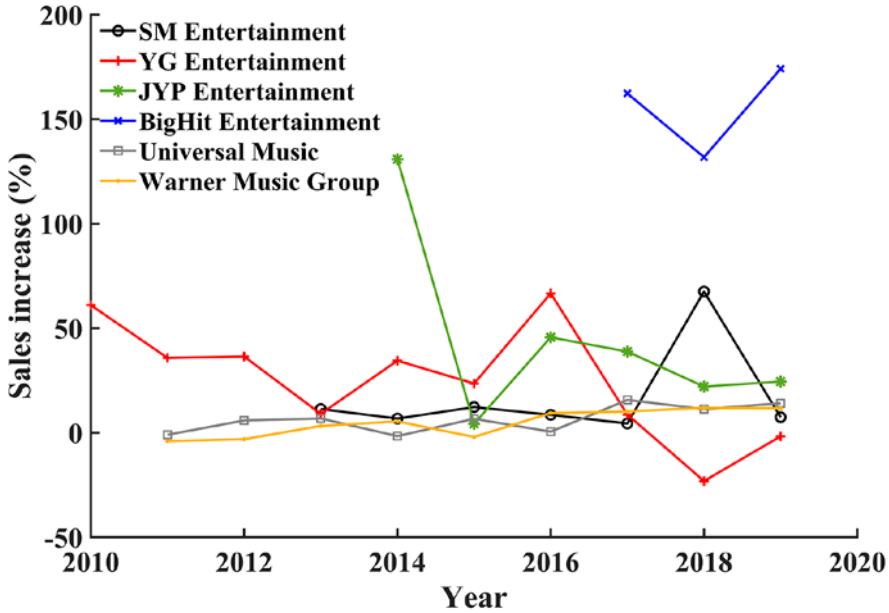
Source: own elaboration.

The rise of K-pop as a cultural and K-cars as an industrial phenomenon suggests some similarities between them. It would be a mistake to ignore that there are unquestionably industrial aspects of K-pop and popular cultural aspects of K-cars. Studies showed that both are the evolutionary outcomes of artistic/cultural and social/industrial traditions unique to Korea (Ahrens, 2016; Chen, 2016; Chung et al., 2015; Jang and Paik, 2012; Messerlin and Shin, 2017; Parc et al., 2017; Shim, 2006; Yim, 2002). While the social/industrial claim is correct, the artistic/cultural claim is not. Historical conditions in Korea have indeed led to the K-pop and K-car phenomena, but the specific implementation of those phenomena has little or nothing to do with traditional Korean art or culture. Korea's unique ability is to deploy its industrial machinery to transform bolder, edgier performances and designs originating elsewhere into forms that are perceived as inoffensive and, therefore, providing broad cross-cultural appeal.

Although originating from similar social/industrial phenomena, K-pop's delayed yet continuing growth in US (and other Western) sales revenues shows its hold on these markets has remained robust compared to K-cars. We argue that besides strong awareness of evolutions in the music industry from Korean labels (Parc and Kawashima, 2018), this is caused by current K-pop b(r)ands' better ability to provide original and relevant contributions to consumers' identity projects (Holt, 2002). Perceived brand authenticity (PBA) plays an important role in the recognition of a brand as a catalyst of self-identification in the current market culture (Morhart et al., 2015; Swaminathan et al., 2020). We will demonstrate that K-pop brands have adhered more strongly to the four dimensions of PBA (continuity, credibility, integrity, symbolism) identified by Morhart et al. (2015) compared to K-car brands. These dimensions will be identified based on (changes in) product design, brand behavior, and the brands' communications about their roots and virtue.

Theoretical Background

K-Pop and K-Cars: Is Korean (National) Culture the Source of Their Success?

Based on Hofstede's work on cultural dimensions in corporations (Hofstede, 1994), many studies attempted to explain the success of Korean (and other East Asian) businesses through investigating national cultural differences between these and other countries, such as copyright legislation, Confucian philosophy in business strategies or product design, and local hybridization with Western values (Ahrens, 2016; Chen, 2016, 2016; Chung et al., 2015; Jang and Paik, 2012; Messerlin and Shin, 2017; Parc et al., 2017; Shim, 2006; Yim, 2002). Yet, if the inclusion of Confucian cultural values in products and hybridization with Western values would be the sole argument explaining the success of Korean products, it is difficult to explain why this success has not occurred with products from other countries that incorporate local culture such as Czech or Polish (pop) music. Moreover, how could the same argument simultaneously explain the bumpy evolution of K-cars' popularity in the USA (Figure 1) and the seemingly continuous rise of K-pop's popularity (Figure 2)?

Recent studies, mostly focusing on K-pop, tackled this conundrum by investigating the evolution of Korean industries based on Porter's diamond (Parc and Kawashima, 2018) and double diamond models (Parc and Y Kim, 2020; Parc and Moon, 2019). These studies show that the Korean music industry quickly adapted to recent changes in

technology and techniques of producing and marketing music driven by Western businesses that influence the sector, such as the use of online video channels (VLive, YouTube) and focusing on the promotion of individual songs rather than albums (Parc and Kawashima, 2018; Parc and Kim, 2020; Parc and Y Kim, 2020). Similarly, the Korean car industry adapted Western strategies to improve its market (Kim, 1998). Moreover, these articles claim that initiatives for the growth of Korean products were mostly driven by companies, and that apart from some legislative interventions, the Korean government only "took a ride along" with the success to promote Korean traditional culture by embedding it in these products (Parc and Moon, 2019).

While we agree that traditional Korean cultural phenomena cannot explain the success of Korean products, the quick adaptation of Korean manufacturers to novel strategies does not sufficiently explain the global success of Korean products. Car manufacturers and music producers from other "non-Western" countries – be it India, China, or Czechia – had equal opportunities to (and often did) adapt to these new strategies, which therefore should have led to a similar success (Sardy and Fetscherin, 2009). However, although having local success, Indian and Chinese car manufacturers (or music producers) have yet been unable to gain strong footholds in the Western world, unless through a takeover of a Western manufacturer and producing cars under this Western name. Again, the consideration of social/industrial improvements in Korean business cannot by itself explain K-pop's growing popularity, while simultaneously explaining the more fluctuating success of K-cars. This article will argue that not only the Korean government but also Korean industries have used the claim of traditional cultures embedded in their products to maintain brand success. Furthermore, although the Korean government may be accused of using recent successes in K-pop and other Korean products to promote itself and Korean nationalism (Parc and Moon, 2019), this article will show that governmental initiatives in organizing and collaborating with Korean business and industries after the Korean War have contributed to the success of Korean products.

This article will further elaborate the thesis that it is not the cultural/artistic phenomena that explain the success of Korean products but rather Korean social/industrial traditions that allowed K-pop to thrive, which sometimes increased K-car success while in other instances limiting its potential. Nevertheless, we will highlight that Korean companies *claiming* traditional values are incorporated in products are important contributors to success and attract new customers. To achieve this, we expand the analysis of K-pop and K-car from current business evolutionary models (Porter's diamond; Parc and Kawashima, 2018; Parc and Kim, 2020; Parc and Kim, 2020) by analyzing

perceived brand authenticity embedded in the commercialization of K-pop and K-cars. It will also show how similar strategies could be developed by other (Central European) industries to break the hegemony in oligopolistic markets.

Korean Traditional Values

Traditional Korean values were developed during the Chosun dynasty, which lasted from 1392 to 1897 (Kim and Vanheusden, 2019). During this period, Confucianism developed and became the main philosophical doctrine in Korea, paying strong attention to an individual's role as a member of the family, community, nation, and natural world (Liu and Stening, 2016). One particular Confucian framework that came to orchestrate everyday life was the principle of Yin and Yang, which describes the quest for finding harmony within and between opposites (Chen and Miller, 2011). The idea of this dual paradox as a main rule of life forced Koreans to maintain certain flexibility in making choices in life and accommodating for and interpreting life events as they considered the world to be in constant flux (Chen, 2001). In other words, trying to maintain a balance between Yin and Yang ensures a balanced life. Therefore, optimal choices in life defy logic, and intuition is considered a valid approach to arrive at a (scientific) conclusion (Li, 2012). Allowing both logical and intuitive pathways for explaining events became the cradle for current practices in Korean (and other Asian countries') medicine, cultural values, business, and social justice (Li, 1998; Little, 2009).

This interplay and quest for balance between opposites differ from the main Western philosophical principles which developed during the same period (Burtt, 1953). Unlike Confucian perspectives, Western societies developed stronger attention toward the individual and their desires. Furthermore, Western societies rebuked intuition as a pathway to arrive at a conclusion: appropriate conclusions should always be based on logic.

Although Western principles entered the Korean society, especially since the Korean War (Kim and Vanheusden, 2019), Korean society still demonstrates strong connections with traditional values, which were mostly driven by social and financial crises occurring during periods of strong changes toward Western perspectives (Kim et al., 1999; Lee and Lee, 2003; Warner, 2016). During these crisis periods, Korean society always appeared to return to more traditional values, thereby trying to find a balance between Western (individualist) and Confucian (collectivist) values. Some researchers argue that modern Korean society can thus be considered a form of Confucian capitalism (Mitu, 2015).

Influence of Traditional Values on Contemporary Korean Business and Society

Contemporary Korean society is an amalgamation of Confucian and capitalist values, visible in the operation of Korean conglomerates, known as *chaebols* (Chung, 2016; Kim, 2019; Lee and McNulty, 2003; Noland, 2012). Korea started its independent industrialization process late compared to other industrialized countries due to the consequences of Japanese colonization and the Korean War. Although Japanese colonization led to the development of industrial plants for improving (Japanese) economy, Korea only developed its own industrial conglomerates in the 1960s (Lee and McNulty, 2003). By that time, other countries had already taken the benefits of growing technology in mass production and distribution and realized the need for product diversification. The complexity of decisions required to coordinate a company in this industrial landscape led to the development of the multi-divisional form of organization, in which "a group of managers would oversee activities within different parts of the company" (Chandler Jr, 1982). Companies would invest in wholesale and rely on dedicated marketing and sales offices to promote their products to an international customer base (Chandler, 1984). These marketing and sales offices, and the provision of goods to franchised sellers, would again be under the control of a management team (Chandler Jr, 1982). Branded products became widely visible in society, and companies became more involved in developing an identity for their brand through advertisement and designing products through which customers could perceive their own sociocultural values in products and companies (Holt, 2002; Low and Fullerton, 1994). As such, the car and cultural (e.g. film) industries, among others, became an oligopoly: dominated by a small group of large companies with excessive managerial hierarchies (Low and Fullerton, 1994). In the USA and later in Europe, this led to the creation of large conglomerates. When Korea started its industrialization process, its industries were forced to adapt themselves to this globalized culture, leading to the creation of *chaebols* such as Samsung or LG in the 1960s and 1970s (Yoo and Moon, 1999). However, the Korean government exercised tight control on the proceedings and growth of the Korean industry, organizing them in successive five-year economic development plans (Yoo and Moon, 1999). This provided a platform for morphing Confucian and capitalist values. Confucianism strongly discourages pursuing a career in business and seeking financial profit or fame. To avoid social conflicts, the Korean government started portraying the search for industrial and economic growth as goals that benefit the nation. As such, making money became an acceptable way of life for Koreans (Noland, 2012; Park, 2010). To further emphasize the claim that industrial growth benefits the nation, traditional Confucian values – such as strict discipline and behavior according to hierarchical rules and contribution to the nation as a motivation to work – were

implemented in *chaebol* business strategies and continue to be evident in Korean working environments (Kee, 2008; Kwon and Kim, 2014; Liu and Stening, 2016; Mitu, 2015; Yun, 2010).

On the other hand, seeking a harmonious life with others and with nature also remains an important part of everyday social interactions in Korea (Chung, 2016; Mitu, 2015). To claim that they are "authentically Korean," Korean brands started actively searching for ways to represent these values to national and international consumers.

Developing and Maintaining Brands

In contemporary culture, consumers look for brands that contribute to developing their identity projects (Holt, 2002). Music and cars cover two types of products that are often involved in these projects, e.g. an affection for punk rock for showing anti-establishment beliefs (Dunn, 2008) or purchasing a Porsche to show a high position on the social ladder or self-confidence (Hennighausen et al., 2016).

One way for brands to contribute to a consumer's identity project is by inducing social interactions and acting as a reference for social trends or societal symbols (Holt, 2002; Hesmondhalgh, 2008). To achieve this cultural symbolism, brands implement and maintain references to particular traditional values or concepts related to their country of origin or the country to which they export their products (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008; Chen, 2016). Appropriate implementation can positively influence brand authenticity perception, which can help consumers in shaping their identity (Holt, 2002; Morhart et al., 2015). This may make consumers more likely to purchase the brand's products.

Morhart et al. (2015) identify four dimensions of perceived brand authenticity (PBA): continuity (a brand's faithfulness to itself), credibility (brand's faithfulness to customers), integrity (brand's willingness to adhere to moral values), and symbolism (brand's ability to support consumers in being true to themselves). These dimensions can be measured through the analysis of indexical (authenticity through inherent qualities), iconic (authenticity through projections of one's beliefs and expectations), and existential (authenticity through being true to one's self) cues.

Methodology

In the following sections, the claims that K-cars' and K-pop's successes stem from social/industrial or artistic/cultural phenomena unique to Korea will be evaluated

based on politicohistorical perspectives on the origin and design philosophies that evolved in both the Korean car and music industry.

Next, we will evaluate changes in the success of K-cars (Hyundai/KIA) and K-pop (SM Entertainment/YG Entertainment/JYP Entertainment/BigHit Entertainment) in the US market through the lens of PBA by using company features or (inter)national events affecting K-cars' and K-pop's PBA. For each of the four PBA dimensions, specific industry features or (inter)national events related to the industry/companies will be compared (Table 1).

Table 1.

Dimension	K-car	K-pop
Continuity	Car design	Korean lyrics and band members
Credibility	7-year warranty programme, social media notifications	Behind the scenes and daily life documentaries, charity work
Integrity	Fraud scandals and discouraging workers' unions Customer care programmes	(Challenges of) maintaining moral values
Symbolism	Affordable luxury Part of everyday life	"Love Yourself" and promotion of inclusivity, maintain morality

Source: own elaboration.

Results and Discussion

The Origins of K-Pop Success

Korea encountered Western popular music for the first time in the 1950s, with American soldiers in the Korean War bringing along their favorite songs from Frank Sinatra, Patti Page, or Les Paul (Russell, 2012). Prior to this, most popular music in Korea consisted of folk songs and traditional instrumental music (Lie, 2012). In the 1970s, both types of music were banned, as folk songs often included messages against the dictatorship of General Park while popular music was considered too loud and leading to a decadent lifestyle, incompatible with Confucian values (Lie, 2012).

Pop re-entered mainstream Korean music during the 1980s, albeit mostly in the form of ballads (Shim, 2006). K-pop saw its first success with Seo Taiji and Boys in 1992

(Lie, 2012). Around the same time, Lee Soo-Man started up SM Entertainment (Shin and Kim, 2013), after being influenced by American pop songs and music videos during his studies in the USA (Lie, 2012). Along with other entertainment houses, Lee established a framework of cultural technology that the Korean government supported in its drive to expand Korean export products after the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Chen, 2016).

The first success stories of K-pop export were acts such as H.O.T. (High Five of Teen-agers) and BoA (Lie, 2012). Within two years, Korea was the second-largest music market in Asia, with $300 million in album sales per year (Shim, 2006). From these successes, the "Big 3" K-pop entertainment houses attempted to gain a foothold in the global market with bands such as BigBang and 2NE1 (YG Entertainment), Wonder Girls (JYP Entertainment), and Girls' Generation (SM Entertainment; Shin and Kim, 2013). Although these bands organized global tours and appeared on *Late Night* shows (G Kim, 2017; Lie, 2012), K-pop's global breakthrough only came after the (online) success of Psy's "Gangnam Style" in 2012 (Kwon and Kim, 2014), a song which does not exactly fit (and almost mocks) K-pop (Ballardie et al., 2019; Park, 2016).

In 2016, K-pop global sales reached a record $4.7 billion (S Kim, 2017; KOCCA, 2017). And in May 2018, Korean boyband BTS (Bangtan Boys, Hangul: 방탄소년단; Revised Romanization: Bangtan Sonyeondan) became the first K-pop band to reach number one on American album charts (BBCNews, 2018a). Well-known for their meticulously choreographed dance performances and "cute" boyish looks, the seven-member group is currently one of Korea's best-selling musical exports (BBCNews, 2018b; Benjamin, 2020). Their aggressively devoted fans have formed a distinct social group, calling themselves BTS ARMY (Ballardie et al., 2019; BBCNews, 2018b; Salsby, 2020). Besides BTS, the girl band BLACKPINK has become the latest YG Entertainment product to reach global success (Herman, 2019).

From a musical style and band setup perspective, some researchers have attempted to locate the roots of K-pop in Korean culture and musical traditions (Cruz et al., 2019; Jang and Paik, 2012; Kim and Bae, 2017). Bands usually have a leader who acts as the spokesperson for the group during interviews and starts the vocals in most songs (Bhutto, 2019). This superficially resembles the traditional Korean music group setup. Lead and follower(s) lyrics let a lead singer sing a song with other singers or the audience following along to create harmony (Jang and Paik, 2012). This structured performer--audience interaction is also observed during current live performances of K-pop bands, with the audience shouting specific catchphrases or lyrics at well-timed moments during a song or moving their concert lights along with the beat (Ballardie

et al., 2019). However, many Western bands also have a spokesperson (e.g. Beyoncé for Destiny's Child or Bono for U2; Petit, 2011; Schuman, 2014)) and thrive on interactions with the audience (Barkhuus and Jørgensen, 2008). As such, these structures in band organization and performance setup can hardly be called traditional Korean.

Moreover, some claim that K-pop maintains Korean authenticity through the exemplification of Confucian values, which are asserted to be the source of its success across Asia (Cho, 2011; Messerlin and Shin, 2017). According to the traditional Confucian worldview, K-pop stars avoid the use of violent, drug-related, and generally immoral lyrics (Cho, 2011; Kim, 2016). They are also strongly controlled to maintain a socially respectable lifestyle, eschewing drugs, sex, and tattoos (Choi and Maliangkay, 2014; Messerlin and Shin, 2017; SERI, 2012; Wong, 2018). The themes of most songs are related to love, and a group's appearance emphasizes cuteness or coolness (Choi and Maliangkay, 2014; Messerlin and Shin, 2017; Oh and Lee, 2014). These characteristics appeal to both young fans and their parents (Ballardie et al., 2019; Lie, 2012; Salsby, 2020).

On the other hand, many aspects of the Confucian worldview are neglected in K-pop. A major example is that in traditional Confucianism, a worthy life is an honorable life, of which singing or artistic performance would only be a small part of the learning process to become a well-respected citizen. As such, entertainers devoting their lives to entertaining others are considered honorless (Morelli, 2001; Shim, 2006, 2008). However, because of K-pop's success, the most desirable careers for the current young Korean generation are to become singers or dancers (Lie, 2012).

Moreover, it is clear that mainstream K-pop bands mainly adopt the styles and fashions of American and European pop and might only subtly flavor the features of these styles with Korean elements (Parc et al., 2017). To avoid being considered Asian copies of Western RandB and hip-hop, K-pop bands seek to blend their music's melodies, sounds, and tunes with Korean lyrics as well as traditional Korean rhythms and musical instruments. For example, what is becoming a familiar part of K-pop is the sound of the *gayageum* (Hangul: 가야금), a zither-like string instrument (Cho, 2012; Messerlin and Shin, 2017; Park, 2016). However, the core of the songs is very similar to those of current Western pop. Although, by mixing English and Korean lyrics, K-pop songs create a seeming complexity and difficulty in the decoding of lyrics, making the songs appear to be both English and Korean (Lie, 2012). Through such slight hybridization of music styles and languages, K-pop remains sufficiently new and innovative to expand and spread its boundaries (Parc et al., 2017).

K-pop is not just about the music. Early on, the Korean entertainment industry sought to surmount any real or perceived language barriers through accompanying music with visually intensive performances that emphasize dancing over singing. Prior to 2000, these visually-focused performances were disregarded in the global music market (Messerlin and Shin, 2017) but subsequently played a major role in the widespread success of the genre (BBCNews, 2018b; Messerlin and Shin, 2017; Parc et al., 2017). K-pop first attracted public attention through music videos on YouTube that provided more entertainment content than just the music itself (Cruz et al., 2019; Meza and Park, 2015). Now, both song and dance performance are considered equally important, and considerable capital is invested in creating unique choreographies for individual songs along with high-content music video clips. Besides behind-the-scenes and daily-life videos, music video clips are widely distributed through social media such as Daum/Naver (Korean web portals), V Live, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Messerlin and Shin, 2017).

Moreover, K-pop stars pay considerable attention to fashion (Choi and Maliangkay, 2014; Lie, 2015; Oh and Lee, 2014; Sawangchot, 2016). Band members typically dress stylishly to look impressive and powerful. Their clothing is a combination of luxury designer brands and Korean streetwear, tailored to ensure that the clothes do not obstruct their dance performances. With the powerful competition between K-pop stars, they must not wear the same clothing twice, thereby reinforcing the image of a successful and luxurious life. Well aware of how paparazzi can be used to improve one's image, many bands devote considerable time to selecting optimal outfits for travel. This has led to the lucrative fashion business called "airport outfit" (Hangul: 공항 패션; Lee and Kim, 2014).

Finally, the rise of online music content has led to a major reduction in the sales of singles and album CDs/DVDs in the music industry (Messerlin and Shin, 2017). To maintain public interest in this market, Korean entertainment companies provide exclusive material with the hardcopy, namely a different album cover for each band member such that fans can select images of their favorite member(s) (Ballardie et al., 2019). Furthermore, K-pop bands publish many mini-albums (Messerlin and Shin, 2017). This might help popularity and keep the band in the limelight (Wong, 2018). Mini-albums show similarities to the Western concept of EPs in the era of vinyl, but EPs never appeared to be produced as frequently as K-pop mini-albums (Rodriguez, 2015). Apart from this, bands produce an enormous amount of accessories and necessities for fans to purchase as part of their concert experience or following the lifestyle of their idols (Ballardie et al., 2019).

Created in South Korea in the 1990s and promoted as a Western-Asian hybrid, K-pop is now a multi-million-dollar industry with many young bands winning audiences around the globe (Choi and Maliangkay, 2014; Messerlin and Shin, 2017). As mentioned above, evidence is slim of Korea's artistic and cultural heritage use in K-pop, namely the presence of musical structures and Confucian values (Cho, 2012; Jang and Paik, 2012; Lie, 2012; Yim, 2002). The use of Korean language lyrics and instruments notwithstanding, there is nothing about K-pop that could not have been created elsewhere. The important point is that it was not created elsewhere but in Korea. Governmental initiatives to promote Korean culture and the quick adaptation of Korean music labels to social media have greatly influenced the global recognition of K-pop and other Korean cultural products (Bhutto, 2019; Jin, 2006, 2016; Kim and Nam, 2016; Parc and Kawashima, 2018; Parc and Kim, 2020).

The Origins of K-Car Success

Only relatively recently have efforts been made to attribute Korean success in global automobile sales to the vehicles' aesthetic roots in Korean tradition. Hyundai's current design philosophy is self-described as "fluidic sculpture" (Chung et al., 2015; Lee, 2010; Lee et al., 2012), which is explained as being inspired by nature ("an aesthetic as unrestricted as flowing water and as free as the wind") and executed with the simplicity characteristic of Eastern art. Despite the artistic references, it is clear from other sources that the inspiration for the design was not nature but rather German and Japanese automobiles (Ahrens, 2016; Choi and Bok, 2009; Chung et al., 2015; Kim, 1998). This adaptation of foreign ideas in car manufacturing is especially apparent in the history of Hyundai (Choi and Bok, 2009; Kim, 1998; Minchin, 2017; Sohal and Ferme, 1996), which is also the main shareholder of KIA since 1998 (KIA, 2020b; Minchin, 2017).

Hyundai started assembling Ford compact cars on a knockdown and later semi-knock-down basis, while simultaneously developing its own engineering skills to manufacture cars (Kim, 1998). After a government initiative supporting the development of Korean cars, Hyundai developed the Pony, which was made almost completely in Korea (Kim, 1998). This was followed by the development of its first front-wheel-drive cars based on technology obtained from Mitsubishi. During the 1980s, Hyundai followed other Asian car manufacturers and entered the US market (Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama, 2020).

After issues related to the 1997 Asian financial crisis and 1998 strikes in Korea, which made the company incapable of meeting export demands, Hyundai established manu-

facturing plants in the USA and other countries (Minchin, 2017). Simultaneously, it extended its car portfolio from compact cars to mid-size and full-size as well as luxury cars, most of which found parts of their design originating from other manufacturers (Choi and Bok, 2009; Kim, 1998).

In contrast, KIA originated as a bicycle manufacturer, developing its first cars in 1974. After being forced to cease passenger car manufacturing in 1981, it re-entered the market after partnering with Ford in 1986 (Kia of LaGrange, 2019), and so KIA entered the US market in 1992 (Kia of LaGrange, 2019). Up until then, its cars were mostly based on foreign technology, and only in 1993 did KIA start paying more attention to research and development (Sohal and Ferme, 1996). After its takeover by Hyundai in 1998 (Kia of LaGrange, 2019), KIA followed in Hyundai's footsteps, expanding its manufacturing sites and setting up its first North American plant in 2010 (Minchin, 2017).

Even after achieving the ability to develop their own cars, Hyundai and KIA continued to develop cars based on imitation and adaptation of foreign design and technology (Choi and Bok, 2009; Jun and Park, 2016; Kim, 1998). In his 2016 book *Seoul Man*, Frank Ahrens provides some specific examples of Hyundai adapting foreign design and technology. As Hyundai's previous Director of Communications, Ahrens's language obviously is that of a seasoned public relations executive but nonetheless worth quoting in full:

> in 2009 in one grand and unexpected flourish, Hyundai shocked the auto industry when it debuted a ground-breaking new design on its big-selling Sonata sedan. Called "Fluidic Sculpture," the look was all curves and swoops. In one move, Hyundai had leaped from bland fast follower to industry design leader, forcing competitors such as Nissan and Toyota to overhaul or at least examine their own cars' designs … Critics favorably compared the new Sonata's design to the Mercedes C-class. A bold character line swept along the side of the Sonata—Hyundai designers called it the "orchid stroke"—and it arced like a javelin in flight, giving the car a look of tension and velocity (Ahrens, 2016).

Along with Mercedes Benz and other foreign manufacturers as worthy design examples, there were other reasons for the similarities: Hyundai has made it a special point to acquire German expertise whenever possible (Choi and Bok, 2009; Kim, 1998). In 2006, Hyundai hired Peter Schreyer, the designer of the Audi TT, who in 2013 was also put in charge of Hyundai design (Ahrens, 2016). In 2017 the Hyundai Motor Studio in Goyang, South Korea, was designed by the German firm Atelier Brückner, which had previously designed the new BMW Museum in Munich (Ahrens, 2016; Lee et al., 2012).

German – or at least European – automobile design was and is indeed a very familiar reference point for Hyundai. Returning to Ahrens' observations:

> My first thought was that the designers had pulled a trick on me and driven in an Audi A7, one of the most beautiful cars on the road. Nope. This was the next Genesis … Genesis had a brushed-chrome hexagonal grille. Car companies spend a lot of money and time – years, even – thinking about and perfecting their grilles …. Think of the "twin kidney" BMW grilles, the three-pointed star in the Mercedes grille, and the diagonal bar across the Volvo grille …. The Genesis hood was long, a characteristic of high-performance rear-wheel-drive European sedans like Jaguars (Ahrens, 2016).

Similarly, subsequent design decisions regarding the Sonata certainly raise further questions regarding Hyundai's originality:

> The new Sonata was sitting next to a new Genesis. It was undeniable, for the first time in Hyundai's history, that these two cars belonged to the same family in the way it is undeniable that all Audis and Benzes belong to the same family, [German manufacturers served again as a reference point, and yet] … Hyundai's designers had taken the powerfully arcing "orchid stroke" character line on the previous Sonata's side – the one that drew comparisons to the Mercedes C-class – and flattened it out, Honda-style … The buzz around the company was that the previous Sonata, which had wowed the pants off of American motoring journalists and made it a success among American customers, was too wild for Korean customers (Ahrens, 2016).

Regarding this "fluidic sculpture," there is no question that the 2010 Hyundai Sonata (Figure 3) was bland and that the 2011 Sonata (Figure 4) was more striking.

Hyundai was also eager to attribute considerable success to "fluidic sculpture." At 2012's Detroit Motor Show, Hyundai Motor America announced that design excellence had contributed around 40% toward the hugely increased sales volumes of the YF Sonata and the fifth-generation Elantra compared to the sales volumes of previous models (Chung et al., 2014). In 2013, Interbrand (Global Brand Consultancy) indicates that Hyundai Motor Company attracted emotional purchases with its strategy of transformation into a design-led brand (Chung et al., 2015). From the work of Chung et al. (2015), it appears that "the brand perception had now gone beyond a pure value play to develop a premium halo."

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

And yet there is no question that the 2015 Sonata (Figure 5) dialed back the dramatic flair of the "orchid stroke." Even though the company claimed success through (re)design, yearly increases in US sales revenues do not show it outperforming any of the other American or Asian manufacturers in the 2011–2015 period (Figure 1). Hyundai's unique car side treatment cannot be regarded as design leadership either because no other company followed.

Figure 5.

This incident illustrates what it is that Hyundai does best: offer attractive but inoffensive versions of bolder vehicles from elsewhere that might not be a buyer's first choice but would still be on that buyer's list of possibilities. Therefore, the Korean automobile industry is comparable to the K-pop playbook: removing violence, drug references, and immorality from lyrics and replacing them with larger doses of romance. Alternatively, removing the tattoos from performers and polishing them up with shiny veneers of cuteness leaves a product that is also attractive and inoffensive. In some way, K-pop and K-car follow in the footsteps of (Japanese) J-pop and J-cars (Freedman and Blair, 2010; Mōri, 2009). However, unlike K-pop outperforming J-pop (Herman, 2018a, 2018b; Hong, 2012), K-cars continue to be outperformed by J-cars in market share, at least in the US market (Cain, 2017; Hill et al., 2011).

If K-cars' artistic design aspects did not give these manufacturers an edge over their competitors – as for example shown by the 2010–2016 sales increases (Figure 1) – it

is unlikely that these artistic/cultural elements were responsible for the sales increase in the late 1990s and early 2000s, or the increased sales in 2008. KIA's increased sales in the 1990s can be explained by the company's entrance and expansion into the US market (Kia of LaGrange, 2019). This expansion might have been hampered by repercussions related to the 1997 Asian financial crisis and Kia's subsequent takeover by Hyundai. However, Hyundai itself struggled to maintain its position in the US market due to major strikes and its inability to meet export demands in 1998 and 1999 (Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama, 2020; Jun and Park, 2016; Kia of LaGrange, 2019; Minchin, 2017; Yoo and Moon, 1999). As with K-pop, governmental initiatives after the 1997 financial crisis to protect the Korean industry contributed to the ability of Hyundai and KIA to continue to focus on developing and improving their car portfolio (Park and Lee, 2002). Therefore, it appears that social and industrial actions by the car and music manufacturers and the Korean government have been responsible for increased sales much more than the embedding of Korean artistic or cultural values in these products.

Therefore, the question remains why K-pop achieved global success and K-cars did not, although both generate inoffensive versions of known Western products and receive Korean governmental support. In the following paragraphs, we will show that although neither K-pop nor K-car is authentically Korean, both claim authenticity, and it is the perceived closer relation of K-pop to traditional Korean culture (compared to K-car) that provides the brand's success.

Maintaining Success: (The Loss of) Brand Authenticity

This section will contrast K-pop's and K-cars' perceived brand activity based on the framework developed by Morhart et al. (2015) as outlined above.

Continuity

Since K-cars entered the American market, they have been considered manufacturers of affordable cars of questionable quality (Homer, 2008). To improve their image, and perhaps attract a consumer group beyond working-class Americans who prefer buying American or US-manufactured products (Essoussi and Merunka, 2007; Levin et al., 1993) and have shown hatred toward foreign manufacturers (Frank, 2002), Hyundai (and Kia) decided to give their cars a more luxurious design (Homer, 2008). Apart from changing the car side frames, the front (face) of the car also received a makeover (Figures 3–5). Hyundai assumed a hexagonal grill (Figure 5) compared to their usual rounded trapezoid (Figures 3–4), which can be considered a bold move by any car manufacturer, as studies show that the front (face) of a car is the most important for brand

recognition (Burnap et al., 2016; Choi and Bok, 2009). By removing the recognizable aspect of the "affordable, low-quality Hyundai," the company might have felt in a better position to attract new customers. The grille would increase its distinction from other (luxury) car manufacturers such as Mercedes, BMW, or Cadillac and help advertise Hyundai – especially its Genesis – to a new customer group of high-earning professionals (Choi and Bok, 2009; Ranscombe et al., 2012). However, as for the "fluidic sculpture," this change in design might have alienated traditional customers in both the USA and Korea, and it did not lead to the expected growth in market share or sales increases (Cain, 2017). The Genesis and other Hyundai models, even though they *looked* luxurious, must be *perceived as* a luxury.

On the other hand, K-pop is branded in such a way that it continues to be perceived as Korean by non-Korean consumers and Western by Korean consumers (Lie, 2012; Messerlin and Shin, 2017). This "perception gap" gives K-pop characteristics of being something new and innovative, which will have helped develop its success (Burnap et al., 2016; Messerlin and Shin, 2017). K-pop bands will introduce songs with Korean lyrics about non-violent themes, combining melodic sections with rap, while incorporating an energetic choreography performed live or as part of high-tech music videos full of symbolic meaning (Ballardie et al., 2019; Lie, 2012; Salsby, 2020; SERI, 2012). These seemingly Korean aspects make K-pop recognizable by audiences around the world, which stands in contrast with the earliest attempts of K-pop bands such as Wonder Girls to break through in the USA with English versions of their songs (Hodoyan--Gastellum, 2016) or CL's style being considered a Korean version of Nicki Minaj (Kwak, 2016). American music fans were not enthused by nor interested in Korean copies of American bands and performers, which may help explain why these bands were not able to achieve the success of current bands.

Credibility

To boost its credibility, the development of the luxury car Genesis might have convinced some customers about the quality of Hyundai products (Choi and Bok, 2009; Knowledge at Wharton, 2009). Moreover, Hyundai attempted to improve its quality perception by advertising seven – and 10-year warranty plans for specific models and a new brand personality, albeit with limited success in changing consumer perception (Homer, 2008). Hyundai has shown openness to its customers when faced with technical issues, informing them about issues with overestimated miles per gallon rates in 2012 (Chung and Kim, 2014). Nevertheless, none of these initiatives are unique to Hyundai and KIA compared to other car manufacturers, and so, they did not improve the perceptions of K-car's authenticity.

For K-pop idols, transparency and willingness to show their daily life have always been prerequisites to please their Korean fans (Chen, 2016; Lie, 2012). This need for a ubiquitous presence was easily expanded to their global fan base through social media. Giving fans the experience to follow everything idols do in their lives is almost unique to K-pop and goes well beyond biographic documentaries developed by Western artists (Yoon, 2018). The willingness of K-pop bands to interact with fans also appears stronger compared to Western artists, with for example BTS frequently referring to their "ARMY" fan base during concerts, documentaries, social media posts, and speeches (Jin and Yi, 2020; Jin, 2018). Idols will often endorse their fans to maintain this community or join them during charity events (Chen, 2016; Low, 2019).

Integrity

Interestingly, both KIA and Hyundai showed a faster rebound from the repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis compared to competitors. One argument that led to this could be increased sales due to the introduction of Hyundai's Assurance Program. This program provided customers with the possibility to return their cars in case they lost their job due to the repercussions of the financial crisis (McAllister, 2010). Simultaneously, KIAs announcement to build a US manufacturing plant during times when American manufacturers were closing their own plants might have had a positive influence on American customers' perspectives on Korean car manufacturers (Minchin, 2017). These initiatives could be perceived as K-car manufacturers caring for their working-class customers by providing them with employment and ways to get cash in case of losing employment. However, it quickly became clear that KIA had received significant tax reductions and incentives to build its plant in Georgia, similar to Hyundai receiving incentives for building its manufacturing plant in the southern USA in the 2000s (Minchin, 2017). Furthermore, Georgia was chosen for building the plant due to a weaker presence of workers' unions in this state, especially compared to the northern USA or Korea (Minchin, 2017). Adding to this, KIA promised to prioritize employing the local community, yet it quickly became clear that the company did not follow up on this promise (Minchin, 2017). Finally, senior management of Hyundai was accused of fraudulent behavior in Korea, and although making changes in management, there have been many "clashes of culture" between Korean senior management and Americans managing the US plant in recent years (Kiley, 2008; Minchin, 2017). Therefore, both KIA and Hyundai do not appear to apply their traditional Confucian values of seeking harmony in design to their management, nor do they seem to behave as a generous father to their community or consumers (Cha, 2003; Li, 2006; Low and Ang, 2012).

For K-pop, with the many social rules that idols must follow to maintain an appropriate – and very prominent – presence in social media, their lives are necessarily governed very rigidly by the entertainment companies (Chen, 2016; J Kim, 2017; Wong, 2018). Even before becoming an official member of a K-pop band, prospective performers are expected to live at residences close to or at their company, participating in long and intensive training schemes (Parc et al., 2017). Social engagements such as dating are in most cases denied for fear of losing fans' attraction. This leads to high pressure on budding Korean entertainment stars, as they understand that even slight deviations from expected behavior could lead to a sudden collapse in fame and immediate removal from the K-pop scene (Ballardie et al., 2019; J Kim, 2017; Wong, 2018). One band that suffered the loss of fame due to inappropriate behavior was 2NE1, which collapsed after allegations of drug smuggling by one member (Salamat, 2020). BigBang also saw a possible return to fame after completing their army duties crushed by allegations of one member's involvement in a sex scandal (Hollingsworth and Seo, 2020). However, with the global expansion of K-pop, some of the rules seem to be relaxing, and it appears now possible for BTS members to wear piercings or tattoos, which would have been considered intolerable seven years ago (Ballardie et al., 2019). As such, it seems that as long as idols refrain from violence or other unlawful behavior and lyrics and maintain strong interaction with their fans through (social) media, the integrity of K-pop will be maintained (Chen, 2016; Jin and Yi, 2020; Lie, 2012; McLaren and Jin, 2020; Oh, 2020).

Symbolism

To become a part of consumers' lives, K-car manufacturers (continue to) follow a post-modernist approach to branding, providing cultural resources with which their customers can identify themselves (Holt, 2002). An important part of this campaign has focused on what Holt describes as "coat-tailing on cultural epicenters" with which working-class members identify themselves (Holt, 2002). As a high number of the working class watches sports, sponsorship of sporting events can nurture association with a brand (Jhally, 1989; Wenner, 1989; Woods, 2015). To explore this opportunity, Hyundai became an official sponsor of FIFA in 1999 (Hassan, 2018). Furthermore, the organization of the 2002 FIFA World Cup by Japan and South Korea might have increased the interest of the (American) public in Korea, leading to a better awareness of the products designed and manufactured in Korea and increasing the perception of quality products manufactured in both countries (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2004; Kim and Morrsion, 2005; Kim and Nam, 2016). More recently, KIA started sponsoring the NBA and other sports organizations (Hassan, 2018). Both companies have also engaged with influencers that affiliate with Korea or Korean culture. One example would be Korean Englishman promoting the features of the KIA Stinger (Englishman, n.d.).

However, the lack of integrity shown by Hyundai and KIA (as described above) and the easy recognition of influencers as brand agents might have thwarted the efforts made by both manufacturers to appear authentic and reduced the effectiveness of their branding as affordable luxury cars (Choi and Bok, 2009; Holt, 2002).

In this sense, the rapid removal of immorally behaving idols might help K-pop maintain its symbolic meaning of the innocent alternative to Western hip-hop or RandB. However, it can also be demonstrated that K-pop has better adapted to the post-postmodernist approach to branding by providing original, relevant cultural material that consumers can use to develop their identity. K-pop bands often have a high number of members than typical Western bands, all of whom have their own personalities and are allowed to engage with individual music or performance projects (Parc et al., 2017; Shah, 2020). This idea of being oneself in a group has been explored to a lesser extent by Western bands, but it appears to attract younger generations and is especially praised by BTS' global fan base (Ballardie et al., 2019; Salsby, 2020). The band BTS has strongly encouraged fans to find their "own voice" and to understand that everyone's life has good and bad moments through their "Love Yourself" series (Wickman, 2018). Moreover, BTS promotes and sponsors campaigns that promote inclusivity, which may further contribute to the perception of the band members as supporting their fans to develop their own identities (BBCNews, 2020). However, to maintain this image, K-pop will need to tackle concerns that are currently raised regarding how entertainment companies treat their pedigree (Choi, 2015; J Kim, 2017; Lie, 2015; Wong, 2018), and some further loosening of the strict rules with which idols must comply will be required to confirm the ability to be oneself in modern society (Ballardie et al., 2019). Similarly, the expectations of K-pop fan bases for their peers to act and react in specific ways to calls for action or during concerts might induce contradictions with the potential to experience concerts according to one's individual desires.

In summary, we argue that K-pop might have had to remove the stigma of early K-pop bands trying to break through globally as copies of Western music styles but has now developed cues that increase their perceived authenticity. Moreover, the industry quickly reacts to situations and events that might challenge its symbolic meaning, integrity, or credibility. Instead, K-car manufacturers' attempts to remove perceptions of the lower quality of their products have only led to limited success, while their inconsistent behavior toward customers and employees may have thwarted their ability to develop authenticity. However, the current success of K-pop might be creating new opportunities for K-cars to increase their US market share and recognition as a good quality brand that cares for its consumers.

Conclusion

Rather than embedding its own culture in a product, it is Korea's history of cultural adaptation that appears to be the driver of the success of both K-pop and K-car. From having acquired considerable foreign culture in its recent past, Korea has developed a unique skill in not only making it its own but also in doing so in a way that other cultures would find equally acceptable. Together with successful business strategies and attention to providing inoffensive and attractive alternatives, they have now become established products in global markets. It is likely that there is even an advantage in there being almost nothing "Korean" about these products. What it means for something to be identified as part of the (South) Korean brand is to be a globally competitive product without the encumbrance of anything descended from traditional Korea.

Nevertheless, competitive does not necessarily mean popular, and popularity cannot be enforced upon consumers. One aspect that affects brand popularity is its perceived authenticity. Based on the dimensions of perceived brand authenticity identified by Morhart et al. (2015), the article argues that K-pop has created a more authentic image of itself compared to K-cars through developing innovative ways of contributing to a consumer's identity project, transparency of idols to fans, and maintaining its moral values as well as aspects that can be perceived as being "Korean." As such, the article provides insights into appropriate strategies for brands originating from peripheral countries to engage with a global consumer community.

Implications for Central-European Industries

Similar to other work in the field on the emergence of Korean products (Parc and Kawashima, 2018; Parc and S D Kim, 2020), the intention of this article is not to glamourize the Korean automobile or music industries but to demonstrate potential frameworks involving both private and governmental initiatives to allow companies to break the West-European Anglo-Saxon hegemony in these industries. Too often are arguments for the success of non-West European or Anglo-Saxon industries based on the emphasis in these industries on maintaining traditional arts or cultural values. As such, many studies seek the reason for the success of the Korean automobile and music industries on the embodiment of Korean traditional values in these products. This article has shown that although Korean products might be able to induce a *perception* of traditional values, the true reason behind their success is an interplay between industrial and governmental forces that led to the evolution of Korean industry and the Korean

economy toward a more Western approach, while maintaining a form of familiarity with traditional values during this process, namely by emphasizing the support to the nation through developing high-profit multinational businesses. In product design, this led to the development of Westernized products such as luxury cars or boybands with a "Korean" flavor, making the products less bold and, therefore, more acceptable for Korean and non-Korean consumers.

As such, Central European industries wishing to develop into an international market could adapt and – as in the case of Skoda – have adapted approaches of embedding hints toward traditional values into their design of West-European and Anglo-Saxon products. However, to reach full success, this article argues the need for strong links between industry and government in making decisions about which industries should be the most important ones, thus ensuring optimal marketing strategies while limiting potential clashes of further "Westernizing" the economy and industry with traditional values as strongly integrated in society. Achieving an appropriate interplay between maintaining social and cultural values while designing and branding local products for an international market can improve the position of Central European industries and allow them to penetrate global industries currently dominated by a small number of companies.

It is commonplace today that design has become not only an important competitive factor in business but perhaps also the most important competitive factor. Recent interruptions notwithstanding, advances in supply chain operation and management have allowed even small companies, wherever they originated, to realize the lowest cost of manufacturing and distribution. Another commonplace is that design itself has become globally homogenized, and this deserves a closer look. One assertion this paper has made is that a design approach rooted in Korean culture has led to products in the automobile and music industries that have become popular throughout the world. This suggests that while consumers in most markets are receptive to new designs, regardless of their cultural origins, those cultural origins can have traditional roots and need not have emerged from some international melting pot. Therefore, it can be important to study. In greater depth the relationship between the local sources of designs and the global uses to which those designs can be applied. What is most exciting about such explorations is that they require the integration of cultural anthropology, art, history, and other humanistic disciplines with more familiar business studies. There are considerable opportunities for such interdisciplinary ventures.

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