The Semiotics of Soft Power; An Examination of the South Korean Entertainment Industry

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Abstract : This paper employs various semiotic methodologies to examine the mechanism of soft power. Soft power refers to a country's global reputation and their ability to leverage that reputation to achieve certain aims. South Korea has invested heavily in their soft power strategy for a multitude of predominantly historical and geopolitical reasons. On account of this investment and the global prominence of their strategy, South Korea was considered to be the optimal candidate for the aims of this investigation. Having isolated the entertainment industry as one of the most heavily funded segments of the South Korean soft power strategy, the analysis restricted itself to this sector. Within this industry, two entertainment products were selected as case studies. The case studies were chosen based on commercial success according to metrics such as streams, purchases, and subsequent revenue. This criterion was deemed to be the most objective and verifiable indicator of the products general appeal. The entertainment products which met the chosen criterion were Netflix' "Squid Game" and BTS' hit single "Butter". The methodologies employed were chosen according to the medium of the entertainment products. For "Squid Game," an aesthetic analysis was carried out to investigate how multi- layered meanings were mobilized in a show popularized by its visual grammar. To examine "Butter", both music semiology and linguistic analysis were employed. The music section featured an analysis underpinned by denotative and connotative music semiotic theories borrowing from scholars Theo van Leeuwen and Martin Irvine. The linguistic analysis focused on stance and semantic fields according to scholarship by George Yule and John W. DuBois. The aesthetic analysis of the first case study revealed intertextual references to famous artworks, which served to augment the emotional provocation of the Squid Game narrative. For the second case study, the findings exposed a set of musical meaning units arranged in a patchwork of familiar and futuristic elements to achieve a song that existed on the boundary between old and new. The linguistic analysis of the song's lyrics found a deceptively innocuous surface level meaning that bore implications for authority, intimacy, and commercial success. Whether through means of visual metaphor, embedded auditory associations, or linguistic subtext, the collective findings of the three analyses exhibited a desire to conjure a form of positive arousal in the spectator. In the synthesis section, this process is likened to that of branding. Through an exploration of branding, the entertainment products can be understood as cogs in a larger operation aiming to create positive associations to Korea as a country and a concept. Limitations in the form of a timeframe biased perspective are addressed, and directions for future research are suggested. This paper employs semiotic methodologies to examine two entertainment products as mechanisms of soft power. Through means of visual metaphor, embedded auditory associations, or linguistic subtext, the findings reveal a desire to conjure positive arousal in the spectator. The synthesis finds similarities to branding, thus positioning the entertainment products as cogs in a larger operation aiming to create positive associations to Korea as a country and a concept.

Keywords : BTS, cognitive semiotics, entertainment, soft power, south korea, squid game