

The Evolution of Citizenship: Tracking the Shift from Collective Duty to Individual Rights in KOBACO Campaigns (1981–2025)

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Abstract

This study examines the longitudinal transformation of citizenship in South Korea by analyzing state-sponsored public service advertisements (PSAs) produced by the Korea Broadcast Advertising Corporation (KOBACO) from 1981 to 2025. Situated at the intersection of media studies and political sociology, the research utilizes a longitudinal mixed-methods approach combining quantitative thematic coding of 445 campaigns with critical discourse analysis to track how the "Good Korean Citizen" has been discursively reconstructed across different political and economic eras. Findings reveal a significant shift from the developmental-authoritarian period (1980s), which emphasized collectivist national duties such as economic productivity and family planning, toward a neoliberal model (1990s-2000s) focused on individualized ethical consumption and personal responsibility. Notably, the contemporary "Smart Society" phase (2020s) marks a new evolution toward digital citizenship. At this time, civic virtue is increasingly characterized by compliance with digitized public health standards and active participation in state-led digital ecosystems. Despite these transitions, the analysis suggests that Korean civic identity maintains a unique synthesis of Confucian relational ethics and modern surveillance norms, where individualism often functions as a form of social obligation rather than radical autonomy.

Keywords

Public Service Advertisements, Public Service Announcements, Korean Studies, Media Studies

Introduction

Roles and Importance of Media in society

Within the context of contemporary society, media serves as a powerful force that helps people access, share, and make sense of information across the globe. Over time, media has undergone a remarkable transformation — evolving from traditional broadcasting, through the rise of digital platforms, and now into the era of Generative AI. This shift is more than just technological progress; it represents a fundamental change in how we communicate and understand the world around us. Media no longer simply delivers information or reflects the reality but it actively shapes our society, influencing how institutions operate and how individuals connect, think, and interact with one another. The power of media used in the society can be seen clearer overtime. Media is used in various dimensions such as in private and public institutes or organizations, in country's management, in diplomatic relations, or in military matters. The power to influence how people think and how society evolves does not belong solely to private media; government-produced media also contributes in meaningful ways. To illustrate, one of the most important tools for the government to direct the messages to their own citizens is “Public Service Advertisement” that many countries have been using in different methods.

Mostly the term “Public Service Advertisement” is confused with the term “Propaganda” because both use persuasive strategies to convey the messages and mostly both types of media are generated under government organizations. Moreover, both share the same aim which is to persuade or affect public behavior. However, Public Service Advertisement is designed to promote social welfare or to address critical social issues such as public health issues, safety of the society, or roles of citizenship. On the other hand, propaganda is designed to serve a political ideology, government agenda, or specific group interests.

Public Service Advertisements

The term of “Public Service Announcement” used in the United States according to Merriam-Webster (2020) refers to an announcement made for the good of the public. Also, “Public Service Advertisement” is defined as advertisements which are related to social issues and broadcast for the interests of the society and for public awareness; they are called social advertisements, public service or public service advertisements. The objective of these advertisements is not to earn financial profit but they work to awaken social consciousness (Narwal, 2024). Moreover, Ni et al. (2022) gave the role of Public Service Advertisements as they involve the collective interest of a community and are concerned to spread the awareness for a purpose that is broadcasted without any charge by the government for the promotion of some state programs or other social agendas (p. 114).

Public Service Advertisements (PSA) can be managed by different kinds of organizations; some by government departments, some by government-funded public organizations, and some by non-governmental councils working with government agencies. In case of South Korea, a government-funded public corporation named “KOBACO” or “한국방송광고진흥공사” is responsible for PSAs.

KOBACO, since its establishment in 1981, has been selling terrestrial broadcast advertising. For those years, it has contributed to the stable supply of financial resources for broadcasting corporations and has protected the public-service nature and the diversity of broadcasting. KOBACO was reborn as a government-funded public corporation on May 23, 2012. To achieve its vision of becoming an 'Industry-leading Public Media Rep', KOBACO is striving to reach its three major goals: to be 'a forward-looking leader that guides the balanced development of the advertising industry', 'a specialized media rep with comprehensive media solutions' and 'a public-interest company that fulfills its social responsibility' (한국방송광고진흥공사, n.d.).

In addition, most of the research and articles related to Korean Public Service Advertisements mainly focused on the analysis of each area of topics such as the effects of Public Service Advertisements and the prevention of diseases or health issues in the society with the research topics "The Effect of Public Service Advertising on Cardiovascular Disease in Korea" (Jang et al., 2016), "Does a TV Public Service Advertisement Campaign for Suicide Prevention Really Work?" (Song et al., 2017) or "Effects of Anti-Smoking Public Service Announcements on the Attitudes of Korean College Students toward Smoking" (Cho et al., 2017). Also, the social issues raised in Korean society such as 'Multiculturalism' are examined through the analyzation of Public Service Advertisements with the research topic "Qualitative analysis of informal curricular texts about multiculturalism in Korea: Two cases of government sponsored public service advertising" (Na et al., 2016). Undeniably, the topic about Korean Wave and Public Service Advertisements is done under the research topic "The discursive construction of the role of public service broadcasting amid the rise of the Korean Wave" (Kim, 2023). There is also one remarkable study about the overall picture of Korean Public Service Advertisements from 1981 – 2023. It is found out that the most common subjects in public service advertisements were 'national unity,' 'social safety,' 'economy,' 'social education,' 'environment,' 'public service,' 'family love,' 'youth,' 'elections,' and 'national health,' in that order. In terms of expression in public service advertisements, information provision was the most frequently used strategy, followed by imperatives, psychological motivation, symbolic imagery, argumentation, and repeated claims. The primary objective of these advertisements was to induce changes in public awareness, followed by behavior modification, information dissemination, and general announcements. Lastly, regarding advertising message strategies, 'promotion-focused' advertisements were the most prevalent, followed by 'prevention-focused' advertisements. Analyzing differences across time periods, statistical differences were found in the themes and expression strategies of public service advertisements, but there were no significant differences in advertisement objectives and message strategies (Um & Kim, 2024).

Therefore, "The Evolution of Citizenship: Tracking the Shift from Collective Duty to Individual Rights in KOBACO Campaigns (1981–2025)" is analyzed to understand how the definition of a "Good Korean Citizen" has changed in the eyes of the state.

Research objectives

1. To identify the shifting thematic priorities of KOBACO campaigns from the developmental-authoritarian era (1981) to the contemporary smart society (2025).
2. To deconstruct the discursive strategies used by the state to internalize civic duties, ranging from physical order and frugality to digital ethics and algorithmic participation.
3. To examine the tension between persistent collectivist values and emerging neoliberal individualism within the Korean civic identity.

Hypothesis

1. The definition of the "Good Korean Citizen" has transitioned from a state-subject (focused on developmental duty and national order) to a digital-participant (focused on ethical consumption and online conduct).
2. Despite the rise of individualism during the Globalization era, KOBACO campaigns maintain a unique "Koreanized" civic model that synthesizes traditional Confucian collectivism with modern digital surveillance norms.
3. The 2020s "Smart Society" phase marks a return to high-compliance citizenship, where the "good citizen" is defined by their willingness to integrate personal data with state-led public health and safety initiatives.

Conceptual framework

This study conceptualizes the evolution of citizenship in South Korea through an analysis of state-sponsored public service advertising campaigns produced by Korea Broadcast Advertising Corporation (KOBACO) between 1981 and 2025. Situated at the intersection of media studies, Korean Studies, and political sociology, the framework integrates theories of developmentalism, neoliberal governmentality, digital citizenship, and Confucian collectivism to explain how civic subjectivity has been discursively constructed and reconstructed across eras.

Research Methodology

This study employs a Longitudinal Mixed-Methods Approach. Firstly, the quantitative content analysis is used to analyze a thematic coding of over 40 years of KOBACO campaigns (1981–2025) across television and print media to identify frequency shifts in categories. Moreover, the critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to analyze the representative campaigns from each decade to uncover the underlying ideologies. The data used for analysis in this study is from the data sheet "Status of public service advertisements produced by the Korea Broadcast Advertising Corporation by topic" from 1981 – 2025 (한국방송광고진흥공사, 2026).

Research results

From the data sheet “Status of public service advertisements produced by the Korea Broadcast Advertising Corporation by topic” from 1981 – 2025 (한국방송광고진흥공사, 2026), with a total of 445 campaigns within 45 years, the primary categories are divided into 11 types which are

1. National Consciousness (20.40%) focused on national identity and civil duties
2. Environment / Energy (17.00%) included resource conservation, pollution and climate change issues
3. Health / Safety (16.50%) included basic safety such as traffic safety to public health and mental health
4. Economy / Industry (10.70%) mostly produced during economic downturns (1982, 1988, 2009)
5. Public Etiquette / Etiquette (10.20%) covered issues of public manners to modern "Digital Etiquette"
6. Home / Child / Youth (9.70%) shifted from “Family Planning” (1980s) to “Child Protection” and “Youth Leadership”
7. Sense of Community (7.80%) focused on multiculturalism and neighborly trust
8. Crime Prevention (7.80%) mostly focused on “Phishing” and “Cybercrime” in recent years
9. Socially Disadvantaged / Minorities (4.90%) emphasized on the elderly, disabled, and multicultural families
10. Human Rights / Labor / Welfare (3.40%) focused on fair recruitment and labor rights
11. Science / Culture / Tourism / Technology & Culture (1.50%) focused on national branding and reading culture in recent years

The secondary categories are divided into 5 most frequent sub-categories which are

1. National Consciousness
2. Traffic Safety
3. Energy / Resource Conservation
4. Public Manners
5. Phishing / Cybercrime

From the analysis of primary categories and secondary categories of Public Service Advertisements, it is found out that there are thematic transitions that can be seen as dramatic changes from the 1980s to the 2020s. Focus of Public Service Advertisements' themes in the 1980s was savings, family planning (curbing population growth), and national events (preparing for the '88 Olympics). In the 2020s, focus was shifted to public health (post-pandemic), digital etiquette, multiculturalism, and cybercrime.

Discussions and Conclusions

The early phase of KOBACO campaigns (1980s–early 1990s) corresponds to South Korea's late developmental-authoritarian context under regimes such as that of Park Chung-Hee. During this period, citizenship was framed through a collectivist-nationalist paradigm in which individuals had to perform due to the state orders or policies. Public service campaigns functioned as a moral theoretical concept, emphasizing public order, anti-corruption, and economic productivity. Citizenship was less about rights and more about disciplined participation in national development. The “Good Korean Citizen” was defined through obedience, sacrifice, and alignment with state modernization goals. With democratization in 1987 along with intensifying globalization in the 1990s, particularly after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the construction of citizenship shifted. Influenced by neoliberal governance models, campaigns began emphasizing personal responsibility, consumer choice, and self-management. KOBACO campaigns increasingly reframed civic duty as individualized ethical conduct such as responsible consumption or protection of environments. The “Good Korean Citizen” became an entrepreneurial self that was no longer merely obedient, but self-regulating and choice-oriented. However, unlike Western neoliberal models centered on radical individual autonomy, Korean civic discourse retained communitarian undertones rooted in Confucian relational ethics. While campaigns increasingly emphasize personal choice, they continue to embed Confucian relational norms and collective well-being as moral imperatives. Thus, individualism emerged not as a replacement of collectivism, but as a form of social obligation. After that, around 2010s–2020s, Korean society shifted to digital citizenship and the smart society which marks a new transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic and rapid digital governance expansion under recent administrations have shaped this phase. In this phase, citizenship becomes mediated by platforms, algorithms, and digital surveillance infrastructures. As South Korea formalizes its smart governance model, the 'ideal citizen' is increasingly characterized by their active participation in digital ecosystems and their adherence to digitized public health and safety standards.

Suggestions

Data of South Korean Public Service Advertisements shows the changes and significant shifts of the society; however, various areas of the social issues presented through Public Service Advertisements should be considered for further researches in different aspects such as in linguistic aspect, discourses analysis aspect, or social sciences and media analysis aspects.

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