



Impact of Korean-Style Political Aesthetics on Trust and Engagement Among Thai Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study examines how Korean-style political aesthetics, shaped by Hallyu soft visual identities and idol-like personas, influence political trust and engagement among Thai undergraduate students. Drawing on visual politics, processing fluency, and soft power theories, the research addresses a gap in Southeast Asian scholarship regarding the political impact of transnational cultural aesthetics at the individual level. A cross-sectional survey of 400 students in Bangkok used validated scales to measure Hallyu consumption, perceptions of political aesthetics, political trust, and political engagement. Data were analyzed with t-tests, ANOVA, and multiple linear regression. Results revealed a Gender Paradox: Females reported significantly higher Hallyu consumption and aesthetic recognition, yet gender did not predict political trust when controlling for aesthetic perception. Instead, perceived Korean-style aesthetics emerged as the strongest driver of trust ($\beta = .229, p < .001$), functioning as a universal marker of modernity. Academic discipline moderated outcomes, with medical and health sciences students showing highest trust and science/engineering students the lowest. Political trust strongly predicted engagement ($\beta = .344, p < .001$), indicating that aestheticized politics can mobilize Gen Z voters beyond passive consumption. These findings suggest Korean-style aesthetics serve as cognitive shortcuts that operate alongside, rather than replace, traditional predictors of political behavior.

Keywords: Political Aesthetics, Hallyu Political, Trust Political, Engagement Thai Youth

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Introduction

Political communication extends well beyond the straightforward transmission of policy positions. As Street (2019) argues, it operates just as powerfully through symbols, visual performance, and the mediated images that quietly inform how citizens assess the credibility of those who seek to lead them. In political contexts marked by deep polarization, where institutional trust is frayed and information environments splinter, voters often fall back on rapid, intuitive judgment. Such judgments are not always the product of careful deliberation. As Reber and Schwarz (1999) and Todorov et al. (2005) demonstrate, aesthetic cues frequently serve as cognitive shortcuts, taming a complexity that might otherwise prove overwhelming.

Thailand provides a particularly instructive case for examining these dynamics. The country's recurring cycles of political disruption and elite contestation have carved the electorate into starkly opposed camps, within which competing visions of modernity and tradition are actively constructed and performed (Kongkirati, 2019). The state-led Thailand 4.0 initiative illustrates how narratives of progress and innovation can be mobilized less as dry policy frameworks and more as visual claims to legitimacy and developmental ambition (Desatova, 2018). But political communication is not shaped solely from above. In recent years, a number of Thai political candidates have begun to adopt an aesthetic repertoire borrowed directly from K-pop culture. Campaign materials now feature pastel palettes, idol-inspired merchandise, the playful hand-heart, and a decidedly more informal digital persona. Taken together, these choices suggest a deliberate recalibration in how political actors present themselves to the electorate.

It is best to understand this shift within the broader regional current of the Korean Wave, or Hallyu. As a transnational force, Hallyu has thoroughly reshaped patterns of consumption, identity formation, and aesthetic preference across Southeast Asia (Jin, 2016 and Lim, 2014). Yet while its cultural and economic footprints have been mapped extensively, its possible implications for individual political perception and behavior remain curiously underexplored.

Parallel to this, research on Thailand's digital landscape has underscored the growing centrality of social media in structuring political participation (Sinpeng, 2021 and Tapsell, 2021). And as Phoborisut (2020) has shown, pro-democracy movements have proven adept at appropriating global popular culture to contest entrenched authority. Despite these important insights, a conspicuous gap remains. There is, at present, no quantitative evidence examining whether recognition of Korean-style political aesthetics correlates with variations in political trust or engagement among Thai youth. Nor do we know if such relationships might differ systematically across gender or academic background. It is precisely this silence that the present study seeks to address.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between Hallyu consumption and the recognition of Korean-style political aesthetics among Thai undergraduate students.
2. To investigate the impact of Korean-style political aesthetics on students' political trust and engagement, specifically analyzing differences across genders.
3. To determine whether academic background (field of study) moderates the reception of aestheticized political campaigns.

Literature Review

1. Processing Fluency as a Modernity Heuristic

Processing fluency theory holds that stimuli which are easier to process cognitively tend to be evaluated more positively, often generating perceptions of truth, attractiveness, and

competence (Reber & Schwarz, 1999). In the political domain, Todorov et al. (2005) demonstrated that even the briefest exposure to a candidate's facial image can nudge electoral preferences through rapid inferences about competence. Extending this logic to the present context, Korean-style political aesthetics are characterized by high production values, soft lighting, pastel colour palettes, and the approachable visual composition long associated with Hallyu media. For digitally native Gen Z voters, these elements may well function as fluency-enhancing cues.

Compared to the dense, policy-heavy messaging of traditional campaigning, such aesthetic choices can operate as implicit signals of modernity and a more civilian, approachable identity. This mechanism carries particular weight in Thailand, where Phoborisut (2020) has shown how pro-democracy movements strategically appropriate global popular culture symbols to challenge the hierarchical and often militarized visual authority of the state. Building on this perspective, the present study conceptualizes aesthetic recognition not as active fandom, but as a form of modernity heuristic. Whereas Nye's (2021) conception of soft power emphasizes attraction through cultural appeal at the state level, the modernity heuristic operates at the individual cognitive level as a mental shortcut triggered by familiar visual cues. The expectation is that this recognition may influence political evaluation independently of any direct or sustained consumption of Hallyu content (H1).

2. Gender, Fandom, and Political Aesthetics

K-pop fandom is frequently described as a gendered cultural space. Affective engagement and a heightened sensitivity to aesthetic detail are often more commonly associated with female participants (Elfving-Hwang, 2018). One might therefore expect female students to report both higher levels of Hallyu consumption and a greater familiarity with Korean-style political aesthetics. However, patterns of cultural consumption do not always translate neatly into differentiated political outcomes.

Boulianne's (2020) meta-analysis of digital political engagement suggests that many contemporary forms of participation increasingly cut across traditional gender divisions. In a similar vein, McCargo (2019) argues that civilian imagery in Thailand functions less as a niche preference and more as a broadly resonant counter-symbol to military authority, one that is not confined to specific demographic enclaves. Taken together, these insights suggest that while exposure and recognition may indeed vary by gender, the political implications of aesthetic cues might be more evenly distributed across the population. The present study therefore examines whether the effects of aesthetic recognition on political trust and engagement remain consistent regardless of gender (H2).

3. Disciplinary Epistemology as a Moderator

Responses to political communication are not shaped by exposure alone. They are also filtered through the cognitive and normative orientations that individuals acquire through their educational training. Kahan (2016) argues that people tend to interpret information in ways that align with their underlying cognitive frameworks. In this respect, disciplinary background may play a meaningful moderating role. Education in medical and health sciences, which places considerable emphasis on empathy and patient-centred care, has been linked to higher levels of interpersonal sensitivity (Hojat et al., 2009). By contrast, training in the sciences and engineering tends to prioritize analytical reasoning and a more critical stance toward surface-level or aesthetic cues.

These divergent orientations suggest that disciplinary background could condition an individual's receptivity to aestheticized political communication. Students immersed in empathy-oriented fields may respond more favourably to the relational and approachable personas crafted by K-pop inspired campaigns. Students in more analytically rigorous fields,

on the other hand, might view such curated visual presentations with greater scepticism. This study tests whether disciplinary variation moderates the relationship between aesthetic recognition and political attitudes (H3), thereby extending Kahan's framework into the realm of visual political communication within a non-Western setting.

4. A Mediated Pathway from Aesthetics to Engagement via Political trust

Finally, this study proposes that the influence of political aesthetics on engagement operates primarily through an indirect pathway, one that runs through political trust. This expectation is grounded in theoretical work that positions trust as a crucial antecedent of political participation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). When citizens trust political actors, the perceived risks associated with engagement tend to diminish and the willingness to participate in political processes rises accordingly.

Empirical support for this mediated relationship can be found in studies examining the effect of visual cues on candidate evaluation (Todorov et al., 2005) as well as in research on digital campaigning in Southeast Asia (Tapsell, 2021). Building on this body of work, the present study tests a sequential model. In this model, recognition of Korean-style political aesthetics is first associated with variations in political trust. That trust, in turn, is associated with higher levels of political engagement. By controlling for direct Hallyu consumption, the analysis seeks to isolate the specific and potentially subtle role that aesthetic perception plays in shaping the political behaviour of Thai youth.

Conceptual Framework

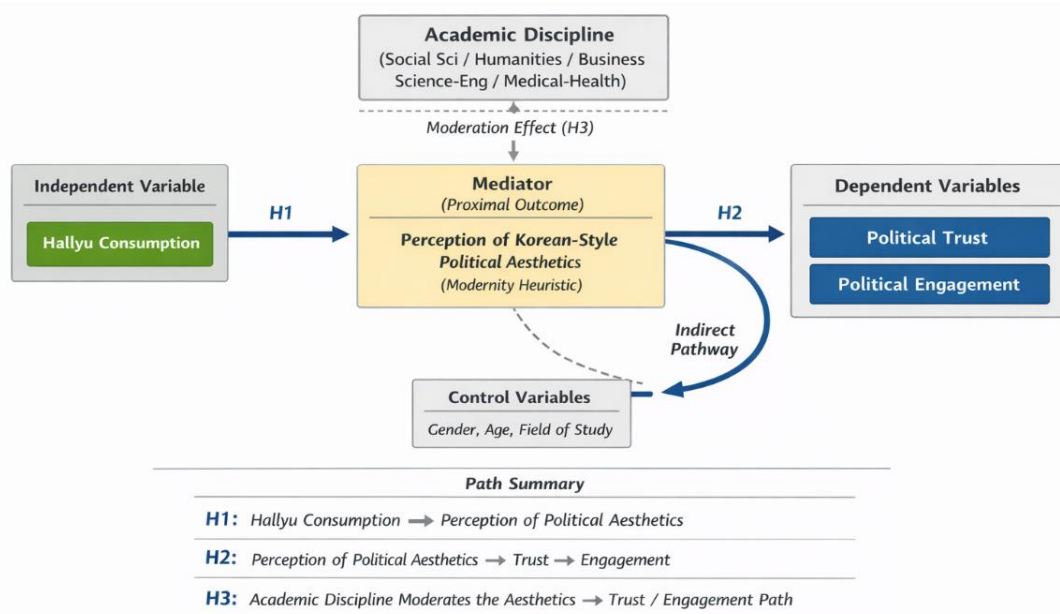


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Note: The model proposes a mediated pathway wherein perceptions of political aesthetics predict trust in political actors, which in turn predicts political engagement. Academic discipline is tested as a moderator of the relationship between aesthetic perception and political outcomes.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design and Sample

This study employs a quantitative cross-sectional survey design targeting undergraduate students in Bangkok, Thailand. The sample represents a digitally engaged Gen Z population drawn from several major universities. Data were collected in 2026 through face-to-face administration of self-administered questionnaires.

A convenience sampling strategy was adopted due to practical constraints in accessing the full target population. Efforts were made to ensure diversity across gender and academic disciplines in order to improve sample heterogeneity. The final sample consisted of 400 respondents. While the non-probability nature of the sampling limits the generalizability of the findings, this sample size is generally considered adequate for statistical analysis at the 95 percent confidence level based on conventional guidelines (Cochran, 1977).

The sample composition was 49.5 percent female ($n = 198$), 46.0 percent male ($n = 184$), and 4.5 percent identifying as other ($n = 18$). The mean age of participants was 19.90 years ($SD = 1.34$). Respondents were drawn from five broad academic disciplines.

2. Measures

All variables were measured using five-point Likert scales. The scale for Hallyu consumption demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). Political engagement also showed good reliability ($\alpha = .86$), as did trust in political actors ($\alpha = .81$). The scale measuring perceptions of Korean-style political aesthetics demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .77$).

3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were followed throughout the data collection process. Participants provided informed consent prior to participation and all responses were collected anonymously. No personally identifiable information was recorded.

4. Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework, the study tests the following hypotheses.

H1: Hallyu consumption is positively associated with the recognition of Korean-style political aesthetics among Thai undergraduate students.

H2: Perceptions of Korean-style political aesthetics are positively associated with political trust and political engagement, and these relationships do not differ significantly by gender.

H3: Academic discipline moderates the relationship between perceptions of political aesthetics and both political trust and political engagement.

5. Analytical Strategy

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS version 28. The analysis included descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and one-way analysis of variance with Tukey HSD post hoc comparisons. Multiple linear regression was employed to examine the relationships between variables and to test the proposed hypotheses.

Results

1. Demographic Characteristics

The analysis was based on a final sample of 400 undergraduate students ($N = 400$). As shown in Table 1, the gender distribution was relatively balanced, with females comprising 49.5% ($n = 198$) and males 46.0% ($n = 184$). The sample spanned five academic disciplines,

with the largest proportion drawn from the science and engineering group (Group 4), which accounted for 43.3% of respondents.

Table 1 Demographic Profile

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	184	46
	Female	198	49.5
	Other	18	4.5
Age	Mean (SD)	19.90 (1.34)	-
Field of Study	Social Sciences	84	21
	Humanities/Arts	72	18
	Business/Economics	26	6.5
	Science/Engineering	173	43.25
	Medical/Health Science	45	11.25

2. Results for Objective 1: Relationship between Hallyu Consumption and Aesthetic Recognition

To assess the internal consistency of the survey instrument, Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficients were calculated for all latent constructs. Respondents reported a moderate level of Hallyu consumption ($\bar{x} = 3.13$). Trust in political actors recorded the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 4.01$, $SD = 0.83$), suggesting relatively favorable evaluations of candidates. In contrast, perceptions of Korean-style political aesthetics were lower ($\bar{x} = 2.87$), indicating that respondents generally did not recognize or agree that Thai politicians successfully adopt K-pop-inspired visual styles.

As shown in Table 2, all constructs demonstrated acceptable to high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .77 to .86, exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.70 for social science research.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Coefficients, and Correlations of Key Variables

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4
1. Hallyu Consumption	3.13	1.12	0.86	-			
2. Perceptions of Political Aesthetics	2.87	0.8	0.77	.29**	-		
3. Political Engagement	3.64	0.92	0.86	.17**	.23**	-	
4. Trust in Political Actors	4.01	0.83	0.81	.10*	.20**	.41**	-

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

The results indicate a moderate positive correlation between Hallyu consumption and perceptions of political aesthetics ($r = .29$, $p < .01$). H1 was supported

3. Results for Objective 2: Impact of Korean-Style Political Aesthetics on Trust and Engagement, and Gender Differences

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in consumption and perception. As shown in Table 3, there was a significant difference in Hallyu consumption between males ($\bar{x} = 2.65$, $SD = 1.04$) and females ($\bar{x} = 3.56$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(380) = -8.76$, $p < .001$, with females reporting higher levels of engagement with Korean popular culture.

A similar pattern was observed for perceptions of political aesthetics. Females reported significantly higher recognition scores ($\bar{x} = 2.96$) than males ($M = 2.75$), $t(380) = -2.67$, $p =$

.008. However, no statistically significant gender differences were found for political engagement ($p = .477$) or trust in political actors ($p = .387$)

Table 3 Group Analysis: Gender Differences (Male vs. Female)

Variable	Male M	SD	Female M	SD	t	p
1. Hallyu Consumption	2.65	1.04	3.56	1.01	-8.76	< .001***
2. Perceptions of Political Aesthetics	2.75	0.78	2.93	0.80	-2.67	.008**
3. Political Engagement	3.58	0.91	3.65	0.94	-0.71	.477
4. Trust in Political Actors	3.98	0.82	4.05	0.84	-0.87	.387

Females reported significantly higher Hallyu consumption and aesthetic recognition, but no significant gender differences emerged in trust or engagement.

Table 4 Multiple Regression Analysis for Political Trust (Model 1)

Independent Variable	β	t	p
(Constant)	2.678	14.44	.000
Perceptions of Political Aesthetics	0.229	3.92	.000*
Hallyu Consumption	0.114	2.56	.011*
Gender (Female)	-0.112	-1.16	.248

Model Summary: $R^2 = .069$, $F(3, 396) = 9.76$, $p < .001$.

Perceptions of political aesthetics were the strongest predictor of trust ($\beta = 0.229$, $p < .001$), while gender was not significant. H2 was supported.

Table 5 Multiple Regression Analysis for Political Engagement (Model 2)

Independent Variable	β	t	p
(Constant)	2.440	13.22	.000
Trust in Political Actors	0.344	8.21	.000*
Perceptions of Political Aesthetics	0.111	2.30	.022*

Model Summary: $R^2 = .178$, $F(2, 397) = 43.00$, $p < .001$.

Trust was the strongest predictor of engagement ($\beta = .344$, $p < .001$). H2 was supported.

4. Results for Objective 3: Moderation by Academic Discipline

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences across fields of study in perceptions of political aesthetics, political engagement, and trust in political actors.

Table 6 One-Way ANOVA of Key Variables by Field of Study

Variable	F	p	Post-hoc Results (Tukey HSD)
2. Perceptions of Political Aesthetics	3.58	.007**	Group 1 > Group 4 ($p = .017$).
3. Political Engagement	3.00	.018*	Group 5 > Group 4 ($p = .011$).
4. Trust in Political Actors	3.58	.007**	Group 5 > Group 4 ($p = .002$); Group 5 > Group 2 ($p = .026$).

Medical and health sciences students reported the highest levels of trust and engagement, while science and engineering students reported the lowest. These findings indicate

that academic discipline significantly moderates the relationship between aesthetic perception and both trust and engagement. H3 was supported.

Discussion

1. The Gender Paradox: Hallyu Consumption vs. Trust in Political Actors

One of the more striking findings to emerge from the data is the divergence between gendered patterns of cultural exposure and the notable absence of gender differences in political outcomes. Female respondents reported significantly higher levels of both Hallyu consumption and aesthetic recognition (Table 3). Yet gender did not significantly predict political trust or engagement once perceptions of political aesthetics were taken into account (Table 5).

This pattern is broadly consistent with Elfving-Hwang (2018), who characterizes K-pop fandom as a gendered cultural space. At the same time, it suggests that the political implications of these aesthetics cannot be confined to that domain. The finding aligns well with Boulianne's (2020) meta-analysis, which demonstrates that forms of digital political engagement increasingly cut across traditional gender divisions. It also resonates with McCargo (2019), who emphasizes the broad resonance of civilian imagery as a counterpoint to military authority in the Thai context. Within this framework, K-pop inspired visual styles appear to function less as markers of a specific subcultural identity and more as widely legible signals of modernity and a civilian orientation.

2. Visual Politics: The Modernity Heuristic

The relatively modest level of explicit recognition reported for Korean-style aesthetics ($M = 2.87$) stands in interesting contrast to the comparatively high levels of political trust observed in the sample ($M = 4.01$). This discrepancy suggests that such visual cues are associated with political evaluations in ways that may not require conscious identification. Rather than being deliberately recognized as references to K-pop, these aesthetic choices may instead be associated with generalized impressions of global modernity and contemporary sophistication. It bears repeating that the cross-sectional design precludes causal claims about whether aesthetics actively produce trust or simply correlate with it.

This interpretation extends Phoborisut's (2020) analysis of visual contestation in Thailand and is consistent with processing fluency accounts (Reber & Schwarz, 1999 and Pennycook & Rand, 2019). For digitally native voters, a high degree of familiarity with polished visual environments may increase the cognitive ease with which such imagery is processed. This fluency, in turn, **may be associated with enhanced** perceptions of competence and approachability. While Street (2019) rightly cautions that an over-reliance on aestheticized politics might encourage more passive forms of spectatorship, the present findings indicate a positive association between aesthetic perception, trust, and participation. These results are correlational in nature and the explained variance is modest ($R^2 = .069$ for trust, $R^2 = .178$ for engagement). This suggests that aesthetic cues operate alongside, rather than in place of, more established predictors of political behavior such as ideology, socioeconomic status, and policy preferences.

3. Disciplinary Differences and Political Perception

The observed differences across academic disciplines (Table 6) provide clear support for H3 and extend Kahan's (2016) framework into the domain of visual political communication. Students enrolled in medical and health sciences fields reported markedly higher levels of political trust and engagement. By contrast, students in science and engineering fields exhibited comparatively lower levels on both measures.

One plausible explanation for this divergence lies in the differing cognitive and normative orientations that tend to be cultivated through disciplinary training. Medical education, with its sustained emphasis on empathy and the nuances of interpersonal care (Hojat et al., 2009), may predispose students to respond more positively to political personas that are constructed as relational and approachable. Science and engineering training, on the other hand, tends to privilege analytical rigor and may foster a more critical or skeptical stance toward cues that appear superficial or merely stylistic. These findings underscore that receptivity to aestheticized political communication is far from uniform. It is conditioned, at least in part, by the underlying epistemological orientations that students absorb through their chosen fields of study.

4. Indirect Effects of Aesthetics via Political Trust

The positive association between political trust and engagement ($\beta = .344$, $p < .001$, Table 6) is consistent with the proposed mediated relationship. The results indicate that perceptions of Korean-style political aesthetics are associated with higher levels of engagement primarily through their relationship with trust. A direct effect on behavior appears to be less pronounced.

This pattern is in line with theoretical models that position trust as a key antecedent of political participation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). It also coheres with prior research examining the influence of visual cues on candidate evaluation (Todorov et al., 2005) and with recent work on the dynamics of digital campaigning in Southeast Asia (Tapsell, 2021). While the cross-sectional design of the study precludes any firm causal inference, the findings are entirely consistent with a pathway in which aesthetic perception contributes to a reservoir of trust. That trust, in turn, appears to be associated with a greater willingness to engage politically.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three principal contributions to the existing literature. First, it conceptualizes aesthetic perception as a form of modernity heuristic and tests this proposition in a non-Western electoral context. By distinguishing this heuristic from state-level soft power (Nye, 2021), the study clarifies how transnational cultural influence operates at the level of individual cognitive processing. Second, it demonstrates that the political relevance of Hallyu operates more robustly through visual recognition than it does through direct cultural consumption or active fandom. Third, it highlights the significant role of disciplinary background in shaping individual responses to political communication. In doing so, it extends prevailing theories of visual politics and soft power into the domain of educationally structured cognition.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion and Implications

The findings indicate that Korean-style political aesthetics function as broadly recognizable signals of modernity among Thai undergraduates. These signals are associated with higher levels of political trust and engagement. Importantly, these relationships appear consistent across gender but vary in meaningful ways according to academic discipline. While Hallyu consumption itself remains a gendered phenomenon, its political implications do not follow the same pattern.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences from the observed associations. The reliance on convenience sampling within Bangkok restricts the generalizability of the findings to the broader Thai youth population, particularly those in rural areas or outside formal university settings. Additionally, self-reported measures may be subject to social desirability bias, a common concern in studies of political attitudes and cultural consumption.

Future Research

Future research could address these limitations by employing experimental designs capable of testing causal mechanisms more directly. Longitudinal approaches would also be valuable for examining how political attitudes and behaviors evolve over time in relation to shifting aesthetic trends. Expanding the sample to include non-student populations and respondents drawn from other regions of Thailand would significantly improve external validity. Comparative studies extending across Southeast Asia would help assess the broader applicability of the modernity heuristic proposed in this study.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be drawn.

1. Political communication.

Political actors may benefit from recognising that the effectiveness of Korean-style aesthetics lies in their ability to signal modernity and civilian identity. For audiences with more analytically oriented backgrounds, visual strategies may need to be complemented by clear and substantive policy communication to maintain credibility.

2. Civic education.

Higher education institutions may consider strengthening media literacy initiatives that enable students to critically evaluate political imagery. Such efforts could support more reflective forms of political engagement by helping individuals distinguish between stylistic presentation and substantive competence.

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