

Evaluation of the MBTI Popularity in South Korea -- An Analysis Based on Media Coverage

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Abstract

With the start of COVID-19 in 2020, the MBTI test became popular among Korean young generation and then developed into a nationwide hot topic. This paper aims to investigate the characteristics of the MBTI popularity in Korea and the public opinions toward this phenomenon. With the analysis of the reports contents, 231 news reports related to MBTI were selected from KINDS (Korea Integrated News Database System) as research samples. The general attitude of the media towards MBTI tests and the reasons for the formation of positive and negative evaluations will be discussed from three perspectives: media attention, media attitudes and cognitive sources. The research finds that the increasing interest in MBTI among the younger generation in Korea is driven by a post-epidemic desire for self-exploration, emotional planning, and online group affiliation. MBTI has gained quasi-scientific status, similar to horoscopes, influenced by celebrities and a substantial fan base in online communication. While widely used for entertainment and social currency, there are concerns that extensive labeling may unconsciously impact individuals' self-perception and hinder the development of a holistic and objective cognitive framework.

Keywords: South Korea Social Culture, MBTI, Public Opinion, Media Coverage

1. MBTI in SOCIAL CONTENT

Based on Carl Jung's Psychological Types, the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) was created by Katharine Mary Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers in the 1940s. This tool categorizes mental activity and types, explaining how individuals gather information, make decisions, and approach life. The theory posits that seemingly random behavioral differences result from fundamental disparities in perception and judgment preferences [1]. The assessment measures behavioral variances across four dimensions: favorite world, information, decisions, and structure. Each dimension has two directions, representing preferences like E (Extroversion) and I (Introversion), N (Intuition) and S (Sensing), F (Feeling) and T (Thinking), and P (Perceiving) and J (Judging). Combining these preferences yields 16 distinct personality types.

Forty years since its inception, the MBTI has become a widely used personality test in Western companies for recruitment and business management. Despite criticism regarding Briggs and Myers' lack of formal psychology training, the MBTI remains a popular global tool. About one in five Fortune 1000 companies incorporates it into their hiring process, with 89% of the top Fortune 100 using it for self-assessment, team evaluation, and team building [2]. According to a JoongAng Daily report, the MBTI is associated with fortune-

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telling methods such as saju and physiognomy [3]. Notably, an increasing number of Korean companies on job boards request applicants to submit their MBTI results, and some banks even require candidates to analyze their personality strengths and weaknesses. As of December 2022, 16personalities.com reports 70 thousand users from Korea out of 40 million, with 91.2% considering the results accurate or very accurate.

In 1986, priest Kim Jeong-taek introduced the MBTI test to Korea, aiming to enhance self-understanding, improve interpersonal relationships, and contribute to societal harmony [4]. A search with the keyword "MBTI" in KINDS from 1992 to 2022 yielded 6,568 results. Figure 1 shows a consistent number of MBTI-related reports, averaging around 250 per year from 2009 to 2019. However, there was a notable surge starting in 2020, with 591 reports in 2021 and 1,849 by November 18, 2022. Over the past decade, MBTI has gained attention in Korean society and media, but the escalating discourse and societal interest in the last three years have elevated it to a prominent cultural phenomenon.

2. CURRENT RESEARCH STATUS

Current MBTI research primarily originates from psychology and medicine. In sociology, integrating MBTI test results with community research yields valuable insights into areas such as career alignment, job performance, learning aptitude, and marital compatibility. Limited studies currently examine the socio-cultural aspects of MBTI transmission, primarily existing as news report reviews. These studies mainly concentrate on scientific exploration, MBTI's role in career selection and planning, celebrity MBTI types, and MBTI-related television programs.

Korea Times' Lee Hae-rin highlights MBTI's growing popularity in Korea, noting its role in fostering belonging and reducing anxiety. This reflects an increased interest in psychological assessments. Korea JoongAng Daily's Sarah Chea extends this trend from blood types and palmistry to MBTI. CNN's Jessie Yeung and Yoon Jung-seo argue that MBTI's surge in Korea is driven by its use in romance, aiding compatibility in relationships and speed dating. The Chosun Ilbo's Lee Jun-woo addresses MBTI's controversy in corporate recruitment, citing that only 3.1% of companies use it. Korea Herald's Choi Jeong-yoon interviews key figures, highlighting MBTI's comforting nature for quick connections and societal harmony. She advises caution against excessive belief. The paper acknowledges limited research on MBTI's cultural popularity, focusing on linkages and controversies. It notes a lack of comprehensive research on overall reasons for its popularity and aims to fill this gap by analyzing Korean media reports. The goal is to evaluate and provide recommendations for MBTI's sustained popularity in Korea, exploring its formation mechanism as a cultural blockbuster and understanding public demand for cultural symbols in the post-epidemic era. The study aims to guide MBTI's development as a cultural IP.

3. SAMPLE SOURCE & STATISTICAL METHODS

The research object of this paper is the reported articles related to MBTI topics in Korean news networks. The samples were collected from KINDS (Korea Integrated News Database System). KINDS, by far Korea's largest reservoir of newspaper articles and databases since 1990, provides newspaper articles and search engine services encompassing the 10 nationwide daily newspapers, 25 local daily newspapers, economic and business newspapers, and Internet newspapers being published in Korea [5].

Using "MBTI" as a keyword for a full-text search in KINDS yielded 6565 results from 1992 to November 18, 2022. To enhance report relevance, four screening rounds occurred: 1) Restricting the search to reports with "MBTI" in the title produced 590 results. 2) Narrowing the time frame to 2020-2022, a period marked by a substantial report increase, resulted in 524 findings. 3) Choosing eight newspapers with over 20 MBTI-related reports from 2020 to 2022: 매일경제(86), 아시아경제(34), 한국일보(31), 한국경제(29), 아주경제(27), 머니투데이(25), 서울경제(23), and 세계일보(22). 4) Excluding duplicate reports. After screening, 49 articles with duplicate or similar content were excluded, leaving a total of 231 samples.

This study analyzes individual media reports, treating each as a distinct unit. Three dimensions guide the analysis: media attention, distinctions in media attitudes through positive, neutral, or negative expressions, and exploration of participants' cognitive roots. Specifically, positive or negative evaluations of MBTI in the media are identified by examining keywords, revealing the underlying reasons for varying media positions. This research focuses on analysis of MBTI-related reports in Korean media.

4. ANALYSIS of MBTI-RELATED REPORTS in KOREAN MEDIA

4.1 Media attention

Attention is an important index to measure the influence and hotness of topics. This section firstly reflects the attention to the year-to-year change in the number of media reports on MBTI and analyzes the reasons for the sudden increase in the hotness of MBTI topics. Then the keywords of the reports will be clustered to summarize the focus of media attention on MBTI-related topics.

4.1.1 Changes in the number of reports

Figure 1 shows the number of titles-related reports from 1990 to 2022. It shows a similar trend to the overall MBTI content texts in Figure 1. There is a dramatic increase starting from 2020, including 108 reports in 2020, 115 in 2021, and 301 in 2022 (as of November 18, 2022). Two points should be noticed from the change in the quantitative statistical trend 1) the reason why 2020 becomes a turning point and 2) the reason for the surge in media attention after 2020.

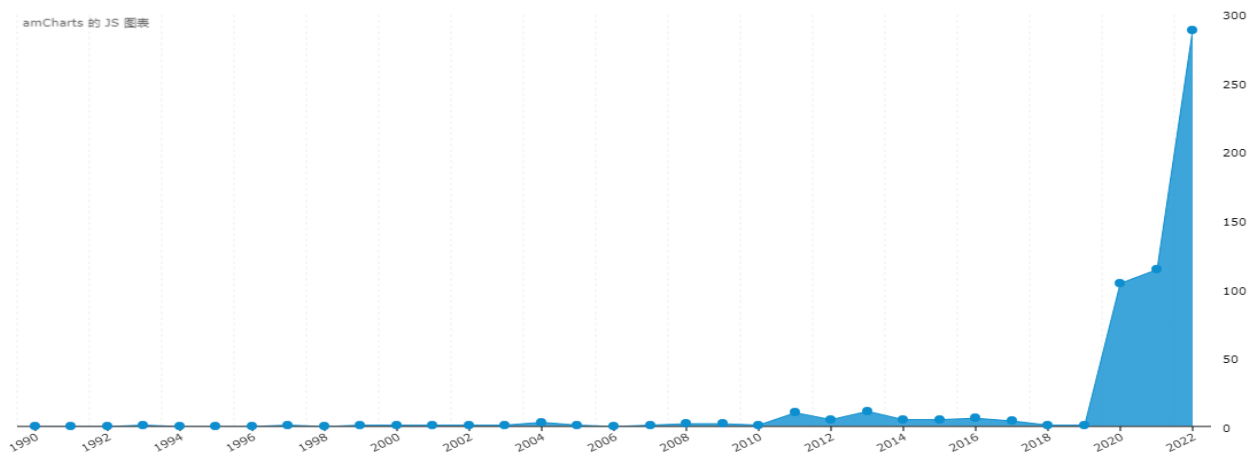


Figure 1 Statistics on the number of reports with MBTI in title from 1990-2022. (Source: KINDS)

1) 2020 as a Turning Point

It is widely believed that the non-contact culture spawned by the covid is directly related to the popularity of MBTI. The researchers sort the world into “contact cultures” (South America, the Middle East, Southern Europe) and “non-contact cultures” (Northern Europe, North America, Asia). In non-contact cultures, people stand farther apart and touchless [6]. Thus, Asian countries, as non-contact cultures in the general sense, should have been more adaptable to the relatively isolated living conditions caused by covid. But while Asian countries have non-contact cultural habits, they are also deeply influenced by collectivist cultural genes. Prompted by collectivism, the intensity of isolation and the effectiveness of prevention was generally better in Asian countries than in Western countries at the beginning of the covid, and collective activities were completely banned. In such a policy environment, people’s face-to-face communication was arguably abruptly cut off altogether, at which point the MBTI, which relies on online testing, emerged as a popular means of quickly understanding the identification of self and others.

2) Rapid Growth after 2020 in South Korea

South Korea boasts a thriving entertainment industry, with content creators attuned to the evolving tastes of the youth. The MBTI trend has seamlessly woven into the fabric of Hallyu and commerce. In the latter half of 2020, Korean idols, notably BTS and BLACKPINK, openly embraced MBTI types, prompting a surge in fans revealing their own results. Social media influencers on platforms like YouTube and Instagram incorporated MBTI into their content creation. Simultaneously, new shows like "See Your MBTI" (2021), "My MBTI is LOVE" (2022), and the variety show "MBTI Inside" (2021) emerged. Businesses capitalized on the trend by launching MBTI-themed social networking apps, facilitating connections based on personality types. Analyzing the trajectory of MBTI's popularity reveals a pattern: grassroots adoption, entertainment industry responsiveness, celebrity influence, widespread cultural and entertainment product integration, culminating in a collective fascination. While the initial visibility of MBTI may be attributed to the timing amid the COVID-19 era, its explosive surge owes much to the strategic promotion within the business landscape.

4.1.2 Keyword Clustering

Using the KINDS web analysis function, the article's keywords were visually organized through statistical analysis, as depicted in Figure 3, showcasing the twenty-nine most frequently used terms. Table 1 presents the occurrence of keywords in tabular form. The findings reveal that the top five keywords are Personality type test, MZ Generation, Yoo Jae-Seok, Test Result, and Lee Hyori. Notably, Yoo Jae-Seok and Lee Hyori, both participants in the Hangout with Yoo variety show, underwent MBTI testing, generating significant discussion and attention. MZ Generation, comprising millennials and Generation Z (born approximately from the 1980s to the 2010s), emerges as the primary cohort of MBTI enthusiasts [7]. This generation demonstrates adeptness in digital information technology, a keen interest in social justice and global issues, higher education levels compared to predecessors, and an upbringing marked by recession-related challenges and uncertainty. Widely recognized as the predominant group in popularity, the media's focus, as discerned from keyword clustering and statistics, revolves around 1) MZ Generation's worldview, 2) MBTI assessments of celebrity figures, 3) MBTI discussions on social media, and 4) traits associated with specific MBTI types.

Table 1. Frequency of Specific Keywords (Source: KINDS)

No.	Keyword	Keyword Frequency	No.	Keyword	Keyword Frequency
1	Personality type test	73	16	Myers	14
2	MZ Generation	54	17	Soyeon	13
3	Yoo Jae-Seok	45	18	People	12
4	Test Result	42	19	The fans	12
5	Lee Hyori	35	20	Celebrity	10
6	Type	30	21	ENTJ	9
7	Briggs	26	22	U-Doragon	9
8	Myers	26	23	Biryong	8
9	SSAK3	22	24	ESFJ	7
10	Briggs	22	25	Children	7
11	Blood type	21	26	Flower MBTI Result	4
12	Instagram	20	27	Actress Han Ye Seul	4
13	MBTI Test	19	28	Composer	3
14	MBTI Test Result	18	29	Curiosity	3
15	SNS	15			

4.2 Differences in Reporting Positions

4.2.1 Overall Attitude Statistics

This paper assesses media perspectives on MBTI, categorizing them as positive, neutral, or negative based on an analysis of 231 reports. Positive sentiments include terms like respect, enjoyment, fun, evolution, potential, understanding, diversity, and self-identity. Negative attitudes involve words such as addiction, misinterpretation, abuse, excess, worry, disbelief, low validity, barriers, and the Barnum effect. The specific word statistics will be shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 below. Figure 2 shows specific statistical findings. Content related to MBTI product promotion, celebrities' MBTI, and MBTI of fictional characters forms a significant portion, revealing two distinct categories. While lacking a clear bias, these contents suggest an acknowledgment of the commercial value of MBTI symbols and the popularity of associated topics. Neutral reports are most common, followed by negative ones, with fewer expressing unequivocal support. Considering commercially promoted and celebrity-related contents as positive, positive reports maintain an advantage. Phenomenological commentary texts tend to exhibit neutral and negative attitudes, while positive attitudes predominate in commercial entertainment texts.

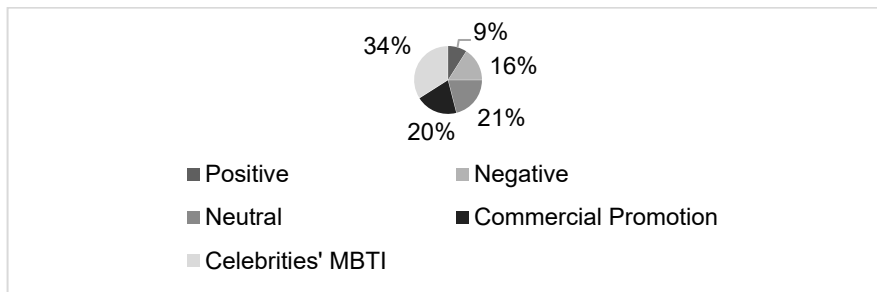


Figure 2. Proportion of media attitudes

4.2.2 Specific Evaluation

Based on our comprehensive evaluation, this section specifically examines how the media assesses MBTI, both positively and negatively. Through a statistical analysis of recurring keywords in the media sample, we aim to elucidate the aspects in which the media expresses support for MBTI and where it may perpetuate certain stereotypes. Figure 3 presents high-frequency words found in positively inclined media reports, while Figure 4 delineates keywords associated with negative tendencies. Positive evaluations predominantly highlight MBTI's contributions to interpersonal communication, self-assessment, and teamwork. These favorable assessments are primarily linked to the positive impact on social interactions. Conversely, negative evaluations center on criticisms related to MBTI's use in recruitment, its scientific validity, and the perceived over-reliance on it by the MZ Generation. In summary, the overall public opinion on MBTI in Korea appears to be generally neutral with a positive inclination. While its entertainment and commercial value receive significant affirmation, criticisms primarily revolve around its scientific rigor and credibility.

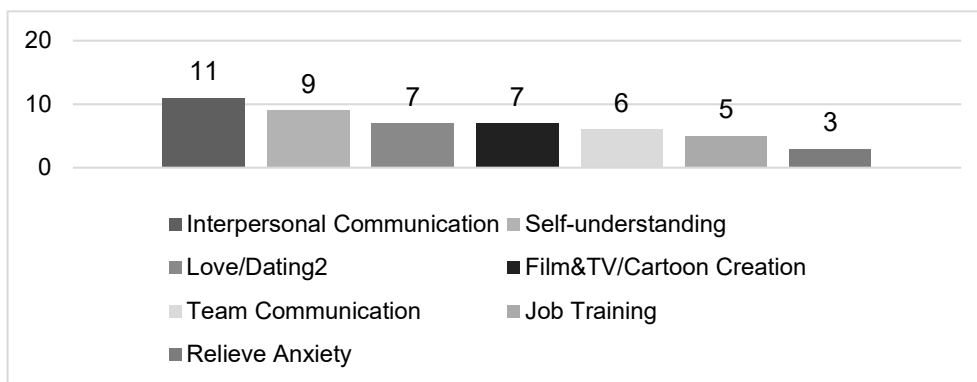


Figure 3. Factors contributing to positive attitudes

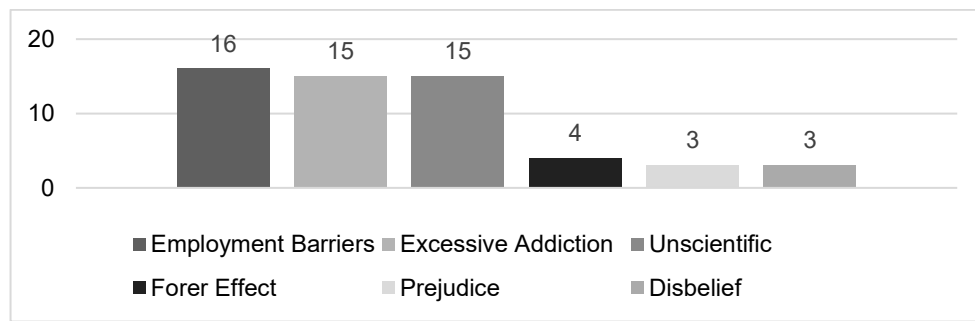


Figure 4. Factors contributing to negative attitudes

4.3 Cognitive Roots: Analysis of Participants Psychology and Behavior

As discussed in the previous section, there is a divergence in the evaluation of MBTI in Korean mass media. The mass media reflect individual and group psychology to a certain extent. This section discusses the reasons for the differences in evaluations. The reasons for positive perceptions lie mainly in the generation of self-identity, the confirmation of collective identity and its social currency function, and the reasons for negative perceptions lie in concerns about the MBTI application in the workplace.

4.3.1 The Generation of Self-identity

The MBTI test, present in Korea for over three decades, has adapted to better meet psychological needs through online tests and mass media. Analysis of reports reveals a focus on personal traits and personality classification, reflecting an increased interest in confirming identity. Hegel's "struggle for recognition" is recognized in the MBTI community, providing valuable recognition. Classifying personalities into 16 types and predicting behaviors offers rational explanations, providing psychological relief. The test combines self-perception with personal expectations, potentially reflecting the "anticipated self." Linked to the Pygmalion effect, praise and trust influence behavior, boosting social support, self-worth, and confidence. MBTI's affirmation fosters constructive interaction with reality, motivating individuals to meet expectations.

4.3.2 Confirmation of Collective Identity

Social identity theory suggests that individuals establish societal standing through social groups, forming a social identity [8]. People join groups to be part of a respected community, fostering a sense of belonging. Social media extends these groups beyond physical boundaries, allowing virtual interactions and addressing social and belonging needs. The collective role of MBTI in Korean society has grown from fan groups to a wider audience. Media often links celebrity and MBTI topics, with celebrity MBTI content dominating. This indicates a significant overlap between MBTI enthusiasts and Hallyu fans. By categorizing celebrities' personalities, fans can identify idols with similar or opposing traits, fostering empathy and enjoyment. MBTI has evolved into an IP culture, creating 16 cultural collectives based on its qualities. Individuals of the same type gather, highlighting unique characteristics and nurturing a sense of identity and belonging within the collective.

4.3.3 Generation of Social Currency:

MBTI's popularity surge is tied to widespread social media use, especially in South Korea, where 90% of the population (46.25 million people) actively engages in social networking [9]. Expressing personality, hobbies, and orientation through four letters has become simple and prominent in this context. Unlike the detailed descriptions required on social media, MBTI condenses information into easily memorable letter combinations, meeting the demands of efficient online interaction. As a result, MBTI has become a new social currency in Korea, comparable to horoscopes and blood types. The psychological dependence on social media can lead to FOMO (fear of missing out), defined by Jonathan in 1998. FOMO is the anxiety about being uninformed or excluded from valuable information, events, experiences, or life choices that could enhance well-being [10]. In the current era of social media's information overload, individuals fear overlooking

significant developments while constantly immersed in updates. Consequently, even those not yet involved in this social phenomenon can passively or actively assimilate into the MBTI craze.

4.3.4 Business Boosting:

Among the sample texts, 45 texts related to business promotion were identified alongside discussions on various phenomena. These texts primarily focus on MBTI-customized hotels, trips, perfumes, food, coffee, desserts, and more. This indicates that MBTI has evolved into a commercial symbol, adding value to promotional activities. Merchants have tailored their products and services to revolve around MBTI, leading to the introduction of themed items like mugs, cultural shirts, pendants, and even unique offerings such as MBTI card-shaped gold by the Korea Minting and Security Printing Corporation [11]. The widespread commercial promotion has significantly contributed to the increased popularity of MBTI, transforming it into a new intellectual property with commercial significance.

4.3.5 Limitation of Application Scenarios

Based on specific evaluation keyword statistics, approval of MBTI is primarily rooted in individual psychology, while disapproval is largely tied to practical application scenarios. Consequently, many participants simultaneously express both approval and disapproval. The general public embraces MBTI for its psychological role in shaping self and collective identity. However, in formal settings like the workplace or interviews, acceptance wanes. Despite this, the actual use of MBTI in corporate recruitment is limited; only 3.1% of 752 surveyed companies incorporated it [12]. This indicates infrequent workplace use, but a prevailing apprehension about potential misuse. Audiences generally tolerate MBTI's use in recreational contexts, emphasizing its scientificity. However, in formal applications, stringent consideration and widespread acknowledgment of its scientific validity and fairness are essential. Hence, attending to MBTI's application contexts can mitigate opposing viewpoints.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper gets the following findings from the analysis of 231 news reports related to MBTI topics from the KINDS (Korea Integrated News Database System):

1) Korean media attention to MBTI topics has surged since 2020. The COVID-19's catalytic effect on collective anxiety and non-contact culture, celebrity effect combined with commercial promotion are the main reasons for the surge of MBTI attention.

2) Media focus more on topic related to MZ Generation's worldview, MBTI of celebrities, MBTI on social media, characteristics of specific MBTI types and other thematic contents. The discussion of it as a popular eye-catching topic is high, but the contents of specific analysis are less.

3) In Korea, the public view of MBTI is generally positive, recognizing its entertainment value. However, criticisms focus on its scientific validity and practical applications, particularly in recruitment. Positive feedback emphasizes MBTI's impact on communication, self-assessment, and teamwork. Negative reviews cite a perceived lack of scientific rigor and the MZ Generation's tendency to overly engage in it. Approvals stem from personal psychological benefits, while disapprovals center on its application in office settings. Therefore, thoughtful consideration of MBTI's context can alleviate negative perceptions.

4) Positive views of MBTI arise from self-identity formation, affirming collective identity, evolving social currency function, and contributing to business promotion. Conversely, negative perceptions stem from concerns about MBTI's application in professional settings. While Western countries use MBTI extensively as a formal personality assessment tool in workplaces, South Korea critiques its role in formal evaluations. In Korea, MBTI is seen more as a social and entertainment tool than a strictly scientific one.

Based on the findings presented, this paper concludes that the growing interest in MBTI topics reflects the heightened needs of the younger generation in the post-epidemic era. This generation seeks self-awareness, emotional planning, physical and mental coordination, as well as group affiliation through online platforms. In Korea, the popularity of MBTI is closely linked to the influence of celebrities and a large fan base. Despite

its psychological origins, MBTI appears to have assumed a pseudo-scientific status in the realm of internet communication, akin to horoscopes. Audiences often identify themselves through textual feedback, influenced by the Barnum effect. Presently, Korean society extensively discusses and relies on MBTI. It serves various purposes, functioning as entertainment, social currency, and a tool for self-orientation. However, the overuse of labeling may lead to psychological implications, unconsciously influencing individuals' perceptions of themselves and others. This may hinder the development of a dispersed, holistic, and objective cognitive logic. In terms of commercial value, MBTI has emerged as a popular intellectual property (IP) with established products, services, and markets. The integration of goods and services with MBTI serves as a successful commercial tactic, providing customers with more personalized choices. Overall, MBTI represents a relatively positive and youthful social and cultural phenomenon.

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