

The Multifaceted Potential of K-pop:

A Deep Dive into K-pop's Cultural Diplomacy & Socio-Political Role in Global Dynamics

by

Julie Melholdt Rasmussen
& Mille Brix Husted Henriksen



Master Thesis

Culture, Communication and Globalisation

Department of Culture and Learning

Aalborg University

10th Semester, Spring 2024

Supervisor: Trine Lund Thomsen

Total number of keystrokes incl. spaces:

264.130

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the individuals and groups of people in our lives, who have supported and inspired us throughout the journey that has led us to this thesis.

To **Trine Lund Thomsen**, our thesis supervisor, who has been an integral part of our academic journey throughout our entire Master's program. Her guidance, supervision, and mentorship have shaped our scholarly pursuits, and we are deeply grateful for her unwavering support and insights.

To **Nam Bada**, to whom we extend our heartfelt appreciation and gratitude, for his continuous support, trust, encouragement, and guidance during our seven-month internship at PSCORE in Seoul until January 2024. His mentorship has been invaluable, shaping not only our understanding of human rights but also our personal growth during our time with PSCORE. We are grateful to PSCORE and Nam Bada for providing us with opportunities to learn, grow, and contribute to meaningful issues together.

To **our loved ones**, we extend our heartfelt appreciation for their unwavering support, love, and encouragement throughout the journey of completing this master's thesis. Your belief in us has been our anchor during challenging times.

To **each other**, we express gratitude and appreciation for the collaborative effort, mutual encouragement, and shared dedication that has propelled this thesis forward. We have navigated challenges, celebrated milestones, and supported each other every step of the way. We could not have wished to end this degree alongside anyone else.

Lastly, to **BTS** – Kim Nam-joon, Kim Seok-jin, Min Yoon-gi, Jung Ho-seok, Park Ji-min, Kim Tae-hyung, and Jeon Jung-kook. Without you and your inspiring, impactful, and beautiful songs, we would not be where we are today. Your music introduced us to K-pop and sparked our interest in inter-Korean issues, which ultimately led to our internship in South Korea and influenced the focus for our Master thesis. With your co-current echoes of “Love yourself, speak yourself”, you inspire us on a daily basis and remind us that we are not alone through our challenges and hardships. Thank you for your endless encouragement, we look forward to making a difference in the world with you.

Abstract

This Master thesis investigates the contribution of K-pop's global influence in South Korea's soft power objectives and cultural diplomacy efforts, as well as examining the K-pop industry's engagement in global socio-political issues. Grounded in the theories of soft power and cultural diplomacy, complemented by concepts within critical feminist studies, this thesis provides a historical insight into South Korea's spread of Hallyu, the spread of its cultural waves globally, and explores the embedded cultural, economic, and socio-political implications leading to the formation of the global phenomenon of the multifaceted K-pop industry. Incorporating qualitative and empirical data from 13 semi-structured interviews of K-pop fans, K-pop industry employee, NGO employees, and experts within international relations, the thesis demonstrates that K-pop serves as an integral soft power resource for South Korea and that the K-pop industry actively participates in socio-political advocacy.

The thesis indicates that K-pop significantly enhances and influences South Korea's diplomatic engagements, improving bi- and multilateral relations within the international community. Furthermore, the K-pop industry engages in both positive and negative forms of activism and advocacy, addressing global socio-political issues such as gender dynamics, social justice, climate change, and cultural pressures. The thesis demonstrates that technological advancements and social media platforms facilitate the K-pop industry's engagement, which empower non-state actors, civil society, and K-pop fandoms to mobilise and drive social movements globally.

Despite these contributions, the findings highlight the limitations and challenges that are associated with the role of K-pop idols as diplomats and activists, which delves into the suitability of idols as social advocates. The internal constraints of the South Korean entertainment industry and external political tensions contribute to hindering the effectiveness of K-pop's potential as a soft power resource in global contexts. Nonetheless, the thesis concludes that K-pop idols and their international fandoms possess considerable influence to change perceptions and advocate for socio-political causes that emphasises the complex nature between popular culture, soft power, and global activism. This thesis contributes to the academic discourse by providing a comprehensive analysis and discussion of K-pop's socio-political dimensions and its role in contemporary international relations, offering new insights into the strategic significance of popular culture in shaping global narratives and fostering cross-cultural exchanges.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction & Problem Formulation	1
1.1. Research Question	4
2. Contextual Clarification	5
2.1. Emergence & Evolution of Hallyu	5
2.2. Cultural Dynamics of Hallyu	7
2.3. Decoding K-pop Culture: Terminology & Concepts	9
3.3.1. <i>K-pop Glossary</i>	11
3. Methodological Framework	13
3.1. Abductive Reasoning	14
3.2. Hermeneutics	14
3.3. Social Constructionism	15
3.4. Qualitative Methodology	16
3.5. Semi-Structured Interviews	17
3.5.1. <i>Interview Guide</i>	19
3.5.2. <i>Informants</i>	20
3.5.3. <i>Ethical Considerations</i>	22
3.6. Limitations & Bias	24
5. Theoretical Framework	24
5.1. Soft Power Theory	25
5.2. Cultural Diplomacy Theory	29
5.3. Concepts within Critical Feminist Studies	33
5.3.1. <i>Intersectionality & Gender</i>	34
5.3.2. <i>Heteronormativity & Patriarchy</i>	35
5.3.3. <i>Post-Structural Feminism & Co-optation</i>	36
6. Analysis	38
6.1. The Cultural Echoes of K-Diplomacy	38
6.2. K-pop Idols: from Trainees to Activists	47
6.3. The United Voices of K-pop Fans	57
6.4. K-pop's Gender Paradox: Between Tradition & Modernity	65
6.5. Behind the Scenes: Ignorance & Issues in the Industry	77
7. Discussion	87
7.1. When Art Meets Activism	87
7.2. South Korean Pop & North Korean Issues	91
8. Conclusion	95
List of References	98

1. Introduction & Problem Formulation

In contemporary international relations, the role of soft power has become increasingly prominent in reshaping and reevaluating traditional diplomatic strategies and global narratives. Soft power, as coined by Joseph Nye (2004) in the late 1980s, refers to a nation's ability to achieve its objective through attraction, persuasion, and appeal rather than coercion or force. While traditional forms of power, such as military force and economic strength, remain important, soft power rests on the appeal of a country's culture and values, enabling it to build alliances, foster relations, and advance its interests beyond its borders (Nye, 1990).

One notable example of soft power is the global cultural phenomenon of K-pop, an abbreviation for Korean pop music, that originated in South Korea. K-pop has transcended geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders to become a contemporary cultural force of unparalleled reach and influence with far-reaching implications for international relations and diplomacy (Kim, 2015). In an era characterised by unprecedented levels of globalisation, digital interconnectedness, and cross-cultural exchange, the emergence of K-pop as a global cultural phenomenon is a testament to popular culture's transformative power in shaping contemporary society (Lie, 2015).

To fully appreciate the significance of K-pop's emergence as a global cultural force and its subsequent impact on contemporary international relations, it is essential to delve into its origins and evolution. The roots of K-pop can be traced back to the early 1990s in South Korea, a period characterised by rapid economic development and political democratisation (Kim, 2022). Some experts even go as far as to relate the current success of Korean culture globally to the organisational support of the South Korean government, which translated into the "rapid growth of South Korean cultural industries" (Kim, 2022, p. 126). As the nation underwent significant social and cultural transformations, a burgeoning music industry emerged, which sought to capitalise on the growing demand for entertainment (Kim, 2022; Lie, 2015). More specifically, South Korea leveraged its cultural exports and expanding cultural industry by implementing cultural policies that aligned with economic strategic frameworks. Over time, these policies have evolved into dynamic cultural initiatives and tools for public diplomacy in South Korea, particularly focusing on export-driven economic strategies (Kim, 2022, p. 125-126).

The initial phase of K-pop's development was marked by the influence of Western music, which was reinterpreted through a Korean lens to create a distinctively Korean sound

that laid the groundwork for what would later set the stage for K-pop's ascent to international prominence (Lie, 2015). The turning point came in the late 1990s in Southeast Asia with the beginning of the Korean Wave, or Hallyu (한류) – a term that was created following the newly-tied diplomatic relations between China and South Korea to describe the regional spread of Korean popular culture (Haugland, 2020; Adams, 2022).

Since then, K-pop's reach has expanded exponentially due to technological advancements and the rise of social media to reach audiences in every corner of the globe (Kim, 2015). In particular, platforms such as YouTube, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Instagram have facilitated the dissemination of K-pop content to a global audience, which has allowed fans to interact with their favourite artists while sharing and connecting with fellow fans worldwide (Adams, 2022). K-pop fans, known for their intense loyalty and organisational skills, have increasingly leveraged their collective power to support various social and political causes. This fan-driven activism is not limited to online campaigns – it extends to real-world actions such as fundraising for disaster relief, supporting social justice movements, and even influencing political discourse (Valeriano & Nissen, 2022). Its meticulously crafted production values, elaborate choreography, and idol culture are central to K-pop's appeal. This fosters a strong sense of community amongst the fans and further amplifies the impact of K-pop by creating a vibrant ecosystem of online engagement and cultural exchange (Adams, 2022; Balraj & Manan, 2022). Specifically this culture of idolisation, coupled with the distinctive nature of K-pop's imagery and lyrics, has cultivated a devoted fan base both domestically and internationally, propelling K-pop to unprecedented levels of fame and success in the entertainment industry (Adams, 2022).

With the widespread popularity surrounding K-pop, there has been an increase in academic exploration of K-pop as a cultural export from South Korea through Hallyu and its evolving role in contemporary international relations (Anand & Baek, 2024). A notable contribution comes from Dr. Dafna Zur and her lecture at Stanford University titled “Korea Gone Global: K-pop and Technologies of Soft Power” (Zur, 2023). Zur's (2023) examination emphasises how K-pop, through strategic use of media and technology, is a powerful tool to shape international perceptions by leveraging social media, streaming platforms, and global collaboration. Moreover, Zur (2023) stresses that more education should be built on the potential of K-pop, as her insights demonstrate the effective use of K-pop in bolstering South Korea's soft power globally and enhancing the country's cultural and political influence too. Moreover, theoretical perspectives, including Dr. Natalia Grincheva's (2020) exploration of museum diplomacy in the digital age, shed light on the broader dynamics of cultural

diplomacy and soft power projection in the context of Hallyu's global expansion. Therefore, Grincheva's (2020) research provides valuable insights into the evolving nature and invaluable potential of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century by examining how digital museums shape international perceptions and interactions.

In relation, Nye's (1990) work on soft power, as previously emphasised, highlights the role of culture, values, and ideology in fostering international influence (p. 168). Although his research focuses more on how nations can utilise soft power, K-pop and Hallyu are seen as cultural exports from South Korea, both with and without government involvement (Nye, 2004; Zur, 2023). Hence, Nye's (2019) framework provides a theoretical foundation and research for understanding the mechanisms driving K-pop's global ascent and its implications for contemporary international relations. Ivan Bakalov (2019) elaborates on Nye's framework by emphasising the transformative influence of intangible cultural resources on soft power, such as music, film, and fashion that aids in shaping international perceptions and preferences (p. 131-132). Moreover, his perspective illustrates the strategic use of cultural elements to enhance a nation's global influence, which highlights their profound impact on contemporary international relations (Bakalov, 2019, p. 131). Both Nye (1990) and Bakalov (2019) agree that beyond traditional power metrics like economy and military, cultural resources foster deeper connections across borders, which shapes global narratives and relations.

This is echoed in Dr. Minsung Kim's Journal article "The Growth of South Korean Soft Power and Its Geopolitical Implications", which was published in the Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs in 2022. Kim (2022) states that the case of K-pop and South Korea "shows the influence of soft power" (Kim, 2022, p. 133), and offers valuable insights into the geopolitical dimensions of South Korean soft power. Essentially, Kim's (2022) journal article examines how South Korea's cultural industries, including but not limited to K-pop, have contributed to the country's soft power capabilities and geopolitical influence (Kim, 2022). Moreover, Kim (2022) incorporates Nye's (2004) theoretical framework to definitively characterise South Korea's potential to use its soft power to broaden its agenda to encompass issues such as "climate change, human rights, and pandemic response" (Kim, 2022, p. 133). By analysing the interplay between cultural exports, economic development, and regional politics, Kim (2022) provides a comprehensive overview of South Korea's soft power strategy and its implications for regional stability and cooperation.

Despite the considerable attention given to K-pop's cultural impact, there remains a conspicuous gap in the scholarly literature on its socio-political dimensions and implications. While existing research has explored various aspects of K-pop, including its economic

impact, cultural significance, and fan culture, there remains a scarcity of comprehensive analysis of its political agency and soft power potential. This gap in knowledge presents a compelling opportunity for a thorough investigation into the political dimensions of K-pop and its role in shaping global socio-political discourse. This thesis seeks to address this gap by exploring how K-pop navigates and influences global socio-political conversations and its role as a platform for activism and engagement with such issues. By examining how K-pop shapes perceptions, contributes to socio-political conversations, and collaborates with international organisations, this thesis aims to unravel the multifaceted role of K-pop as both a political tool and a soft power asset. Moreover, it seeks to explore how K-pop serves as a cultural bridge in international dialogues on pressing socio-political issues, offering insights into its potential to drive social change on a global scale.

1.1. Research Question

The significance of this thesis lies in its potential to deepen our understanding of K-pop's role as a soft power resource in contemporary international relations. As K-pop continues to exert influence on global audiences, it is imperative to critically examine its political agency and implications for diplomacy to fully grasp its potential. By doing so, this thesis aims to contribute to broader discussions on the power dynamics of cultural globalisation and soft power in the 21st century. Therefore, the research on K-pop represents a unique opportunity to explore the interplay between culture, politics, and society in an increasingly interconnected and digitalised world. By examining how K-pop intersects with broader socio-political issues, this thesis aims to uncover the transformative potential of popular culture in addressing urgent global challenges. As the following sections will demonstrate, the socio-political dimensions of K-pop offer an elaborate foundation for scholarly inquiry, inviting us to rethink how we engage with and understand the world around us. To comprehensively explore this, the following research question will lay the foundation for the forthcoming analysis of K-pop and its socio-political potential:

How does K-pop's global influence contribute to South Korea's soft power objectives and cultural diplomacy efforts, and how does the K-pop industry actively engage in global socio-political issues?

2. Contextual Clarification

The contextual clarification will serve as a foundational framework for understanding the multifaceted phenomenon of Hallyu and will lay the groundwork for the subsequent analysis and discussion. The contextual clarification will be divided into three sections, which each will navigate through the historical emergence and evolution of Hallyu, its cultural dynamics, and essential concepts pertinent to Korean popular culture.

2.1. Emergence & Evolution of Hallyu

The evolution of Hallyu, often referred to as the Korean Wave, emphasises a captivating narrative that intertwines cultural, historical, and socio-economic forces that have propelled South Korea onto the global cultural stage (Roll, 2021). At its core, the emergence of Hallyu was accelerated by a confluence of historical circumstances and strategic interventions aimed at promoting South Korean cultural products worldwide.

Following the era of Japanese colonial rule and the devastation of the Korean War, South Korea embarked on a journey of post-war reconstruction and industrialisation (Kim, 2015, p. 154-156). South Korea transitioned into an economic powerhouse following the Korean War, also referred to as the “Miracle on Han River [한강의 기적]”, due to its almost instantaneous economic development in the latter half of the 20th century (Koen et al., 2021). More specifically, the “Miracle on Han River” directly stems from how South Korea transformed from “one of the poorest countries in the world at the end of the Korean War into an economy generating a GDP per capita comparable to that of some European countries” (Koen et al., 2021). With its economic boom, the South Korean government recognised the potential of cultural industries as a catalyst for soft power, cultural diplomacy, and economic growth (Kim, 2015, p. 154). In addition, Cicchelli and Octobre (2021) emphasise the deliberate efforts of the South Korean government to cultivate a vibrant pop culture and entertainment industry. Moreover, they recognise the government’s strategic importance in emancipating South Korea from its colonial heritage under Japanese rule while positioning itself as a cultural pioneer (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021, p. 12).

The earliest stages of Hallyu can be traced back to the late 1990s when South Korea put in effort to export its cultural products to the Southeast Asian region (Kim, 2015, p. 154). Hallyu represents the cultural exports from South Korea, “with China becoming the first country where appreciation for Korean products was recorded, a few years after the two countries had resumed diplomatic relations in 1992” (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021, p. 12-13).

The term “Hallyu” itself encapsulates the wave-like spread of Korean culture across borders, as the name stems from the Chinese expression ‘hanliu [韓流]’, which directly translates to Korean Wave (Roll, 2021). Specifically, “the term was first coined by the Chinese press in the late 1990s to describe the growing popularity of Korean pop culture in China” (Kim, 2015, p. 156). It has since come to be known as Hallyu [한류], romanised from the written South Korean language Hangul – directly linking it to South Korea and its culture (Roll, 2021; Kim, 2015).

At the heart of Hallyu’s emergence lies the phenomenon of Korean dramas and films, more commonly referred to as K-dramas, which served as precursors to its initial regional spread. These K-dramas are characterised by their emotive storytelling, significant cinematography, and distinctive aesthetic, which resonated deeply with audiences across East Asia, particularly in China and Japan (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021, p. 12-13). K-dramas such as “Winter Sonata [겨울 연가]” garnered a lot of attention in Japan upon its release, whereas “Autumn in My Heart [가을동화]” became increasingly popular in countries such as Hong Kong and Singapore (Kim, 2015, p. 158; Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021, p. 13). These shows marked a significant turning point that showcased Hallyu’s ability to utilise cultural products to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021, p. 16).

However, it was the rise of Korean pop music, more commonly referred to as K-pop, in the early and mid-2000s that propelled Hallyu to unprecedented heights due to the “idol groups-led K-pop boom” (Kim, 2015, p. 157). It was particularly the early K-pop idols such as BoA, 2PM, Girls’ Generation, BIGBANG, and SHINee that captured a global audience through their distinctive sound and visuals (Roll, 2021; Kim, 2015, p. 158). The success of K-pop can be attributed to several factors, including the strategic marketing employed by entertainment agencies, digital advancements, and the cultivation of dedicated fan communities to connect audiences globally (Roll, 2021). Moreover, the globalisation and spread of both Hallyu and K-pop were facilitated by the South Korean government’s proactive support for cultural industries. Essentially, the government has invested in cultural infrastructure, implemented supportive policies, and official governmental ministries, as well as launching promotional campaigns to enhance the international visibility of Korean music, entertainment, and culture (Roll, 2021; Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021, p. 14). This collective effort has not only boosted the export of Korean cultural products through Hallyu, but it has also enhanced the soft power and global image of South Korea (Roll, 2021).

2.2. Cultural Dynamics of Hallyu

Hallyu has significantly enhanced South Korea's soft power, enabling its cultural exports to rapidly penetrate international markets and embed themselves in modern society over the past few years. This is reflected in the ever-growing popularity of K-culture elements through the Hallyu waves, which have made a splash over the past generations, through the help of social media and its users (Huang, 2017).

One of the most notable instances of Hallyu and introduction to the cultural wave for many international audiences was the 2012 hit “Gangnam Style” by South Korean idol singer PSY. The song made its way onto the Hot Billboard 100 at a resounding second place and became the first YouTube video to reach one billion views (Kim, 2022). Thanks to its catchy tune and memorable dance routine, which aided its virality and differed from what Western audiences were accustomed to, the song acted as a catalyst for the coming waves of K-pop through Hallyu (Kang & Sit, 2022).

Alongside the evolution of technology and social media platforms, the growth of Hallyu and the spread of Korean culture were almost simultaneous. K-pop, K-dramas, and K-trends were posted, shared, and consumed thanks to platforms, such as Instagram and X, formerly known as Twitter, which aided in promoting globalisation and cross-cultural dialogues (Huang, 2017; Anand & Baek, 2024). K-pop groups such as BTS and BLACKPINK, among others, were able to appear on international stages, go on world tours, popularise Korean songs, and notably win awards at Western music award shows (Anand & Baek, 2024; Media Outreach, 2019). Additionally, the formation of fan clubs, fan meetings, and interactive fan engagement events has contributed to the continuous popularity of K-pop idols globally (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021, p. 13). Similarly, K-dramas and K-films, such as “Squid Game [오징어 게임]”, “The Glory [더 글로리]”, “Train to Busan [부산행]”, and “Parasite [기생충]” were being introduced to mainstream streaming platforms and broke records relating viewership and popularity – with “Parasite” becoming the first South Korean film to win an Academy Award for Best Picture and Best Director in 2020 (Anand & Baek, 2024; Burke, 2021; Chow, 2020).

Along with the popularity of K-pop idols and K-drama actors growing exponentially, especially on social media, Korean culture was able to integrate itself with Western culture through the idol's promotions of current K-trends, such as beauty, food, and fashion. Over the past few years mukbang [먹방] videos, which can be categorised as an online eating show, have grown from being just a South Korean phenomenon to one that has swept over Western

audiences too (Avosmart, n.d.). Similarly, Korean ramen exports hit an all-time high last year, reaching a milestone of one trillion KRW [Korean Won] in 2023 due to steady annual growth since 2015. According to Nongshim [농심], the largest ramen exporter in South Korea, a majority of exports are sent to the USA, alongside Australia and the UK making the top 10 list (Kim, 2023). However, ramen was not the only product to experience growth.

Over the years, Korea has become the world's third-largest exporter of skincare and cosmetics with a notable rise in Korean brands and products being sold to international audiences, such as the USA, the UK, and Germany (Le Guay & Gallon, 2021). These positive growths in Korean exports can be linked to K-pop idols lending their likeness to partnerships, endorsements, advertisements, or even everyday use (Keegan, 2023). K-pop idols have notably sold out products simply by using them in live streams, pictures, or YouTube videos thanks to their marketability and fanbase (Tan, 2022). Live streaming is a prominent feature within the K-pop industry, as it allows for fans and idols to actively engage with one another in real-time. For this purpose, platforms such as Weverse and V-LIVE were created by agencies to provide live-streaming services and direct engagement between the idols and their fans through posts and comments (Devoe, 2021; Koreaboo, 2022).

With the help of Hallyu, K-pop idols have been able to migrate into the international market and advertise for well-known Western brands, magazines, and fashion houses (Anand & Baek, 2024). Most noticeably, the various members of the K-pop group BTS have collaborated with notable brands, such as Calvin Klein, Louis Vuitton, Dior, Celiné and Cartier, with each campaign going viral over the past few years (Nayyar, 2023). The true reach of Hallyu was exemplified by the various exhibitions that were held in various Western art museums, such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2022; MFA Boston, 2024). The exhibitions aimed to explore the influence that South Korea's soft power has had on "cinema, drama, music, fandom, beauty and fashion" (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2022).

The spread of Hallyu has not only reached and changed Western audiences and international markets but also South Korea itself. To further promote their soft power and encourage engagement in K-culture, South Korea has introduced the Hallyu VISA. The Hallyu VISA has been marketed towards K-pop fans and South Korean culture enthusiasts by offering a two-year stay to those who enrol in local performing arts schools (Kelleher, 2024). Much like the wave it refers to, Hallyu is an unstoppable force that will continue to grow and manifest in new ways as technology and societies change and shift alongside it.

2.3. Decoding K-pop Culture: Terminology & Concepts

The last section of the contextual clarification will consist of an overview of Korean pop culture and K-pop, as well as relevant terminology and concepts, which will be beneficial to fully comprehend the empirical data that has been collected. Moreover, this section will consist of a comprehensive overview of K-pop culture and the process of becoming an idol.

K-pop as a genre had its start in the 1950s during the Korean War with the Kim Sisters, a K-pop trio. The sisters did not speak English but were able to cover English songs and perform for the American GIs phonetically. Despite popular belief that newer K-pop groups were the first to perform in America, the Kim Sisters appeared on the then-popular Ed Sullivan Show, an American talk show, a total of 22 times and became the first Korean group to enter the Billboard Charts in 1962 (The Los Angeles Film School, 2021). However, a more modern approach to K-pop emerged during the 1970s and 80s, when social activism was embedded into the genre (Koennecke, 2023). This shift in the genre, among other factors, led to the democratisation of South Korea alongside modernisation and lessening of censorship, which would go on to affect the future television and K-pop industry (Romano, 2018). Each weekend, musical talent shows would be broadcast throughout South Korea and in 1992, the Korean public would be introduced to Seo Taiji and Boys, referred to as the first modern K-pop group (Romano, 2018). Seo Taiji and Boys challenged Korean norms within music by singing about teen angst and societal pressures endured by young Koreans through American-style pop music (Romano, 2018).

Seo Taiji and Boys kickstarted a new standard for K-pop idols and introduced the first generation of K-pop idols, which supposedly lasted from 1992 to the early 2000s (The Los Angeles Film School, 2021). Inspired by American boy bands, newfound importance was placed on attractive group members, eye-catching performances, difficult choreography, and memorable tunes, which has continued into modern-day K-pop. Notable groups such as H.O.T., Sechs Kies, S.E.S, and Fin.K.L debuted (The Los Angeles Film School, 2021). The second generation of K-pop lasted from the early 2000s to around the 2010s and debuted K-pop groups such as BIGBANG, SHINee and Girls' Generation (The Los Angeles Film School, 2021; Verma, 2024). The third generation had an explosive and monumental start with groups such as BTS, EXO, BLACKPINK, and TWICE making their debut and utilising the social media platforms that were evolving alongside them (The Los Angeles Film School, 2021; Verma, 2024). In 2024, BTS and BLACKPINK are viewed as the two most popular K-pop groups according to the 2024 Overseas Korean Wave Survey, which was conducted

globally by South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism alongside Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (Das, 2024).

The fourth generation is currently active and has debuted groups such as NewJeans, TXT, and Stray Kids who repeatedly release hits and showcase their talent (Verma, 2024). In other words, each generation of K-pop introduced new ways to challenge traditional Korean norms through their well-written lyrics, experimental fashion styles, and captivating music that resonated with young and older audiences alike (The Los Angeles Film School, 2021).

Much like in the Western music industry, when an artist is under a music label, K-pop groups debut under agencies but before doing so, each idol must go through the trainee phase through their agency and management (Sunio, 2020). As of 2021, there were 231 entertainment agencies established in South Korea. Among these, four prominent companies are considered the most successful, which collectively are known as the Big4 [빅4] in the entertainment industry (Zheng, 2021). These are SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and HYBE Corporation – each totalling billions of Korean Won in revenue sales due to their marketable and effective trainees turned idols (Statista, 2024). First and foremost, agencies will hold online and live global auditions, wherein thousands of hopeful idol-aspirants will prepare a small performance to impress the judges, whereafter a few will be chosen to proceed to the next stage (Sunio, 2020). In some cases, idols have been scouted on the street by talent scouts rather than having to audition, however, this phenomenon is rare (Sunio, 2020; Choi, 2021a).

The trainee period can last up to eight years, depending on the agency and is a gruelling process according to idols and idol trainers, as it entails endless singing and dancing lessons, harsh diets, and extensive media training (Sunio, 2020; Ha, 2023). The trainee period is vital as it enables the agency to build and train the perfect idol, who can gain and attract mass audiences. This differs from Western celebrity standards, as idols are viewed as representations of their group and agency, therefore more pressure and responsibility are placed upon their shoulders regarding their ability to become a successful idol (Lee, 2021).

However, being a trainee does not guarantee the opportunity to debut, therefore some have to train for longer and some simply never debut (Sunio, 2020). Before debuting, K-pop trainees are grouped, to test their compatibility and chemistry, both personally and professionally, as well as how they look and sound together. This extensive process aids the agency in determining the final group formation before its debut (Sunio, 2020; Ha, 2023).

K-pop idol groups usually consist of several members and one leader, who carries the responsibility of caring for and ensuring healthy members, good performances, and

appropriate behaviour (Sunio, 2020). Each member is given a specific role or role, which is placed upon them depending on their talents, which usually consists of either being a vocalist, dancer, or rapper. One member can have several roles, however, the members are ranked according to their ability by main, lead, and sub. Those who are viewed as the best are referred to as main, the second best is referred to as lead, and the third best is sub. These roles and the members are thereafter, commonly, referred to as vocal line, dancer line, or rapper line among the fans (Sunio, 2020).

Navigating the intricacies of K-pop culture can be tough for newcomers due to the abundance of specialised vocabulary used by idol groups, fans, and the media alike. The glossary below encompasses the most relevant vocabulary within the K-pop industry and fandoms to aid the reader through the thesis.

3.3.1. K-pop Glossary

The forthcoming K-pop glossary draws upon an established familiarity with K-pop, which encompasses an ongoing immersion in K-pop culture and fandoms, reflecting continuous engagement with the subject matter. It seeks to provide thorough definitions supported by relevant literature that elucidates the significance and prevalence of each term within the context of K-pop.

Agency	The entertainment company that an idol group is signed to.
Anti	Someone who is against a specific individual or idol group.
Bias	A fan's favourite member of an idol group.
Bias wrecker	A fan's second favourite member of an idol group.
Comeback	When an idol group releases a new song or album, which they actively promote.
Concept	The theme of an album is reflected in the way the idols perform, dress, and interact. This often correlates with a comeback.
Debut	When a trainee group officially becomes an idol group and releases their first single.
Deongsaeng	A Romanised version of the Korean way of saying "younger sibling". Typically used to refer to younger idol groups by older idol groups.
Ending Fairy	When a camera zooms in on a certain member at the end of the performance the member acts charmingly to the camera.

Events	Often referred to as fan-funded events held at caf��es for special occasions for a group or specific idol, primarily during birthdays, anniversaries, debuts, music, and album promotions.
Fancam	A video of an idol group or member of an idol group performing that is posted online and circulated among fans.
Fanchant	“Fanchants” are phrases that fans shout before or during an idol’s performance. Typically it can be their names or words relevant to the song, concept, or comeback. (Pham, 2020).
Fan-service	Idols do this to please their fans through acts such as winking, flirting, or making hearts with their fingers or hands.
Fansite	A fan who takes high-quality pictures and/or videos of one or more members of an idol group and posts them to their social media.
Hyung	The Romanised version of the Korean way of saying “older brother” by younger males.
Idol	The way to describe a Korean pop star or artist.
Idol groups	The way to describe a Korean pop group or act.
Leader	A member within an idol group who is in charge of organising and being responsible for the rest of the group, as well as serving as a liaison during interviews and presentations.
Lead [noun]	Used to describe a member of an idol group that is categorised as the second-best vocalist, rapper, or dancer. These are referred to as lead vocal, lead rapper, or lead dancer.
Lightstick	A custom-made “glowstick” that carries an important symbolism which is significant to the idol group or the fandom and often used during performances to show support.
[Noun] Line	The term is typically used to describe or group together members of an idol group who share the same position or role, such as rap line, dance line, or vocal line. Other lines may be formed depending on the idol group members, such as birth year or nationality.
Main [noun]	Used to describe a member of an idol group that is categorised as the best vocalist, rapper, or dancer. These are referred to as main vocal, main rapper, or main dancer.
Maknae	The Romanised version of the Korean way of saying “younger sibling”. For K-pop, the term is used to refer to the youngest member of the idol group.
Mini-Album	A term used to refer to an album that is shorter and cheaper than a typical full-length album.

Noona	The Romanised version of the Korean way of saying “older sister” by younger males.
Oppa	The Romanised version of the Korean way of saying “older brother” by younger females.
Rookie	An idol group who have just debuted.
Sasaeng	An obsessive fan who engages in questionable behaviour against an idol, often stalking, endangering the safety and purposefully invading an idol’s privacy.
Selca	Korean way of saying “selfie” which refers to a self-taken picture of the idol member(s).
Skinship	Bonding through physical touch such as holding hands and hugging.
Stan(ning)	Refers to being a big fan of an idol group.
Sub [noun]	Used to describe a member or members of an idol group categorised as supporting the main and lead vocalists, rappers, and dancers. Often seen as the third best of their given position.
Subunit	A sub-unit is a smaller group of idols within an idol group who perform and release music together under their given sub-unit name (Morin, 2019).
Ultimate Bias	A fan’s all-time favourite idol amongst all idols.
Unnie	The Romanised version of the Korean way of saying “older sister” by younger females.
Trainee	A term used to refer to idols before they officially debut as they train under their agency.
Visual	“The most attractive member of a group based on Korean beauty standards” (Pham, 2020).

3. Methodological Framework

The following section will include an overview of our research methods and considerations, which will be applied to explore the chosen phenomenon and answer the thesis’ research question. The methodology section will cover and explain the chosen methodological considerations such as abductive reasoning, hermeneutics as the chosen epistemology and social constructionism as the chosen ontology. Furthermore, this section will explain the research design of qualitative methodology and semi-structured interviews, which will form the foundation for collecting empirical data. Additionally, significant ethical considerations,

limitations, and biases that stem from the methodological considerations will be addressed and discussed.

3.1. Abductive Reasoning

In the pursuit of understanding the dynamics between theory and social research within the realm of contemporary cultural phenomena, methodological frameworks play a pivotal role in guiding the inquiry process. One framework is abductive reasoning, which emphasises the perspectives, language, and meanings discovered through the collected data (Bryman, 2016, p. 401). As defined by Blaikie and Priest (2019), abductive reasoning is characterised by its emphasis on understanding the researched social phenomena through the perspectives, interpretations, and motivations *of* and perpetuated *by* the social actors within the given phenomena (p. 93). By grounding the inquiry in the lived experiences and motivations of social actors, including K-pop fans, experts, the K-pop industry and non-governmental organisation (NGO) employees, this thesis aims to explain the complexity between K-pop's cultural influence and its implications for global socio-political discourses. Thereby, abductive reasoning is a logical framework for the scope of this thesis, as it facilitates a nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between theory and social research within the context of K-pop's political influence.

Furthermore, the application of abductive reasoning allows for an iterative exploration of the relations between theories and empirical data within the context of the researched phenomena (Bryman, 2016; Blaikie & Priest, 2019). Abductive reasoning, as the guiding principle, facilitates an iterative exploration of empirical data and theoretical frameworks, allowing for the continuous refinement of insights and hypotheses (Bryman, 2016; Blaikie & Priest, 2019). Through a systematic and iterative exploration of qualitative data and theoretical frameworks, this thesis aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between cultural phenomena, political dynamics, international relations, and societal paradigms in the contemporary global landscape.

3.2. Hermeneutics

Epistemology focuses on the importance of how the social world of the chosen phenomenon is studied and understood within social research (Bryman, 2016). Hermeneutics is one of the main branches of epistemology and it highlights the social actor's subjective interpretations of their social world, rather than concentrating on the shared knowledge among them (Porta &

Keating, 2008, p. 351). The hermeneutical approach signifies that the social actors and their understanding of their social world will be the centre of the research, with researchers approaching this social context with preconceived notions and knowledge of the chosen phenomenon (Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 25). This is called the hermeneutic horizon, wherein subjective interpretations of concepts such as prejudices, understandings and experiences are housed (Højbjerg, 2014, p. 301-303).

In relation to this thesis and its chosen phenomenon, awareness is maintained regarding preconceptions concerning K-pop's cultural influence and its implications for global socio-political discourses. This awareness is facilitated by gathering data through the perspectives of interviewed social actors, supplemented by additional data and research to establish a foundational hermeneutic horizon. Throughout the thesis, a fusion of the respective subjective hermeneutic horizons will take place, wherein the chosen social world and phenomenon will become interpreted and understood through the social world it exists in, through the lenses of the chosen social actors (Højbjerg, 2014, p. 303-304). Henceforth, the social actors will be referred to as informants due to the chosen methodology of semi-structured interviews.

Hermeneutics is built upon the concept of the hermeneutic circle, which emphasises that fully understanding a phenomenon is dependent on fully understanding the components and elements that are relevant to the phenomenon, as well as their relevance (Højbjerg, 2014). Similarly, hermeneutics highlights that truth is a subjective matter that aids the thesis, as it allows for the informants/social actors to fully relay their socially created understanding of their social world (Bryman, 2016, p. 375). This accentuates the importance of internally understanding the social phenomenon through the lenses of the chosen informants, who carry well-rounded hermeneutic horizons and can contribute to the empirical data collection and analysis of the thesis.

3.3. Social Constructionism

Ontological considerations prompt researchers to question how the world is structured and perceived by those who interact and exist within it (Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 21). More specifically, ontology encourages the interrogation of the nature of K-pop's impact and how it is constructed and interpreted by various social actors within diverse social and political contexts. The ontology of this thesis is rooted in social constructionism, as social constructionism offers a valuable framework for analysis, as it simultaneously emphasises the

role of social actors and their interactions in shaping their narratives (Porta & Keating, 2008; Bryman, 2016). Within social constructionism, cultural phenomena, such as K-pop, are not considered to be static or predetermined entities but rather products of ongoing social interactions, interpretations, and discursive practices (Bryman, 2016). By incorporating a constructionist ontology, the social world existing within the particular phenomena is continuously constructed and reconstructed through the actors' actions within the social world (Bryman, 2016, p. 32-33). As such, the implications suggest that the researched phenomenon is the direct outcome of said interactions between these social actors and that the knowledge shared is therefore also socially constructed (Bryman, 2016, p. 32-33).

This perspective emphasises the importance of understanding how individuals and communities interpret and attribute meaning to K-pop within their specific social and cultural contexts. The choice of social constructionism, as the ontological framework for this thesis, is deliberate and justified for several reasons. Firstly, it acknowledges the dynamic nature of K-pop, which evolves in response to societal changes, technological advancements, and global trends. Secondly, it recognises the multiplicity of interpretations of K-pop, emphasising the diverse meanings attached to it based on cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and social contexts. Thirdly, it highlights the agency of social actors, including fans, artists, media outlets, and stakeholders, in shaping and disseminating the image and significance of K-pop. Finally, it emphasises the contextual embeddedness of K-pop within broader socio-political and cultural dynamics.

By adopting a social constructionist ontology, this thesis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of K-pop's influence and its implications for contemporary international relations and diplomacy. It seeks to unravel the complex interplay between K-pop, soft power, and global socio-political dynamics, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of K-pop's role in shaping global perceptions and discourse.

3.4. Qualitative Methodology

A qualitative methodology will guide the research process by obtaining relevant data to answer the given research question. Lamont (2015) defines that qualitative methods encompass techniques for collecting and analysing data that do not rely on numerical values. These methods focus on gathering and analysing non-numeric data to gain insights into the researched topic (Lamont, 2015, p. 78). The empirical data for this thesis will be collected from multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Firstly, internet-based research will be conducted by obtaining publicly accessible data, including scholarly literature, online articles, and reports (Bryman, 2016). This also involves relevant websites, peer-reviewed journals, and academic databases, such as ProQuest, Google Scholar, and JSTOR, particularly made available through Aalborg University, to gather insights into the multifaceted dimensions of K-pop's cultural influence and political significance in contemporary society. Furthermore, qualitative data will be collected from various reports, scholarly articles, and documents from international organisations, NGOs, and governmental agencies that address cultural, social, and political issues, as well as other related topics relevant to answering the research question adequately.

In addition, semi-structured interviews will be conducted to obtain firsthand perspectives from the chosen informants, which will be further elaborated in the forthcoming sections. Semi-structured interviews offer a flexible yet structured approach to data collection to delve further into the informants' views and experiences to the focus of the research (Bryman, 2016). The interviews will provide valuable qualitative data, which will offer insights into the role of K-pop in advocating for social change. This multi-faceted approach to data collection will ensure a comprehensive analysis of K-pop's global impact and possibilities for social and political activism.

3.5. Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative interviews can range from being completely unstructured, to semi-structured, and fully structured to investigate and understand a phenomenon in a real-world setting through the eyes of social actors or groups (Magaldi & Berler, 2020, p. 4825-4826; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1358-1360). Semi-structured interviews are viewed as structured conversations between the interviewer and informant, wherein a safe space is created for the informant to answer the planned, open-ended, and follow-up questions regarding the researched phenomenon (Magaldi & Berler, 2020, p. 4826). With the help of the prepared interview guide, the interviewer has the freedom and flexibility to diverge and ask questions if new and pertinent information is brought up by the informant (Magaldi & Berler, 2020, p. 4825; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1360). However, creating a suitable interview guide to ensure a natural flow, throughout the interview, is the third step in the seven-step guide to conducting a successful semi-structured interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1360).

The first step consists of assessing and considering whether the semi-structured interview is the correct method for the chosen research, as it is best suited for exploring and addressing social questions, such as lived experiences of certain phenomena, informants' world-views, and perspectives (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1361; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 49). The second step is the sampling choice, through either probability, non-probability or purposive sampling, deciding on the appropriate sampling size, and the recruitment process of relevant and knowledgeable informants, who can provide heightened trustworthiness to the collected data (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1361-1362).

The third step concentrates on curating the interview guide and the necessary open-ended questions needed to research the chosen phenomenon. The guide also aids in giving the interviewer an overview of the pertinent topics, whilst providing a natural structure for the interviewer to follow to ensure the interview feels natural and casual (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1362; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The fourth step focuses on how the interviews are conducted, recorded, transcribed, and stored. Semi-structured interviews can be conducted either face-to-face, through written correspondence or via video or phone calls. After that, a decision has to be made whether the interviews are recorded and how the recording shall be done; either just audio or audio and visual. However, these decisions are encouraged to be taken with the informant in mind, as a more comfortable environment can ease them and allow them to speak more freely. The storing of the data must comply with personal data laws and is encouraged to be kept safe to keep personal information confidential (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1363).

The fifth step is about the coding and theme identification of the collected qualitative data, which focuses on finding repeating themes, similarities, and differences in the collected data which will aid the forthcoming analysis (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1364). In relation, thematic analysis, much like the coding process apparent in the fifth step of semi-structured interviews, involves the identification of recurring patterns and themes within the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4). This is done by the researchers dissecting the collected data into manageable elements by assigning code labels, which will allow the researchers to extract core themes. Additionally, by doing so, the data will be significantly reduced, which will make the data more comprehensible for interpretation and analysis (Bryman, 2016, p. 11).

Similar to the fifth step of semi-structured interviews, the coding process within thematic analysis explores the differences, similarities, and patterns of meaning present in the collected data, which will further aid in facilitating the identification and analysis of

significant themes for the forthcoming analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 53). The thematic analysis follows a structured approach that encompasses data coding, theme generation, and refinement, mirroring the methodology of semi-structured interviews. The application of analytic sensibility is pivotal, as it enables researchers to uncover deeper meanings and connections within the dataset, extending beyond surface-level content (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 44). By incorporating this particular step of thematic analysis in relation to the fifth step of semi-structured methodology, the data interpretation's depth and richness will be enhanced, thereby further enriching the understanding of the research topic for this thesis.

Lastly, the sixth and seventh steps for semi-structured interviews are built upon drawing conclusions and reporting the findings found within the collected data throughout the analysis, conclusion, and discussion sections (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1364-1365). The upcoming sections will delve into the aforementioned steps; the development of the interview guide, the chosen informants and the methods employed during the interview process.

3.5.1. Interview Guide

As mentioned in the previous section, the interview guide plays a pivotal role in conducting the semi-structured interviews successfully. Through the help of the interview guide, the interviewer can ensure a flow between the questions asked and the answers given by the chosen informants. All questions are phrased in a manner that encourages expansive responses, as opposed to close-ended ones, so as not to lead the informants to specific answers and to fully delve into the chosen researched phenomenon (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1362).

An interview guide was created for each informant group which includes K-pop fans, a K-pop industry employee, NGO employees, and experts. For the K-pop fans and K-pop industry employee, the interview guide questions were created informally to ensure accessibility across various academic levels and to foster a natural and relaxed atmosphere during the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). For the NGO employees and experts, the questions were created with their research area and academic expertise in mind, to ensure well-rounded questions, wherein they could apply their knowledge to the chosen researched phenomenon (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

After drafting the initial interview guide for K-pop fans, which was the largest informant group interviewed, a pilot interview was conducted to gauge if the sequence and structure of the questions were optimal. After the pilot interview, the interview guide was

revised and restructured for a smoother conversational flow. Additionally, to guarantee comfort among the informants, the researchers adapted their language and vocabulary to create a more natural and dialogic interview. Although the interview guide structure seems rigid, the informant's experiences and answers were considered when asking follow-up questions to gain a comprehensive understanding of their view on the researched phenomena. This approach greatly enriched the empirical collection, fostering broad and explorative insights.

This approach was not applied to the other groups, as the experts and NGO employees had questions specifically tailored for them per their area of expertise. Therefore, we were unable to conduct a pilot interview and make the necessary changes needed to ensure that all relevant topics were covered through the planned and follow-up questions.

3.5.2. Informants

For the thesis, a total of 13 interviews were conducted. Specifically, they consisted of one K-pop industry employee, two experts, four NGO employees and six K-pop fans to cover all topics seen as relevant to the chosen researched phenomenon. The number of chosen informants is based on their willingness to partake in the interviews, as well as a limited time frame in which to transcribe and thoroughly analyse. For all informants, their schedule, time zone, and comfortability were prioritised to ensure successful interviews, which resulted in five out of the 13 interviews being conducted solely through email.

The two experts are Karen Smith ([Appendix 1](#)), *former Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General on Responsibility to Protect*; and Elisabeth Pramendorfer ([Appendix 2](#)), *Atrocity Prevention Expert and UN Geneva Representative for the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*.

Moreover, the four NGO employees consist of Ethan Hee-seok Shin ([Appendix 3](#)), *Legal Analyst at Transitional Justice Working Group*; Nam Bada ([Appendix 4](#)), *Secretary General at NGO People for Successful COrean REunification (PSCORE)*; Kim Seung-Hyeon ([Appendix 5](#)), *Co-founder and Representative of International Democracy Hub (IDH)*; and Kwag Hee-Yoon ([Appendix 6](#)), *Senior Manager at International Democracy Hub (IDH)*. Each expert and NGO employee was recruited through personal and professional relations that were established through shared interests in North Korean human rights, activism, and advocacy. They were interviewed due to their academic and professional knowledge of the aforementioned topics.

The K-pop industry employee works as a Marketing Manager for a K-pop touring company, on a national and international scale and was found and contacted through one of the K-pop fan informants. Their employer will remain unnamed and as an extra precaution, she will be given the alias 'Esme' throughout the thesis, so as not to harm her job position or employer. Her insight into and knowledge of the K-pop industry allowed for a new internal perspective to be introduced and considered throughout the analysis, as someone who has first-hand experienced the K-pop industry and the effect it can have.

The K-pop industry employee is named Esme, she is 27 years old, Malaysian, and lives in South Korea ([Appendix 7](#)).

The six K-pop fans were recruited through personal and professional relations established during a shared internship, due to their interests in K-pop, international relations, and human rights, as well as having educational backgrounds within areas such as international relations and Asia studies. The informants were chosen based on their cultural and geographical diversity and their ability to provide unique insights and perspectives to the thesis regarding the chosen phenomenon. All six informants were given aliases to maintain anonymity and to ensure that their answers and opinions may not affect them or their circumstances, which is one of the ethical considerations taken.

The first informant is named Lina, she is 22 years old, Irish/Australian, and lives in The Netherlands ([Appendix 8](#)).

The second informant is named Rachel, she is 26 years old, Italian, and lives in South Korea ([Appendix 9](#)).

The third informant is named Zara, she is 25 years old, German, and lives in Germany ([Appendix 10](#)).

The fourth informant is named Ines, she is 24 years old, Algerian, and lives in South Korea ([Appendix 11](#)).

The fifth informant is named Aram, she is 25 years old, American, and lives in South Korea ([Appendix 12](#)).

The sixth informant is named Isabella, she is 24 years old, Spanish, and lives in Spain ([Appendix 13](#)).

3.5.3. Ethical Considerations

When conducting semi-structured interviews, ethical considerations must be taken throughout to ensure the credibility of the research and the well-being of the informants involved – especially those who are anonymised.

In the initial recruitment phase, all informants were informed of the research purpose and were sent the interview guide, consisting of the questions that would be asked during the interview. We assessed that it was necessary to anonymise the informants in case sensitive information could arise during the interview, as we inquired about personal opinions and topics such as activism and socio-political issues. During the first steps of the recruitment process, the informants were informed that they could choose not to answer any question(s) or withdraw from the research without facing any repercussions before, during, and even after the interview had concluded. Additionally, we asked for consent to screen-record and audio-record the interviews to aid with the transcription. All files were kept on offline data storage, following GDPR [General Data Protection Regulation] laws, and were deleted after the completion of the transcription. Finally, all transcriptions were sent to the respective informants to allow them to add, remove, or edit any of their given answers before starting the analysis. Before asking the first question in the interview, informants were reminded of their rights to refuse a question and to withdraw from the interview, as well as their consent to record and keep files whilst explaining the transcription process and how their information would be handled confidentially to ensure full transparency.

When conducting interviews with informants created through personal relations, the occurrence of social desirability bias must be considered and kept in the back of the researcher's mind when analysing the collected answers. Social desirability bias refers to the tendency for informants to respond to questions with what they believe are *expected* or *wanted* by the researchers, or that they might give answers that align with social norms rather than their own truthful beliefs or opinions. This bias can be especially prevalent when dealing with areas that might include sensitive information, which has the potential to impact the personal relationship between informant and researcher (Bryman, 2016, p. 217). Steps can be taken to minimise the bias, such as substituting the interviews with surveys to allow for complete anonymity. However, this would remove the opportunity for asking follow-up questions and fully understanding the informants' perspectives on the chosen phenomenon, which can negatively affect the collected data's validity and reliability (Aarhus Universitet, n.d.).

In relation to this, substituting written interviews for physical or online interviews can also affect the thesis' validity and reliability negatively. The physical element of semi-structured interviews allows for body language to be seen and for a conversation to flow, which naturally opens up follow-up questions to be asked and answers to be discussed. The written interviews stagnate the natural flow of a conversation or train of thought to be followed and expanded upon. Similarly, as we are unable to observe them during the interview, we are unable to know whether their answers are coming naturally or from other sources. However, as we share personal relations with them, we must exercise trust between us as researchers and them as trustworthy informants.

As with any research the validity, reliability, and generalisability can vary according to the methodology and chosen theories. Qualitative methods focus on non-numerical data and the subjective world understandings of social actors, compared to quantitative data, which primarily deals with numerical and statistical data (Leung, 2015, p. 324). However, the subjectivity of the collected qualitative data can lower the generalisability of the research, as the findings cannot be generalised to the broader population or different contexts (Leung, 2015, p. 324). Similarly, the external reliability is usually low concerning qualitative methods as it can be difficult to replicate and repeat the research and reach the same results, due to the subjectivity of the informants (Bryman, 2016, p. 46). On the other hand, the internal reliability will be high as both researchers were present for all interviews and can therefore agree on what was experienced and understood (Bryman, 2016, p. 46).

Furthermore, the ecological validity can be considered as high, as the interviews were conducted based on the availability and comfortability of the informants in their residence to gain authentic answers regarding their understanding of the chosen phenomenon. A high ecological validity strengthens the reliability of informants' answers and allows for the informants to recognise themselves in their given answers throughout the thesis (Bryman, 2016, p. 48). The internal validity can be measured as high as steps were taken to minimise the risk of bias by designing and asking exploratory questions to gain several understandings of the phenomenon (Bryman 2016, p. 47). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), the interviewer plays a crucial role in facilitating and securing a high internal validity. To fulfil this role effectively, methodologies were researched and applied regarding discerning which narratives presented by the informant should be explored further and which should not (p. 224). The external validity is low as the thesis has focused on a phenomenon that is present predominantly in South Korea and therefore the research will be difficult to apply in different contexts, such as other countries (Bryman 2016, p. 47).

3.6. Limitations & Bias

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this thesis and the potential biases inherent in the research process. As fans of K-pop ourselves, we recognise the possibility of unintentional biases influencing our interpretation and analysis of the phenomenon. “Our assumptions always influence our research – it’s not a question *whether* they influence but *how* they influence” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 18). This bias might manifest in an overly positive portrayal of K-pop's impact or a tendency to overlook potential criticisms or controversies within the industry. Additionally, while efforts have been made to incorporate diverse viewpoints and sources, our understanding of K-pop is inevitably influenced by our own experiences and perspectives as fans.

The lack of gender and age diversity among the K-pop fans interviewed, all women aged 22-26, reflects the nature of our engagement within a community where such demographics are prevalent, inadvertently restricting the diversity of perspectives represented in our thesis. However, it also emphasises the depth of insight gained from our direct interactions with fellow K-pop fans, which illuminates the intricacies and nuances of K-pop fandom from a firsthand perspective. As such, recognising these inherent biases is essential for ensuring transparency and integrity in our research process, as it allows us to critically reflect on our perspectives and potential blind spots.

Furthermore, this thesis is limited by the scope of available literature and data, particularly regarding the political dimensions of K-pop and its impact on diplomacy. The evolving nature of K-pop and its global reach also present challenges in capturing its full complexity within the confines of a single research. Despite these limitations, we strive to maintain thoroughness and objectivity in our analysis, acknowledging the need for critical reflexivity and openness to alternative interpretations. By addressing these limitations transparently, we aim to enhance the credibility and integrity of our research findings.

5. Theoretical Framework

The forthcoming section will elaborate in detail on the theoretical framework that will be used to analyse and interpret the collected empirical data. Specifically, the section will delve into the theories of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy to explore the cultural phenomenon of K-pop and its influence and implications in contemporary global dynamics, as pointed out by the informants. Moreover, to complement these theories, the framework will include

notable concepts within Critical Feminist Studies to provide additional insights into how feminist perspectives intersect with K-pop's cultural influence.

5.1. Soft Power Theory

As briefly mentioned in the introduction of thesis, there will be a focus on soft power as conceptualised by Joseph Nye in 1990. Nye's (1990) conceptualisation of soft power has influenced the field of international relations by providing a framework for understanding the complexities of power dynamics and power resources in the contemporary world (p. 159). Essentially, Nye's works, including but not limited to "*Soft Power*" (1990), "*Power and Foreign Policy*" (2011), and "*Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept*" (2021), have provided theoretical frameworks and empirical data that highlights the increasing prevalence of soft power in shaping international relations (Nye, 1990; Nye, 2011; Nye, 2021). In a journal article, Ivan Bakalov (2019) emphasises the prevalence of soft power since it was introduced within the discipline of international relations, wherein he states that "scholars still acknowledge the fact that the Harvard professor [Joseph Nye] was the one who coined the term 'soft power' and still juxtapose their arguments against his" (p. 130).

While the term itself first gained prominence in the late 20th century, its theoretical underpinnings draw from historical precedents from the evolving nature of power in the post-Cold War era (Nye, 2021, p. 196). Throughout his seminal work, Nye (1990) acknowledges the antiquity of power dynamics while simultaneously emphasising the progressing landscape where traditional measures of power, such as military might and economic prowess, are complemented by intangible resources (p. 154-156). Therefore, with the decline of traditional power measures centred on military might or economic prowess, scholars and policymakers sought alternative frameworks to understand influence in a globalised world. Nye's (2008) conceptualisation filled this gap by emphasising the role of intangible assets such as culture, ideology, and institutions in shaping international outcomes (p. 94). In other words, power was seen as "becoming less transferable, less coercive, and less tangible. Modern trends and changes in political issues are having significant effects on the nature of power and the resources that produce it" (Nye, 1990, p. 167).

This theoretical construct conceptualised by Nye (1990) transcends conventional paradigms of power, which aids in elucidating the significance of intangible assets and cultural capital in fostering diplomatic rapport and cooperative relationships globally. The concept of soft power consists of a broad spectrum of resources and behavioural perspectives

that contribute to a nation's ability to shape the preferences and behaviours of others (Nye, 2011, p. 9-19). Moreover, Nye (2021) clarifies that while various resources contribute to soft power, it is ultimately characterised by attraction and persuasion, contrasting with the coercive nature of hard power (p. 201). This makes it a more subtle but influential form of power with contemporary relevance (Nye, 1990, p. 166).

Additionally, soft power operates through co-optive means that include but are not limited to framing agendas, persuasion, and positive attraction (Nye, 2011, p. 18-19). At the heart of soft power, Nye (2008) has maintained a continuous emphasis on culture, political values, and foreign policies being vital resources of a nation's soft power potential (p. 95-96; Nye, 2019, p. 8). This has also been echoed by other scholarly research and literature on soft power within international politics, wherein culture, political values, and foreign policies are essential resources of soft power (Bakalov, 2019, p. 132-133).

First and foremost, a nation's culture or cultural heritage encompasses a "set of practices that create meaning for society, and it has many manifestations" (Nye, 2008, p. 96). In this relation, there is a distinction between popular culture, focusing primarily on any forms of art catered as mass entertainment or is consumed by the majority of society; whereas high culture, such as education, traditional art, and literature, are considered to be consumed by elites in society (Nye, 2008, p. 96; Jones, 2013). Culture as a soft power resource serves as a channel for conveying identity, fostering connections, attracting, and resonating with people worldwide (Nye, 1990, p. 167). Essentially, highlights culture's role in shaping perceptions and building bridges across diverse cultures (Nye, 2021, p. 196). However, despite the fact that popular channels of culture can provide more opportunities to attract people worldwide, Nye (1990) emphasises that it is crucial to be mindful of the potential "triviality and fad in popular behavior" (p. 169).

Secondly, political values include the ideological principles, ethical standards, and political ideals upheld by a country, which influence perceptions of its legitimacy and moral authority on the global stage (Nye, 2019, p. 8). Countries that adhere *to* and advocate *for* values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, often wield greater soft power by appealing to universal aspirations and ideals (Nye, 2004, p. 22; Nye, 1990, p. 167). On the contrary, countries or nations that deviate from these values may face additional challenges in projecting soft power and building positive international reputations (Nye, 1990; Nye, 2021).

Third and finally, foreign policies are vital resources in shaping soft power, as they reflect a country's or nation's commitment to peacekeeping, international cooperation, and adherence to shared norms that shape a country's soft power projection (Nye, 1990, p. 162).

According to Nye (2008), a nation's foreign policies, when perceived as principled and legitimate, can enhance its soft power by fostering cooperation and trust with other countries (p. 95-96). On the contrary, if foreign policies appear controversial or inconsistent, they may partly be responsible for undermining a nation's soft power and eroding its credibility internationally (Nye, 2019, p. 8; Nye, 2008, p. 95-96).

The effectiveness of soft power depends on the appeal, attraction, and authenticity of a country's or nation's soft power resources (Nye, 2008, p. 95). In this relation, Nye (2019) highlights the importance of self-criticism, credibility, and civil society in generating soft power, which emphasises the need for governments to foster an environment valuable to the cultivation of soft power assets and resources (p. 8-10). As highlighted through Nye's (2008) work, governments must invest in promoting their culture and cultural heritage, upholding their political values, and pursuing foreign policies that align with their stated principles to enhance their soft power and influence globally (p. 95). Furthermore, public diplomacy is emphasised as important within the conceptualisation of soft power in shaping international preferences and perceptions (Nye, 2019, p. 11). Soft power stresses the role of public diplomacy in mobilising these resources to attract international and foreign publics, wherein effective diplomacy necessitates understanding and adaptation to the perspectives of the target audience(s) (Nye, 2019, p. 13-14). There is a need for two-way communication in public diplomacy, where listening and understanding the target audience's values and concerns are just as important as conveying one's own messages (Nye, 2019, p. 13-14).

Public diplomacy, a term that gained traction in the mid-20th century, includes efforts to promote a nation's soft power, with the aim to foster positive international relations and project a favourable image of the given country or nation globally (Nye, 2019, p. 10-12). More specifically, it involves strategic communication, cultural exchange programs, educational initiatives, and media outreach, which are all designed to foster mutual understanding and goodwill between nations (Nye, 2019, p. 7). In contrast to the theoretical conceptualisation of diplomacy that focuses primarily on government-to-government interactions, public diplomacy targets broader audiences with the aim of constructing enduring relations built on mutual trust and shared interests (Nye, 2019, p. 11). Particularly, effective public diplomacy enhances a nation's reputation and global image, as well as strengthening its ability to address transnational challenges through collaborative efforts and diplomatic partnerships (Nye, 2019, p. 10).

In addition to governments, civil society and non-state actors play crucial roles in shaping soft power dynamics (Nye, 2019, p. 7-8; Nye, 2021, p. 206). Cultural institutions,

NGOs, and grassroots movements, among others, often enjoy higher levels of trust and credibility – especially in areas related to human rights advocacy or environmental conservation (Nye, 2019, p. 8). Civil society is a term that encompasses a diverse array of organisations that operate independently from the state, whilst engaging in activities aimed at promoting social matters, such as social change, advancing human rights, and addressing collective concerns (Nye, 2019, p. 7-8).

Furthermore, Nye (2019) emphasises this lack of governmental trust by stating that: “soft power has its limitations. Much of a country’s soft power is produced by its civil society, and that makes it more difficult for governments to wield” (p. 8). Therefore, collaborative efforts between civil society entities and governments are seen as frequently common, with civil society entities amplifying messages and extending through their diverse networks (Nye, 2021, p. 206). These entities wield significant influence in shaping public discourse and narratives, mobilising public perceptions, and holding governments and international institutions and/or bodies accountable for their actions (Nye, 2019, p. 7-10). For instance, cultural institutions such as museums, theatres, and art galleries serve as ambassadors of a nation’s cultural heritage, which fosters cross-cultural understanding and appreciation (Nye, 2019, p. 7-8).

Within the domain of soft power, civil society and non-state actors play crucial roles as both influencers and purveyors of cultural narratives, values, and norms (Nye, 2019, p. 8). “Soft power is ubiquitous at all levels of human behaviour from individuals to nations, and is likely to become increasingly important because of the information revolution that we are currently living through” (Nye, 2019, p. 8-9). As Nye (2019) accentuates, the Digital age era has transformed the landscape of soft power projection that has led to the empowerment of non-state actors to engage in public diplomacy on unprecedented scales (Nye, 2019, p. 10; Nye, 1990, p. 164). Moreover, in an era characterised by social media proliferation and digital connectivity, non-state actors are able to harness the power of technology to amplify their voices, mobilise support, and catalyse social movements globally (Nye, 2019, pp. 8, 15-16).

Social media platforms and online forums serve as powerful tools for individuals and organisations to influence global narratives, which can enable soft power to be projected through persuasion and attraction (Nye, 2019, p. 10). This is echoed by Nye (2019), who writes that: “All information goes through cultural filters, and what we think are clear statements are rarely heard as intended. Telling is far less influential than actions and symbols that show as well as tell” (p. 14). For instance, online advocacy campaigns, viral hashtags,

and digital storytelling platforms enable individuals and organisations to transcend geographical borders, whilst engaging diverse audiences in meaningful dialogue and collective action (Nye, 2019, p. 8-16).

Essentially, civil society and non-state actors contribute to soft power dynamics by advocating for universal values, promoting cultural exchange, and fostering people-to-people connections that similarly transcend political differences, whilst promoting mutual understanding and cooperation among nations (Nye, 2019, p. 8; Nye, 2011, p. 10-11). Moreover, the active involvement of said actors is aiding in strengthening the foundation of international relations, enriching global discourse, and empowering individuals to become agents of positive change in an increasingly interconnected world (Nye, 2019; Nye, 2021). By leveraging digital technologies, non-state and civil society actors mobilise support, raise awareness, and advocate for issues of mutual concerns, thus contributing significantly to the dissemination of soft power in today's interconnected world (Nye, 2019, p. 10-16).

In the context of the thesis' scope, soft power offers a relevant analytical framework. By examining how South Korea strategically leverages its cultural assets to enhance its soft power, this thesis will shed light on the broader dynamics of cultural globalisation and the transformative potential of popular culture in addressing global challenges. Moreover, by understanding soft power and its resources in shaping international perceptions and relations, this thesis can effectively examine how K-pop operates as a cultural export from South Korea. In essence, through the lens of soft power theory, this thesis aims to uncover the political dimensions of K-pop and its implications for diplomacy, shedding light on its role as both a cultural phenomenon and a strategic asset in international affairs.

5.2. Cultural Diplomacy Theory

No matter where or when, diplomacy has always played a vital role in international relations, and how states, nations, and organisations interact with one another. Diplomacy is typically understood “as carrying out a country's external relations, implementing its foreign policy, above all through negotiations, except for war and military operations” (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 183). This is carried out by state-appointed actors, who represent their state and its wishes within the international community and negotiations (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 1-2). However, as societies and nations have modernised and globalised, the concept of diplomacy and diplomats have shifted alongside it, to encompass new roles and new understandings (Balzacq, et al., 2018, p. 183-184). Likewise, the act of diplomacy and the amount of

diplomatic actors has grown exponentially to cover all diplomatic sectors such as economic, humanitarian, digital, and health, among others (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 9).

Diplomacy started as a monopolisation, influenced by aristocratic and bureaucratic European societies, wherein the act of diplomacy was exclusively reserved for aforementioned state-appointed and sovereign actors, to represent and fulfil their diplomatic requirements through representation, communication, and negotiation (Constantinou, 2016, p. 23; Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 183). The diplomat's main aim is to ensure negotiations and disagreements between nations or states do not become conflicts, preventing disagreements from forming during earlier communication stages, and improving relations between actors in the international community (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 10).

The modern understanding of diplomacy does not *limit* the act of diplomacy or diplomatic relations to agents of the state but has evolved to include non-state actors and individuals, whilst simultaneously taking on new tasks and tackling new issues within international relations (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 184). Non-state actors such as NGOs, celebrities, international corporations, charities, think tanks, religious groups, and private foundations can undertake and participate in diplomatic relations as the “art of responding” to international issues requires several moving parts to work together, due to the effects of globalisation (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 184). New methods of diplomacy were introduced to achieve further-reaching and influential diplomacy, such as “multi-track diplomacy”, wherein both state-appointed and non-state actors conduct diplomacy through three different tracks (governmental, institutional, and communal), and “poly-lateral diplomacy”, diplomatic talks between state and non-state entities (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 184-185).

The involvement of non-state actors within diplomatic relations, coined as “open diplomacy” by President Woodrow Wilson, was emphasised and introduced after significant developments within human rights after the two world wars to encourage transparent and multilateral relations (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 187). This change in diplomacy made it possible for non-state actors to interact with and become a part of both the old and new “public diplomacy” (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 187).

Edmund Guillion coined “public diplomacy” in 1965 and laid the groundwork for the concept before the digital age (Snow, 2020, p. 2). Since then, public diplomacy has been defined and redefined repeatedly by different actors from different states and nations within the international community. Therefore, creating a definition of public diplomacy, that is accurate and all-encompassing of the many integral parts that play a role, has been viewed as an issue. Simply put, public diplomacy “deals with the influence of public attitudes on the

formation and execution of foreign policies” (Pamment, 2013, p. 6). This influence is communicated through state-crafted engagements that are primarily cultural and informational to engage and gain support for foreign policy measurements, which includes citizens, people with authoritarian influence, and grassroots organisations, among others (Snow, 2020, p. 2; Nye, 2019, p. 11). Public diplomacy actors target influential groups within other nations or states, with the intent to sway them to a degree wherein they can impact their own governments to change or comply with foreign policies (Pamment, 2013, p. 7).

A distinction has been made between “old” and “new” public diplomacy, due to the introduction, evolution, and implementation of technology, social media, and globalisation regarding communication (Pamment, 2013, p. 7-9). The notion of “new” public diplomacy became omnipresent after Jan Melissen’s 2005 publication “The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations”. Melissen attributed the change in public diplomacy to the influx of new actors, who participated and changed diplomatic practices, increasingly interacting with foreign audiences, and transitioning from one-way to two-way communication and engagement (Pamment, 2013, p. 9). Public diplomacy relies heavily on the role of the press and media to aid in influencing and encouraging the public to interact with and gain an interest in the foreign affairs between their own country and others (Pamment, 2013, p. 9). The media and modern technology are viewed as an integral part of public diplomacy, since “central to public diplomacy is the transnational flow of information and ideas” (Pamment, 2013, p. 9). The importance of transnational and multilateral flows is also found in the concept of cultural diplomacy, which is an endlessly evolving form of public diplomacy that can take many shapes and forms (Mark, 2009, p. 1).

In relation, cultural diplomacy entails the deployment and exportation of a state’s culture in an attempt to communicate with foreign audiences to positively influence their opinions and attitudes toward said exported culture (Nye, 2011, p. 18). Similarly, cultural diplomacy can be used by nations and states in order to improve their national image and reputation internationally and can encourage social cohesion among targeted minority ethnic groups (Mark, 2009, p. 1). These efforts of exporting one nation’s culture internationally through cultural diplomacy are viewed as an expression of Joseph Nye’s soft power, as introduced in the section above, which is defined as a quest for power and influence without using force (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 228).

Within international relations and public diplomacy efforts, cultural diplomacy has historically not been viewed as a serious attempt at diplomacy and has usually been looked down upon by diplomatic institutions and diplomats alike. This view on cultural diplomacy is

attributed to the lack of research, regarding the long-term effects of cultural diplomacy over time on international audiences, and how effective it can be regarding foreign policy (Mark, 2009). Furthermore, much like public diplomacy, a lack of a concrete definition of cultural diplomacy, and how exactly it *can* and *should* be practised, makes it difficult for diplomats and institutions to fully understand and utilise it to its full potential (Mark, 2009, p. 2-4).

The problem arises when attempting to define culture within cultural diplomacy, as the understanding of culture can be subjective and has changed over time, since the establishment of the bourgeoisie, which introduced the term “high culture”. High culture consisted of artistic expressions that were enjoyed by the elites, such as “visual arts, literature, theatre, dance (ballet and contemporary [dance]), and music” (Mark, 2009, p. 5). On the other hand, the current understanding of culture encompasses popular culture and does not limit cultural expressions or activities to one certain social class (Mark, 2009, p. 5). Popular culture refers to media and artistic expressions such as films, music, TV shows, and books that are enjoyed by the majority of the public and attract mass audiences (Mark, 2009, p. 5; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.a).

Cultural diplomacy can simultaneously be viewed as an attempt at preserving and respecting heritage, tradition, and norms, whilst introducing them to foreign audiences to encourage interaction and tourism multilaterally and multiculturally (Balzacq et al., 2018, pp. 228, 234-235). Concurrently, cultural diplomacy is employed by diplomats to advance and encourage trade, diplomatic, economic, and political interests through bi- and multilateral relationships (Mark, 2009, p. 9). In particular, cultural diplomacy plays a crucial role in enhancing a country's soft power by showcasing its cultural achievements and fostering cross-cultural understanding (Nye, 2011, p. 18).

Despite this, state-appointed actors, governments, and recognised diplomats are not the only individuals who can use cultural diplomacy or be cultural diplomats. Governments often employ and appoint influential cultural agents such as singers, actors, artists, athletes, scholars, and celebrities to become ambassadors for either the nation, a community, or an institution (Mark, 2019, p. 10; Dittmer & McConnell, 2016, p. 25). Cultural diplomacy encompasses a variety of activities, such as a world tour by a musical artist, an international premier of a foreign film, a travelling exhibition by an artist, a lecture given by a professor, international sports events, and countless more (Mark, 2009, p. 10). This use of ambassadors can also be viewed as celebrity diplomacy, wherein celebrities are tasked with creating or bringing awareness to international issues, such as poverty and illnesses, that lack attention and action (Wilson Center, 2007). The use of celebrity diplomacy has become a widespread

trend as “they [celebrities] can help you reach an audience which you wouldn’t otherwise get to, one which doesn’t listen to institutions but responds to people,” as argued by NGO Oxfam (Cooper, 2008, p. 7). Celebrity diplomacy is viewed as an unofficial form of public diplomacy. Therefore, according to Cooper (2008), celebrity diplomacy does not face the same limitations that are present in public diplomacy’s protocols, etiquettes, and rules, which has the potential to hinder and lessen diplomatic efforts (p. 11).

Despite these many different perceptions and understandings of cultural diplomacy, scholar Milton Cummings’ definition of the concept manages to encompass all the components and defines it as:

“the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding’ which ‘can also be more of a one-way street than a twoway exchange, as when one nation concentrates its efforts on promoting the national language, explaining its policies and point of view, or ‘telling its story’ to the rest of the world” (Mark, 2009, p. 6).

The concept and phenomenon of cultural diplomacy will be applied through the analytical framework to aid this thesis. By examining how South Korea has both effectively and ineffectively incorporated and utilised cultural diplomacy throughout the years, a discussion can be had regarding the future of the soft power tool and its advantages and disadvantages for the reputation of South Korea within the international community. Furthermore, the use of K-pop idols and K-pop as one of their main exports of cultural diplomacy will be explored and analysed in the forthcoming analysis.

5.3. Concepts within Critical Feminist Studies

To complement the theoretical framework and the collected empirical data, this section of the thesis will explore and define key concepts within critical feminism, including intersectionality, gender performativity, heteronormativity, patriarchal society, Confucian ideals, co-optation of feminism, and post-structural feminism. The explanation of these concepts will aid the research by providing valuable theoretical lenses to analyse the complex gender dynamics in the thesis’ context. This will offer insights into how intersecting identities, social constructs, cultural norms, and power structures shape an individual’s experiences. By emphasising these concepts, the thesis aims to deepen the understanding of

the complex interplay of gender in the cultural phenomena of K-pop that will be researched, as well as to contextualise empirical data collected.

5.3.1. Intersectionality & Gender

A notable concept within critical feminist studies is intersectionality or intersectional feminism, which is considered to be a somewhat redundant term, because “If feminism isn’t attentive to issues impacting a range of women, then it’s not actually feminism” (Zaborskis, 2018). Intersectionality, as a term and a concept was first introduced in the 1980s by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlighting the exclusion of the experiences and struggles of women of colour, which were generally disregarded from feminist scholarly discourse, thereby highlighting the intersection of gender and race (Adewunmi, 2023). Since then, the concept has evolved into an inclusive perspective of feminism, which focuses on the interconnectedness of social identities and power structures, particularly in relation to the marginalised experiences of individuals in society (Zaborskis, 2018; Adewunmi, 2023).

Due to Jennifer Nash’s (2008) overview of intersectionality’s power since its origin, intersectionality as a concept recognises the complexities of human experiences that emphasise the interconnectedness between systems of power and oppression – acknowledging that individuals may experience privilege and oppression simultaneously based on their intersecting social positions (p. 1-15). Essentially, an intersectional feminist perspective allows for a greater nuanced comprehension of power structures and systems of oppression, which will aid in a more thorough understanding of issues related to culture, power, and gender in the context of K-pop, its global influence, and its political implications.

In relation to intersectional feminism, the concept of gender performativity, as conceptualised by Judith Butler (2002), suggests that gender is not an inherent trait but rather something that is continuously constructed through social interactions and norms (p. xv). Therefore, the gendered body is understood as being performative, which suggests that repeated sets of actions affect and produce social circumstances and change (Butler, 1999, p. 10). Butler (1999) argues that gender roles are not only a direct result of societal norms and values, but rather that they continue to exist to the extent that they are, and continue to be, acted upon or acted out (p. 10-11).

In other words, this thesis will utilise Butler’s (1999) conceptualisation of gender, which differentiates between one’s biologically assigned sex and gender as a social and cultural construct (p. 9). Thereby understanding that “the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders” (Butler, 1999,

p. 10). By doing so, this thesis aims to include a non-binary understanding of gender and rather will incorporate the perspective of understanding gender as a social construct that recognises that societal norms, expectations, and power dynamics shape the understanding of gender roles and identities (Butler, 1999, pp. 16, 23-24). “It becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler, 1999, p. 6). Therefore, by explaining the concepts of gender performativity and gender as a social construct, the thesis will be provided with a framework that aids in examining the ways in which gender norms and expectations are negotiated, challenged, perpetuated, reinforced, and reproduced within various cultural contexts relating to K-pop as a phenomenon.

5.3.2. Heteronormativity & Patriarchy

A widespread concept within critical feminism is the concept of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity and its ideological standpoint are founded upon the belief that “there are two separate and opposing genders with associated natural roles that match their assigned sex, and that heterosexuality is a given” (van der Toorn et al., 2020, p. 160). Heteronormativity has been and continues to be prevalent within countless, modern societies, and is what societies have built their foundation upon, as it shapes how individuals view the world and those around them, whilst simultaneously shaping how they view themselves through internalised heteronormativity (van der Toorn et al., 2020, p. 160).

Heteronormative ideals place binary gender understanding and gender roles on the individual, dependent on the gender that aligns with the individual's biological sex (van der Toorn et al., 2020, p. 160). A typical understanding of heteronormativity is that of a nuclear family, wherein all members of the family are socially recognised; the father is the main breadwinner and the mother stays at home to cook, clean, and care for the children (van der Toorn et al., 2020, p. 160). Binary understandings of gender can contribute to prevalent gendered issues such as stereotyping, sexism, and discrimination against those who deviate from heteronormative ideals and norms, and those who identify with homonormative ideals (van der Toorn et al., 2020, p. 160-161). Homonormativity refers to the discourse wherein the idea and notion of LGBTQ+ identities becoming normalised, alongside heterosexuality, and not seen as non-conformists regarding social norms, behaviours, and beliefs (Paviour-Smith, 2010, p. 178).

Heteronormative ideals are often viewed as going hand-in-hand with patriarchal values, ideas, and societies, as patriarchy is defined as “a social structure and system of

customs where a male, superior in hierarchy, dominates, oppresses and exploits the female” (Park, 2001, p. 43). This traditional understanding of gender roles often leads to the oppression and subordination of women, whilst men and their opinions, beliefs, and needs are prioritised by governments, institutions, and society itself (Anyangwe & Mahtani, 2023). Patriarchal roots can be traced back to ideals and beliefs as old as Confucianism, which was founded between 551 to 479 B.C.E. by Chinese philosopher, Confucius (National Geographic Education, 2024). Confucian patriarchal ideals aided in creating prevalent gender ideologies throughout East Asia, such as “wise mother, good wife”, which promotes the idea that women do not own an identity outside their binary gender roles in relation to their male counterparts (Choi, 2009, p. 5-6).

These concepts are viewed as vital regarding the thesis, as the K-pop industry is built upon the South Korean heteronormative and patriarchal society, which ultimately has undoubtedly shaped the industry into how it works and how it is viewed today through the eyes of the internal members and external international community. Factors and concepts such as heteronormativity and patriarchy cannot be disregarded when understanding how gender and feminism play a role within K-pop idols and the act of K-pop diplomacy.

5.3.3. Post-Structural Feminism & Co-optation

A continuously evolving approach within feminism is post-structural feminism, which aids in shaping contemporary feminist thought and practice (Chapell, 2013; Kinsella, 2017). However, this thesis will explain the post-structural approach to feminism, which challenges traditional notions of power dynamics, gender, and fixed categories of femininity and masculinity – emphasising intersectionality, gender as a social construction, and gender performativity (Kinsella, 2017, p. 200; Connell, 2014, p. 553). Thereby, making it a highly relevant approach to incorporate regarding the interconnectedness of all the aforementioned concepts. “Firstly, patriarchy and the state are fused and intertwined, and second, they are only loosely related and easily untangled. In recent years this binary thinking has been challenged by a number of alternative approaches to the state including poststructuralist (...) approaches” (Chapell, 2013, p. 606). Post-structural feminism highlights the importance of language, discourse, and representation in shaping gender norms, hierarchies, gendered experiences and knowledge (Kinsella, 2017, p. 200).

Essentially, poststructuralists play a crucial role in unveiling previously unnoticed layers of power that are essential for reshaping the world into a less oppressive structure (Wooldridge, 2015). Post-structural feminism will provide the forthcoming analysis with a

nuanced understanding of how gender operates as a social construct, whilst uncovering underlying power structures that influence *how* gender is constructed, performed, and experienced within the K-pop industry and its global fandom. Moreover, it will allow for a critical examination of power relations and their intersection with gender norms, inequalities, and stereotypes and how these are challenged, perpetuated, and transformed through K-pop's cultural influence.

Co-optation is a concept typically defined as “taking over or appropriation of something for a new or different purpose” that is prevalent within politics, policy making, and the military (Merriam Webster, 2024; von der Lippe, 2012, p. 20). However, alongside the rise and progression of third and fourth-wave feminism, the concept of co-optation has become prominent and an issue with modern-day feminism (Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018, p. 2). Feminist co-optation refers to the act wherein feminist ideas, notions, and rhetoric are adopted and appropriated by individuals, groups, or organisations in order to gain social or commercial advantages without actually sympathising or agreeing with feminist ideals or values (von der Lippe, 2012, p. 21; Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018, p. 8).

Within co-optation, concepts such as “rainbow washing”, also known as “pink washing”, where companies, corporates, and brands use rainbow colours on their products and marketing, particularly during Pride Month, to indicate a form of progressive support and allyship for LGBTIA+, fall under the umbrella of feminist and corporate co-optation and can be viewed each year during June (Oetzel, 2023, pp. 1-3, 8). The co-optation of feminism focuses on gaining consumers and supporters, whilst utilising and over-taking integral feminist frameworks, rather than adapting their existent framework to incorporate feminism and challenge systems of inequality (Ana, 2018, p.153).

Feminist co-optation is relevant, as it emphasises the complexities of feminist movements and their interactions with dominant power structures, such as patriarchal societies. The concept of feminist co-optation will be used throughout the analysis to explore how feminist ideals are appropriated and commodified within the K-pop industry for cultural and commercial purposes. In the context of the K-pop industry and its global influence, examples of the commodification and appropriation of feminism can be examined and analysed, which can shed light on how feminist principles are negotiated, adapted, or undermined in commercialised and mainstream cultural spaces.

6. Analysis

The methodological framework employed in this thesis involved an examination of 13 transcripts to discern and uncover initial codes, identifying commonalities, recurring patterns, and divergent elements across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 53). Subsequently, these initial codes were systematically labelled and reviewed to extract overarching themes that could clarify the nuances in the transcripts (Bryman, 2016, p. 11). These themes, characterised by their significance and recurrence, were deemed crucial in summarising the nature of the data, whilst shedding light on the complexities within. It is upon these distinctive themes that the forthcoming analysis is constructed, wherein each theme serves as a medium through which the complexities of the researched phenomenon will be examined, clarified, and analysed.

To structure the forthcoming analysis, five key themes have been selected. These themes encompass a spectrum of relevant areas that are central to the scope of this thesis. The chosen themes are: *K-Diplomacy*, *K-pop Activism*, *Fan Activism*, *Gender Dynamics*, and *Industrial Censorship*. These themes will serve as the structural framework for the subsequent sections of this thesis' analysis, and will provide a comprehensive exploration of the dynamics of K-pop's role within contemporary socio-political and cultural contexts, as delineated in the problem formulation.

6.1. The Cultural Echoes of K-Diplomacy

K-Diplomacy, or the strategic incorporation of Korean cultural assets in diplomatic strategies, holds a significant position within South Korea's contemporary international relations framework. This section of the analysis delves into the implications of K-Diplomacy by using insights from the transcripts to illuminate its multifaceted influence and potential. Karen Smith, who has previous experience working with foreign policies and soft power within a South African context, argues:

“Popular culture is a soft power tool. So I mean, on the one hand, I think what governments try to do often and some of them do it very badly, I think the Korean Government probably does it well... They've recognised that K-pop is a really, *really* useful potential source, right? For their own foreign policy strategy and interest. I think, other countries don't do that very well” (Appendix 1, p. 3).

Smith suggests that K-pop, a popular culture medium, serves as a soft power tool, as it enhances the appeal and influence of South Korea internationally. This correlates with the theoretical framework of soft power, wherein the definition of soft power lies in the ability of a country to attract and persuade others through its culture, values, and policies, rather than through coercion or force (Nye, 1990). By acknowledging K-pop's appeal and influence globally, Smith emphasises its role in enhancing South Korea's soft power and global reputation. Furthermore, Smith's remarks emphasise the strategic approach of the South Korean government in leveraging K-pop for diplomatic agendas, which resonates with the principles of cultural diplomacy (Appendix 1, p. 3).

Cultural diplomacy involves the strategic use of cultural resources, such as popular culture like music, to promote a country's interests and achieve foreign policy objectives, as argued by Mark (2009). Therefore, by recognising the value of K-pop as a cultural export, the South Korean government effectively engages in cultural diplomacy to enhance South Korea's soft power and its global influence, whilst cultivating positive international perceptions. Smith further accentuates this by mentioning that foreign ministries have acknowledged the potential of looking at public diplomacy through a different lens, and shares:

“And of course, you know, I don't know how you see the relationship between public diplomacy and soft power. Again, for me, soft power is kind of the outcome. Public diplomacy is like a strategy, and for me, cultural diplomacy of which pop culture is one... It's kind of part of public diplomacy, right?”

(Appendix 1, p. 8).

By viewing soft power as the outcome of public diplomacy, Smith highlights the strategic nature of public diplomacy as a means to cultivate and harness soft power resources. This perspective emphasises the significance of cultural diplomacy, including the use of popular culture like K-pop, within the broader framework of public diplomacy. Therefore, by incorporating popular culture into public diplomacy efforts, governments and organisations can effectively engage with global audiences and promote their interests in a more engaging and relatable manner (Mark, 2009).

Elisabeth Pramendorfer, the Geneva representative of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, echoes Smith's view on the possibilities of popular culture, by affirming that “there's a huge, *huge* opportunity through cultural diplomacy, through popular culture, to also make it much more inclusive” (Appendix 2, p. 14). Pramendorfer's

acknowledgement of the potential of cultural diplomacy to foster inclusivity resonates with Nye's (2019) notion of soft power, as a means to shape preferences and build relationships based on shared values and cultural exchange (p. 8). In other words, Pramendorfer suggested that the idea of leveraging popular culture and cultural diplomacy can potentially create more inclusive and diverse forms of engagement with global audiences (Appendix 2, p. 14). Essentially, this suggests a recognition of the power of cultural exchange and dialogue in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among nations.

Furthermore, Smith shares her observation about other countries' ineffective utilisation of popular culture as a soft power tool, wherein she exemplifies that, "Nigeria has a lot of cultural soft power in terms of music, you know, the film industry, Nollywood [Nigerian Hollywood], but they don't really... The government hasn't really strategically used that" (Appendix 1, p. 3). Smith's comparison between the South Korean government's effective use of popular culture, namely K-pop, and the ineffective utilisation of cultural soft power by other countries, such as Nigeria, emphasises the importance of integrating cultural promotion into broader foreign policy strategies. This aligns with the thesis' theoretical framework, which emphasises the need for coherence and alignment between cultural promotion and policy objectives to effectively harness the potential of popular culture for diplomatic purposes (Nye, 2008; Jones, 2013). Therefore, it could be argued that governments that strategically harness the power of popular culture, as exemplified by South Korea's approach to K-pop, are better positioned to achieve their diplomatic goals and enhance their international position. This is further accentuated by Smith, who shares that:

“(...) the South Korean government is quite interesting, and they have, I mean, they've used K-pop, as far as I know, you know, they've got some of these groups [K-pop idols] to kind of represent them at certain events” (Appendix 1, p. 3).

Given Smith's previous expertise within the field of soft power, the potential and successes of South Korea's utilisation of popular culture to further its agenda globally can be considered to be both significant and universal as a soft power resource in shaping contemporary international relations. Additionally, insights from other informants further highlight the instrumental role of K-pop in South Korea's diplomatic efforts. Smith's statement of K-pop idols being used to represent South Korea at certain events is echoed by Lina, a K-pop enthusiast, who shares that “they [idols] might be, you know, used as a kind of diplomacy almost, you know, so you want to present the version, the best, *best* people of your country” (Appendix 8, p. 8). Expanding on this notion, Rachel, who has been a K-pop fan

since 2010, mentioned the popular K-pop group, BTS, and their potential involvement in diplomatic missions, including serving their military service on Dokdo [독도] Islands, which is considered to be a symbol of long-standing diplomatic tensions between Japan and Korea (Appendix 9, p. 12; Genova, 2018). The islands hold historical and cultural significance for Korea, dating back centuries to the Japanese occupation period and its subsequent return to Korea in 1945 (Genova, 2018; Korea Dokdo Foundation, 2024).

This dispute highlights the geopolitical sensitivity surrounding the islands, as they serve as a symbolic indicator of Korean territorial sovereignty with implications for national security and economic interests (Genova, 2018). Despite official Korean ownership, ongoing disputes with Japan over Dokdo [독도] persist, making it a focal point of diplomatic efforts and symbolic significance for South Korea (Lim, 2022). Therefore, the Korean government's contemplation of sending BTS to Dokdo [독도] indicates a form of cultural diplomacy and soft power, which emphasises the instrumental role of cultural products in shaping perceptions and advancing diplomatic objectives (Nye, 2019, p. 10). It can therefore be argued that by leveraging BTS' global influence and popularity, South Korea sought to draw international attention to the territorial dispute, potentially solidifying its claims on Dokdo [독도] through heightened visibility and advocacy. This strategic use of K-pop as a diplomatic asset emphasises the evolving landscape of soft power in international relations, where cultural or non-state actors, like BTS, serve as influential agents of diplomatic engagement and geopolitical discourse.

Lina echoes this sentiment of the South Korean government's acknowledgement and use of popular culture, and states: "So I feel like, yeah, the government also can maybe weapon, or not weaponize, but just, you know, make use of Korean culture, K pop for, for, for political diplomacy reasons" (Appendix 8, p. 11). Lina's observation aligns with broader scholarly discourse on the evolving role of soft power in international relations, wherein cultural expressions wield considerable influence in advancing national interests (Nye, 1990; Nye, 2008). Moreover, Lina's comment on the government's ability to "weaponise" or use Korean culture for diplomatic purposes raises questions about the ethical implications of such practices which, according to Nye (2019), is a crucial element to encompass in a soft power resource. While cultural diplomacy can foster mutual understanding and goodwill between nations (Nye, 2019), the instrumentalisation of culture for political agendas may risk commodifying cultural expressions and undermining their authenticity. Considering these ethical implications surrounding cultural diplomacy, Rachel shares another instance where the South Korean government aimed to use BTS to mitigate diplomatic challenges, which

simultaneously highlights K-pop's potential to entertain and influence international relations. Rachel recalls:

“So when Jamboree happened, you know, they messed it up, the whole organisation thing. And I remember, I think Jin and Hoseok [members of BTS], they were already doing military service, and the government was like, *Oh my God, if you guys could come and like maybe perform here...* Like, you know, to distract or fix what happened” (Appendix 9, p. 12).

Rachel's account of the Jamboree incident sheds light on another instance of the South Korean government leveraging K-pop, particularly BTS, for diplomatic purposes. Following organisational failures during the World Scout Jamboree in South Korea in August 2023, the government sought to rectify the situation by requesting that Kim Seok-jin and Jung Ho-seok, two members of BTS that were carrying out their military service at the time, to perform at the Jamboree event (Appendix, 9, p. 12; Mackenzie, 2024). This actively illustrates the government's recognition of BTS' influential global status and their potential to mitigate diplomatic setbacks through their attendance and participation in such events.

Despite the government's suggestions, the two members of BTS did not end up performing at the event due to their military service. However, the suggestion still fits the framework of soft power, which emphasises the ability of a country to attract and persuade others through cultural and ideological means (Nye, 2021). It could be argued that by showcasing BTS' talent and popularity at an international event like the Jamboree, the Korean government aimed to demonstrate its cultural prowess and resilience in the face of organisational challenges. Similarly, it echoes the cultural diplomacy framework, wherein cultural expressions like music are used to promote national interests and foster positive international relations (Mark, 2009). Therefore, South Korea's suggestion for BTS members to perform at the Jamboree exemplified its efforts to bolster cultural influence and forge stronger diplomatic ties with the participating nations. Although no performance was held, the suggestion in itself highlighted the intertwined relationship between popular culture and diplomacy in contemporary international relations.

In addition, Isabella, as a long-term BTS fan, shares her insights into the multifaceted influence of K-pop beyond a surface level, emphasising its role as an influential tool for cultural diplomacy and governmental agendas (Appendix 13, p. 6):

“I do think that it's more than music. It's more than just like a few, you know, singers or idols on a stage. It goes way more

beyond that and they all send a different message (...) they [K-pop groups] have so much popularity and impact on like millions and millions of people. And we have seen it, like they are used for diplomatic, cultural diplomacy. They are used for like governmental stuff” (Appendix 13, p. 5-6).

Here, Isabella delves into the transformative power of K-pop and its significance beyond mere mass media entertainment, as popular culture usually encompasses (Mark, 2009). Her perspective aligns closely with Smith’s observations regarding the strategic incorporation of popular culture into governmental agendas for diplomatic purposes, wherein Smith states that the Korean government is “interested in using K-pop to make itself look good, right, 'cause that's what states generally do. I mean, they use soft power resources to make the state be more attractive” (Appendix 1, p. 8). By highlighting the broader impact of K-pop, Isabella accentuates its role as a soft power resource for cultural diplomacy, which simultaneously echoes Rachel’s insights into the potential involvement of K-pop groups, such as BTS, in diplomatic missions (Appendix 13; Appendix 9).

Furthermore, the involvement of non-state actors, like K-pop idols, in cultural diplomacy, emphasises the evolving nature of diplomatic practices. Celebrities and cultural ambassadors play a crucial role in promoting national culture and fostering cross-cultural understanding, contributing to a country’s soft power projection (Wilson Center, 2007). Isabella further elaborates on this aspect of K-pop idols within diplomacy frameworks:

“Yeah, I think, I mean, it was President Moon when they, he gave the diplomat passports to BTS (...) That's like diplomacy, like maybe not direct, but it's like high, like soft power diplomacy” (Appendix 13, p. 6).

In this statement, Isabella is referencing the decision made by former South Korean President Moon to grant BTS diplomatic passports in July of 2021, which highlights the tangible impact of K-pop on diplomatic efforts (Appendix 13, p. 6). This governmental decision illustrates a deliberate effort to use BTS’ global influence for diplomatic purposes, by appointing them as “special presidential envoys for future generations and culture,” as stated by former President Moon at the official ceremony (Choi, 2021b). The government intended to use BTS’ widespread popularity to increase awareness of global issues among younger generations following the COVID-19 pandemic (Choi, 2021b). In her observation, Isabella refers to this governmental move as “high, soft power diplomacy”, which encapsulates the strategic use of cultural resources, such as K-pop, to wield influence and

advance national interests on the global stage (Appendix 13, p. 6). Moreover, by involving BTS in diplomatic initiatives, it arguably reflects a sophisticated understanding of the soft power potential inherent in K-pop and its ability to shape perceptions of South Korea abroad.

Kim Seung-hyeon, the founder and general manager of IDH, a South Korean-based NGO, emphasises this point by highlighting how K-pop plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of South Korean culture globally (Appendix 5, p. 1). Moreover, Kim stresses that K-pop's widespread popularity actively contributes to South Korea's soft power and cultural diplomacy efforts by generating interest in the country beyond its economic and geopolitical significance (Appendix 5, p. 1). This demonstrates how South Korea capitalised on its cultural assets to promote a favourable international image, thereby reinforcing its position as a central player in international affairs. Similarly, Kwag Hee-yoon, senior manager at IDH and coworker of Kim, elucidates the far-reaching impact of K-pop globally:

“K-pop is extremely influential in international business. First of all, it helps international society members to recognize the existence of our country, South Korea. And since the words and gestures from K-pop artists are super powerful to the public, I think it truly helps South Korea's diplomatic relations and soft power strategies to be recognized and more reliable in international society” (Appendix 6, p. 1).

In this statement, Kwag points out K-pop's role as a cultural ambassador for South Korea. Kwag's emphasis on K-pop's influence in international business resonates with the concept of soft power, as articulated by Nye (2008), wherein K-pop serves as a notable soft power resource for South Korea with its widespread popularity and cultural appeal. Essentially, by engaging global audiences, K-pop aids in enhancing South Korea's reputation and influence internationally, thereby contributing to its soft power capability as a powerful tool in shaping international relations. Additionally, Kwag's mention of the impact of K-pop artists' “words and gestures” emphasises the performative nature of K-pop culture, in which the idols enact and embody South Korean cultural identity through their music, fashion, and behaviour. This is a crucial element of how K-pop idols, and K-pop in itself, aid in influencing how South Korea is perceived beyond their borders.

In this relation, Kwag shares a tangible example that encapsulates South Korea's strategic cultural efforts, namely the ‘Begin Again [비긴어게인]’ television program (Appendix 6, p. 2). This Korean program ran from 2019 to 2020 and featured reputable Korean musicians who travelled to various foreign countries while busking around the world where

they were relatively unknown (Appendix 6, p. 2: Jang, 2019). The television program offers an interesting example of how South Korea strategically leverages its cultural strengths to enhance its global influence and diplomatic relationships. Specifically, its innovative approach to cultural diplomacy is exemplified by the blend of music, culture, and travel inherent in the program.

The central aspect of the program features Korean musicians, who are accustomed to performing on stage with a big domestic fan base and have to adapt in foreign European cities, with no knowledge of the belonging culture or language of the location (Jang, 2019). This forced the musicians to engage through cultural expressions by busking on the streets (IMDb, n.d.). By doing so, the musicians not only showcase the vibrancy of South Korean music and culture but also facilitate meaningful cultural exchange and engagement on a global scale, which is a crucial element of soft power theory (Nye, 2019). Additionally, the positive reception of the program, both internationally during the filming and domestically in Korea upon its release, accentuates the universal appeal of Korean culture and its ability to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. In other words, the portrayal of Korean musicians in these settings reflects the performative nature of K-pop culture, where idols and artists embody and express South Korean identity through their music and performance – practically functioning as cultural ambassadors (Appendix 6, p. 2). Through their participation in an exchange of cultural expressions in a program like ‘Begin Again [비긴어게인]’, the Korean artists effectively connect with international audiences, fostering cultural appreciation and understanding that may lead to curiosity about South Korean-related subjects.

The correlation between K-pop and interest in South Korean-related issues is evident, with Lina emphasising that K-pop was the reason for the global recognition of South Korea (Appendix 8, p. 3). This increased interest extends beyond just entertainment arguments, as exemplified by K-pop fans (Appendix 8-13). Rachel shares a compelling example of the controversy sparked by BTS member Park Ji-min’s shirt displaying the Imperial Japanese flag in 2018 on Korea’s liberation day (Appendix 9, p. 7). However, this inadvertently highlighted historical tensions from when Korea was colonised by Japan, leading to a cancelled scheduled performance in Japan and a public apology by BTS’ agency. However, the apology sparked domestic criticism in Korea, with many questioning the need for it (Sheffield, 2018; Dudden, 2019). This illustrates the complex interplay of cultural symbols and historical narratives in international relations. It also emphasises the intricate dynamics of public diplomacy, as BTS and their agency had to navigate between diplomatic relations and domestic sentiments.

According to Rachel, this experience prompted reflection on enduring tensions between Korea and Japan, and the “permanent sentiment of big dislike towards Japan” in Korea, which made Rachel explore Korean historical, political, and cultural topics (Appendix 9, p. 7-8). Rachel’s example also highlights how K-pop can inadvertently ignite discussions about complex geopolitical issues, aligning with the notion of cultural diplomacy to foster mutual understanding and dialogue between nations (Nye, 2008). By igniting such discussions on historical and contemporary relations, K-pop aids in enhancing awareness and promoting cross-cultural dialogue, reinforcing South Korea’s soft power (Melissen, 2005). Similarly, Lina highlights the Korean Embassy’s cultural promotion efforts in the Hague, through movies, music, and food, which emphasise cross-cultural dialogue and the strategic use of cultural exports to cultivate international goodwill (Appendix 8, p. 10). Such initiatives, as outlined by Mark (2009), contribute to South Korea’s global image and influence through cultural diplomacy, by acknowledging the value of engaging the youth to foster interest in Korea through popular culture exports.

Additionally, the surge of Hallyu, particularly K-pop’s global prominence, has boosted interest in Korean language courses globally compared to other languages, as observed by Lina (Appendix 8, p. 13-14). This reflects the transformative impact of Hallyu on international cultural consumption patterns and the growing cultural capital of Korean pop culture, which is a significant component of South Korea’s soft power strategies (Nye, 2011). Lina also accentuates the heightened global presence and visibility of South Korea due to K-pop’s popularity, which has resulted in increased tourism centred around popular culture and a rise in academic interest in Korean or Area studies (Appendix 8, p. 10). Moreover, Lina shares her observation of a high percentage of tourists and “fans who are going to Korea just for BTS” (Appendix 8, p. 13). This aligns with the concept of soft power, where cultural exports, like K-pop, shape international preferences and perceptions, which generates interest in its culture while boosting tourism, according to Nye (2019). Lina further highlights this by emphasising Korea’s evolution into a major cultural hub, largely driven by the mainstreaming of K-pop, Korean food, and K-dramas globally, which has had significant economic implications for South Korea (Appendix 8, p. 14).

Furthermore, K-pop’s economic impact goes beyond the entertainment revenue, where collaborations between idols and major Korean corporations such as Samsung, Hyundai, and LG, as well as the booming Korean skincare industry, all significantly contribute to the national gross domestic product [GDP], as articulated by Rachel (Appendix 9, p. 13). Rachel suggests that “K-pop does way more than only 10% of the GDP, of the national GDP”

(Appendix 9, p. 13). Although the precise number is elusive, the K-pop market alone is estimated to reach \$20 billion by 2031, according to a report by Allied Market Research, with a survey illustrating the existence of 225 million Hallyu fans worldwide as of 2024 (AFM Editorial Office, 2024). This highlights the interconnectedness between culture, economy, and soft power, as K-pop also fuels economic growth and enhances South Korea's global development.

Moreover, as highlighted by Lina, South Korea strategically uses K-pop and K-culture for diplomatic purposes aimed at facilitating dialogue between nations. This strategic usage aligns with the concepts of soft power (Nye, 2019), where cultural exports serve as diplomatic tools that bolster a country's international influence and perception. Lina also points out South Korea's introduction of the "K-wave visa," officially named the Digital Nomad visa, which reflects the country's recognition of the global impact of its cultural exports (Appendix 8, p. 15). The visa was launched in January this year and emphasises the influence of K-pop and K-culture in shaping perceptions of South Korea, while also influencing policy initiatives aimed at attracting international visitors (Marcus, 2024). This initiative illustrates how K-pop contributes to enhancing South Korea's global image and fostering international relations, which reaffirms the interconnectedness between popular culture and soft power. As popular culture continues to intertwine with soft power dynamics, K-diplomacy emerges as a powerful tool for enhancing South Korea's presence in international relations.

6.2. K-pop Idols: from Trainees to Activists

K-pop activism, much like K-diplomacy, plays a big role in South Korea's soft power potential and cultural diplomacy approach. This form of activism is not only encouraged by K-pop fans and K-pop groups' agencies alike, but simultaneously by the government to improve South Korea's reputation within the international community, and in its foreign relations. K-pop activism has its advantages and disadvantages, which will be explored and theorised in this section to understand the reach and effect of K-pop idol activism. Karen Smith, who has previously researched Western celebrity activism and diplomacy explains that:

"I did a little bit of work on celebrity diplomacy and there's huge criticism of it, where it really can almost undermine an issue where it's then not seen as serious anymore because you suddenly have these frivolous pop stars who are... You know, becoming the spokespersons for it which might appeal to their

supporters but might not appeal to people who are generally interested in this question, this human rights issue, perhaps. So it's about yeah, about using it in a very, very careful and thoughtful way, I think" (Appendix 1, p. 13-14).

Smith's observation highlights the main pitfall and disadvantage regarding the use of celebrities or idols to provide a voice and aid in raising awareness for issues that need active intervention and aid. Despite celebrity diplomacy, and in this case K-pop activism, acting as an unofficial form of public and cultural diplomacy, it cannot guarantee positive results, despite aiming to improve the image and reputation of the country and government from which the celebrity, or idol, comes from (Cooper, 2008; Mark, 2009). The use of the "wrong" idol for the means of activism and diplomacy has the consequence of diluting and lessening the reach of South Korea's soft power, as the activism efforts can be seen as insincere and as a means of promoting their cultural assets and diplomacy rather than focusing on the issue at hand (Mark, 2009).

K-pop activism, much like cultural diplomacy, lacks a concrete definition and framework, which can make it difficult for governments and institutions to efficiently harness the power and full effect of using idols without facing issues (Mark, 2009). Simultaneously, this issue can lead other governments and important organisations, within the international community, to question the moral authority of South Korea, which can lead to a lessened soft power projection, weakened international relations, and a negative reputation (Nye, 1990; Nye, 2019; Nye, 2021).

Likewise, the idol(s) chosen for diplomatic acts or activism can be accused of being performative, as pointed out by Lina (Appendix 8, p. 11-12). Performative activism is defined as "activism that is done to increase one's social capital rather than because of one's devotion to a cause" (Boston Medical Center, 2021). In May 2022, also known as AANHPI [Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander] Heritage Month, BTS visited the White House to address the surge of Anti-Asian hate crimes after the COVID-19 pandemic (Regan & Dailey, 2022). Each of the seven members gave introductory remarks at the press briefing and went on to have a 35-minute meeting with Joe Biden, current president of the US, to discuss which actions need to be taken to lessen Anti-Asian hate crimes in America (Regan & Dailey, 2022). However, Lina found this act of diplomacy to be performative and fabricated, because a translator was not provided for the journalists to ask BTS questions. Furthermore, they were not incentivized to engage in discourse beyond their prepared remarks (Appendix 8, p. 11-12).

Lina feels as if BTS were used for their global influence and image to make a statement, rather than authentically advocating for an issue that they may have some strong opinions about as they were not allowed to speak freely (Appendix 8, p. 11-12). This can have the consequence of lessening the public's and international communities' trust in those governments and institutions that practise cultural diplomacy and soft power, as they may view the use of idols or celebrities as superficial rather than genuine (Wilson Center, 2017). In turn, this can negatively affect the intended audience and diminish the popularity and reputation of the country or institution, as well as the idol(s), whilst exploiting the influence that the celebrity has over the international community (Nye, 2011; Cooper, 2008).

On the other hand, Zara disagrees that performative activism should only be viewed as a negative consequence of K-pop activism and celebrity diplomacy, but rather argues that:

“Even if that were the case I do not really see the harm in it. Using your platform may be performative but as long as the artists still donate money or make more people aware of an issue there is a benefit to a good cause. So while it may not be really the artists' true passion, there is still a positive outcome”
(Appendix 10, p. 3).

Zara touches upon the consideration that despite performative activism being a possibility, it does not necessarily have to be viewed as a negative consequence of K-pop activism and cultural diplomacy. This speaks to the power and influence of the soft power of K-pop activism, albeit it may be used in contexts that are not considered genuine, it can still aid in generating awareness regarding pertinent issues spanning cross-cultural contexts (Nye, 2021). As pointed out by Cooper (2008), the use of non-state actors and celebrities can bring awareness of issues to audiences, which generally do not engage in or respond to government or institutions. In contrast, they are more likely to respond to non-state actors, which echoes the influence that celebrities *can* have over audiences and the international community (Wilson Center, 2007). This act of K-pop activism performed by BTS in America highlights one of the main objectives of cultural diplomacy. By introducing their norms and heritage regarding speaking out about anti-Asian hate to a foreign audience, they encourage positive rather than negative interactions between majority and minority ethnic groups (Balzacq et al., 2018; Mark, 2009).

Therefore, whether or not an act of activism is genuine or performative on behalf of the idol, awareness is still spread and reflects well on the countries' reputation, as they effectively harness the power and influence of their cultural assets to foreign audiences

(Balzacq et al., 2018). As such, efforts of K-pop activism can lead and encourage fans to participate in activism and diplomacy alongside their favourite K-pop idols. However, not all K-pop activism stems from the government or high-ranking institutions or organisations, but also from the K-pop idols themselves, as mentioned by Aram, who shares that: “KARD’s BM and the girl group Black Swan have spoken up about the genocide happening in Gaza against Palestine” (Appendix 12, p. 1). Usually, K-pop idols are advised not to speak out regarding political issues and humanitarian crises as this can divide audiences and fans alike.

Despite this, BM, a member of the mixed-gender-group KARD, and Fatou, a member of the girl-group Black Swan, have made their opinions clear through online media posts, where they expressed their support for Palestine and Palestinians amidst the crisis taking place in Gaza (Koreaboo, 2023; Cherrie, 2023). Many fans expressed their appreciation regarding the two idols taking a stand, however many have speculated as to why other idols have not taken a stand or voiced their opinions (Koreaboo, 2023; Cherrie, 2023).

Fatou's Senegalese heritage and her role in Black Swan, a K-pop group that consists only of non-Korean members, challenge the norms of the K-pop industry (Ku, 2023). In K-pop, where most idols conform to Korean standards and beauty norms, Fatou's background introduces a distinctive intersectionality encompassing race, nationality, and cultural identity (Zaborskis, 2028; Adewunmi, 2023). This perspective enables her to offer a distinct viewpoint on international conflicts that diverge from the typical narrative of homogeneous K-pop groups, as exemplified by the Palestine crisis. Similarly, BM's position in KARD, known for its unconventional gender composition in K-pop, intersects with his identity as a Korean American navigating issues of race and nationality. These intersections illustrate how cultural identities within K-pop shape their views on socio-political issues, despite the industry's tendency to favour homogeneous group compositions and cultural hegemonic beauty standards (Zaborskis, 2018; Adewunmi, 2023).

This highlights the extent to which the soft power of K-pop has an influence, as idols refrain from speaking their opinions, as it could reflect badly on their group, agency, or South Korea and shape the opinions and behaviours of their audience (Nye, 2011). However, as mentioned by Ethan Hee-seok Shin, a legal analyst who grew up and lives in Korea, K-pop idols are more likely to join campaigns or fundraisers that represent “soft issues”, rather than ones that may cause controversy due to South Korea’s societal values (Appendix 3, p. 10-11). Shin goes on to explain that:

“So, whatever is happening in South Korea or in North Korea,
kind of matters to the people [South Koreans] but anything

beyond those borders... I think people tend to think that “Oh, that's someone else's business,” “That's someone else's war,” “Someone else's atrocity, so why should we care?”. And I mean, I wouldn't put it so bluntly but... I guess, they almost say they don't care but it's just a very different level of... Caring that's there” (Appendix 3, p. 11).

Shin explains that South Korea, as a country and a government, may not want to risk facing backlash for participating in such issues due to their bi- and multilateral relations within the international community (Appendix 3, p. 11). Due to South Korea's encouragement of soft power distribution and cultural diplomacy, especially through their use of non-state actors such as idols, the government has been able to build a strong economy and diplomatic relations with countries (Mark, 2009). Despite this belief, some well-known and respected K-pop stars have recently become involved in controversies regarding promoting and using brands such as Starbucks, McDonald's, and Burger King. These brands are being boycotted globally due to their public support for Israel and Zionism during the Hamas-Israel conflict (Kim, 2024; Muiz 2023). In general, K-pop idols are discouraged from mentioning brand names due to strict advertising and branding laws within South Korea, to avoid association with political discussions and maintain a neutral stance in the eyes of the international community (Muiz, 2023; Zoom, 2021).

Even so, notable K-pop idols such as soloist Jeon Somi, Jennie and Jisoo from girl-group BLACKPINK, Hoshi from boy-group SEVENTEEN, and all members of girl-group aespa have been showcasing products and merchandise from Starbucks and McDonald's on their social media platforms (Kim, 2024; Muiz, 2023). The actions of the idols can be seen as hypocritical, as they are aware of their influential global power over both national and international audiences due to their ingrained strict advertising laws and societal norms, yet chose to promote controversial brands (Nye, 2019). These observed contradictions within K-pop activism and South Korean society counter Joseph Nye's soft power framework. According to Nye (2008), effective soft power requires governments to engage in self-criticism and continuously uphold their political values to successfully promote their soft power and influence. Additionally, the idol's lack of participation in branded boycotts demonstrates an absence of awareness and reflection regarding international communities' values and concerns. This, in turn, can actively undermine South Korea's soft power reach and K-pop idols appropriate soft power resources (Nye, 2008; Nye, 2019).

The lack of consistency by the idols regarding South Korean societal norms, as pointed out by Shin, can lessen the trust and efficiency of South Korea's soft power and diplomatic relations, through the usage of social media platforms and the evolution of technology (Nye, 2019, p. 10). Lina explains that the reasoning behind the idol's promotion of boycotted brands could be due to unawareness and an ingrained ignorance due to them growing up under an agency and not learning about deeper social issues (Appendix 8, p. 9). However, it can be argued that the idols are aware and well-informed about global and socio-political issues, due to their online presence, as evidenced by some of the idols deleting their posts that featured the boycotted brands – and some even issuing apologies (Muiz, 2023).

K-pop activism is not limited to the action of the K-pop idols, but also through their chosen medium of media, song lyrics. Several K-pop idols have released songs over the years, which could be categorised as activism, due to their progressive lyrics speaking out against governments, societal norms and issues, taboos and stigmas mirroring an understanding of the issues and troubles that the international community must deal with (Nye, 2019). Each of the interviewed K-pop fans mentioned and highlighted BTS as contributing actively and effectively to activism through their music, wherein they tackle pertinent issues relevant to their audience – both nationally and internationally (Appendix 8-13). Ines, Zara, and Isabella all mention “Spring Day” by BTS as an example of activism through K-pop (Appendix 11, p. 3; Appendix 10, p. 3; Appendix 13, p. 4). The song explores themes of love, loss and being nostalgic for the past, but is also considered a tribute to the lives lost in the Sewol Ferry tragedy in 2014, wherein 304 people lost their lives, including 250 young students, due to the ferry sinking (Park, 2024).

The commemoration is attributed to the yellow ribbons seen in the “Spring Day” music video, which are used to memorialise the incident (Koreaboo, 2020). Through their songs, such as “Spring Day”, BTS can aid in shedding light on issues that international audiences may not have been aware of. Through this, BTS can aid in increasing awareness and further the credibility of South Korea, as they operate independently from the state and address collective concerns, much like civil societies (Nye, 2019). Similarly, acknowledging such incidents and voicing self-criticism, where the government and country have failed to aid, can increase South Korea's credibility in its soft power, as the government has faced backlash regarding the handling of the Sewol Ferry tragedy (Nye, 2019; Kelly, 2014).

Furthermore, BTS' catalogue of songs tackles and recognises social issues, either nationally or internationally, that reflect a sense of self-awareness and a need to “do better” in

aid of K-pop activism and going against the South Korean government (Yep, 2023). One of BTS' first releases "N.O." criticises the Korean education system, as mentioned by Zara, whilst others such as "Am I Wrong" tackle political corruption, and "Go Go" and "Spine Breaker" address materialism and capitalism, as mentioned by Ines (Appendix 10, p. 3; Appendix 11, p. 3; Yep, 2023). Min Yoon-gi, a member of BTS, who releases music under the soloist name Agust D, has released several songs and albums over the years revealing his struggles with mental health issues, which is considered a taboo issue in South Korea (Appendix 9, p. 8; Tizzard, 2022).

Although these songs and many more are centred around placing a spotlight on social issues, particularly in South Korea, BTS are still considered vital cultural diplomats, due to their diplomatic passports and having been appointed as "special presidential envoys for future generations and culture", as mentioned previously (Choi, 2021b). This choice on behalf of the South Korean government, despite BTS' critique against them, shows a willingness to reflect upon their society and its issues. It also demonstrates an attempt to engage in two-way communication with national and international audiences, who receive and perceive BTS' K-pop activism and South Korea's soft power (Nye, 2019). Nye (2019) underscores that governments, that practise soft power, typically face a lack of trust as non-government bodies primarily wield and produce soft power and use it to shape public perceptions, and narratives and to hold the government accountable for their actions (Nye, 2019). South Korea's ability to successfully collaborate and work with BTS bridges the gap between government and non-governmental bodies and leads to a more cohesive soft power strategy and a further reaching influence by amplifying awareness and accountability (Nye, 2021).

BTS are not the only K-pop idols who practise activism through their music, the girl group (G)I-DLE have also made an impact with their songs recently, as pointed out by informants Lina, Rachel, and Zara (Appendix 8, p. 6-7; Appendix 9, p. 3; Appendix 10, p. 2). (G)I-DLES songs such as "Allergy", "Nxde", and "Wife" place a spotlight on South Korea's harsh beauty standards, lack of feminism, and restrictive gender roles while taking an anti-patriarchy stance in a patriarchal society (Sarkar, 2024; Shen, 2024). BTS' and (G)I-DLE's willingness to tackle such issues in their songs highlights an awareness of their audience and an active participation in two-way communication, which increases soft power influence, as audiences become more open when being considered and acknowledged by the affluent non-state actors (Nye, 2019). Simultaneously, K-pop activism paints South Korea as an aware and progressive nation, which aids in its reputation and can encourage states with

similar interests to engage with South Korea (Nye, 2019). Lina attributes their willingness to the fact that both groups have an artistic freedom:

“So-yeon, the leader of (G)I-DLE, she like writes and produce, you know, the songs. So maybe that's why you might see some more kind of, some songs that critique society more than maybe songs that are just produced by the company or that don't really necessarily have a meaning, you know, attached to the artist or (...) and same with BTS” (Appendix 8, p. 7).

Much like (G)I-DLE, in every album since BTS’ debut, all BTS members are credited with either producing or writing their own songs, which allows for more freedom and more space to voice concerns regarding socio-political issues and spreading deeper messages, as suggested by Lina (Dzurillay, 2020; Appendix 8, p. 7). This sentiment of focusing on artistic freedom and bringing awareness to socio-political issues through K-pop activism is echoed by Nam Bada, Secretary-General of People for Successful COrean REunification [PSCORE], who believes that BTS’ messages and efforts are important and vital for civil society actors (Appendix 4, p. 7). Moreover, K-pop activism is not only practised through the lyrics, dance moves, or music videos by K-pop idols, but also through their donations, speeches, and appearances on the international stage with help from their agency, government, and fans.

As the issue of climate change has exponentially grown over the years, more and more K-pop idols are eager to join the conversation and play their part (Chai, 2021). Efforts by BLACKPINK were pointed out by informant Isabella and Kwag Hee-Yoon, Senior Manager of IDH (Appendix 6, p.1-2; Appendix 13, p. 2-3). BLACKPINK, one of Korea’s leading girl-groups, was appointed as “Advocates for the United Nations Conference on Climate Change” (COP26) in 2020, due to their advocacy efforts for climate change and environmentalism (UN SDG, n.d.). In collaboration with the British Embassy in Seoul, BLACKPINK released videos discussing the severity and seriousness of climate change and encouraged the international community to get involved and make a difference (France24, 2023; Appendix 6, p. 1). Similar to this, BTS members have been substituting standard petroleum ink for soy ink, made from soybeans, for the printing on their albums, which is considered eco-friendly and easier to recycle (Bts Purple, 2024).

However, it is not just idols who have been pressing for awareness on climate change, but the K-pop industry as a whole. Rachel mentioned in her interview that the K-pop industry is slowly starting to turn away from producing and selling full-scale albums and CDs are replacing CDs with QR codes, which the buyer can scan with their phone to get exclusive

content and the songs from the album (Appendix 9, p. 4). The focus placed on an internationally acknowledged issue through the activism of the K-pop idols reflects well on South Korea's reputation, as it shows an interest in the issues that countless governments and institutions are trying to tackle (Nye, 2008; Nye, 2019). South Korea's political and moral values, through K-pop activism on climate change, allows them to wield greater soft power as their morals and ideals align with that of the international community and can lead way to positive international relations between nations with similar interests (Nye, 2004).

K-pop albums have the power to contribute to and spark important conversations, whilst spreading awareness alongside activism efforts. One album that has made a considerable difference and impression, according to informants Isabella and Rachel, was the 'Love Yourself' album series by BTS (Appendix 9, p. 4; Appendix 13, p. 3). The album series consisted of three albums named 'LOVE YOURSELF 承 HER', 'LOVE YOURSELF 轉 TEAR', and 'LOVE YOURSELF 結 ANSWER' and explores themes of self-love, acceptance, grieving, and mental health struggles throughout (HuskyFox et al., 2019). In collaboration with UNICEF, BTS and their agency initiated the 'Love Myself' campaign in November of 2017, alongside their album releases, intending to eradicate violence, abuse, and bullying whilst fostering self-esteem and self-love among children and youth worldwide (UNICEF, 2021). UNICEF states that throughout the seven-year-long campaign:

“BIGHIT MUSIC, BTS, and its fan base worldwide have contributed more than 8.9 billion won (around US\$6.6 million) through the LOVE MYSELF campaign, which includes the sale of LOVE MYSELF merchandise and album profits to UNICEF” (UNICEF, 2024).

This collaboration culminated in BTS giving a speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 2018, wherein they delved into topics such as self-love and self-acknowledgement, whilst spreading awareness regarding their 'Love Myself' campaign (UNICEF, 2018). BTS' appearance and speech at the UN made its impression as out of the total 13 interviews that were conducted, seven mentioned the event (Appendix 6; Appendix 8-13). The recognition of BTS' UN appearance in seven out of thirteen interviews emphasises their influential role as global cultural ambassadors. This acknowledgement highlights BTS' advocacy for youth empowerment and mental health internationally, further illustrating their significant impact in shaping global discourse beyond their contributions to the K-pop industry.

BTS' presence on such a global and political stage allows for South Korea's values and priorities to be exposed to a larger international audience, which the South Korean government would not generally have access to. The use of celebrity diplomacy, alongside K-pop activism, within internationally recognised institutions and organisations has allowed South Korean culture, its government, and foreign policies to be showcased and introduced to the international community (Nye, 2008; Cooper, 2008). Moreover, nations and institutions that share similar socio-political values can successfully engage in bi- and multilateral relations with South Korea to strengthen each other and aid each other's soft power reach (Nye, 2019; Nye, 2011). As non-state actors, K-pop idols, together with the South Korean government, can be seen as catalysts for change. They can encourage and empower other nations and non-state actors to engage and raise awareness, extending beyond just K-pop. (Nye, 2019; Nye, 2021).

South Korea's soft power, thanks to K-pop, continues to grow as non-state actors continuously engage in socio-political discussions, campaigns, and discussions through speeches, lyrics, and donations. Despite this, informant Isabella believes more can be done by K-pop idols if they fully want to:

“For me, all the things that they [K-pop idols] have done, like climate change like love yourself? Obviously, it's awesome that they do it and it's good, but for example, I don't like, right now with Palestine and Israel... nobody said anything about that 'cause they know that if you position yourself to one or to another, it will be a disaster. And that's the truth. So obviously, for me, if they would position themselves to Palestine, I will be like extra happy or like, *yeah, that's awesome*. But I know that half of the fandom will be like, *no, no, no*. So, it's good, but at the same time, like I had a discussion with my little sister one day about the... if a famous person says something about a topic or not, and then I said to her, *it's not their job to do it*, like they don't have to, they're artists and like then, if they want to get involved in a specific thing they should do” (Appendix 13, p. 10-11).

K-pop activism serves as a dynamic force for social change, whilst building cultural bridges and amplifying voices and issues in need of global and national attention and action. The successful collaborations between governments, agencies, and K-pop idols have led to an increase in South Korea's soft power influence and reach over the international community

and have allowed for relations between relevant nations, states, and institutions to be formed and will continue to do so. However, where K-pop activism happens, fan activism is sure to follow as K-pop fans are eager to echo and continue the hard work of their favourite idols to show support and encouragement.

6.3. The United Voices of K-pop Fans

K-pop activism and fan activism often go together as fans often find themselves to be inspired by their favourite artists to campaign alongside them, to further spread awareness regarding the issue they advocate for. Although fan activism has always existed, it has recently become a force to be reckoned with, due to the development of social media, globalisation, and the power of K-pop (Bruner, 2020).

Within fan activism, the role of being a fan goes beyond merely purchasing merch, attending concerts, and learning lyrics. Fandoms can be mobilised to aid in societal and political change, whilst being encouraged by their idols and fellow fans (Renaissance, 2023). Kim Seung-hyeon, the founder and manager of IDH, a South Korean NGO, explains the power and success of fan activism through the fact that:

“K-pop fandoms are highly organized and passionate communities capable of mobilizing significant resources and attention. They often engage in philanthropic activities and advocacy campaigns, both online and offline, amplifying voices for positive change and supporting various social causes. (...) K-pop fandoms are instrumental in driving social change and advocacy. Their collective action and online activism can amplify marginalized voices and narratives, promoting human rights, diversity, and inclusion on a global scale” (Appendix 5, p. 2).

As pointed out by Kim, fan activism can manifest itself both offline and online, which is echoed by our informants Rachel, Zara, and Ines, who have participated in online campaigns on behalf of their favourite K-pop idols or groups (Appendix 9, p. 5; Appendix 10, p. 2; Appendix 11, p. 2-3). Zara, who is a political science student and owns a K-pop account, contributes her knowledge of K-pop and fan activism to X, formerly known as Twitter (Appendix 10, p. 1-2). Drawing from her engagement with K-pop culture, she became aware of campaigns such as The Polished Man, a campaign founded to support women and children affected by violence, through one of her favourite boy-groups, ATEEZ, who became

ambassadors for the movement and campaign (Appendix 10, p. 2). Moreover, she mentioned becoming aware of a “fan-run activist group called „One in an Army,” that collects donations for different social causes every month” (Appendix 10, p. 2; Media Outreach, 2020). Moreover, Zara shares that she donated to the Polished Man campaign and volunteered as a translator and organising staff for “One in an Army” for a few months, whilst Ines also participated in online campaigns “advocating for equality/education/social change and awareness” through X between 2016 to 2020 (Appendix 10, p. 2; Appendix 11, p. 2-3).

Similarly, Rachel explains that she donated money to the Black Lives Matter [BLM], movement after it was revealed that BTS had secretly donated \$1 million USD to the cause which led to the BTS fandom, ARMY, to match and double their donation in BTS’ name (Appendix 9, p. 5; Davis, 2020). This example was also brought up by Isabella, who highlighted that BTS did not expect their fans to find out and match their donation and that this is just a testament to BTS’ power, activism efforts, and influence within the BTS fandom (Appendix 13, p. 9). In the lens of cultural diplomacy, these aforementioned examples emphasised by the interviewed K-pop fans accentuate the role of cultural products, such as K-pop music and fan communities, in fostering mutual understanding and solidarity between different communities that transcend linguistic and cultural barriers (Balzacq et al., 2018).

By K-pop idols actively and directly participating in advocacy and activism, the fans perceive their values through the reach of K-pop and therefore feel encouraged to play their part in becoming agents of social change alongside their idols. The harmony between shared values and morals allows for trust to be built between the fans and idols, whilst simultaneously aiding the South Korean government, as the activism transcends national borders and seeps into international communities, such as diverse K-pop fandoms. As Nye (2019) mentions in his soft power framework, the introduction of the digital age and social media plays a vital role in allowing non-state actors to effectively participate in social movements and become catalysts for social change, whilst promoting collective action within the international community. Zara highlights this by pointing out that:

“Since K-pop is a large worldwide phenomenon, it can be used as a platform to spread ideas among many people. K-pop fans, in my experience, tend to be relatively progressive and politically interested and I feel like when you become part of a group (for instance a fandom) you tend to take on opinions and interests that this group shares. Because of that, K-pop fans

often tend to also become politically active in some way”
(Appendix 10, p. 4).

As Zara notes, the sense of belonging and shared identity within fandoms fosters a collective consciousness, wherein fans are inclined to adopt and advocate the values and interests of the group, which demonstrates how digital platforms enable non-state actors, as Nye (2019) highlights. Consequently, K-pop fandoms serve as hubs for political mobilisation and activism, wherein they leverage their collective influence to effectuate change and amplify marginalised voices (Zarborskis, 2018; Adewunmi, 2023). Karen Smith, former Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General on Responsibility to Protect, supports Zara’s claims by acknowledging that “the potential for who can be soft power actors has really expanded with social media”, which in turn allows for a greater soft power potential and influence regarding cultural and political values (Appendix 1, p. 4; Bakalov, 2019). With all of this in mind, it needs to be pointed out that K-pop fans are not just K-pop fans, this renders them binary. K-pop fans and fandoms are neither homogenous nor monolithic in relation to age, sex, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, or political standing; they are a diverse community with shared morals, values, and admiration for their favourite K-pop idols (Harris, 2022).

The presence of diversity within K-pop fandoms allows for the issues, focused on by the K-pop activists and fans, to be spread further and be communicated to bigger audiences. A majority of fans belong to minority groups, such as LGBTQIA+, Black, and Latino, and therefore they find themselves drawn to communities wherein they feel they can connect based on their shared experiences (Bruner, 2020). Furthermore, Zara points out that fans and K-pop idols are more likely to engage in issues that are personal to them. This bears resemblance to Nye’s (2008) focus on soft power receivers’ need for mirroring and aligning principles to trust non-state actors and the government they represent (Appendix 10, p. 1). International K-pop fans and their engagement with Korean media and culture is described by TIME, as an innately socio-political phenomenon, “because it’s something that’s not fed to you by your country’s media” (Bruner, 2020).

K-pop idols wish to remain politically neutral and unbiased regarding their political stance, which is pointed out by BTS’ leader and member, Kim Nam-joon, who argues: “We are not political figures, but as they say, everything is political eventually. Even a pebble can be political” (Davis, 2020). Despite this, issues such as discrimination, racism, and prejudice, which are all integral issues within the BLM movement, inherently become political, as prejudice can align with certain political groups or agendas, as put forward by the

interviewed K-pop fans. This can indirectly hint at K-pop idols' political opinions and leanings, as put forward by Isabella during the heightened attention on the BLM movement in the US (Appendix 13, p. 3). Particularly, BTS' stance against prejudice and their support of the BLM movement was understood by K-pop fans, as the members being anti-Trump, which caused and encouraged fan activism to reach new heights (Bruner, 2020). K-pop fans collectively registered themselves for tickets during one of Trump's rallies in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which concluded with the rally lacking in participants, as the K-pop fans had the aim of lessening Trump supporters attendance and promoting a no-show protest (Lorenz et al., 2020). Similarly, K-pop fans flooded hashtags such as #WhiteLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter, hashtags aimed at combating the BLM movement, with K-pop memes, fan cams, and videos to fight the fake news that was rampantly spreading on social media (Bruner, 2020).

Nye's (2019) framework of soft power builds upon the use of viral online campaigns, hashtags, and social media platforms to further engage audiences in soft power whilst promoting collective action and meaningful conversations despite geographical borders. The joint activism between K-pop idols and K-pop fans contributes to cultural diplomacy efforts by advocating for universal issues that require action, despite geographical and cultural differences that may occur within the non-state actors' communities (Nye, 2019; Nye, 2011). Furthermore, their actions can aid in international relations between nations, as reflected in BTS' visit to the White House, wherein they spoke out against prejudice and racism against Asians, which can be likened to the BLM movement as they both tackle racial-specific issues (Regan & Dailey, 2022). Additionally, this aligns with the broader concept of cultural diplomacy, wherein cultural exchanges and interactions between nations contribute to mutual understanding and cooperation (Balzacq et al., 2018).

As previously emphasised, fans find motivation not only from the direct engagement of K-pop artists in advocacy or activism but also from their favourite K-pop idols' interests. Zara and Ines share that their engagement with social media platforms within the K-pop community introduced and exposed them to activism causes and socio-political issues on an international scale that affected fans and their nation (Appendix 10, p. 2-3; Appendix 11, p. 2). Aram summarises this phenomenon by explaining that:

"I think it truly brings people together and teaches others about how different cultures are. We are all so different, yet we have something so big that connects us. We all enjoy this specific type of music that pushes us to continue to work and better

ourselves. Learning about others teaches us the struggles that others may face, which then leads us to teach and influence others as well. I think it's like a big wave" (Appendix 12, p. 3).

K-pop as a soft power resource, alongside the South Korean government's diplomatic efforts, has the power to unite fans globally despite their geographical borders and varying ages, religions, and nationalities to promote and engage in activism efforts whilst supporting the causes that are affecting their "fellow" fans. The joint efforts embody the idea of soft power as action is taken through dialogue, discussions, and activism efforts between multicultural nations and multilateral relations to aid one another, whilst promoting unity and influence between the nations (Nye, 2019).

The collective action of K-pop fans is best represented through the efforts of completely fan-run activism efforts, such as the KPOP4PLANET movement, which relies solely on the participation of fans all over the world and is free from government or K-pop idol contribution (Milko, 2024). KPOP4PLANET, an environmentalist group, was founded by the K-pop fans Nurul Sarifah and Dayeon Lee in 2021, as a reaction to the growing climate crises and concerns that have continuously worsened and affected the international community with support from international fans on a grand scale (Milko, 2024). Within the organisation, K-pop fans are viewed as the ambassadors and the agents of change that embody the movement, whilst collaborating with various other fan-run organisations internationally to advance and foster their environmentalist ideals (KPOP4PLANET, 2024). A total of 57,103 K-pop fans, as of May 2024, spanning 223 countries are participating in and promoting KPOP4PLANET activities, such as protests, campaigns, and conferences (KPOP4PLANET, 2024).

In 2021, KPOP4PLANET collaborated with Korea Beyond Coal, which consists of several civic groups advocating for South Korea to stop the usage of coal power, to raise awareness regarding a potential coal-burning plant being built. The location of the planned power plant was on Maengbang Beach, which was featured in one of BTS' album covers (Milko, 2024). Protesters took to the beach with posters and an online campaign, as well as a petition, were spread on social media in order to raise awareness. Furthermore, KPOP4PLANET petitioned Hyundai, a South Korean car manufacturer, to cancel deals with one of Indonesia's largest coal miners, Adaro Energy Indonesia. Hyundai had arranged to purchase low-carbon aluminium from Adaro however, the aluminium would be produced with newly-built coal-burning plants. Hyundai cancelled the contract with Adaro after

receiving the KPOP4PLANET petition and decided to explore other avenues of renewable energy instead (Milko, 2024).

As accentuated by Nye (2019), the influence of organisations and civil society is evident and vital for a country's soft power foundation and resources, as the public views civil society to be more trustworthy and credible, due to their morals and values. An international community campaigning and advocating for environmentalist ideals and climate change in the name of K-pop, and consequently South Korea, increases South Korea's reputation due to the civil society's contribution to universal issues (Nye, 2019; Nye 2021). Their contribution demonstrates an interest in two-way communication with the international community, which can further aid the activism perpetuated by K-pop idols, such as BLACKPINK, who advocate for climate change campaigns, as well as South Korea's diplomatic efforts to create sustainable bi- and multilateral relations (Appendix 6, p. 1).

The ability of K-pop fans to successfully mobilise and participate in activism efforts is further amplified by their fan-driven efforts, separate from civil societies as well. Rachel and Isabella, both long-time BTS fans, use the example of birthday events wherein K-pop fans celebrate a K-pop idol's birthday through various avenues. Rachel recalls that:

“For example, Armies are not allowed to give gifts to BTS since 2017 or something like that, they're not allowed to send gifts anymore. So what would you do? For Namjoon's birthday, which I don't remember which year, they planted like 1,000,000 trees somewhere in the world. Like even doing those small things, it's like, it can be something or like donating money, I think this is a really good thing to engage a new generation”
(Appendix 9, p. 3-4).

This fan-run birthday initiative for BTS leader and member Kim Nam-joon, wherein BTS fans all over the world plant trees on his birthday in honour of him, has spanned several years, due to his well-known love for nature and culture which is evident through his social media. Trees have been planted throughout the months of September and November since 2017 in countries such as South Korea, The Philippines, India, Brunei, Russia and Georgia, alongside countless others, to commemorate Nam-joon's birthday internationally (Khan, 2021; Green Brunei, 2019; Delgado, 2019; Kim, 2019; Banerjee, 2022). Similarly, fans of BTS member Kim Tae-hyung joined together in 2022 to celebrate the sixth birthday of his solo song “Stigma”. The fans donated over \$17 thousand USD to Hope Bridge National

Disaster Relief Association which provided relief to victims of the flooding and typhoon disaster in South Korea (Ha, 2022).

The efforts of the fans reflect the influence of K-pop idols as a successful cultural and soft power influence as the fans engage in issues that are meaningful to the K-pop idols. Through their activism, the fans are indirectly reflecting and showcasing the values of the South Korean government, in the name of K-pop, to other audiences who may not be aware and create potential relations which all involved nations can benefit from (Nye, 2019). The effect of fan activism is best represented through Isabella's experiences participating in fan culture, through fan events and simply showing an interest in K-pop and Korean culture. Isabella shares that:

“(...) for example when videos [of BTS] went to the UN to talk about Asian hate and everything, I reposted on my social media and then many, many people contacted me or DM'ed me. *Like what? What is that? What's happening like?*” (Appendix 13, p. 8).

She goes on to explain that whenever her friends or family read or hear something about Korea, they go to her and ask her to explain it as they are aware of her interest in Korean culture even though, as she shares she is not an expert on the topics (Appendix 13, p. 8). Due to Isabella's interest, her friends and family engage in Korean culture alongside her by joining her for K-pop fan events, listening to K-pop, sharing Korean news on social media, and eating at Korean restaurants (Appendix 13, p. 2). Although this is not actively an example of K-pop fan activism, simply by being a fan and enjoying Korean culture, Isabella is inherently aiding and proving the extent to which South Korea's soft power resources, such as K-pop, can influence the international community. Isabella's interest in South Korea has allowed for South Korea's morals, principles, and foreign policy to become introduced and integrated within her peer community and increase awareness regarding topics such as fan activism, K-pop activism, and Korean diplomacy (Nye, 2019).

Recent examples of fan activism have emerged in South Korea as scandals continue to develop within the K-pop industry involving various agencies and the government. A trend is evident among fandoms and fans: when their favourite K-pop idols face backlash or unfair treatment offline or online, they unite. Particularly in South Korea, K-pop fans mobilise, creating awareness through online campaigns and deploying protest trucks to agency buildings. Additionally, they send funeral wreaths to express their discontent and anger towards those opposing their idols (Shinde, 2023; Korea Times, 2024). Within the past two

months a subsidiary of HYBE, one of the biggest agencies in South Korea named Ador “has been engaged in a public spat with HYBE for a few weeks now. In April 2024, HYBE ordered an audit of ADOR, alleging that its CEO Min Hee-jin was attempting to go solo and take over the company” (Singh, 2024). Following this revelation, HYBE reported Min to the police, whereafter she held a press conference, alongside her lawyers, wherein she exposed private messages between her and the Chairman and Founder of HYBE, Bang Si-hyuk, denied allegations, and accused him of mistreatment and mismanagement (Singh, 2024). Min alleged that Bang had copied her ideas to create BTS, as well as accusing HYBE and BTS of being involved in a cult called “Dahn World” whilst bringing up old allegations of “sajaegi” [사재기], which translates to chart manipulation (Economic Times, 2024; Srivastava, 2024a). These allegations have been handed over to KOCCA [Korea Creative Content Agency], which will investigate whether or not HYBE aided in manipulating the charts in 2015 during a BTS comeback (Economic Times, 2024). If the allegations are proven to be true, BTS risk losing all of the honours that have been bestowed upon them over the years, including their Order of Culture Meret (Economic Times, 2024).

In response to the allegations, investigation, and unimpressive responses by HYBE and its founder, Bang Si-hyuk, BTS fans are defending BTS in their honour as all seven members are currently completing their military service, something all Korean men must do, and therefore cannot comment on the situation (Sukri, 2024). BTS fans have been sending protest trucks to stand in front of the HYBE building, as well as taking out full-page newspaper ads to express messages such as: “We support BTS, not HYBE. A label that doesn't protect its artistes has no reason to exist. Protecting its artistes is a label's most basic obligation and BTS' label is not fulfilling this obligation” (Sukri, 2024). The biggest impact has been the sending and displaying of funeral wreaths in front of the HYBE building, with various messages such as ““Our BTS’ only when you need them. But biting the bullet whenever you're at disadvantage” and “Not a single answer when a statement is required. I thought you might've died so I'm sending this” from dissatisfied BTS fans (Koreaboo, 2024; Pannchoa, 2024). Funeral wreaths play a vital and symbolic part in Korean culture, as funerals hold spiritual and significant meaning to South Koreans and are typically sent as a kind gesture for the grieving family and the deceased wishing them their condolences (Koreaboo 2024; The Sanchon Hunjang, 2005).

The activism incited by mainly BTS fans ensured that others who are not K-pop fans become aware of the issue, as highlighted by online forums, wherein users shared that “Fans can do anything, I support them,” as well as “Wow daebak [awesome].. fans should also do

what they can” (Pannkpop, 2024). The inclusion of mainstream Korean culture and heritage, such as the funeral wreaths, can aid in making the activism seem more poignant, as Koreans use their own culture against one another to make a point. Simultaneously, K-pop fans are utilising their cultural heritage to make a statement, which aids in facilitating and showcasing their culture to international audiences and can increase interest in South Korea and its culture (Nye, 2008). Furthermore, BTS fans are showing a form of self-reflection regarding their values and principles, as BTS fans have historically been supportive of HYBE, as the company was viewed, as an “underdog” during BTS’ debut years, but fans are now prepared to boycott and protest what they once supported.

Despite this, the South Korean government has managed to successfully utilise its soft power resources and non-state actors internationally, through both offline and online channels, which embodies fan activism that is perpetuated on behalf of South Korea’s far-reaching influence and considerable soft power (Nye, 2019; Nye, 2021). The trickle-down effect from the heights of Korean diplomacy to K-pop activism, and all the way down to K-pop fans, speaks to the power of K-pop as a vital part of South Korea’s soft power agenda. This could be argued to leave the international community wondering how the reach of K-pop as a soft power resource can be furthered and utilised more effectively. Despite the success of this phenomenon, integral socio-political issues are lacking awareness in South Korea which continue to reflect badly on the government, such as anti-feminist movements and overarching patriarchal issues, which can hinder other states’ willingness to engage in bi- and multilateral relations with the South Korean government.

6.4. K-pop's Gender Paradox: Between Tradition & Modernity

Within the K-pop industry, gender dynamics serve as a lens through which broader societal norms and challenges are reflected and contested. This section of the analysis explores how K-pop idols and the K-pop industry navigate the multifaceted interactions between gendered expectations, society, and the K-pop industry. Drawing on the insights from the transcripts, this section delves into the interplay between gender representation, cultural norms, and the pursuit of social change within the K-pop landscape. First and foremost, Ines, a long-term K-pop fan currently studying in Chuncheon [춘천] in South Korea, shares how K-pop has gone beyond the field of entertainment:

“As a social science major myself, I believe K-pop, on its own, is useful in understanding issues such as whitewashing and imperialism in Asian society, Asian fetishization, and gender

roles. In addition to the commercialization of humans and stripping them of certain humane aspects” (Appendix 11, p. 1).

In the context of K-pop, the industry’s global popularity and cultural influence exemplify South Korea’s successful projection of soft power, as it disseminates Korean cultural products and values worldwide. Ines’ recognition of K-pop’s role in understanding issues, such as whitewashing, imperialism, Asian fetishisation, and gender roles, emphasises the industry’s potential as a tool for cultural diplomacy that simultaneously facilitates intercultural dialogue and exchange (Appendix 11, p. 1; Mark, 2009). Moreover, it suggests an awareness of K-pop, as a cultural phenomenon reflecting and perpetuating these complex dynamics, which presents the prevalence of concepts like intersectionality and gender performativity (Zarboskis, 2018; Nash, 2008; Butler, 1999). Furthermore, the critique put forward by Ines of the commercialisation of K-pop aligns with post-structural feminist perspectives, which challenge traditional notions of power dynamics and fixed categories of femininity and masculinity (Appendix 11, p. 1; Kinsella, 2017). In relation to this, post-structural feminism emphasises the role of language, discourse, and representation in shaping gender norms and experiences (Wooldridge, 2015).

Ines’ recognition of the commodification of individuals within the K-pop industry reflects a post-structuralist perspective of power relations and gender dynamics, which highlights how capitalist forces intersect with gendered representations in popular culture. Ines’ reflection on the broader societal implications of K-pop, particularly concerning gender roles, resonates with concepts within critical feminist studies (Appendix 11, p. 1). Within K-pop, gender roles are often reinforced and subverted through the portrayal of idols in music videos, lyrics, performances, and public appearances (Apolinario, 2024). Ines’ example suggests an awareness of how K-pop reflects and challenges traditional gender norms, offering space for the expression of diverse gender identities but also brings awareness to patriarchal and heteronormative ideals of femininity and masculinity (Appendix 11, p. 1; van der Toorn et al., 2020). An example of critique or emphasis on binary gender roles within K-pop, by the girl group (G)I-DLE, is accentuated by Lina, who shares:

“Yeah, I guess maybe I think of (G)I-DLE now. (...) Their latest song, one of the latest songs, I think ‘Wife’ it is, it sounds so strange, it’s like repetitive and, you know, silly, but yeah, maybe it’s also to do with that [critiquing society]. Yeah, critiquing this, you know, gender binary, you know? You know, role between wife and husband” (Appendix 8, p. 6).

As Lina exemplifies, (G)I-DLE's song "Wife" has sparked discussions about gender roles and patriarchy within the K-pop industry and in Korean society (Appendix 8, p. 6-7; Sarkar, 2024). Lina notes that (G)I-DLE employs satire and humour in "Wife," as tools for socially critical commentary on societal expectations surrounding marriage and femininity in both their lyrics and music video (Appendix 8, p. 6; Sarkar, 2024). Specifically, Lina's comments suggest that "Wife" serves as a tool for cultural diplomacy by engaging with societal issues in a satirical manner. In relation, Lina describes the lyrics and concept as "outrageously silly" and resembling a parody, which suggests the deliberate use of unconventional elements to convey their critique of marriage, gender binaries, and traditional gender roles (Appendix 8, p. 6). Therefore, it could be argued that by addressing societal issues through their music, (G)I-DLE exercises soft power, shaping perceptions, and generating interest in South Korean culture and values (Nye, 2011; Jones, 2013). Thus, the girl-group's ability to ignite discussions and provoke thought on restrictive gender roles reflects the persuasive power of K-pop as a cultural export.

Moreover, the song addresses the heteronormative male gaze, covertly critiquing oppressive patriarchal structures, which reflects a broader societal critique rather than individual men (Park, 2001; Appendix 8, p. 6). The term "male gaze" directly refers to the perspective through which media and society frequently depict women, often emphasising their appearances and compliance with patriarchal and heteronormative ideals (Vanbuskirk, 2024). In this regard, "Wife" addresses the embedded heteronormative male gaze in society by deconstructing and parodying traditional gender roles and expectations that are associated with marriage and femininity.

Similarly, the accentuation of heteronormative gender roles in K-pop resonates with Butler's (1999) framework on gender performativity, illustrating how societal expectations shape the performance of gender within the industry through repeated acts. In the context of K-pop, idols' gender performativity contributes to the reinforcement or subversion of societal expectations imposed on their biological sex. Thus, (G)I-DLE's song challenges the notion of fixed gender identities and opens up space for alternative expressions of gender within the industry (Appendix 8, p. 6-7). This aligns with critical feminist perspectives that highlight the intersectionality of gender and power dynamics within society (Adewunmi, 2023). Therefore, by critiquing traditional gender roles in a playful and exaggerated manner, as pointed out by Lina (Appendix 8, p. 6), (G)I-DLE offers a nuanced commentary on the societal pressures placed on women to conform to narrow and restricted gender roles.

Furthermore, (G)I-DLE's critique of traditional gender roles in "Wife" challenges hegemonic ideologies through their music, which translates into actively contributing to reshaping global perceptions of South Korea, as a socially progressive nation, albeit that being far from reality, thereby bolstering its soft power on issues related to gender and identity. This intentional subversion of traditional gender roles in "Wife" reflects a post-structural feminist approach, which challenges fixed categories of femininity and masculinity (Kinsella, 2017; Dawson, 2024a). (G)I-DLE's portrayal of women as independent and assertive individuals challenges the stereotypical passive and submissive portrayal of wives, which disrupts the conventional narratives of female gender roles in society (Appendix 8, p. 6; Apolinario, 2024).

This patriarchal conception of women with binary gender roles and norms has attracted a lot of attention in South Korea, leading to the official foundation of the 4B Movement in 2019. The movement signifies a significant ideological stance, rejecting traditional gender roles as a form of protest against the systemic oppressive patriarchy ingrained in the Korean government and society (Coffey, 2024). The movement originated online and quickly gained momentum, fueled by outrage against misogyny, gender-based violence, and societal pressures. The movement's four B's or principles, Bihon [비혼] (no marriage), Biksekseu 비섹스 (no sex with men), Bichulsan [비출산] (no childbirth), and Beonae [비연애] (no dating men), reflect a deliberate rejection of conventional expectations placed on women (Mitchell, 2024). The 4B movement is particularly significant within the context of South Korea's systemic embedded gender dynamics and societal issues, which encompass high-profile cases of gender-based violence and discrimination (Coffey, 2024). In other words, the 4B ideology serves as a response to these injustices by advocating for women's autonomy and liberation from patriarchal societal norms.

Essentially, the movement's emergence emphasises a growing discontent among women, not only in South Korea but globally too, as evidenced by its widespread support and discussions on social media platforms like TikTok (Mitchell, 2024; Coffey, 2024). In the context of cultural diplomacy and soft power, the 4B movement challenges traditional narratives about South Korea's societal norms and values. While South Korea often projects an image of modernity and progressiveness, the existence of feminist movements like 4B highlights the contradictions within its society. Therefore, by amplifying the voices of women advocating for change, as (G)I-DLE does through their song "Wife," the movement contributes to reshaping global perceptions of South Korea, which emphasises the imperativeness for more nuanced understandings of its social and political landscape.

Essentially, this accentuates the significance of K-pop as a cultural medium for exploring and rejecting binary essentialist notions of gender roles and norms, as argued by Butler (1999). Moreover, within the context of South Korea's cultural diplomacy efforts, (G)I-DLE's music contributes to reshaping global perceptions of the nation. This highlights the industry's potential to shape broader discussions about gender and power within Korean society, which would resonate with audiences globally. Lina's observations regarding gender roles in K-pop, coupled with (G)I-DLE's song, offer valuable insights into how the industry both reflects and contests traditional gender norms (Appendix 8, p. 6-7). Essentially, it becomes evident that K-pop serves as a medium for cultural resistance and expression, where idols navigate and challenge societal expectations surrounding gender and identity (Sarkar, 2024). Moreover, the involvement of (G)I-DLE in this context, highlights the role of non-state actors in shaping soft power dynamics. As influential cultural agents, K-pop idols like (G)I-DLE members effectively convey South Korea's cultural narratives and values to international audiences. Their popularity and influence enable them to reach a diverse global audience and generate interest in South Korean culture, thereby enhancing the country's soft power projection.

Building on the gender dynamics within K-pop, Rachel mentions another example, which is the controversy that BTS' song "War of Hormone" sparked upon its release in 2014 (Appendix 9, p. 8). The song ignited debates about gender roles, the objectification of women, and misogyny in K-pop lyrics. Particularly, BTS' song was criticised for perpetuating sexist stereotypes that portrayed women as objects of male desire (Gandhiok, 2020; Nolan, 2023). From a theoretical perspective, "War of Hormone" aligns with feminist concepts, notably Butler's (1999) notion of cultural products reflecting and contesting societal norms, which emphasises how songs with similar implications to BTS' "War of Hormone" can prove to promote potentially damaging narratives.

However, BTS' leader, Kim Nam-joon, addressed the controversy by acknowledging the objectifying depiction of women and stressing the significance of correcting societal biases through music, as emphasised by Ines (Appendix 11, p. 2). Moreover, he spoke on behalf of BTS with the promise to educate themselves with the guidance of feminist scholars to scrutinise their future lyrics to prevent such missteps in the future (Nolan, 2023). Nam-joon's actions, combined with BTS and their agency's implementation of the issue, illustrate the intersection of cultural diplomacy and soft power. This strategic response not only navigated negative consequences but also illustrated a commitment to fostering positive social change (Novel, 2023; Sarkar, 2024). By doing so, it could be argued that it similarly

relates to co-optation, wherein dominant narratives are challenged and reappropriated to serve progressive agendas (Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018). BTS' strategic approach accentuates how the K-pop industry *can* wield its influence to shape global perceptions and promote values aligned with cultural diplomacy objectives, similar to how (G)I-DLE did with "Wife".

However, the systemic patriarchal norms are apparent through the inherent double standards between female and male idols. Ines emphasises the contrasting responses to male and female K-pop idols engaging with feminist literature in South Korea, such as the Korean book "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982 [82년생 김지영]" and the Japanese book "Breasts and Eggs (夏物語)," highlight the complexities of gender dynamics and feminist co-optation within the K-pop industry (Appendix 11, p. 3; Lee, 2018). While male idols endorsing or caught reading well-known feminist literature faced minimal criticism or even praise, female idols like Yun-jin, a member of the girl-group LE SSERAFIM, faced backlash – with some male fans even going as far as to burn the girl-group's merchandise in protest (Nolan, 2024; Dawson, 2024b). This selective engagement with feminist themes reflects the K-pop industry's tendency to prioritise profitability over genuine adherence to feminist values, which perpetuates a lack of feminist sympathism that is appropriated for commercial agendas (Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018). As characterised by the concept of co-optation, the commodification and appropriation of feminist ideas for commercial purposes colours the authenticity of South Korea's so-called progressive image on gender issues, ultimately affecting the nation's soft power globally (McCurry, 2022; Nolan, 2024).

Additionally, the double standard intersects with broader socio-political issues in South Korea, such as the current President Yoon Suk-yeon winning the elections in 2022, by publicly advocating a very heteronormative, patriarchal, and "anti-feminist" campaign (McCurry, 2022). Official Korean statistics showed that President Yoon's majority votes were young male voters, who supported his "anti-feminist" agenda, which he continues to carry out by aiming to completely abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality in South Korea (McCurry, 2022). While K-pop enhances South Korea's soft power projection by promoting its cultural exports, the industry's selective engagement with feminist themes reflects the heteronormative misconception of feminism as synonymous with misandry and further perpetuates societal misunderstandings of feminist ideals (Dawson, 2024b). Thereby, by perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions about feminism, K-pop inadvertently contributes to the reinforcement of traditional gender norms, potentially undermining efforts to present South Korea as a socially progressive nation. This tension emphasises the complex

connection between national identity and cultural representations globally, which ultimately influences perceptions of South Korea's values and priorities (Balzacq et al., 2018).

As Ines acknowledges the issue of whitewashing (Appendix 11, p. 1), it emphasises how the K-pop industry perpetuates certain beauty ideals and cultural norms, despite its global appeal and influence, which aid in perpetuating systemic inequalities within the industries (Srivastava, 2024b). As highlighted by Ines, within K-pop, whitewashing may manifest as a form of cultural imperialism, wherein the industry exhibits a preference for lighter-skinned idols (Appendix 11, p. 1). Ines' recognition of this issue highlights how representations in K-pop may perpetuate or challenge existing power structures, thereby perpetuating Eurocentric beauty standards and erasing diverse racial identities (Appendix 8, p. 1; Srivastava, 2024b). As highlighted, whitewashing aids in promoting homogenised beauty ideals that align with Western standards while marginalising non-conforming identities (Chen, 2023). Through photo editing, styling, and promotional material, often achieved through digital manipulation or makeup, the industry strategically constructs a carefully curated image that conforms to Western ideas, thereby enhancing its appeal in global markets (Chen, 2023; Srivastava, 2024b). By doing so, these acts not only reinforce colourism but also marginalise darker-skinned idols and fans by promoting the notion that lighter skin is more desirable (Appendix 11, p. 1).

The K-pop industry's preference for lighter skin tones reflects a broader trend of cultural hegemony, whilst casting doubt about the authenticity, cultural diversity, and inclusivity in media representations in the Korean entertainment industry. Although whitewashing might aid in enhancing the industry's international appeal and influence by appearing to cater to Western beauty standards, it also highlights the ethical dilemmas inherent in leveraging cultural norms for strategic purposes. By prioritising commercial interests over cultural authenticity, the industry risks alienating audiences and perpetuating harmful stereotypes (Appendix 11, p. 1; Chen, 2023). Ultimately, whitewashing in K-pop serves as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of cultural imperialism and the ethical responsibilities of cultural producers in shaping global narratives. In contrast, the balance between cultural representations and commercial interests should be critically reflected on, which highlights the significance of promoting diversity and inclusivity in media representations – even within the realm of soft power and cultural diplomacy agendas.

Another issue that Ines has been made more aware of, through K-pop, is imperialism, which emphasises the intricate dynamics of cultural exchange, where Korean cultural products are both celebrated and commodified globally, and the pervasive influence of

Western capitalist norms on the K-pop industry's global expansion (Appendix 11, p. 1). Through practices like whitewashing, the K-pop industry not only seeks to appeal to Western audiences but also inadvertently reinforces cultural hegemony by conforming to dominant narratives propagated by Western capitalism (Chen, 2023; Srivastava, 2024b). Ines' recognition suggests an evolving awareness of the complexities surrounding cultural globalisation and the nuanced power dynamics inherent in the dissemination of Korean cultural products internationally (Appendix 11, p. 1).

As K-pop becomes increasingly celebrated and commodified worldwide, it is imperative to critically comprehend how it intersects with broader geopolitical agendas and capitalist structures, particularly in shaping representations of identity and beauty standards. Rachel echoes Ines' acknowledgement of being made aware of imperialism through the lens of K-pop, as previously stated in section 6.1 of the analysis (Appendix 9, p. 7-8). Therefore, it offers valuable insights into a broader tendency where cultural products, like K-pop, are not only consumed but also appropriated and reinterpreted within the global market.

The last issue that Ines emphasises is Asian fetishisation, which refers to the objectification and exoticisation of individuals of Asian descent, often rooted in stereotypes and colonial narratives (Appendix 11, p. 1). In the context of K-pop, the issue of Asian fetishisation is a pertinent concern, as it may manifest in the hypersexualisation or infantilisation of idols, as well as in the fetishisation of specific East Asian beauty standards. By acknowledging the presence of Asian fetishisation within K-pop, Ines highlights how the industry simultaneously challenges and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Asian identity, women, and sexuality (Appendix 11, p. 1).

This is echoed by Zara, a K-pop fan and avid supporter of feminism and human rights, who shares: "(G)I-DLE has released multiple songs that hold a feminist message such as 'NXDE' (*discussing the over-sexualization of women*)" (Appendix 10, p. 2). As Zara emphasises, (G)I-DLE's song "Nxde" addresses the sexualisation of women with an emphasis on reclaiming autonomy over one's own body (Appendix 10, p. 2; Murray, 2023). The song's lyrics confront societal expectations and stereotypes associated with nudity and female sexuality, challenging viewers to reconsider their perspectives and confront their biases of inappropriateness surrounding female nudity (Pham, 2022). This emphasises the girl-group's commitment to using their cultural influence and popularity for social advocacy regarding social justice issues. By doing so, (G)I-DLE strategically navigates cultural norms and challenges prevailing narratives through their artistic expression (Nye, 2008).

The accompanying music video for “Nxde” deconstructs Marilyn Monroe’s status as a sex symbol to reveal the limitations imposed on women by patriarchal norms. As such, the deconstruction of Monroe is used to challenge prevailing notions of objectification and sexualisation of women in the media (Murray, 2023; Pham, 2022). This also aligns with the concept of co-optation within feminist theory, which examines how feminist ideals are appropriated and commodified within commercialised spaces (Eschle & Manguerra, 2018). More specifically, this is illustrated by the members of (G)I-DLE wearing iconic Marilyn Monroe looks in an effort to portray Monroe in a more authentic light (Struzinsky, 2023). Moreover, while being dressed as Monroe, the members reenact the artist Banky’s iconic act of shredding his own artwork, which in this context could symbolise their rejection of societal expectations and their refusal to be objectified (Benjamin, 2022; Cho, 2022). Thereby, focusing on “society’s misogynistic expectations of female idols and the overt sexualisation of women’s bodies” (Karrah, 2022). By doing so, (G)I-DLE demonstrates their commitment to promoting a message of empowerment and autonomy for women by reclaiming their image and rejecting patriarchal societal norms.

Moreover, (G)I-DLE’s exploration of empowerment and feminist themes in songs like “Nxde” emphasises the group’s commitment to using their platform to address social justice issues (Appendix 10, p. 2-3). Through their music and visual storytelling, (G)I-DLE navigates the complexities of identity and representation, encouraging listeners to embrace their authentic selves and reject societal norms that perpetuate objectification and marginalisation (Cho, 2022). As put forward by both Ines and Zara, it becomes evident that K-pop serves as a space for both resistance and negotiation, where artists engage with and challenge prevailing narratives about race, gender, and sexuality (Benjamin, 2022). This acknowledgement resonates with the understanding of intersectionality within critical feminist studies, which emphasises the interconnectedness of social identities and power dynamics in relation to the experiences of females in society (Nash, 2008).

Jeon So-yeon’s, the leader of the girl-group (G)I-DLE, explanation of the literal intention behind the song title further highlights their role in addressing social issues, wherein their clever approach to addressing the issue of illegal pornography, particularly child pornography, garnered praise both in South Korea and internationally (Lucas, 2022; Sweeting, 2022). “In South Korea, the production, consumption, or distribution of pornography is illegal. This has meant that nonconsensual pornographic videos of women and children are common” (Lucas, 2022). More specifically, (G)I-DLE’s Korean name is 아이들 (aideul), which directly translates to “children” in English. Therefore, by naming

their song “Nxde,” (G)I-DLE effectively alters search results, aiding in decreasing the searches for child pornography when searching the words “아이들 [children]” combined with “nxde” or “nude” on any internet or social media platforms in South Korea (Lucas, 2022; Sweeting, 2022). In other words, this illustrates the use of cultural diplomacy to promote social change and address systemic inequalities through popular culture (Mark, 2009).

As fans engage with (G)I-DLE’s music and message, they actively participate in and contribute to discussions on empowerment, representation, and social change. This emphasises the transformative potential of cultural production in addressing systemic inequalities and challenging hegemonic norms (Lucas, 2022). This simultaneously echoes the principles of soft power and cultural diplomacy, while (G)I-DLE demonstrates the potential of cultural influence to drive meaningful societal shifts.

When asking the K-pop fans to share any actions perpetrated by K-pop idols that have inspired social or political discussions, negatively or positively, the Burning Sun Scandal was referenced by Lina, Rachel, Zara, and Isabella (Appendix 8, p. 5; Appendix 9, p. 10; Appendix 10, p. 3, Appendix 13, p. 5). Specifically, Zara shares: “As a negative example, scandals like Seungri’s Burning Sun Scandal have opened the discussion around the sexual exploitation of women in Korea” (Appendix 10, p. 3). The Burning Sun Scandal, which unfolded in 2018, exposed a web of corruption, illegal activities, and sexual exploitation within Seoul’s nightlife scene, implicating several high-profile figures in the South Korean entertainment industry (Lee, 2019). At the heart of the scandal was the Burning Sun Club [클럽 버닝썬], located in the Gangnam [강남구] district of Seoul, which became implicated in allegations of drug trafficking, sexual assault, embezzlement, and police corruption (BBC News, 2023). K-pop idol Seungri, a member of a well-known second-generation K-pop boy-group called BIGBANG, was implicated and faced jail time as a co-owner of the Burning Sun Club (Lee, 2022; SCMP, 2022).

Seungri was accused and sentenced to 3 years, but only served 18 months, for facilitating the provision of drugs and soliciting prostitution services for VIP clients at the club (SCMP, 2023). The scandal also implicated other individuals associated with the entertainment industry, which amplified the scandal’s impact on public perception and discourse surrounding issues of privilege, influence, and accountability in South Korea (Lee, 2019). Moreover, the scandal aids in discussions about toxic masculinity, patriarchal hierarchies, and the intersections of gender, power, and privilege within South Korean society. As the majority of K-pop fans interviewed mentioned this scandal, it points towards

its significant impact on South Korea's soft power, as it tarnished the country's global image, particularly within the realm of the Korean entertainment industry, which is a key cultural export (BBC News, 2023). Additionally, due to how significant the scandal was and continues to be talked about, as emphasised by Rachel (Appendix 9, p. 10).

In relation to the Burning Sun Scandal, Lina also references her awareness of the increasing "Spy Cam Crisis" epidemic in South Korea, also called "몰카 [molka]", where secret cameras are placed in public settings to illegally film, particularly women and children, which are often uploaded to websites as voyeuristic, spycam porn (Appendix 8, p. 5; Gunia, 2022). Spy cameras were also placed in the Burning Sun Club, which particularly filmed and shared intimate illicit pictures and videos in sex chat rooms with members, clients, investors, and employees connected to the club (Sharma, 2024). Therefore, by implicating K-pop idols in illicit activities, the scandal directly undermines South Korea's cultural diplomacy efforts to illustrate its cultural achievements and foster cross-cultural understandings during that period (Nye, 2011). This is due to the fact that K-pop idols serve as unofficial ambassadors for South Korea's cultural exports, as previously stated in the other sections of the analysis, meaning their involvement in scandals or controversies like Burning Sun can significantly affect the nation's diplomatic objectives (Wilson Center, 2007). Essentially, this reflects the evolving nature of cultural diplomacy and soft power in the digital age, where non-state actors wield significant influence in shaping global narratives and perceptions, positively and negatively (Nye, 2019).

Moreover, the Burning Sun Scandal is an example of the complexities of managing South Korea's cultural influence and the intricate balance between promoting cultural exports, whilst also addressing internal issues that may undermine the nation's reputation (Lim, 2023). The scandal also revealed the limitations of cultural diplomacy when faced with allegations of corruption and misconduct involving prominent cultural figures (Cooper, 2008). As put forward by a podcast episode around the scandal from BBC Radio 4, Burning Sun also prompted critical reflection on the ethical responsibilities of cultural ambassadors and the role of cultural institutions in upholding ethical standards (BBC Radio 4, 2023; Cooper, 2008). Thereby, despite efforts to project a positive global image, scandals like the Burning Sun can erode the credibility of cultural diplomacy initiatives, directly affecting how South Korea is perceived within topics related to the said scandals globally (Lim, 2023; Nye, 2019).

As previously exemplified in this section of the analysis, K-pop music has a layer of potential to influence and be weaponised for a social cause. This is exemplified by Hee-yoon who states she has seen various examples of K-pop being used in socio-political contexts:

“A few years ago, students at Ewha Womans University in South Korea staged a protest against the establishment of a new college within the university. During this protest, the students sang Girls' Generation's "Into the New World" and eventually ended the protest with the resignation of the university's president” (Appendix 6, p. 2).

As presented by Hee-yoon's reference to the use of the girl-group's song being used at the protest at Ewha Womans University in South Korea in 2016, could be argued to further amplify the multifaceted role of K-pop in mobilising and advocating for social change domestically (Yim, 2022). This aligns with the concept of soft power, where cultural exports like K-pop serve as tools for projecting the nation's values and ideals globally, as well as influencing societal norms and perceptions domestically and internationally (Bakalov, 2019; Nye, 2021). As students sang Girls' Generation's song at the protest, as emphasised by Hee-yoon, exemplified the capacity of K-pop to resonate with the aspirations and sentiments of diverse social movements, similar to the evolution of the 4B movement, as previously described (Hu et al., 2022). The Korea Herald, a well-known online newspaper in South Korea, has called Girls' Generation's debut song “Into the New World [다시 만난 세계]” as the “Millennials' anthem of solidarity” (Yim, 2024). Therefore, the song's transformation from a cheerful K-pop song into a symbol of solidarity of resistance emphasises its adaptability and relevance in different contexts.

This could reflect the phenomenon of appropriation wherein elements of one culture are adopted and repurposed by another for social or political expression. This is exemplified by the girl-group's song being used at an anti-government rally in Thailand, further reinforcing its significance beyond entertainment, which accentuates its significance as a unifying symbol of collective resistance and empowerment (Jeong, 2020). Moreover, the song's usage in deliberate protest settings reflects the concept of cultural diplomacy, wherein cultural products serve as instruments for fostering mutual understanding, and solidarity between different communities and nations – directly transcending geographical, linguistic, and cultural barriers (Balzacq et al., 2018).

Moreover, the use of “Into the New World [다시 만난 세계]” as a protest anthem illustrates the subversive potential of cultural products in challenging established power

structures and advocating for progressive change (Yim, 2024; Zur, 2023). This resonates with post-structural feminist approaches, which emphasise the fluidity and contingency of social norms and identity, and the capacity of cultural elements to challenge traditional notions of power dynamics (Kinsella, 2017; Conell, 2014). Essentially, Hee-yoon's reference to the protest at Ewha Womans University and the legacy of "Into the New World [다시 만난 세계]" as a protest anthem further emphasise the transformative potential of K-pop as a catalyst for social change and cultural innovation. As such, by intersecting with socio-political issues and amplifying marginalised voices, K-pop aids in enhancing South Korea's soft power project, while contributing to broader processes of social transformation and democratisation domestically as well as internationally.

6.5. Behind the Scenes: Ignorance & Issues in the Industry

As previously clarified, the rise of K-pop, as a global phenomenon through Hallyu, has brought global attention to South Korean culture and has emphasised the influence of K-pop idols as cultural ambassadors who wield significant soft power. However, their influence is not without limitations, particularly within the context of South Korea's conservative societal norms and the restrictive control exerted by entertainment agencies, as emphasised by the interviewed informants. This is further amplified by Aram, who currently resides and works in South Korea:

"Many people in Korea are known to be very conservative, so speaking up about certain topics could lead to the idols being shunned or ridiculed in public places. There is a chance of them losing their position in groups, or even be pushed to do something unfixable" (Appendix 12, p. 3).

In other words, during the last years, the gap between liberals and conservatives continues to grow, wherein the percentage of people piercing their ideology as conservative has increased above those of liberal or progressive values in the last years (Jung, 2022). Aram's insights illuminate the consequences that idols may face if they *do* decide to speak out on topics that might be considered controversial or merely non-conservative (Appendix 12, p. 3). Nye's (2019) framework of soft power illustrates how non-state actors like K-pop idols can influence global audiences through cultural appeal rather than political power. However, the conservative environment within South Korea limits the extent to which these idols can engage in soft power initiatives related to issues contradicting conservative values. Aram's comment illustrates that while K-pop idols have the potential to act as agents of soft

power, the societal and agency-imposed restrictions often lessen this potential, as well as the potential consequences that somehow act as a discouragement to take any chances (Appendix 12, p. 3).

This societal conservatism in South Korea can be argued to extend to the general public's perception of political and social issues, as reflected in the limited open-mindedness on progressive topics, which Aram elaborately describes: "There is such a limited amount of people who are open-minded when it comes to politics in Korea" (Appendix 12, p. 4). This sentiment about politics being sensitive in South Korea is also repeated by Karen Smith, Rachel, and Lina (Appendix 1, p. 9; Appendix 8, p. 3; Appendix 9, p. 11). In contemporary times, there are not many issues related to society and culture that are not in *some* way incorporated or used for political agendas, which can make universal issues, such as equal rights, become a matter of politics (Kushnarenko, 2019). In general, conservative and heteronormative structures aid in creating and reinforcing a hostile environment for Korean, but also for idols who wish to engage in activist efforts in more contemporary relevant issues, such as feminism, LGBTQ+ and women's rights, as previously stated in the aforementioned section, where only female idols were directly ridiculed for merely being photographed reading feminist books (Nolan, 2024; Dawson, 2024b). The risk of public backlash and potential career damages as put forward by Aram, discourages idols from directly addressing these topics publicly (Appendix 12, p. 3).

Zara echoes this sentiment by emphasising: "This [societal restriction] makes it less likely that an artist is allowed to speak out openly about controversial issues like LGBTQ+ issues, feminism, and such" (Appendix 10, p. 4). The concepts from critical feminist studies, particularly intersectionality, highlight the difficulties idols and fans face when they belong to multiple marginalised groups (Zaborskis, 2018). In other words, Zara's observation about the limited probability of idols speaking out on such issues (Appendix 10, p. 4), highlights how intersectional identities can be particularly silenced within the K-pop industry, where the societal pressure to conform is immense. In 2022, K-pop idol Kim Tae-seob, known by his stage name HOLLAND, publicly came out and expressed his disappointment and fear due to the violent and discriminatory experiences that he had faced. This eventually led to numerous entertainment agencies rejecting him upon his debut (Bruère-Dawson, 2023). Additionally, his songs and music videos are flagged as restricted for anyone under 19, due to people reporting his content as inappropriate behaviour (Benjamin, 2022).

The consequences that HOLLAND faces highlight the limitations of cultural product's influence when it clashes with deeply ingrained societal conservative and

heteronormative values. As such, it could be argued that the country's societal norms can undermine cultural diplomacy efforts by limiting the scope of progressive messages that its cultural ambassadors, like HOLLAND, can convey. As Amnesty International has reported, there is still a conservative stance on LGBTQ+ issues in South Korea, and as of 2024, the country has yet to legally recognise civil unions and same-sex marriages (Amnesty International, 2024). Although the Korean Anti-Discrimination Law theoretically prohibits discrimination based on sex, religion, and social status, there are no effective remedies or enforcement mechanisms in place to protect individuals in the LGBTQ+ community (Thoreson, 2023; Yoon, 2023). Consequently, they remain vulnerable to rights violations and discrimination, as reported by Human Rights Watch (Thoreson, 2023). Despite legal shortcomings, there has been a rise in celebrations and protests advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in South Korea, despite significant resistance from conservative and religious groups in society (Yim, 2024).

Thus, social conservatism poses notable barriers for K-pop idols who wish to openly advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, as they resist progressive movements that do not conform to their traditional values, which reflects broader challenges within cultural diplomacy and soft power theories (Nye, 2019). As previously stated, South Korea has strategically used its cultural exports, like K-pop, to enhance its global influence. However, when it comes to advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, this cultural diplomacy strategy faces internal resistance due to the conservative societal environment. In other words, idols and their agencies often navigate a delicate balance between maintaining their popularity both domestically and internationally, while avoiding controversy that could potentially alienate segments of their fanbase or attract negative attention from conservative and heteronormative groups, as emphasised by Aram (Appendix 12, p. 3). This caution is indicative of a broader strategy to ensure that K-pop remains a unifying cultural force rather than a divisive one, wherein crucial contemporary issues may not receive the attention they deserve from culturally influential figures like idols.

Karen Smith and Elisabeth Pramendorfer, notable individuals within the field of IR, echo how this tension illustrates that cultural diplomacy efforts are facing constraints when attempting to project progressive values internationally, whilst simultaneously managing domestic societal pressures that may oppose such values (Appendix 1, p. 9-11; Appendix 2, p. 16). However, despite these societal heteronormative constraints, some K-pop idols had subtly expressed support for progressive matters, such as LGBTQ+ rights and feminism, through fashion choices, concept ideas, and by promoting art made by marginalised groups of

society (Mubarak, 2023). This has not received backlash, due to the fact that K-pop and K-pop idols feed into the notion of gender being performative, as argued by Butler (1999), wherein their gender expressions become a blend of traditional views of feminism and masculinity (Bruère-Dawson, 2023). Moreover, although idols might not be able to show support overtly, Zara mentions how K-pop fandoms are known to have a large percentage of fans who identify as queer, who then deliberately advocate for their rights through their K-pop platforms and communities (Appendix 10, p. 1).

From the perspective of soft power (Nye, 2021), this fan-driven advocacy illustrates how non-state actors, such as fans, can wield cultural influence to challenge both the patriarchy and heteronormativity apparent in South Korean society (Park, 2001, p. 43). While the idols themselves may be restricted by such ideals, their fans use their platforms and collective voices to engage in a form of “open diplomacy” (Balzacq et al., 2018, p. 187). By shedding light on the internalised heteronormativity that affects non-conformists to patriarchal and binary understandings and ideologies (van der Toorn et al., 2020). However, the constraints within the K-pop industry are not limited to issues of heteronormativity and patriarchy. The broader environment that idols operate within can have severe personal repercussions, which both Rachel and Aram stress, particularly when societal pressures and the harsh realities of fame intersect. This environment is further complicated by the mental health struggles and social stigmas that many idols face (Appendix 9, p. 7; Appendix 12, p. 4). Aram further elaborates on this point:

“There have been many idols who have committed suicide. It might not be directly related to activism, but I do believe that many of them have gone through some things like bullying and accusations of things that they may not have done. I believe there is such a limited amount of people who are open-minded when it comes to politics in Korea and many people are *very* conservative, which then makes it difficult to speak up about things like politics, scandals, bullying” (Appendix 12, p. 4).

This pressure, as pointed out by Aram, is composed of the embedded patriarchal, heteronormative, and conservative norms that influence South Korean society, which makes it difficult for idols to speak out against injustices without facing severe backlash. Aram’s observation about the prevalence of bullying and accusations faced by idols, sometimes leading to tragic outcomes like suicide, points to the intense pressure and scrutiny within the K-pop industry (Appendix 12, p. 4). As post-structural feminism proposes, the scrutiny can

be understood as critiquing the power dynamics within cultural industries that suppress marginalised voices and restrict activism (Kinsella, 2017).

Ines comments on the broader societal focus on survival rather than activism, stating, “This is not me criticizing the artists; I simply think that Koreans, in general, are too busy trying to survive in their society to pay attention to what’s going on in other parts of the world” (Appendix 11, p. 2). Ines’ perspective emphasises how societal structure and economic pressures limit the capacity for social and political engagement, further reinforcing resistance to progress. As such, the focus on immediate survival over broader social issues illustrates how soft power is constrained by domestic challenges, which aid in limiting the impact of cultural diplomacy and the potential for societal change (Nye, 2021; Appendix 11, p. 2).

In the context of K-pop, entertainment agencies exert considerable control over K-pop idols signed to their agency, thus limiting their ability to engage in activism. Moreover, through the lens of soft power (Nye, 2008), it highlights how cultural products like K-pop have the potential to influence global perceptions, whereas internal societal pressures inhibit this potential. Zara points to the influence of entertainment agencies on idols’ freedom to express their opinions: “I think a lot of times, company policies just reflect societal pressures and are in place because they want to avoid backlash” (Appendix 10, p. 4). Arguably, this situation aligns with concepts of co-optation in post-structural feminism, where idols’ potential for activist efforts is suppressed by the very structure that promotes their careers (Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018). This form of control emphasises the tension between maintaining a public image and the desire for social change, highlighting the broader challenges within the K-pop industry and South Korean society.

As introduced, K-pop agencies have considerable power and influence over their signed K-pop idols compared to Western celebrities under Western music labels and agencies. The difference in agencies is best described by Rachel, an Italian living and working in South Korea, through a political lens:

“Like for example take like American pop and like K-pop–
Okay, when was the Trump, like during the election between
Trump and ehh... Yeah, Hillary Clinton. Like I remember how
Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Taylor Swift– Oh, who else? Like J.
Cole? Like so many of them came out and said like, *please just
don't vote for Trump*. Nothing like that could have happened in
Korea, because you cannot make your social political

preference like known, it's even hard to say it subtly, but even more so freely. (...) Not only like culture like as a perspective Korea, but I would say like K-pop entertainment wise culturally.” (Appendix 9, p. 11).

The cultural difference between young Western artists and young K-pop idols is clear, as K-pop idols are consistently encouraged by their agencies to remain politically unbiased. Political opinions can have detrimental effects on the K-pop idols themselves, their agency, their fans and, possibly, the South Korean government. This phenomenon of agency-driven and industrial censorship is repeated several times throughout the conducted interviews by K-pop fans and experts alike and is best described by Esme, who works within the K-pop industry and can therefore provide an insight into the censorship (Appendix 2; Appendix 7-11; Appendix 13). Esme describes the K-pop industry as one that is highly curated and controlled by institutions such as agencies, investors, and the media, wherein news and online posts related to their K-pop idols are drafted and filtered several times before management approves and allows the posts to be uploaded. Esme continues by explaining that the investors and agency try to refrain from commenting on or being related to socio-political issues, as it can damage the image of the idol(s) and the agency. Among other things, this is due to the risk of controversy, scandal, or cancellation which can end careers within the K-pop industry as pointed out by Lina, Zara, and Aram (Appendix 7-8; Appendix 10; Appendix 12).

K-pop stars, such as idols and actors, who have faced the consequence of being involved in controversies and being cancelled, which is defined “as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure”, are often shunned from the media (Yang, 2022a). These cancellations can lead to K-pop groups disbanding, agencies going bankrupt, actors being unemployed, and even suicide – as described earlier (Yang, 2022a). The choice and establishment of industrial censorship were created to minimise the risk of this fallout. However, this brought along other consequences regarding South Korea’s soft power.

The involvement of K-pop idols in controversies and scandals can lead to the minimisation and decrease of K-pop, as a soft power resource and South Korea’s soft power reach, as the non-state actors can be viewed as untrustworthy and as going against universal morals and principles that are present within the international community (Nye, 2011; Nye, 2019). Furthermore, scandals and controversies can lead to the exposure or showcasing of issues that are pertinent within South Korea, which the government has failed to acknowledge or address adequately, as mentioned in section 6.4. This can be viewed as a lack of interest in

international issues, a lack of two-way communication between the government, institutions, and their target audience, and a lack of awareness regarding shared norms and morals; all of which are vital within Nye's soft power framework (Nye, 1990; Nye, 2008; Nye, 2019). This, in turn, can affect the bilateral and multilateral relations of the South Korean government, which have been built through South Korea's soft power. The controversies can undermine South Korea's credibility and the weight of the government's public and cultural diplomatic efforts, particularly if they do not share the same values as other states and their populations (Nye, 2008; Nye, 2019).

Ethan Hee-seok Shin and Elisabeth Pramendorfer, both who work with and for human rights efforts, suggest that K-pop idols are more likely to work with non-controversial, non-political, and soft issues such as philanthropy work, fundraising for campaigns or food drives as some examples (Appendix 2 p. 16; Appendix 3, p. 10). This tendency aligns with soft power efforts, which propose that cultural figures can wield significant influence through non-political means, thereby avoiding direct confrontation with embedded societal norms (Nye, 2021). In relation, Pramendorfer brings up an interesting point of whether K-pop idols *should* be considered as appropriate and sensible advocates for issues related to socio-political topics and emphasises that it is:

“(...) important to be very mindful, as to what is certain, especially pop culture...what certain pop culture stands for, in a sense that from the perspective of people you want to reach and social justice causes, you want to fight and you want to promote. I think you have to be very careful in choosing, who actually represents these values” (Appendix 2, p. 16).

As Pramendorfer emphasises, the highlighted caution illustrates the need to critically evaluate which pop culture figures are able to authentically and effectively represent and advocate for social justice causes without being co-opted by the very systems they aim to challenge. This sentiment is carried on by Lina, who discusses if K-pop idols should be seen as appropriate socio-political advocates by their fans or just simply as entertainers who aid South Korea's economy and tourism industry:

“But I think especially with K pop, fans might view it as like, K-Pop is a real form of you know entertainment, you know like that's the purpose, you know, entertain, bring in money, bring in tourism, but it's not really used as a mode of, I don't know, communicating some greater political agenda maybe.” (Appendix 8, p. 3).

Lina's statement also raises questions about the extent to which K-pop can or should engage in broader socio-political issues to further enhance global awareness. Ines, who currently lives and studies in South Korea, repeats this statement by stating that netizens, a term referring to a habitual internet user, encourages idols to "focus on dance and looking pretty instead of talking about things you don't understand" (Appendix 11, p. 1). Her observation highlights the challenges that K-pop idols face in balancing societal values and expectations placed upon them by their industry and their fans. This could illustrate a tension in cultural diplomacy efforts, where the image projected by K-pop idols in global contexts may negatively influence perceptions of South Korea's values and societal norms. Ines continues by pointing out that "They [idols] are viciously criticized and looked down upon yet upheld to a high pedestal and highly praised, so it's contradicting and shows double standards of the fans/public" (Appendix 11, p. 1). These statements beg the question of whether idols actively wish to participate in socio-political discussions and issues as at each turn they may face criticism and pushback from their agency, the government, and most importantly for the idols, their fans.

K-pop idols' participation in activism and advocacy regarding socio-political issues, as discussed before, can lead to controversies and backlash. The backlash does not only affect the idols, but also their company, investors, and their families, as the idols carry a lot of responsibility on their shoulders, as pointed out by several of the informants (Appendix 8; Appendix 10-11; Appendix 13). However, rather than the idols being viewed as individuals, they are often viewed as products and will be used as needed by their agency to gain capitalistic advantage and continuously appeal to international audiences (Appendix 8; Appendix 13). Everything that the idols do from what they wear, what they say, and especially what they post, must be approved and filtered by the agency to ensure no affiliation with socio-political issues to lessen the risk of backlash and controversy (Appendix 7; Appendix 11; Appendix 13). This aggressive filtering and censoring highlight the potential of K-pop idols as resources for soft power, as their words and actions carry an immense weight that can influence, sway, or change the opinions of their primary demographic. In turn, this can affect international communities and therefore institutional and governmental bodies.

The power of the K-pop idols' online posts is described by Ines, who believes that:

"(...) K-pop artists can use their personal social media platforms to show support for causes through purchases such as clothes and products. A simple photo on their social media can bring

attention to vulnerable groups of people. A simple t-shirt or drink choice they make can be helpful, too. It does come at a high risk, which almost all artists aren't willing to make" (Appendix 11, p. 2).

Ines' observation correlates with cultural diplomacy, wherein cultural figures can engage in "open diplomacy" by covertly endorsing social causes, which might aid in the potential influence on public perceptions and perspectives (Balzacq et al., 2018). However, the high risk associated with such endorsements illustrates the intricate balance that idols must maintain. Rachel echoes this by sharing:

"K-pop idols, has always been like not allowed to say what they're really thinking on a political issue, or whatever. But I think with the usage of like Instagram, like being more around and stuff like that– Of course, they're still human beings, so like they can actually express themselves in some ways through it. And it might be good, it might be bad. It does really depend on what they're saying or from like, what their label actually allows them to say" (Appendix 9, p. 3).

Rachel's quote points out the imbalance that occurs between idols and their agencies, as agencies may treat the idols as commodities and products that have been created through the idols' many years of idol training. It could be argued that the agencies forget that idols are still human beings with opinions, regarding socio-political issues and discussions that take place within the international community (Appendix 9). Lina and Rachel share the opinion that they believe that idols want to comment on certain issues and discussions in society, but due to their international influence and impressionable audiences, the agencies have to implement censorship to avoid repercussions (Appendix 8-9).

The evolution and implementation of social media for K-pop idols have produced new ways in which the idols are controlled and censored. However, it has also presented new avenues for idols to show or create awareness regarding national and international issues. Nye's (2019) soft power framework highlights the power of the incorporation of social media, as the internet can amplify the voices of the K-pop idols advocating for issues, whether it be inherently or directly, to reach new target audiences and further enable the catalysation of social movements. The posts shared by K-pop idols have the potential to transcend geographical and political borders, whilst engaging the international audience in

meaningful discussions. However, this comes at the risk of whether or not the idols are perceived as the appropriate non-state actors to participate in or ignite the dialogues.

Despite all this, the phenomenon of industrial censorship is not as prevalent for older idols or entertainment figures. Nam Bada, who is Korean and has spent his entire life in South Korea, points out that older generations of K-pop idols, who have experienced a natural decrease in popularity over the years, are actively engaging in political discussions, as they openly share their socio-political opinions (Appendix 4, p. 8). For example, Kwon Mina, a former member of the 3rd generation girl group AOA, voiced her disappointment in former President Moon Jae-in, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the context of rising house prices and COVID-19 vaccination concerns. Similarly, K-drama actors and former K-pop singers, such as former K-pop idol Lee Joon from the 2nd generation boy-group MBLAQ, demonstrated in movements against Former President Park Geun-hye in 2017, who was impeached and convicted due to corruption charges brought against her (Park, 2021).

Nam further states that popular and modern K-pop groups need supporters and fans from multiple sides of the political spectrum to maintain their popularity, but older idols can rely solely on the supporters from their preferred political stance (Appendix 4, p. 8). During elections, such as the presidential election that took place in March of 2022, idols are careful with using or wearing certain colours, due to their correlation with the political parties in Korea, as well as using or signalling the numbers one and two (Yang, 2022b). In South Korea during the 2022 presidential election, the colour red and the number one symbolised the People Power Party (PPP) and the presidential candidate Yoon Suk-yeol, whilst blue and the number two represented the Democratic Party (DP) and the presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung (Yang, 2022b).

Although the idols are encouraging fans of age to vote, they do so carefully and without hinting at their own political leanings to avoid backlash from the opposing political party and its supporters (Yang, 2022b). During the election idols would use colourless emojis, such as Go Won, a member of girl-group LOONA, using a white heart instead of a coloured heart and members of girl-group of aespa, Karina and Winter, alongside Joohoney, a member of boy-group Monsta X, dressing in colourless clothing to avoid making accidental political statements that could sway their fans and audiences (Yang, 2022b). Furthermore, idols would avoid using peace signs or thumbs up in pictures and videos, as they could be portrayed and understood as numbers one and two (Yang, 2022b).

The reasoning behind continued industrial censorship is best described by Lee Gyu-tag, professor of media studies and pop music at George Mason University Korea, who

explains that “K-pop idols are strongly expected to be non-political beings (...) idols are expected to have the virtue of being pure and detached from worldly issues” (Yang, 2022b). Idols are idolised to a degree, wherein they cannot be seen as individuals and as members of the Korean public, as mentioned by Lina (Appendix 8, p. 3). K-pop idols’ full potential, as soft power resources and instrumental non-state actors, is continuously hindered by the industry that gave them their platform and audience that can be used for better. Therefore, this begs the question of whether idols should be encouraged or asked to comment on socio-political issues that may be seen as controversial and how would their contribution *actually* aid the goal?

7. Discussion

Based on the analysis conducted, the forthcoming discussion will focus on the potential and challenges of using K-pop as a tool for advocacy and social change. The discussion will explore the concept of “artivism,” delving into how K-pop, with its global influence, can be harnessed to address socio-political issues. Additionally, the discussion will examine the specific context of North Korea by discussing the complexities and obstacles in using K-pop for advocacy of a politically tense environment. Essentially, the forthcoming discussion aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the possibilities and limitations of leveraging K-pop for cultural diplomacy and human rights efforts.

7.1. When Art Meets Activism

Artivism, a combination of the words art and activism, is a growing phenomenon within the world of social activism. Artivism has the power and aids in bringing international issues closer to home and informing stakeholders about situations, as explained by Elisabeth Pramendorfer, who works at the United Nations in Geneva (Appendix 2, p. 7). Artivism can consist of paintings, exhibitions, murals, videos, and performances with the goal of advocating for social change and can be viewed as a soft power resource, as it is based upon a non-violent method of promoting collective action and open dialogue (Williams, 2022). Artists use their platform and artworks as a form of communication, much like demonstrators during a protest or social demonstration to create awareness and demand tangible action be taken (Williams, 2022).

Artivism has its roots in the Chicano movement, a radicalised Mexican-American movement, which took place in Los Angeles throughout the 1960s with the goal of

combating racism, embracing one's full heritage, and rejecting forced assimilation (Carillo, 2023). Activist and poet Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales wrote a poem in 1967 encompassing the movement's goals and social values, which became a driving force for the movement, as well as nationally mobilising young Mexican-American students to participate in demonstrations to advocate for their civil rights and recognition of their ancestral heritage (Carillo, 2023).

Modern iterations of activism can be seen in artworks by anonymous street artist Banksy, originally placed in the United Kingdom, whose graffiti works and murals challenge certain issues such as capitalistic greed, migration, and war on both public and private property all over the world (Williams, 2022). His artwork makes use of well-known characters and logos in a satirical manner to showcase contradictions and expose issues in modern society, which allows a wider audience to recognise and understand his artwork (Williams, 2022). Even well-known artists, such as Pablo Picasso, have participated in the act of activism and in response to his anti-war painting, named *Guernica*, Pablo asserted that "Painting is not made to decorate apartments. It's an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy" (Funderburk, 2021).

Despite activism being connected to typical forms of high culture, as described within the cultural diplomatic framework (Jones, 2013), it can be applied to forms of culture enjoyed by all as this widens its reach and broadens its audience, allowing for more awareness to be spread. Activism can consist of other forms of popular culture such as theatre, poetry, films, and music (Funderburk, 2021). Ethan Hee-seok Shin, legal analyst at Transitional Justice Working Group, highlights movies such as "*Schindler's List*," which focuses on the Holocaust, by aiding in re-telling and exposing real-life issues and tragedies to audiences all over the world, despite language barriers and geographical borders (Appendix 3, pp. 5, 8). However, it is crucial to consider the selection of voices advocating for these issues—whether as advocates, directors, or artists. Genuine connection to the issues can significantly strengthen the cause, whereas selecting individuals who are perceived as mismatched can potentially undermine and diminish awareness (Appendix 1, p. 7). Karen Smith, who grew up in South Africa, mentions Ugandan musician Bobi Wine, who successfully used his platform to practise political activism through his lyrics, wherein he criticises the Ugandan government for their lack of action regarding prevalent socio-political issues (Appendix 1, p. 12).

Due to this, it can be interpreted that K-pop can fall under the umbrella term of activism, as their songs and lyrics can carry socio-political meaning with the aim of challenging their governments, societal standards and understandings, and informing their

audience to inspire dialogue and collective action. As music has the power to disseminate knowledge, much like films and theatre productions, K-pop's ability to aid in causes and social movements is heightened, alongside social media and the culture of virality their messages and lyrics can reach audiences like never before.

The possibilities of activism are endless due to the growth of social media, as pointed out by Smith. However, Smith continues by explaining that governments, NGOs, and organisations are not realising and recognising the power and impact of social media and how it can be utilised to spread cultural awareness and more initiatives should be implemented to aid their causes (Appendix 1). Kwag Hee-yoon, senior manager at IDH, elaborates upon this by explaining their plans to implement the app "Instatoon," an app which turns pictures into artwork, in their human rights efforts campaign and the power of art in modern settings.

"Art can transcend language to convey emotions and ideas, serving as a powerful means of communication. It fosters connections among people through diverse perspectives and senses. Moreover, if artists from different cultures and languages participate in an Insta-toon project together, it can facilitate international communication and cooperation through processes that respect cultural differences" (Appendix 6, p. 2).

Similarly, activism not only has the potential to spread and create awareness regarding issues in the international community but also aids in preventing issues from evolving and tragedies repeating themselves – wherein culture and art can play a big role if incorporated correctly by governments. Smith uses the example of the Rwandan genocide and how the governmental use of art and culture, to bring communities together and provide a foundation of similarity between them, played an essential role in the prevention cycle (Appendix 1, p. 14). Pramendorfer echoes this statement by explaining the power of physical installations and exhibitions of activism within governmental and institutional buildings, such as the UN. More specifically, Pramendorfer argues that exhibitions, film festivals, and concerts have the possibility to bring issues closer to "home" as they humanise the issues and inform audiences, which highlights the true soft power of activism efforts (Appendix 2, p. 7).

Despite this, activism efforts carry the risk of being misunderstood and misinterpreted by audiences. Like any piece of artistic expression, it is up to the targeted audience to interpret and understand the art within their own context (Felshin, 1995, p. 160, 256). Similarly, if the art form does not provide enough context, regarding the activism they are aiming to create, then it cannot be guaranteed that the full effect of activism can be

experienced by the audience. Not every art form, such as murals and paintings, can be concrete in describing an issue or situation, as it is based upon how the artists themselves observe and experience the issue, which the audience may not relate to or be able to decipher (Felshin, 1995, p. 10-12). This in turn can inspire the question of whether the artwork can be perceived as activism, if the message fails to reach and influence the targeted audience.

A famous quote, within the art world, sums up this situation best: “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, which is used to express that not all people have the same opinion of what is attractive or interesting (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.b). The audience may view the artistic expression as something other than activism or simply just art, and enjoy the content without fully grasping the issue or cause that the art aims to spread or showcase. Furthermore, the possibility of activism is dependent upon which art form or expression is utilised, in order to tackle issues and educate the audience. It is not a certainty that each art form appeals to the targeted or a wider audience, which decreases the effort of activism and its soft power to inspire action and dialogue. Additionally, the partnership between activism and governments, NGOs, and civil society is underdeveloped, as the full potential of activism is undiscovered by the institutions. Smith explains that governments, NGOs, and civil societies are utilising activism and cultural products in very different ways, which lessens the effect, but an alignment between them *could* increase the potential and success of the effort (Appendix 1, p. 15).

Each of these considerations must be taken into account if K-pop’s potential, as a successful soft power resource, could be utilised further to integrate more socio-political issues into their songs and non-art activism efforts. The K-pop idols, their agencies, the government, and NGOs must collaborate and decide whether the idols are the appropriate ambassadors for challenging socio-political issues, as well as ensuring the appropriate targeted audience is reached. Moreover, as K-pop songs are predominantly in Korean, actions need to be taken to ensure that the language barrier does not pose an issue or get in the way of the intended activism through their lyrics. However, this apparent language barrier decreases with the increasing releases of completely English songs by K-pop idols, which arguably will make their intended or non-intended activism through lyrics more accessible and impactful (Yoo, 2023) Similarly, it cannot be guaranteed that their activism will reach broader or international audiences if they carry no interest in Korean pop culture.

Like with every art form, the reach of activism is limited by the audience's subjective opinions and interests, even if they care about the issue that is challenged or discussed by the K-pop idols. Pramendorfer highlights that musical artists, such as K-pop idols, have an

influence and authority over their fans, which can enable trickle-down mechanisms and multiply the reach of the efforts among civil society and non-state actors and, in turn, influence governments (Appendix 2, p. 18). With this in mind, K-pop idols are able to reach their young and, often, politically-motivated audience and communicate new or forgotten issues, which can increase awareness, and mobilisation, and reignite a discussion among non-state actors and civil society. As already experienced, K-pop has the possibility to continuously aid in challenging and addressing social issues, however, if they are to be applied to socio-political issues then Korean societal norms and the foundation of the K-pop industry must be challenged first, which can prove to be an issue in itself.

7.2. South Korean Pop & North Korean Issues

As the analysis has illustrated, K-pop has, beyond entertainment value, shown potential as a powerful soft power resource – particularly within the fields of social change and advocacy. However, it should be emphasised that K-pop is only associated with South Korea and *not* North Korea – despite the literal meaning of the phenomenon being ‘Korean’ pop music (The Economist, 2024). The Economist (2024) emphasises this difference, which notes that while South Korea wields considerable cultural influence globally, North Korea’s state-controlled pop culture serves primarily as a propaganda tool for the dictatorial regime.

“North Korean pop culture, by contrast, is state-directed and aims to please one man [Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un] (...) When it comes to hard power, the two Koreas are in the same weight class, thanks to the North’s nuclear weapons. But culturally, the South is a colossus, whereas the North’s soft power is as weak as the rationale for making a communist dictatorship hereditary” (The Economist, 2024).

As the statement suggests, there is a vast distinction between North and South Korea, which is exacerbated by political tensions and historical divisions that are intensified by the ongoing human rights violations regularly taking place in North Korea (Human Rights Watch, 2024). An interesting prospect would be to look into how K-pop might be used as a cultural resource for peacebuilding and human rights awareness in North Korea, and in the broader context of inter-Korean relations. First and foremost, using K-pop in peacebuilding strategies for inter-Korean relations or using it to address North Korea’s continuous human rights violations, may present more challenges than practical or applicable solutions, given that K-pop represents and is directly tied to South Korean culture.

Kim Seung-hyeon, the founder and general manager of IDH, a South Korean NGO focused on creating awareness of North Korea's human rights violations, highlights several advantageous possibilities by applying K-pop in collaborative efforts with international human rights organisations (Appendix 5, p. 1-2). As a manager of an NGO, Kim is optimistic about the potential of K-pop to support North Korean human rights organisations, as he believes that joint initiatives can leverage K-pop's influence to promote shared goals of dignity, equality, and justice – both internationally and in inter-Korean relations (Appendix 5, p. 2). He argues that “Through music and entertainment, it [K-pop] can bridge cultural divides and foster empathy, particularly in regions marked by political tensions or human rights challenges” (Appendix 5, p. 2). Moreover, Kim suggests that collaborative efforts could be enhanced between K-pop stakeholders, civil society organisations, and government bodies by implementing joint strategic campaigns, policy advocacy, and educational programs aimed at promoting human rights and global connectivity (Appendix 5, p. 3). In other words, such integrated approaches could potentially amplify the reach and effectiveness of human rights advocacy efforts in general.

Similarly, Karen Smith, former Special Advisor of the Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect, shares the role of social media and the digital revolution in amplifying K-pop's influence potentially beyond its entertainment values (Appendix 1, p. 5). Smith suggests that social media has the potential to leverage cultural resources for soft power, particularly among young people influenced by celebrities, thereby enhancing avenues for global communication and understanding (Appendix 1, p. 5-6; Nwankwo, 2023).

In relation, Kwag Hee-yoon, who works alongside Kim at IDH, emphasises the potential of art in transcending language barriers and might aid in facilitating international cooperation (Appendix 6, p. 2). In late October of 2023, a South Korean student-led organisation at Yonsei University hosted a youth seminar focusing on North Korean Women's Human Rights at the Canadian Embassy in Seoul, where experts shared the increasing power that art holds in establishing awareness in the context of North Korea (Jung, 2023). As mentioned in the previous section of the discussion, using any form of art addresses challenging topics by communicating complex ideas and emotions without relying on the restriction of language (Appendix 6, p. 2). As such, with the increasing popularity of K-pop music and its global presence on social networks, it might not be an entirely impossible feat for the evolution of art and North Korea to one day encompass K-pop too.

However, despite K-pop's potential to bring international attention to issues related to North Korea, internet access within North Korea is heavily restricted and forbidden. In severe

cases, it can result in death if caught consuming so-called “capitalist” content, which North Korea believes includes American and South Korean culture (Son, 2024; Lenor, 2024). As of 2024, it is estimated that fewer than 1,000 North Koreans have supervised and limited access to the Internet out of the approximately 26 million people living in North Korea (Lenor, 2024). In a 2023 report called ‘Digital Hostages: Internet Freedom in North Korea’ published by the NGO People for Successful COrean REunification [PSCORE], the conclusion states that: “Access to the global Internet in the DPRK is restricted to a privileged and insignificant portion of the population collaborating with the leader” (PSCORE, 2023, p. 138). As such, the lack of free access to the internet undermines the effectiveness of using K-pop and social media, as tools for influencing North Korean citizens or for fostering cross-cultural understanding between the two Koreas.

In 2018, the popular K-pop girl-group Red Velvet performed in Pyongyang, North Korea, as a cultural exchange between the countries (Associated Press, 2018). Red Velvet’s performance momentarily softened political tensions with K-pop as a soft power resource, highlighting how cultural exchanges can foster goodwill and understanding. However, by 2021, Kim Jong-un had reversed his stance on K-pop and other South Korean entertainment, describing it as a “vicious cancer” threatening North Korea’s socialism (Kim & Jeong, 2021). This distinct shift in opinion emphasises the complex nature of cultural diplomacy regarding North Korea. It could be argued that the initial positive reception of K-pop in North Korea, as a bridge for cultural exchange, was overshadowed by subsequent crackdowns, which indicates the unpredictable dynamics of using cultural resources in politically high-tension areas. Despite this, the brief success of such cultural exchanges also demonstrates that K-pop holds potential, as a soft power resource that is capable of creating moments of connection even amidst political adversity.

Nam Bada, the Secretary-General of PSCORE, highlights numerous challenges in applying K-pop for advocacy surrounding North Korea and even reunification matters between North and South Korea (Appendix 4, p. 2-7). Specifically, Nam points out that humanitarian and human rights conditions in North Korea are highly politicised, which makes any NGO initiatives particularly sensitive and challenging – arguably more if K-pop was to be integrated into such initiatives (Appendix 4, p. 2-3). While K-pop has the potential to support humanitarian aid, the current political climate in North Korea makes such efforts nearly impossible – especially considering the heightened tensions following North Korea’s decision to launch spy satellites and demolish the statue symbolising reunification earlier this year (Chen & Seo, 2024). Additionally, Nam shares firsthand accounts of economic barriers,

noting that involving K-pop idols in advocacy efforts can be prohibitively expensive for NGOs like PSCORE. Despite the high costs, he supports such collaborative efforts and states that while PSCORE previously used rock music for a fundraising event, K-pop's global popularity could have aided in spreading more awareness could have aided in spreading more awareness (Appendix 4, p. 3). However, this financial constraint, put forward by Nam, limits the feasibility of using K-pop as a tool used by NGOs with limited funding capabilities.

Given the political tension between North and South Korea, Nam further states that a significant challenge is North Korea's political manipulation of cultural exchanges (Appendix 4, p. 4; Davenport, 2024). As an example, Nam stresses that South Korea has attempted to use cultural exchange programs multiple times to foster better relations, but that North Korea often exploits these initiatives for their own political or economic gains (Appendix 4, p. 4-5). Therefore, it could be argued that North Korea's exploitation erases the cultural aspect of such exchanges, thus undermining the genuine intentions behind cultural diplomacy efforts and further complicating the possibility of using K-pop for peacebuilding efforts.

In relation, Kwag offers a cautionary perspective on K-pop's potential negative impact, wherein she emphasises that "just as K-pop carries a high positive impact, negative content and concepts within it can also wield considerable influence, making it a double-edged sword in terms of its potential impact" (Appendix 6, p. 3). In other words, negative content within the K-pop industry can perpetuate harmful stereotypes or undermine serious issues in the context of North Korea. As such, K-pop's double-edged sword necessitates a careful and deliberate approach to advocacy, to ensure that the content aligns with the values and goals of human rights initiatives, rather than potentially harming efforts made by organisations or government bodies prior to their involvement.

Kwag's point is echoed by Ethan Hee-seok Shin, legal analyst at Transitional Justice Working Group in Seoul, which focuses on transitional justice mechanisms in North Korea, who emphasises that connecting popular culture consumption with political activism is challenging and demanding (Appendix 3, p. 3). Shin observes that while K-pop idols hold significant global influence, their primary appeal lies in their entertainment appeal rather than activism. He stresses that to engage idols in North Korean human rights advocacy would require strategic efforts and involvement in meaningful discussions – both of which will be costly and most likely not approved by the agencies, due to the political sensitiveness (Appendix 3, p. 3-5). In other words, the reach of popular culture vastly exceeds traditional means of diplomacy, but *actually* leveraging this reach effectively for human rights causes is

complex and requires careful planning to melt the barrier between entertainment and activism.

However, one might question whether investing significant effort into educating and engaging K-pop idols for North Korean human rights advocacy would be the most effective approach. Elisabeth Pramendorfer, Senior Human Rights Officer at Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, highlights the nature of the grassroots movement is in effective advocacy, wherein she notes that human rights activists often emerge from crisis situations rather than formal educational backgrounds (Appendix 2, p. 15-16). This highlights the importance of empowering individuals, including those within North Korea and even idols, as potential advocates for human rights, accountability, and justice despite prevailing agency restrictions.

In light of these challenges and possibilities, the potential of K-pop as a medium for advocacy remains largely confined to audiences *outside* of North Korea. The severe restrictions on internet access and the North Korean regime's control over cultural consumption significantly limit K-pop's direct impact and effect within the country. Therefore, while K-pop *can* raise international awareness and foster empathy globally, its utilisation as a tool for peacebuilding and human rights advocacy, within North Korea itself, is profoundly constrained by the country's political realities.

8. Conclusion

This Master's thesis aimed to identify how K-pop's global influence contributes to South Korea's soft power objectives and cultural diplomacy efforts, as well as exploring how the K-pop industry actively engages in global socio-political issues. Based on a thematic analysis of qualitative empirical data, particularly obtained from conducted semi-structured interviews, it can be concluded that K-pop should be understood as a crucial soft power resource. K-pop has become increasingly embedded in South Korea's objectives and efforts in diplomatic engagements, which has aided in the improvement of bi- and multilateral relations within the international community. Moreover, it can be concluded that the K-pop industry, both negatively and positively, engages in activism, advocacy, and heteronormative values regarding imperative global socio-political issues.

While the choice of semi-structured interviews limited the generalisation of the thesis, it provided new insights into a phenomenon that has significant scholarly gaps regarding the implementation of K-pop and its multifaceted potential in socio-political dimensions and

implications. The chosen methodology demonstrates a deliberate effort to explore the advantages and disadvantages of K-pop's involvement in socio-political activism and advocacy by emphasising the role of social actors' (informants) and their narratives regarding the research phenomenon. This methodological approach is further enriched by integrating insights from experts in the field of international relations, alongside the experiences and knowledge from civil society actors, who actively work within sectors directly engaging with socio-political issues.

By incorporating various outlooks, the collection of empirical data allowed for the inclusion of contrasting perspectives, which aided in a comprehensive analysis of K-pop's potential and associated challenges as a soft power resource within a socio-political context. It could therefore be concluded that using semi-structured interviews, as the chosen methodological approach, allowed for our hermeneutic horizon to be fused with the inclusion of the social actors' respective hermeneutic horizons. This resulted in expanding our understanding of the phenomenon and aiding in establishing results that exceeded our expectations.

As the theories of soft power and cultural diplomacy emphasise, the growing mistrust in governments' and their objectives has led to an increase of non-state and civil society actors to become gradually incorporated in conversations regarding diplomatic endeavours. This has allowed for the inclusion of K-pop idols in shaping and influencing perceptions of cultural narratives, values, and norms beyond geographical borders. Therefore, the use of K-pop in these efforts emphasises the idols' as influential agents that aid in bringing global and domestic awareness to issues, which might not be prioritised by the South Korean government. As the K-pop idols already carry significant global influence and acclaim, international audiences are more inclined to respond *to* or engage *with* their intended or unintended diplomatic and activism efforts.

In relation to globalised interconnectedness and cultural diplomacy, brought forward by technological advancements and social media platforms, K-pop idols and their international fandoms can mobilise and collectively make a difference without being hindered by public diplomacy's protocols, etiquettes, and rules, which can diminish such efforts. This has resulted in the empowerment of non-state actors to engage in socio-political endeavours in the name of K-pop, as they are able to harness the international connectivity of K-pop fandoms to empower their voices, galvanise support, and spark social movements on a global scale. As the transcripts from the interviewed informants illustrated, K-pop idols and their fans aided in shedding light on issues pertaining to gender dynamics, social justice,

climate change, and cultural pressures. These issues might not have been brought up in traditional diplomatic settings by the government, due to its conformative patriarchal and heteronormative ideals ingrained in South Korea's societal foundation.

A significant point that was emphasised throughout the analysis and discussion is founded in the need for considerations to be taken regarding the appropriateness of K-pop idols as diplomats and activists, and whether the expectation of them "speaking out" is a burden they are unable to carry or live up to realistically. As such, it could be concluded that albeit K-pop idols and their international fandoms possess a considerable amount of influential power to change perceptions and preferences, there are certain internal limitations within the Korean entertainment industry and external factors regarding political tensions that could hinder the efficiency of the multifaceted potential of K-pop.

List of References

- Aarhus Universitet (n.d.) Metodeguiden: Subjektive besvarelser (social desirability). *Aarhus Universitet*. <https://metodeguiden.au.dk/subjektive-besvarelser-social-desirability>. Accessed 4 April 2024.
- Adams, T. (2022). K-everything: the rise and rise of Korean culture. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/04/korea-culture-k-pop-music-film-tv-hall-yu-v-and-a>. Accessed 2 April 2024.
- Adeoye-Olatunde, O. & Olenik, N. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy* 2021;4:1358–1367. *Pharmacotherapy Publications, Inc.: USA*.
- Adewunmi, B. (2023). Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality: “I wanted to come up with an everyday metaphor that anyone could use”. *The New Statesman*. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/welfare/2014/04/kimberl-crenshaw-intersectionality-i-wanted-come-everyday-metaphor-anyone-could>. Accessed 27 April 2024.
- AFM Editorial Office (2024). K-pop is making billions for South Korea. *Asia Fund Managers: Economies*. <https://asiafundmanagers.com/int/kpop-and-economic-impact-on-south-korea/>. Accessed 10 May 2024.
- Amnesty International (2024). South Korea: Amnesty International makes submission to Supreme Court ahead of ruling on LGBTI rights. *Amnesty International*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/south-korea-amnesty-international-makes-submission-to-supreme-court-ahead-of-ruling-on-lgbti-rights/>. Accessed 19 May 2024.
- Ana, A. (2018). PRECARIOUS LOCATIONS: FEMINIST CO-OPTATION AND STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE IN THE NEOLIBERAL AGE. 30(4), 153–179. *Praktyka Teoretyczna: Poland*. <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/prt/article/view/19012/18738>.
- Anand, S. & Baek, D. S. (2024). “Understanding Hallyu: The Impact of Korean Pop Culture” by Sanya Anand and David Seyheon Baek. *The Marketing Journal*. <https://www.marketingjournal.org/understanding-hallyu-the-impact-of-korean-pop-culture-by-sanya-anand-and-david-seyheon-baek/>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
- Anyangwe, E. & Mahtani, M (2023). What is patriarchy? What does it mean and why is everyone talking about it? *CNN World*.

- Apolinario, A. (2024). 'Wife' by (G)I-DLE is Absolutely Cocoloco. *Herald Husky*. <https://heraldhusky.wordpress.com/2024/01/29/wife-by-gi-dle-is-absolutely-cocoloco/>. Accessed 12 May 2024.
- Associated Press (2018). Red Velvet Perform for North Korean Leader Kim Jong-Un in Rare Pyongyang Concert. *Billboard*. <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/red-velvet-perform-north-korean-leader-kim-jong-un-pyongyang-8280163/>. Accessed 22 May 2024.
- Avosmart (n.d.). What is mukbang? Exploring the Cultural Phenomenon and Its Impact on Society. *Avosmart*. <https://avosmart.com/blog/what-is-mukbang/>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
- Bakalov, I. (2019). Whither soft power? Divisions, milestones, and prospects of a research programme in the making. *Journal of Political Power*, 12(1), 129–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2019.1573613>.
- Balraj, B. M., & Manan, M. H. bt A. (2022). The Conception of Soft Power in Korean's Popular Culture. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(9), 1905 – 1910. DOI:10.6007/ijarbss/v12-i9/14387.
- Balzacq, T., Charillon, F. & Ramel, F. (2018). Global Diplomacy: An Introduction to Theory and Practice. *Palgrave Macmillan: Switzerland*.
- Banerjee, U. (2022). BTS' RM aka Kim Namjoon's fans from India plant 500 trees in Noida on his birthday; ARMYs thank their 'wholesome gesture'. *Bollywood Life*. <https://www.bollywoodlife.com/hollywood/bts-rm-aka-kim-namjoons-fans-from-india-plant-500-trees-in-noida-on-his-birthday-armys-thank-their-wholesome-gesture-entertainment-news-2184380/>. Accessed 16 May 2024.
- BBC News (2023). New series for BBC Radio 4's Intrigue unravels the shocking sex scandals which shook the world of K-Pop. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/2023/intrigue-burning-sun-podcast-radio-4>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- BBC Radio 4 (2023). Intrigue. Burning Sun - Ep. 3. The Nightclub. *BBC Radio 4*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0fvcznj>. Accessed 15 May 2023.
- Benjamin, J. (2022). (G)I-DLE Open Up About Pressures Ahead of 'Nxde' Release & The Teamwork Guiding Them Today. *Billboard*. <https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/g-i-dle-interview-nxde-i-love-album-tour-teamwork-1235158996/>. Accessed 13 May 2024.

- Boston Medical Center** (2021). Performative Activism. *Boston Medical Center*.
<https://www.bmc.org/glossary-culture-transformation/performative-activism#:~:text=Defined%20as%20activism%20that%20is,sexist%2C%20homophobic%2C%20etc.>
 Accessed 8 May 2024.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V.** (2022). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. Sage Publications Ltd: USA.
- Bruère-Dawson, C.** (2023). The Paradox Of Queerness In K-Pop. *BØWIE*.
<https://www.bowiecreators.com/article/the-paradox-of-queerness-in-k-pop>. Accessed 19 May 2024.
- Bruner, R.** (2020). How K-Pop Fans Actually Work as a Force for Political Activism in 2020. *TIME*. <https://time.com/5866955/k-pop-political/>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Bryman, A.** (2016). *Social Research Methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press: UK.
- Bts Purple** [purple_lovetae07]. (2024, April 27). Apparently Namjoon's chose that his new physical album is printed with "SOY INK" made from soybeans. Compared to traditional petroleum-based ink, soy-based ink is accepted as more environmentally friendly. While slower to dry than many inks, it provides more accurate colors and makes it easier to recycle paper. OMG NAMJOON 🥺💖 Ctto. [Images attached] [Thread]. *Instagram Threads*. https://www.threads.net/@purple_lovetae07/post/C6Q4aDySdXu. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- Burke, M.** (2021). 'Squid Game' reaches 111M viewers, becoming Netflix's biggest debut hit. *NBC News: Culture and Trends*.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/tv/squid-game-reaches-111m-viewers-becoming-netflix-s-biggest-debut-n1281415>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
- Butler, J.** (2002). *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203902752>.
- Cambridge Dictionary** (n.d.a). Meaning of pop culture in English. *Cambridge Dictionary*.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pop-culture>. Accessed 24 April 2024.
- Cambridge Dictionary** (n.d.b). Meaning of beauty is in the eye of the beholder in English. *Cambridge Dictionary*.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/beauty-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder>. Accessed 22 May 2024.

- Carillo, K. J. (2023). How the Chicano Movement Championed Mexican-American Identity and Fought for Change. *HISTORY*. <https://www.history.com/news/chicano-movement>. Accessed 21 May 2024.
- Cicchelli, V. & Octobre, S. (2021). The Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture: Surfing the Korean Wave. *Palgrave Macmillan: London and Springer Nature: Switzerland*. <https://link-springer-com.zorac.aub.aau.dk/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-030-84296-3.pdf>.
- Chai, P. Y. (2021). K-POP IDOLS SPEAK UP FOR CLIMATE CHANGE. *ENVI Media*. <https://www.envimedia.co/k-pop-idols-speak-up-for-climate-change/>. Accessed 27 May 2024.
- Chen, H. & Seo, Y.-J. (2024). North Korea says it will no longer seek reunification with South Korea, will launch new spy satellites in 2024. *CNN World*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/31/asia/north-korea-reconciliation-south-korea-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed 21 May 2024.
- Cherrie, S. S. (2023). BLACKSWAN's Fatou Speaks Out In Solidarity With Palestine. *Koreaboo*. <https://www.koreaboo.com/news/blackswan-fatou-speaks-in-solidarity-palestine/>. Accessed 8 May 2024.
- Cho, S. (2022). Miyeon And Shuhua Share What (G)I-DLE Means To Them, Break Down The Meaning Of "Nxde," And More. *Soompi*. <https://www.soompi.com/article/1551994wpp/miyeon-and-shuhua-share-what-gi-dle-means-to-them-break-down-the-meaning-of-nxde-and-more>. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- Choi, H-W. (2009). "Wise Mother, Good Wife": A Transcultural Discursive Construct in Modern Korea. *The Journal of Korean Studies* (1979-), Vol. 14, No. 1 (Fall 2009), pp. 1-33. *Duke University Press: USA*. <https://www-jstor-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/stable/pdf/43998361>.
- Choi, H-R. (2021a). Crazy K-pop scouting stories: Cha Eun-woo and Bae Suzy were both spotted by talent scouts ... outside the toilets. *Style*. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3142094/crazy-k-pop-scouting-stories-cha-eun-woo-and-bae-suzy>. Accessed 16 April 2024.
- Choi, J.-W. (2021b). President Moon meets BTS, officially appoints them as special diplomatic envoy. *The Korean Herald*. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210914000864>. Accessed 8 May 2024.
- Chow, A. (2020). Parasite's Best Picture Oscar Is Historic. Is This the Beginning of a New Era in Film? *TIME*. <https://time.com/5779940/parasite-best-picture-oscar/>. Accessed 9 April 2024.

- Coffey, H. (2024). Could South Korea's 4B movement destroy heterosexual relationships?. *The Independent*.
<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/south-korea-4b-movement-women-celibate-sex-b2527832.html>. Accessed 16 May 2024.
- Connell, R. (2014). The sociology of gender in Southern perspective. *Current Sociology*, 62(4), 550-567. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392114524510>.
- Constantinou, C. M. (2016). 1: Everyday diplomacy: mission, spectacle and the remaking of diplomatic culture in J. Dittmer & F. McConnell (ed.) *Diplomatic Cultures and International Politics: Translations, spaces and alternatives*. Routledge: London & New York.
- Cooper, A. F. (2008). *Celebrity diplomacy*. Routledge: London & New York.
- Das, H. (2024). BTS and BLACKPINK hailed as most popular K-pop groups in global survey, Check full list. *PINKVILLA*.
<https://www.pinkvilla.com/entertainment/bts-and-blackpink-hailed-as-most-popular-k-pop-groups-in-global-survey-check-full-list-1291626>. Accessed 28 May 2024.
- Davenport, K. (2024). Amid Rising Tensions, North, South Korea Exchange Threats. *Arms Control Association*.
<https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-03/news/amid-rising-tensions-north-south-korea-exchange-threats>. Accessed 21 May 2024.
- Davis, R. (2020). BTS on the Decision to Donate to Black Lives Matter: 'Prejudice Should Not Be Tolerated'. *Variety*.
<https://variety.com/2020/music/news/bts-black-lives-matter-donation-1234789434/>. Accessed 14 May 2024.
- Dawson, E. (2024a). What's Meaning Behind (G)I-DLE's 'Wife'? Controversial Lyrics Explained by K-Media. *KpopStarz*.
<https://www.kpopstarz.com/articles/317203/20240122/meaning-behind-gidle-wife-controversial-lyrics-explained-media.htm>. Accessed 12 May 2024.
- Dawson, E. (2024b). 5 K-pop Idols Criticized for Reading 'Feminist' Books: Red Velvet Irene, BTS RM, More!. *KpopStarz*.
<https://www.kpopstarz.com/articles/317917/20240303/5-kpop-idols-criticized-reading-feminist-books-red-velvet-irene-bts-rm.htm>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Delgado, S. (2019). The BTS ARMY Is Planting Trees and Writing Heartfelt Messages for Leader RM's Birthday. *Teen Vogue*.
<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/bts-army-planting-trees-writing-heartfelt-messages-leader-rm>

[der-rm-birthday#:~:text=%E2%80%9CTo%20celebrate%20RM's%20birthday%2C%20we,fan%20account%20shared%20on%20Twitter](#). Accessed 16 May 2024.

Devoe, N. (2021). Here's Everything To Know About Weverse, And How It's Changing. *Elite Daily*. <https://www.elitedaily.com/entertainment/weverse-app-explained>. Accessed 28 May 2024.

Dittmer, J. & McConnell, F. (2016). Diplomatic Cultures and International Politics: Translations, spaces and alternatives. *Routledge: London & New York*.

Dudden, A. (2019). Japan's rising sun flag has a history of horror. It must be banned at the Tokyo Olympics. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/01/japan-rising-sun-flag-history-olympic-ban-south-korea>. Accessed 10 May 2024.

Dzurillay, J. (2020). Does BTS Really Produce Their Own Music?. *Cheatsheet*. <https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/bts-produce-their-own-music.html/>. Accessed 10 May 2024.

Economic Times (2024). Did BTS's agency HYBE manipulate the group's success? South Korean govt to investigate allegations of chart-rigging. *Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/did-btss-agency-hybe-manipulate-the-groups-success-south-korean-govt-to-investigate-allegations-of-chart-rigging/articleshow/109890235.cms>. Accessed 17 May 2024.

Eschle, C., & Maiguashca, B. (2018). Theorising feminist organising in and against neoliberalism: beyond co-optation and resistance?. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1(1-2), 223-239. Retrieved May 6, 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510818X15272520831120>.

France24 (2023). K-pop stars Blackpink get UK honours for climate advocacy. *France24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231122-k-pop-stars-blackpink-get-uk-honours-for-climate-advocacy>. Accessed 13 May 2024.

Felshin, N. (1995). But is it art? : the spirit of art as activism. *Bay Press*.

Funderburk, A. (2021). Artivism: Making a Difference Through Art. *Art&Object*. <https://www.artandobject.com/articles/artivism-making-difference-through-art>. Accessed 21 May 2024

Gandhiok, T. (2020). BTS' Evolution From Crass Sexism To Considerate Feminism. *SheThePeople*. <https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/bts-evolution-from-crass-sexism-to-considerate-feminism>. Accessed 15 May 2024.

- Genova, A. (2018). Two nations disputed these small islands for 300 years. *National Geographic*.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/history-dispute-photos-dodko-rocks-islands>. Accessed 7 May 2024.
- Green Brunei (2019). BTS TREE PLANTING. *Green Brunei*.
<https://green-brunei.com/2019/11/24/bts-tree-planting/>. Accessed 16 May 2024.
- Grincheva, N. (2020). Museum Diplomacy in the Digital Age (1st ed.). *Routledge: London & New York*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351251006>.
- Gunia, A. (2023). 'It Breaks My Heart.' Confronting the Traumatic Impact of South Korea's Spycam Problem on Women. *TIME*.
<https://time.com/6154837/open-shutters-south-korea-spycam-molka/>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Ha, S. (2022). BTS fans from all over the world donate money for flood recovery in V's name. *ALLKPOP*.
<https://www.allkpop.com/article/2022/09/bts-fans-from-all-over-the-world-donate-money-for-flood-recovery-in-vs-name>. Accessed 16 May 2024.
- Ha, S. (2023). A famous idol trainer reveals the grim truth for trainees who don't debut in time. *ALLKPOP*.
<https://www.allkpop.com/article/2023/03/a-famous-idol-trainer-reveals-the-grim-truth-for-trainees-who-dont-debut-in-time>. Accessed 16 April 2024.
- Harris, M. (2022). Globalization of K-pop: How Diverse is the K-pop Fandom? *INSIGHT by Balance Now*.
[https://insight.balancenow.co/globalization-of-k-pop-how-diverse-is-the-k-pop-fandom/#:~:text=Multiple%20studies%20have%20shown%20that,and%20multiracial%20\(6%25\)%20fans](https://insight.balancenow.co/globalization-of-k-pop-how-diverse-is-the-k-pop-fandom/#:~:text=Multiple%20studies%20have%20shown%20that,and%20multiracial%20(6%25)%20fans). Accessed 14 May 2024.
- Haugland, C. (2020). Hallyu, The Korean Wave. Embassy of the Republic of Korea to Norway. *Embassy News; Citizen Journalists*.
https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/no-en/brd/m_21237/view.do?seq=81. Accessed 10 April 2024.
- Hu, E., Lee, J. W. & Paczek, J. (2022). How Girls' Generation shaped K-pop as we know it. *National Public Radio [NPR]*.
<https://www.npr.org/2022/09/12/1122480955/girls-generation-forever-1-anniversary-into-the-new-world>. Accessed 16 May 2024.
- Huang, S. (2017). Social media and the new Korean Wave. *Media, Culture & Society* 2017, Vol. 39(5) 773–777. *Sage Publications Ltd: USA*.

- Human Rights Watch.** (2024). North Korea: Events of 2023. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/north-korea>. Accessed 21 May 2024.
- HuskyFox, Ahn, H-C. & Lee, D-H.** (2019). BTS 'LOVE YOURSELF' SERIES Album Identity. *Behance*. <https://www.behance.net/gallery/77735237/BTS-LOVE-YOURSELF-SERIES-Album-Identity>. Accessed on 13 May 2024.
- Højbjerg, H.** (2014). Kapitel 9: Hermeneutik: Forståelse og fortolkning i samfundsvidenskaberne. In L. Fuglsang & P. Bitsch-Olsen (eds). *Videnskabsteori i samfundsvidenskaberne - på tværs af fagkulturer og paradigmer* (3rd ed.). *Samfundslitteratur: Denmark*.
- IMDb [Internet Movie Database].** (n.d.). Begin Again: Plot. *Internet Movie Database [IMDb]*. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt15002384/plotsummary/?ref_=tt_ov_pl. Accessed 9 May 2024.
- Jang, G.-S.** (2019). [오피니언 칼럼] 최창일 시인, "정치, '비긴어게인'처럼 할 수 없을까" [Eng translation: (Opinion Column) Poet Choi Chang-il, "Can't we do politics like 'Begin Again'?]. *미래일보 [Mirae Ilbo]* <http://hkmd.kr/mobile/article.html?no=35727>. Accessed 9 May 2024.
- Jeong, J.-N.** (2020). K-pop appeared at anti-government protests in Thailand... "Girls' Generation is the greatest strength" [태국 반정부 집회에 등장한 케이팝... "소녀시대가 가장 큰 힘"]. *Asia Today*. <https://www.asiatoday.co.kr/view.php?key=20201020010010707>. Accessed 16 May 2024.
- Jones, A.** (2013). High culture versus pop culture: which is best for engaging students? *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2013/feb/20/pop-culture-teaching-learning-engaging-students>. Accessed 18 April 2024
- Jung, D.-M.** (2022). More Koreans now see themselves as conservative than progressive. *The Korea Times*. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/05/113_327059.html. Accessed 18 May 2024.
- Jung, N.-K.** (2023). *Approaching North Korean Women's Rights through Art [Seminar Presentation]*. North Korean Women's Human Rights: Youth Seminar, 30 October 2023, Embassy of Canada, Seoul, South Korea.
- Kang, L. & Sit, J.** (2022). 'Gangnam Style' at 10: How Psy's smash hit sent Korean culture global. *CNN*.

- <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/psy-gangnam-style-10-years-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
- Karrah.** (2022). (G)I-dle Pushes Boundaries in "Nxde". *Seoulbeats*.
<https://seoulbeats.com/2022/10/gi-dle-pushes-boundaries-in-nxde/>. Accessed 14 May 2024.
- Keegan, M.** (2023). K-pop partnerships: A win-win for brands and artists or just lazy marketing? *Campaign Asia*.
<https://www.campaignasia.com/article/k-pop-partnerships-a-win-win-for-brands-and-artists-or-just-lazy-marketing/485755>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
- Kelleher, S.** (2024). South Korea Is Launching A Visa Just For K-Pop Fans. *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/suzannerowankelleher/2024/01/02/south-korea-is-launching-a-visa-just-for-k-pop-fans/?sh=56bb209139d3>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
- Kelly, R. E.** (2014). Sewol tragedy puts focus on Korean corruption, at last. *The Interpreter*.
<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/sewol-tragedy-puts-focus-korean-corruption-last>. Accessed 10 May 2024.
- Khan, A.** (2021). Fans celebrate BTS RM's birthday by going all-out from billboard ads, charities to tree plantations. *Sports Keeda*.
<https://www.sportskeeda.com/pop-culture/fans-celebrate-bts-rm-s-birthday-going-all-out-billboard-ads-charities-tree-plantations>. Accessed 16 May 2024.
- Kim, B.-R.** (2015). Past, Present and Future of Hallyu (Korean Wave). Vol. 5, No. 5; October 2015. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*.
- Kim, U.** (2019). BTS Fans Build Forest In RM's Name As Birthday Gift. *Soompi*.
<https://www.soompi.com/article/1349882wpp/bts-fans-build-forest-in-rms-name-as-birthday-gift>. Accessed 16 May 2024.
- Kim, M.** (2022). The Growth of South Korean Soft Power and Its Geopolitical Implications. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs, Air University Press: USA*.
<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3212634/the-growth-of-south-korean-soft-power-and-its-geopolitical-implications/>. Accessed 21 April 2024.
- Kim, H-Y.** (2023). Korean ramen exports hit record high amid global K-culture boom. *The Korea Herald*.
<https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20231120000614>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
- Kim, J-Y.** (2024). K-pop stars criticized for drinking coffee from 'pro-Israel' Starbucks. *Korea JoongAng Daily*.

- <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-01-14/entertainment/kpop/Kpop-stars-criticized-for-drinking-coffee-from-proIsrael-Starbucks/1957391>. Accessed 9 May 2024.
- Kim, S. & Jeong, Y.-S.** (2021). North Korea's Kim Jong-un isn't a K-pop fan anymore. *Korea JoongAng Daily*.
<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/06/16/national/northKorea/North-Korea-Red-Velvet-Kpop/20210616185700258.html>. Accessed 22 May 2024.
- Kinsella, H. M.** (2017). "Feminism" in J. Baylis, S. Smith & P. Owens. (Eds.), *The Globalisation of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*. 7th ed, pp. 189-203. Oxford University Press.
- Koen, V., André, C., Beom, J., Purwin, A. & Kim, B.** [OECD]. (2021). 12 Ways that Korea is changing the world: Sustaining the Miracle on the Han River. *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]*.
<https://www.oecd.org/country/korea/thematic-focus/sustaining-the-miracle-on-the-han-river-103653fa/>. Accessed 17 April 2024.
- Koennecke, G.** (2023). A history of K-pop music. *The Post Athens*.
<https://www.thepostathens.com/article/2023/09/a-history-of-k-pop-music>. Accessed 15 April 2024.
- Korea Times** (2024). NewJeans fans send protest truck against agency chief in conflict with HYBE. *Korea Times*. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2024/04/398_373371.html. Accessed 17 May 2024.
- Koreaboo** (2020). BTS Confirms That "Spring Day" Was Written About A Specific Event, Leading Fans To Believe It Was About The Sewol Ferry Tragedy. *Koreaboo*.
<https://www.koreaboo.com/news/bts-confirms-spring-day-written-specific-event-leading-fans-believe-sewol-ferry-tragedy/>. Accessed 10 May 2024.
- Koreaboo** (2022). Weverse Live Has Now Uploaded Artists' Old V LIVEs And Fans Are Voicing Their Concerns About The Change. *Koreaboo*.
<https://www.koreaboo.com/news/weverse-v-live-hybe-txt-bts-concerns-frustration-change-platform/>. Accessed 28 May 2024.
- Koreaboo** (2023). KARD's BM Speaks Out About The Israel-Palestine Crisis. *Koreaboo*.
<https://www.koreaboo.com/news/kard-bm-gaza-israel-palestine/>. Accessed 8 May 2024.
- Koreaboo** (2024). Why BTS Fans Are Taking Out Full-Page Newspaper Ads And Sending Flower Wreaths To HYBE. *Koreaboo*.
<https://www.koreaboo.com/news/bts-fans-army-flower-wreaths-newspaper-ads-protest-hybe/>. Accessed 17 May 2024.

- Korea Dokdo Foundation.** (2024). Why Dokdo is Korean Territory: The truth of the Dokdo. *Korea Dokdo Foundation* [독도재단]. <https://www.koreadokdo.or.kr/en/contents/sub01/page.html?mid=162169173>. Accessed 7 May 2024.
- KPOP4PLANET** (2024). ABOUT. *KPOP4PLANET*. <https://www.kpop4planet.com/about>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Ku, Y.** (2023). Blackswan: The K-pop girl group with no Korean members. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66541773>. Accessed 27 May 2024.
- Kushnarenko, N.** (2019). LGBT and Feminism: Why Does Gender Equality Bother Conservatives? *Heinrich Böll Stiftung: Kuiv, Ukraine*. <https://ua.boell.org/en/2019/12/25/lgbt-and-feminism-why-does-gender-equality-bother-conservatives>. Accessed 18 May 2024.
- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S.** (2015). Interview- det kvalitative forskningsinterview som håndværk. 3. Edition. *Hans Reitzels Forlag: Copenhagen*.
- Lamont, C.** (2015). Research methods in international relations. *Sage Publications Ltd: USA*.
- Lee, C.** (2018). [Feature] Feminist novel becomes center of controversy in South Korea. *The Korea Herald*. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180327000799>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Lee, G.-L.** (2019). Five foreigners linked to YG-Seungri sex scandal. *Korea Times*. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2024/04/398_269810.html. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Lee, J.** (2021). The Process Of Becoming A K-Pop Idol. *Creatrip*. <https://creatrip.com/en/news/11280>. Accessed 30 April 2024.
- Le Guay, B. & Gallon, V.** (2021). K-Beauty: How did Korea make its mark in the world of cosmetics? *Premium Beauty News*. <https://www.premiumbeautynews.com/en/k-beauty-how-did-korea-make-its.19204#>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
- Lenor, R.** (2024). New report shows how digitally disconnected North Korea is from the world. *Daily NK*. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/new-report-shows-how-digitally-disconnected-north-korea-is-from-world/>. Accessed 21 May 2024.
- Leung, L.** (2015). Validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 4(3):324-7.

- Lie, J. (2015). *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (1st ed.). University of California Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt9qh2pr>.
- Lim, J.-S. (2023). Big Bang's Seungri finishes 18-month jail term. *The Korea Herald*.
<https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230210000554>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Lorenz, T., Browning, K. & Frenkel, S. (2020). TikTok Teens and K-Pop Stans Say They Sank Trump Rally. *NY Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Lucas, S. (2022). (G)I-DLE New Song “Nxde” Gains Attention After Becoming A Trend On TikTok Aimed At Combating The Sexualization Of Idols. *Koreaboo*.
<https://www.koreaboo.com/news/gidle-nxde-trend-tiktok-combat-sexualisation-idols/>. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- Mackenzie, J. (2024). South Korea: World Scout Jamboree disaster blamed on government. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68902885>. Accessed 7 May 2024.
- Magaldi, D. & Berler, M. (2020) Semi-structured interviews in V., Zeigler-Hill & T.K. Shackelford (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*. *Switzerland: Springer Nature*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24612-3>.
- Marcus, L. (2024). South Korea’s digital nomad visa is about much more than travel. *CNN Travel*.
<https://edition.cnn.com/travel/south-korea-digital-nomad-visa-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed 10 May 2024.
- Mark, S. (2009). DISCUSSION PAPERS IN DIPLOMACY: A Greater Role for Cultural Diplomacy. *Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’*.
- McCurry, J. (2022). Outcry as South Korean president tries to scrap gender equality ministry to ‘protect’ women. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/07/outcry-as-south-korean-president-tries-to-scrap-gender-equality-ministry-to-protect-women>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Media Outreach (2019). #KPopTwitter continues to make Hallyu Waves with record 5.3 billion Tweets globally in 2018. *Media Outreach*.
<https://www.media-outreach.com/news/singapore/2019/02/21/7999/kpoptwitter-continues-to-make-hallyu-waves-with-record-5-3-billion-tweets-globally-in-2018/>. Accessed 9 April 2024.

- Media Outreach** (2020). ATEEZ sign up to be Polished Man ambassadors. *Metropolitan Digital*.
<https://metropolitandigital.com/entertainment-news/6432-ateez-sign-up-to-be-polished-man-ambassadors>. Accessed 14 May 2024.
- Merriam Webster** (2024). Co-optation noun. *Merriam Webster: Dictionary*.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/co-optation#:~:text=noun,fist%20as%20a%20patriotic%20symbol%20%E2%80%A6>. Accessed 28 April 2024.
- MFA Boston** (2024). Hallyu! The Korean Wave. *MFA Boston*.
<https://www.mfa.org/exhibition/hallyu-the-korean-wave>. Accessed 10 April 2024.
- Milko, V.** (2024). K-pop fans around globe rally for climate and environment goals. *AP News*.
<https://apnews.com/article/hyundai-coal-kpop-indonesia-climate-0e7ec393f20ca0194d7291e70f49b084>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Mitchell, R.** (2024). Should Women Start Boycotting Men? Inside South Korea's 4B Movement. *ELLE*. <https://www.elle.com.au/culture/4b-movement-meaning/>. Accessed 16 May 2024.
- Morin, N.** (2019). K-Pop 101: The Terms You Need To Know Before You Stan. *Refinery29*.
<https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/k-pop-music-fans-terms-meaning>. Accessed 16 April 2024.
- Mubarak, S.** (2023). 5 Times K-Pop Idols Supported LGBTQ+ Community With Their Style. *HELLO! INDIA*.
<https://in.hellomagazine.com/fashion/gallery/20230802303132/k-pop-idols-lgbtq-support-through-style/1/>. Accessed 19 May 2024.
- Muiz, W. A.** (2023). K-pop Idols' sudden love for Starbucks face backlash amid Palestine-Israel boycott. *Sinar Daily*.
<https://www.sinardaily.my/article/214277/focus/k-pop-idols-sudden-love-for-starbucks-face-backlash-amid-palestine-israel-boycott>. Accessed 9 May 2024.
- Murray, M.** (2023). How (G)I-DLE Explore Empowerment On 'Nxde' And I love. *THE HONEY POP*.
<https://thehoneypop.com/2022/10/20/how-gi-dle-explore-empowerment-on-nxde-and-i-love/?v=3a52f3c22ed6>. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- Nash, J. C.** (2008). Re-thinking intersectionality. *Feminist Review*, 89, 1–15.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40663957>.

- National Geographic Education (2024). ENCYCLOPEDIC ENTRY: Confucianism. *National Geographic*.
<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/confucianism/>. Accessed 27 April 2024.
- Nayyar, K. (2023). Here Are Some of the BTS Members' Recent Global Brand Collaborations, from Dior to Valentino. *PRESTIGE*.
<https://www.prestigeonline.com/th/style/fashion/bts-global-brand-collaborations/#:~:text=In%20the%20past%2C%20BTS%20have,came%20to%20the%20lux%20category>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
- Nolan, A. (2023). BTS's RM Opens Up About The "Misogyny" Controversy The Group Faced. *Koreaboo*.
<https://www.koreaboo.com/news/bts-rm-addresses-misogyny-controversy/>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Nolan, A. (2024). LE SSERAFIM's Yunjin Sparks Heated Debate In Korea After Reading "Feminist" Book. *Koreaboo*.
<https://www.koreaboo.com/news/le-sserafim-yunjin-sparks-heated-debate-reading-feminist-book/>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Nwankwo, E. C. (2023). The Power of Social Media in Shaping Politics and Social Movements. *MEDIUM*.
<https://ericnwankwo.medium.com/the-power-of-social-media-in-shaping-politics-and-social-movements-d473eb4ab559>. Accessed 22 May 2024.
- Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft power : the means to success in world politics. *New York: Public Affairs*.
- Nye, J. S. (2008). Public Diplomacy and Soft Power. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616, 94–109. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996>.
- Nye, J. S. (2011). Power and foreign policy. *Journal of Political Power*, 4(1), 9–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2011.555960>.
- Nye, J. S. (2019). Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Revisited. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 14(1–2), 7–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-14101013>.
- Nye, J. S. (2021). Soft power: the evolution of a concept. *Journal of Political Power*, 14(1), 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879572>.

- Oetzel, J. (2023). Rainbow-Washing: Corporate Co-Optation and Hashtag Activism. Policy Brief No. 165. *Toda Peace Institute*.
https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-165_rainbow-washing_oetzel.pdf
- Pamment, J. (2013). New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century: A comparative study of policy and practice. *Routledge: London & New York*.
- Pannchoa (2024). [theqoo] THE CONDOLENCE FLOWER WREATHS THAT WILL SOON BE SENT TO HYBE. *Pannchoa*.
<https://www.pannchoa.com/2024/05/theqoo-condolence-flower-wreaths-that.html>.
 Accessed 17 May 2024.
- Pannkpop (2024). Korean netizens react to the funeral wreaths placed in front of HYBE in real time. *Pannkpop*.
<https://pannkpop.com/korean-netizens-react-to-the-funeral-wreaths-placed-in-front-of-hybe-in-real-time/>. Accessed 19 May 2024.
- Park, B-J. (2001). Patriarchy in Korean Society: Substance and Appearance of Power. *Korea journal* v.41 no.4: South Korea.
- Park, H-S. (2021). Stars becoming more vocal in political matters. *Korea Times*.
https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2021/03/398_305510.html. Accessed 20 May 2024.
- Park, S. Y.-S. (2024). How the Sewol Sinking Changed South Korea. *The Diplomat*.
<https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/how-the-sewol-sinking-changed-south-korea/>. Accessed 27 May 2024.
- Paviour-Smith, M. (2010). 'Masculine Normal Guy Here' – Lonely Hearts and 'Normal' Gays in Cyberspace. In R. Taiwo (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Discourse Behavior and Digital Communication: Language Structures and Social Interaction* (pp. 164-179). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-61520-773-2.ch010>.
- PSCORE. (2023). Digital Hostages: Internet Freedom in North Korea. *People for Successful COrean REunification [PSCORE]*.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1slq5K6ZcSltYreaPQuhlCB9-cJk8vH7J/view>.
- Pham, J. (2020). 25 K-Pop Fandom Words Every K-Pop Stan Should Know: If you're new to K-pop, here's the slang to know. *Stylecaster*.
<https://stylecaster.com/feature/k-pop-fandom-words-1153522/>. Accessed 15 April 2024.
- Pham, T. (2022). (G)I-DLE go 'Nxde,' Baring Their Authentic Selves on Marilyn Monroe-Inspired Track. *University of California Irvine: Official Campus Newspaper*.

- <https://newuniversity.org/2022/11/18/gi-dle-go-nxde-baring-their-authentic-selves-on-marilyn-monroe-inspired-track/>. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- Porta, D. D. & Keating, M. (2008).** Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective. *Cambridge University Press: UK*.
- Regan, J. & Dailey, H. (2022).** BTS Visit the White House & Meet With President Joe Biden: Photos. *Billboard*.
<https://www.billboard.com/photos/bts-at-white-house-joe-biden-meeting-1235079570/>. Accessed 8 May 2024.
- Renaissance (2023).** Fan Activism: How Music Fandoms Are Driving Social Change. *Renaissance*. <https://blog.renaissance.app/fan-activism/>. Accessed 14 May 2024.
- Roll, M. (2021).** Korean Wave (Hallyu) – The Rise of Korea’s Cultural Economy and Pop Culture. *Martin Roll Company: Business & Brand Leadership*.
<https://martinroll.com/resources/articles/asia/korean-wave-hallyu-the-rise-of-koreas-cultural-economy-pop-culture/>. Accessed 12 April 2014.
- Romano, A. (2018).** How K-pop became a global phenomenon. *VOX*.
<https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/2/16/16915672/what-is-kpop-history-explained>. Accessed 15 April 2024.
- Sarkar, I. (2024).** (G)I-DLE's 'Wife' Is A Clever Absurdist Take On Patriarchy | K-Pop Explained. *Kpopmap TRENDS*.
<https://trends.kpopmap.com/gidle-wife-is-a-clever-absurdist-take-on-patriarchy-kpop-explained/>. Accessed 12 May 2024.
- SCMP (2022).** Disgraced K-pop star Seungri admits guilt, sees jail term halved on appeal for his part in Burning Sun prostitution and embezzlement scandal. *South China Morning Post*.
https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/k-pop/news/article/3164973/disgraced-k-pop-star-seungri-admits-guilt-sees-jail-term?campaign=3164973&module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Sharma, I. (2024).** What was South Korea's Burning Sun scandal involving K-pop celebrities. *NewsBytes*.
<https://www.newsbytesapp.com/news/entertainment/what-was-south-korea-s-burning-sun-scandal/story>. Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Sheffield, D. (2018).** BTS Jimin’s T-shirt controversy isn’t the first K-pop-related historical blunder. *METRO*.
<https://metro.co.uk/2018/11/14/bts-jimins-t-shirt-controversy-isnt-the-first-k-pop-related-historical-blunder-8126778/>. Accessed 10 May 2024.

- Shen, Y. (2024). Feminism and Freedom in K-pop Music: the Cultural Rebellion of (G)I-DLE. *Presset*.
<https://www.preset.no/kultur/2024/2/8/feminism-and-freedom-in-k-pop-music-the-cultural-rebellion-of-gi-dle>. Accessed 10 May 2024.
- Shinde, S. (2023). 6 times K-pop fandoms organized protest truck demonstrations: ENHYPEN's Bite Me controversy, EXO OT6 demand, and more. *Sports Skeeda*.
<https://www.sportskeeda.com/pop-culture/6-times-k-pop-fandoms-organized-protest-truck-demonstrations-enhypen-s-bite-me-controversy-exo-ot6-demand>. Accessed 17 May 2024.
- Singh, R. (2024). Explained: Controversy and drama at Hybe, the K-pop company behind BTS. *Indian Express*.
<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-culture/hybe-k-pop-ador-controversy-newjeans-bts-9328888/#:~:text=A%20Hybe%20subsidiary%20named%20ADOR,made%20CEO%20two%20years%20later>. Accessed 17 May 2024.
- Snow, N. (2020). Public Diplomacy. *Oxford University Press: USA*.
- Son, S. A. (2024). Clicking foreign media still cause to die in North Korea. *Asia Times*.
<https://asiatimes.com/2024/02/clicking-foreign-media-still-cause-to-die-in-north-korea/>. Accessed 21 May 2024.
- Srivastava, A. (2024a). BTS Members' cult group scandal: HYBE fumes over 'Dahn World' connection, 'crossing the line...'. *Hindustan Times*.
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/music/bts-members-cult-group-scandal-hybe-fumes-over-dahn-world-connection-crossing-the-line-101714418657445.html>. Accessed 17 May 2024.
- Srivastava, A. (2024b). Whitewashing Zendaya: Korean media faces backlash for their 'weird' obsession amid Dune 2 promotion. *Hindustan Times*.
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/hollywood/whitewashing-zendaya-korean-media-faces-backlash-for-their-weird-obsession-amid-dune-2-promotion-101708652381180.html>. Accessed 12 May 2024.
- Statista (2024). K-pop and the big 4 entertainment agencies in South Korea - statistics & facts. *Statista*.
<https://www.statista.com/topics/5688/k-pop-and-big-4-entertainment-agencies-in-south-korea/#topicOverview>. Accessed 15 April 2024.
- Strutzinsky, N. (2023). The Message, Cinematics, and Emotional Impact of "Nxde" by (G)I-DLE. *George Mason University*.
<https://tntlab.carterschool.gmu.edu/discover/rabbit-holes/the-message-cinematics-and-emotional-impact-of-nxde-by-gi-dle/>. Accessed 14 May 2024.

- Sunio, P. (2020). From BTS to Blackpink – what it takes to become a K-pop idol in South Korea. *Style*.
<https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/news-trends/article/3048154/bts-blackpink-what-it-takes-become-k-pop-idol-south>. Accessed 15 April 2024.
- Sweeting, T. (2022). (G)I-DLE’s Soyeon Praised For Coming Up With Clever Way To Prevent Illegal Pornography. *Koreaboo*.
<https://www.koreaboo.com/news/gidle-soyeon-nude-child-illegal-pornography-praised/>. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- Tan, C. (2022). 7 Times BTS Unintentionally Caused Products To Sell Out. *Tatler*.
<https://www.tatlerasia.com/lifestyle/entertainment/bts-effect-members-sold-out-items-merchandise>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
- The Economist (2024). Why South Korean pop culture rocks and North Korea’s does not. *The Economist*.
<https://www.economist.com/culture/2024/04/22/why-south-korean-pop-culture-rocks-and-north-koreas-does-not>. Accessed 21 May 2024.
- The Los Angeles Film School (2021). A BRIEF HISTORY OF K-POP. *The Los Angeles Film School*. <https://www.lafilm.edu/blog/a-brief-history-of-kpop/>. Accessed 15 April 2024.
- The Sanchon Hunjang (2005). The Sanchon Hunjang’s Guide to Korean Funerals. *The Sanchon Hunjang*.
<https://sanchonhunjang.blogspot.com/2005/11/sanchon-hunjangs-guide-to-korean.html>. Accessed 17 May 2024.
- Thoreson, R. (2023). Marriage Equality Gets a Boost in South Korea: Proposed Law Would Protect Rights of Same-Sex Couples. *Human Rights Watch*.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/01/marriage-equality-gets-boost-south-korea>. Accessed 19 May 2024.
- Tizzard, D. A. (2022). Korean Mental Health: Stranger Things. *Korea Times*.
https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2024/04/715_329976.html. Accessed 10 May 2024.
- UN SDG (n.d.). BLACKPINK – SDG Advocates. *UN SDG*.
<https://www.unsdgadvocates.org/blackpink>. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- UNICEF (2018, September 24). BTS speech at the United Nations | UNICEF [Video]. *Youtube*.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTe4f-bBEKg&t=2s&ab_channel=UNICEF. Accessed 13 May 2024.

- UNICEF (2021). BTS and Big Hit renew commitment to “LOVE MYSELF” campaign to support UNICEF in ending violence and neglect as well as promoting self-esteem and well-being. *UNICEF*.
<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/bts-and-big-hit-renew-commitment-love-myself-campaign-support-unicef-ending-violence>. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- UNICEF (2024). BTS and UNICEF celebrate LOVE MYSELF campaign with renewed support for UNICEF’s #OnMyMind initiative. *UNICEF*.
<https://www.unicef.org/partnerships/bts-and-unicef-celebrate-love-myself-campaign-renewed-support-unicefs-onmymind#:~:text=As%20of%20March%202024%2C%20BIGHIT.and%20album%20profits%20to%20UNICEF>. Accessed 13 May 2024.
- Valeriano, B. & Nissen, A. (2022). This Is South Korea’s K-pop Soft Power Moment. *The Diplomat*.
<https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/this-is-south-koreas-k-pop-soft-power-moment/>. Accessed 8 April 2024.
- Vanbuskirk, S. (2024). Understanding the Male Gaze and How It Objectifies Women: Perception and Sexualisation. *VeryWellMind*.
<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-male-gaze-5118422>. Accessed 27 May 2024.
- van der Toorn, J., Pliskin, J., & Morgenroth, T. (2020). Not quite over the rainbow: the unrelenting and insidious nature of heteronormative ideology. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* Volume 34, August 2020, Pages 160-165. *ScienceDirect*.
- Verma, S. (2024). Decoding the 4 Generations of K-Pop. *HALSUG*.
<https://halsugprod.com/blog/decoding-four-generations-of-kpop>. Accessed 15 April 2024.
- Victoria & Albert Museum (2022). HALLYU! THE KOREAN WAVE. *VAM*.
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/hallyu-the-korean-wave>. Accessed 10 April 2024.
- von der Lippe, B. (2012). The White Woman’s Burden: “Feminist” War Rhetoric and the Phenomenon of Co-optation. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 20(1), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2011.618811>.
- Williams, G. T. (2022). Artivism: The Artists and Artwork Fighting for Social Change. *Sound Of Life*.
<https://www.soundoflife.com/blogs/experiences/artivism-artists-artwork-social-change>. Accessed 21 May 2024.
- Wilson Center (2007). Celebrity Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities. *Wilson Center*.
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/celebrity-diplomacy-challenges-and-opportunities>. Accessed 24 April 2024.

- Wooldridge, M. (2015). Poststructuralism and Feminism: The Interplay between Gender, Language and Power. *York University*.
<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/22/poststructuralism-and-feminism-the-interplay-between-gender-language-and-power/>. Accessed 28 April 2024.
- Yang, H. (2022a). The wrath of 'cancel culture' wanes for K-pop stars. *Korea JoongAng Daily*.
<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/04/28/entertainment/kpop/stray-kids-big-bang-gidle-soojin/20220428132642731.html>. Accessed 20 May 2024.
- Yang, H. (2022b). Idols think twice about their every move during election season. *Korea JoongAng Daily*.
<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/03/15/entertainment/kpop/korea-presidential-election-kpop-vote-kpop-politics/20220315155650208.html>. Accessed 20 May 2024.
- Yep, T. (2023). BTS Songs That Address Social Issues. *Pop Tokki*.
<https://www.poptokki.com/bts-songs-that-address-social-issues/>. Accessed 10 May 2024.
- Yim, H.-S. (2022). 'Into the New World': Girls' Generation's debut song lives on as Millennials' anthem of solidarity. *The Korea Herald*.
<https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220414000732>. Accessed 16 May 2024.
- Yim, H.-S. (2024). South Korea LGBTQ event finds home in streets after permit struggle. *Reuters*.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-lgbtq-event-finds-home-streets-after-permit-struggle-2024-05-07/>. Accessed 19 May 2024.
- Yoo, H. (2023). K-pop targets global audience with English lyrics. *The Korea Herald*.
<https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20231031000546>. Accessed 27 May 2024.
- Yoon, M.-S. (2023). Where does Korea stand on same-sex marriage? *The Korea Herald*.
<https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230320000689>. Accessed 19 May 2024.
- Zaborskis, M. (2018). Gender Studies: Foundations and Key Concepts. *JSTOR: Daily*.
<https://daily.jstor.org/reading-list-gender-studies/>. Accessed 27 April 2024.
- Zheng, C. (2021). Analysis of Kpop Agencies. *Medium*.
<https://crzheng97.medium.com/analysis-of-kpop-agencies-9a2fd99c891a>. Accessed 15 April 2024.
- Zoom (2021). BTS' V's huge blunder in latest VLIVE gets the most hilarious damage control response from Jimin - Find out. *Zoom TV Entertainment*.
<https://www.zoomtventertainment.com/korean/bts-vs-huge-blunder-in-latest-vlive-gets-th>

[e-most-hilarious-damage-control-response-from-jimin-find-out-article-88026239.](#)

Accessed 9 May 2024.

Zur, D. (2023). Korea Gone Global: K-Pop and Technologies of Soft Power. Stanford University. *SPICE: Stanford Program on International Cross-Cultural Education*. <https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/multimedia/korea-gone-global-k-pop-and-technologies-soft-power>. Accessed 4 April 2024.