

K-pop Idols as Diplomats: South Korean Celebrities and Soft Power

*By Tara Shafie**

This study explores how South Korea has expanded its soft power through a strategy of using K-pop music idols as diplomats. It demonstrates how the South Korean government effectively employs K-pop to increase its soft power and uses K-pop idols as public diplomats, in five case studies from 2018–2022. Using global media discourse as an indicator of soft power, it provides an analysis of the effects of this strategy and shows how it has been advantageous for South Korea. The K-pop industry's combined economic and cultural power make it a prime example of soft power today. With broader implications, this study suggests a more comprehensive definition of soft power.

Keywords: *K-pop, soft power, South Korea, public diplomacy, international relations*

Introduction

In recent years, the popularity of Korean pop music, or K-pop, has expanded exponentially around the world. This trend, known as the Hallyu Wave, or Korean Wave, began in the 1990s, rising every year (Park 2023a). The K-pop music industry and overall entertainment industry is a significant part of South Korea's economy, with the music group BTS alone contributing over \$3.5 billion annually (Young 2022). K-pop artists and merchandise generated over nine billion dollars in 2023 in the US alone, for example. The international K-pop phenomenon is still growing rapidly and continuing to generate revenue worldwide.

This study explores how the South Korean government intentionally uses K-pop idols as public diplomats for the purpose of expanding its soft power. I examine how the South Korean government successfully used K-pop idols as public diplomats from 2018–2022, and analyze some of the recent effects of this strategy. This endeavor has been advantageous for South Korea as a whole because it has helped increase its soft power and revenue; it has in turn expanded the K-pop industry itself. I argue that the K-pop industry's combined economic and cultural power make it one effective element of South Korea's current soft power.

As defined in Joseph Nye's well-known work, soft power grows when a country gains international influence through non-militaristic means (Nye 1990). For Nye, soft power is more about attraction or persuasion, whereas hard power is more about coercion, force, or the threat of force (of course, we must recognize that there is some overlap between hard and soft power). Since the end of the Cold War, countries have been attempting to gain influence through non-traditional and non-militaristic means, such as cultural and economic influence. K-pop rests at the intersection of

*Researcher, San Francisco State University, USA.

the cultural and the economic, as it is a cultural industry unique to South Korea that also has a tangible impact on the economy.

On a theoretical level, my findings offer a useful new perspective on South Korean soft power, and my analysis will push against traditional theories of diplomacy by emphasizing the role of non-state actors in the field of international relations, following the Nascent School of Diplomacy. Though I rely on Nye's theory of soft power for the theoretical framework, I explore how both hard power and soft power go together, thereby combining elements from the realist and constructivist schools. Simply put, realism tends to emphasize monetary gains of tangible influence, which constructivism does not tend to account for. With this analysis, I will also offer a more comprehensive definition of soft power that, as observed by scholars, the field of international relations sorely lacks (Yun 2018). Scholars continue to disagree on the nuances of what constitutes soft power. I suggest that varied existing definitions tend to ignore the monetary impact of non-militaristic influence. By incorporating some aspects of hard power and traditional soft power into a more comprehensive definition, I suggest a broader definition of soft power in looking at K-pop and South Korea.

Of course, from one perspective, music, film, television, new media, and other creative industries all represent manifestations of material power, in a sense. Because music and shows related to K-pop rely on technology for monetary gain; I acknowledge that material power and the products of material culture and intellectual property (such as K-pop music, K-pop competition shows, related group merchandise, and even K-drama shows) are material aspects of soft power. Thus, the South Korean government established the Ministry of Sports, Culture and Tourism to federally and financially support this intellectual property and cultural production (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, South Korea).

I present five case studies of the South Korean government's use of K-pop idols as public diplomats that have never been analyzed before in an international relations setting. The five cases I have selected because they are the most representative include:

1. K-pop group EXO performing at the 2018 Winter Olympics closing ceremony.
2. K-pop group Red Velvet performing for Kim Jong-un and members of the North Korean government on a diplomatic trip to North Korea.
3. EXO meeting US President Donald Trump during a presidential visit to South Korea.
4. K-pop group BTS meeting US President Joe Biden at the White House.
5. BTS giving a speech at the United Nations.

As part of my analyses, I provide figures for strategies of quantifying soft power. One indicator of soft power I use is worldwide media coverage, showing how a case has more impact on South Korea's soft power if it has more media coverage. Second, I use the monthly K-pop group Brand Reputation Index to quantify a given group's popularity at a particular time. This measure of popularity can be used to explain variation in soft power gains, as groups that are more popular engaging in public diplomacy will result in higher soft power gains. I also provide approval ratings of the current president of South Korea at the time of each given case, and the approval rating of the other party involved (if any) to further explain variation in soft power

gains. This can also help illustrate if the case had any effect on a particular politician's approval rating. The South Korean president's approval ratings are taken from domestic Gallup polls in South Korea, and the American presidents' approval ratings are taken from domestic American Gallup polls. The United Nations' approval rating is also taken from domestic American Gallup polls. These data are a mix of primary and secondary sources.

Literature Review

I offer a synthesis of the common debates in the field of International Relations relating to soft power and public diplomacy. I first discuss discourse on soft power, also with a section analyzing existing soft power indexes and data. I then look briefly at the existing literature on schools of diplomacy, challenging the Traditional School, and affirming the Nascent School. I push against notions of "soft power resources" versus actual examples of soft power, explaining how it is applicable to the South Korean K-pop project (as well as looking at broader implications of soft power, specifically found in Japan's case, to provide further context).

Soft Power

Before we can analyze how *soft power* is applied to South Korean celebrities, we must first understand the concept as a whole. Soft power was originally coined by Joseph Nye in his 1990 work, in which he examines the state of great powers' international influence in a post-Cold War era where the power game itself has fundamentally changed. Prior to the Cold War, power was gained primarily through hard power, or militaristic force. Nye argues that international influence can also be considered power, and when it is gained through non-militaristic means, it is known as soft power. This may be achieved in many ways, the most common being diplomacy and trade. As an example, Nye explores Japan's growing economy (at the time of its industrialization and rapid growth) as another source of soft power. Since Japan was able to manufacture and export in-demand goods so efficiently, it allowed for their companies to take root abroad, thereby expanding its international influence, or soft power. Operationally, we can understand that Nye conceptualizes soft power as ideological influence, or economic influence, as long as it is not gained through traditionally militaristic means or coercion (Nye 1990, p. 153). As I will argue later in this paper, in a sense, money is soft power. Influence can be bought. This statement seems to challenge Nye, as he states that payment is a form of hard power in *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power* (2008). However, later in the same article, he suggests that advertising is a viable way of expanding and promoting influence (Nye 2008). Advertising money is key, because when a country is attempting to sell a product (in the example of South Korea, itself) to an international audience, which requires money to do so. In addition, the very implication of a country's "interests" that they are attempting to get through diplomacy tends to refer to monetary gains.

There are many ways in which scholars have measured and operationally defined soft power. Nye's original definition of the term allows for revision and debate. According to Yun (2018), some ways scholars operationalize soft power include a country's reputation, a nation's brand, and national image. Yun identifies another group of scholars who measure soft power through various indicators, such as "a country's attribute, behavior, and performance", yet there is disagreement even within this camp. Nye views the movement of people, such as tourists, students, and immigrants as an example of soft power, but some scholars disagree with Nye himself on this particular indicator (Yun 2018). Such scholars include Olivé and Molina (2011), and Trunkos (2013), who view these as *manifestations* of soft power, as opposed to *resources* (Olivé and Molina 2011).

Indexes

There are multiple indexes that seek to measure and visually map out soft power. The Soft Power 30 index, acknowledged by Nye, operationalizes and quantifies the soft power of 30 countries. It was advertised as the first project of its kind in 2011, and remains the soft power index that scholars consult the most. Yun analyzes the Soft Power 30's validity, stating that issues arise with the inclusion of instrumental resources, which Yun claims "require a nuanced understanding of their relationship with basic resources" (Yun 2018, p. 11). Basic resources are operationalized by several indicators (such as the UN's index of gender inequality, quality of universities, foreign aid, and more). Instrumental resources, Yun defines, are ways in which basic resources are highlighted, and tend to be intangible. Contact with these basic resources results in various types of beliefs, which increases a country's soft power. These beliefs that people gain are instrumental resources, and they help to increase a country's appeal. This is where the debate about the movement of people, students, and tourists as soft power indicators arises again. It is difficult to theoretically classify and practically measure the movement of people. Yun specifically uses students as an example, as an instrumental resource. She states that since the instrumental resource effect of the movement of people is so hard to quantify, the Soft Power 30 including it as a marker of soft power is problematic.

The Soft Power 30 uses six indicators for the operationalization of soft power: diplomacy, culture, education, government, business, and digital resources. Yun observes that the Soft Power 30 is lacking in any indicators involving military power. A first-glance response to this is that soft power is defined as non-militaristic power, which is why it is entirely excluded. However, Yun makes a valid point; a powerful military can induce fear from other countries as well as improve a country's reputation, which would be soft power. As stated in my introduction, I am interested in how hard and soft power intersect. By strictly separating them, as Yun points out, we are not accounting for very tangible forms of power. Soft power can still be related to the military while not yet being hard power, and conversely, hard power can have very real effects on soft power.

In addition to the Soft Power 30, the Lowy Institute offers a soft power index specific to Asia.¹ The main measures of soft power in this particular index are: economic capability, military capability, resilience, future resources, economic relationships, defense networks, diplomatic influence, and cultural influence.² Already, the Lowy Institute is accounting for one of Yun's critiques on the Soft Power 30. Yun's paper was published in 2018, and the Lowy Institute began its research in 2018, addressing gaps in existing research (Yun 2018, pp. 11–14). The Soft Power 30 also has not been updated since 2019, making its data outdated, specifically that of East Asian countries. South Korea has gained immense soft power with the K-pop industry in the past few years, and the Soft Power 30 does not yet account for these recent developments. As of 2019, however, South Korea has risen in the overall rankings, and if the Soft Power 30 updates again, we might safely assume that it would likely rank even higher, thanks in part to further cultural gains. Since the Soft Power 30 is outdated, the Lowy Institute helps to account for the East Asian data. Though the measurement tools are different, it nevertheless helps to visualize the rise in soft power for Asian countries (Lowy Institute).

Public Diplomacy

Soft power is an important feature of public diplomacy.³ Since international relations itself is a relatively new field, it is constantly developing, as seen from the theory of soft power itself (coined in 1990 and now an integral part of the field). As international relations continue to develop, traditional notions of diplomacy are also challenged. The Traditional School of diplomacy focuses entirely on states, and views diplomacy as interactions between states. The Nascent School of diplomacy, however, focuses on the role of *non-state* actors in diplomacy. The Traditional School does not acknowledge actors outside of states, which entirely ignores powerful actors such as NGOs, IGOs, multinational corporations, and public figures, that may all significantly impact foreign policy. Scholars view the Nascent School as twenty-first-century diplomacy; the international stage has fundamentally changed since the pre-Cold War era, and traditional diplomacy is no longer as effective (Lee and Ayhan 2015). Nascent scholars believe that non-state actors are faster than and just as effective as state actors, and that diplomacy does not reside exclusively within states and government personnel. The Nascent School calls for a shift in emphasis from traditional state-based diplomacy to that of non-state actors, who must be

¹It also includes the US, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand, but does not include Middle Eastern countries.

²Sub Indicators: size, international leverage, technology, connectivity, defense spending, armed forces, weapons and platforms, signature capabilities, Asian military posture, internal stability, resource security, geoeconomic security, geopolitical security, nuclear deterrence, economic resources (2030), defense resources (2030), broad resources (2030), demographic resources (2030), regional trade relations, regional investment ties, economic diplomacy, regional alliance network, regional defense diplomacy, global defense partnerships, diplomatic network, multilateral power, foreign policy, cultural projection, international influence, and people exchanges.

³It is outside of the scope of this paper to analyze every aspect of public diplomacy, thus I simply focus on its relationship with soft power.

acknowledged for their influence on the contemporary world stage. A question that the Nascent School poses, however, is:

“Do nonstate actors have readily definable diplomatic practices and procedures for the realization of policy goals? If so, why are they effective, and how do they differ from the traditional means and methods of diplomacy?” (Murray 2008)

Lee and Ayhan (2015) help answer this question, reminding us that “public diplomacy can have various objectives from advocacy to promotion of universal values”, which non-state actors can easily accomplish. They also add, that by virtue of being a *non*-state actor, non-state actors can contribute to unintentional consequences from their public diplomacy. Citing Leonard et al., Lee and Ayhan, they observe that effective public diplomacy requires years-long relationship building so that a certain level of trust is maintained between the actors and the public (Lee and Ayhan 2015, p. 61).

Non-state actors have an advantage over state actors, as they are not limited by term limits. For example, the presidential term limit in South Korea is five years. Compare that to the example of a K-Pop music group singer, such as EXO’s Suho, who has been a public figure since 2012, and will continue to be a public figure for the duration of EXO’s career. The non-state actor has a clear advantage over the state actor in this scenario, as the non-state actor has spent over a decade building up a large fanbase who trusts him and his opinions. Though a president may have had a long political career prior to becoming president, their standing with the general public always depends on their current performance as president, whereas non-state actors are not held to the same standard. State actors simply do not have the same type of relationship with the public as non-state actors do, which makes them ideal for public diplomacy. In addition, non-state actors are useful in scenarios in which a given state itself “lacks credibility”. In these situations, non-state actors have more social capital, and are more effective than state actors, with appeals to a wider population. One way the state can lack credibility is when public diplomacy is seen by public opinion as a state’s self-interest. A way non-state actors can combat this is that they can show “goodwill and adherence to universal values” (Lee and Ayhan 2015, p. 63). Due to the nature of the K-pop industry and the standards to which it holds its many idols, they are often believed to be exhibiting “goodwill” and are therefore effective non-state actors for public diplomacy.⁴ In short, celebrity diplomats are an effective way to brand the state, and increase influence with both their domestic, and international audience by associating the government with their good image.

⁴Beyond the scope of the present study, there are of course limitations to using celebrities as cultural ambassadors; for instance, they might exhibit behaviors that reflect badly on the country (such as a BTS member being fined for a DUI), see: Frater (2024).

The South Korean Case

The K-pop industry's success is an example of soft power. With the Hallyu Wave, South Korea's pop culture has grown exponentially in popularity over the last few decades (Park 2023a). The South Korean pop culture industry is also seen as a way to define a Korean identity after thousands of years of oppression, according to South Korean nationalists. Amidst the rising Japanese pop culture industry with anime and manga globally, South Korea sought to establish its own unique pop culture, which is K-pop (Huat 2012). In addition to national identity, the K-pop industry also accounts for a significant amount of revenue for South Korea's economy, with its estimated contribution in 2021 being \$8.1 billion (Allied Market Research 2021). As suggested earlier, *money is soft power*. The more money South Korea gains from K-pop, the more money it has to accomplish other policy goals, and to invest in furthering its influence worldwide.

The K-pop industry is inherently linked to the South Korean government, as K-pop idols are often employed as public diplomats, or are specifically promoted by the government for the purpose of gaining soft power (Proctor 2021). The Ministry of Sports, Culture, and Tourism was specifically created during the Hallyu Wave to capitalize on the industry's growing popularity (Park 2023a). Since the government knows how important K-pop is for its economy and soft power, it has attempted to lessen roadblocks that popular K-pop groups face, one being mandatory military service. All male South Korean citizens must enlist in the military for around two years by the age of 28. This obviously affects all K-pop boy groups, whose careers are halted during military service. South Korea did not want to lose the revenue and soft power that BTS were bringing it, so the government passed a law in 2020 called "The BTS Law," in which entertainers can defer their military service until they are 30 years old if they have been awarded a medal of cultural merit (Sang-hun 2015).

Proctor (2021) observes how the Hallyu Wave is a strong example of soft power and cultural diplomacy; however, Vuving's (2009) earlier study disagrees:

"Cultural events, exchange programs, broadcasting, or teaching a country's language... do not produce soft power directly. They provide a first but important step in the translation of benignity, beauty, and brilliance into soft power." (Vuving 2009)

On the contrary, I would emphasize that international influence *is* soft power—in fact, language popularity is one of the metrics used by the Soft Power 30. As of 2023, Korean is the second most popular Asian language in the United States, and enrollment in Korean language courses at American universities increased by 78% from 2009 to 2016, with K-pop's popularity growing more since that statistic was published (Kim 2023, Miller 2023). Vuving has "attraction" that leads to soft power split up into these three categories (benignity, beauty, and brilliance), which Yun suggests as a possible framework for future scholarship. Alliteration notwithstanding, this categorization muddies the concept instead of clarifying it. Vuving each of these categories as:

Benignity: a country having good intentions
 Beauty: shared values
 Brilliance: admiration

In practice, these categories are not really that different from each other. In addition, he is claiming that these three categories are just *preludes* to soft power, not soft power itself. He claims that the aforementioned cultural events and programs only lead to “understanding,” and eventually work to help his three categories turn into soft power. I suggest that positive sentiment, the increasing popularity of a language, and cultural events and exchanges are all soft power, as seen with the Soft Power 30.

If I were to follow Vuving’s framework, K-pop would not be soft power at all, but “*brilliance*” or a soft power *resource*. This framework would also disagree that Japanese pop culture equals soft power, which has been widely acknowledged by scholars.⁵ Japan’s pop culture industry is backed by the government, and has been built into Japan’s foreign policy since 2007, with the establishment of the “Cool Japan Strategy”. Japan has also started many projects in order to further its soft power through pop culture, such as the International Manga Award, which is an example of a “cultural event”, which Vuving claims is not an example of soft power.

K-pop is soft power. Vuving invents these categories because, according to Nye, soft power gets confused with its resources. I disagree with this unnecessary complication. Something is either influence or it is not—not a beginning stage of soft power. This framework would ignore the very real soft power gains that South Korea has gotten through the K-pop industry by chalking them up as “soft power resources”. The field is always changing, and with this change comes clarifying and updating terms. K-pop is a very real case of soft power, and should be viewed as such, not as containing “resources” of soft power.

Argument

The use of non-state actors in public diplomacy, in addition to being a relatively new phenomenon, is overlooked within the literature. I argue that the intentional use of non-state actors (in this case, K-pop idols), is an effective way to increase a country’s soft power. I use constructivism broadly speaking for my theoretical framework, as the constructivist approach can account for factors (such as ideology and influence) that the other schools do not. As discussed in the brief literature review above, measuring and defining soft power remains contentious among scholars. Due to the rising popularity of K-pop, and the desire to distinctly define itself in terms of pop culture from its neighbors, the South Korean government has capitalized on its celebrities by employing them as public diplomats. K-pop is unique to South Korea; thus K-pop idols are seen worldwide as representatives of South Korea. A government using celebrities as public diplomats is nothing new, but it tends to mostly occur domestically. South Korea is unique, as these K-pop idols are frequently sent specifically on international diplomatic trips as representatives of South Korea.

I argue that the more South Korea employs K-pop idols as public diplomats, South Korea’s soft power grows, resulting in a positive relationship. These

⁵See also my analysis of the “Cool Japan” strategy: Shafie 2024. Other studies exploring Japan’s pop culture in relation to its soft power are numerous, including: Dalot-Bul 2009, Lam 2007, Green 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan 2007, Otmazgin 2014.

initiatives put K-pop celebrities at the front and center of the world stage, thereby increasing South Korea's soft power. As outlined by Nye, "information is power", and due to globalization and technological developments, soft power as a whole has been growing increasingly more important (Nye and Kim 2019). Since information (including both positive and negative press coverage) is key, the more diplomatic trips K-pop idols go on, the more they will be covered in the press, and the more they will be discussed internationally. Though South Korea's soft power will continue to grow with the K-pop industry, employing K-pop idols as public diplomats and representatives of South Korea helps link the idols to the country, and also the government, thereby raising positive attitudes about South Korea worldwide, and ultimately increasing soft power.

However, the Traditional School of Diplomacy would disagree with this view, as it sees diplomacy as interactions between states, and does not acknowledge non-state actors. The Traditional School would argue that the use of K-pop idols as diplomats is not real diplomacy, seeing as they are non-state actors, and not the state itself. Other scholars would also see indicators of soft power that fit in my definition as "resources" of soft power, and not tangible examples of soft power itself. These scholars would disagree with my definition, claiming instead that common soft power gains from the Hallyu Wave, such as increasing language popularity and tourism, are not an indicator of soft power (Vuving 2009). However, the Traditional School of Diplomacy is not sufficient by itself in explaining all contemporary diplomatic interactions and soft power gains. This is why the Nascent School of Diplomacy point of view is necessary to bridge the gap between state and non-state actors in diplomatic theory, as it focuses on the role of non-state actors. The Nascent School of Diplomacy is contemporary diplomacy, acknowledging advancements in technology, globalization, and the role of non-state actors in public diplomacy. In addition, scholars who disagree with the movement of people and language popularity as indicators of soft power disagree with Nye himself, and are ignoring very large and real soft power gains (Yun 2018, p. 11). Using these scholars' framework, tourists visiting South Korea because of K-pop idols advertising it would not be seen as a case of soft power, which I argue against. My argument includes a concise definition of soft power, and accounts for contemporary forms of diplomacy that the Traditional School does not account for.

Methodology

While the Hallyu Wave began in the 1990s, the time period of my selected cases ranges from 2018–2022⁶. My analysis and framework could also apply to more recent years of K-pop idols as public diplomats and non-state actors in contemporary diplomacy in future studies; however, here I have specifically chosen my cases based on international impact and cultural significance.

I use qualitative case studies of the South Korean government employing K-pop idols as public diplomats. My data sources are a mix of primary Korean sources

⁶The cases are from 2018–2022, but press coverage about EXO performing at the Olympics began in 2017, so the search accounts for early press coverage.

and secondary American and international sources. I use mixed methods, measuring each case's impact on soft power by corresponding worldwide media coverage, accessed from the ProQuest Global Newsstream database. With "information is power" in mind, I count the number of articles in the database that mention each case to determine how it has impacted South Korea's soft power. The ProQuest Global NewsStream includes newspapers, wire feeds, blogs, podcasts, websites, magazines, reports, and "other sources", which are primarily news broadcast transcripts. It is important to note that one limitation to this database is that the keyword search only results in news sources that use Latin characters (but there is nevertheless worldwide coverage, because many countries' news sources either write in English or use Latin characters). The searches are also limited to the exact characters entered. The keyword searches for each case are as follows:

"EXO" AND "Olympics" AND "Pyeongchang" from 2017
"Red Velvet" AND "North Korea" AND "Kim" from 2018
"EXO" AND "K-pop" AND "Trump" from 2017
"BTS" AND "K-pop" AND "United Nations" from 2021
"BTS" AND "K-pop" AND "Biden" from 2022

In addition to the measuring amount of news coverage as described above, for the three cases about K-pop groups meeting American presidents and speaking at the United Nations, I also analyze each president's as well as the United Nations' approval ratings at the time as a possible explanatory factor for the effectiveness of the diplomatic trip. For the qualitative analysis of my cases, I use a mix of primary and secondary sources, primarily news articles, as these cases have not yet been analyzed in detail in an academic setting. The news coverage will range from South Korean to Western sources, depending on each case.

As for K-pop idols, I theorize that more popular groups will result in more soft power gains. A group's popularity can be quantified through the K-pop Brand Reputation index. Released every month by the Korean Business Research Institute, monthly brand reputations can also include actors and drama series, as well as K-pop idols. There are four main indexes focusing on K-pop idols: Boy Group Monthly Brand Reputation, Boy Group Individual Monthly Brand Reputation, Girl Group Monthly Brand Reputation, and Girl Group Individual Monthly Brand Reputation. Each group and individual idol generates a score on the index, with events piquing popularity resulting in higher scores for a particular month. I have gathered the scores for each group for the month of or after the case, depending on when the case occurred. These scores can be used to explain variation in soft power gains by quantifying a group's popularity and effectiveness as a public diplomat. I also use pre- and post-case approval ratings of the South Korean president at the time, taken from domestic South Korean Gallup polls, as well as the other party (if any) involved, which are taken from domestic American Gallup polls, to further explain variations in soft power gains.

The five unique cases I focus on, as outlined above, are: EXO performing at the 2018 Winter Olympics, Red Velvet performing in North Korea, EXO meeting President Trump, BTS speaking at the United Nations, and BTS meeting President

Biden. Again, these five are selected specifically for cultural significance, worldwide impact, as well as for the nature of the trip. These are all cases of soft power in action.

EXO's performance at the 2018 Winter Olympics closing ceremony in Pyeongchang was selected since sports diplomacy is a prime example of soft power. States have used sports and the Olympics for public diplomacy since the modern re-establishment of the Olympics. By winning at an international sporting event, a country's soft power grows along with its prestige (Albert 2018). Therefore, having a K-pop group perform at the closing ceremony functions similarly to having athletes participating in an event: soft power and prestige increases. The South Korean government knew that the world would be watching, and used this opportunity to associate itself with a K-pop group, thereby using EXO as public diplomats on the world stage.

Red Velvet's performance in North Korea was specifically selected to emphasize the role K-pop idols can play in bilateral relations between North and South Korea. K-pop, was, and is still banned in North Korea (Seo 2024). It has also played a unique role in current conflict between North and South Korea, as South Korea uses K-pop for its side of the "speaker wars", where North Korea blasts propaganda and South Korea plays K-pop from loudspeakers into the demilitarized zone (Sang-hun 2015). Red Velvet's performance in North Korea was a diplomatic trip consisting of a troupe of South Korean performers, similar to the North Korean troupe in the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea, a few months prior. I selected this case to show the effectiveness of K-pop diplomacy in bilateral relations.

EXO's meeting with President Trump was selected to demonstrate how K-pop idols interact with state actors, specifically heads of state. Trump was in South Korea for the G20 Summit, and was welcomed by both EXO and the South Korean President. This is a unique phenomenon to South Korea, as when foreign heads of state come to the United States, they are not typically greeted by a famous musical artist, say, Taylor Swift. South Korea specifically hand picks K-pop idols for these diplomatic visits to help associate their positive image with the government. EXO was also most likely selected since they had previously met Ivanka Trump at the 2018 Olympics closing ceremony (Andrew and Gray 2019).

BTS speaking at the United Nations was selected because out of all these cases, it was the one that most likely had the biggest impact on South Korea's soft power, seeing as it was the largest scale event. BTS were appointed by President Moon Jae-in as presidential envoys to the United Nations for "future generations and culture" (Oh and Lee 2021). Though many celebrities do work with the United Nations, this is the first time K-pop idols have received such a high honor and position within the United Nations itself. In addition, this is a case of public figures working with an IGO, which are two examples of non-state actors in public diplomacy.

The last, and most recent case is BTS meeting President Biden, which was also selected for K-pop idols interacting with heads of state. BTS also spoke at the White House press briefing room, which is a tactic that the American government uses with American celebrities for public diplomacy. The justification for this trip was for BTS to discuss anti-Asian hate with President Biden, however, BTS are not Asian-American, which drew backlash (Regan and Dailey 2022). The White House could have invited Asian-American artists, but chose to invite Asian artists from the

continent, which suggests an ulterior soft power-related motive. BTS made international headlines with this trip to the White House, whereas an Asian American artist would not have made many headlines outside of the United States.

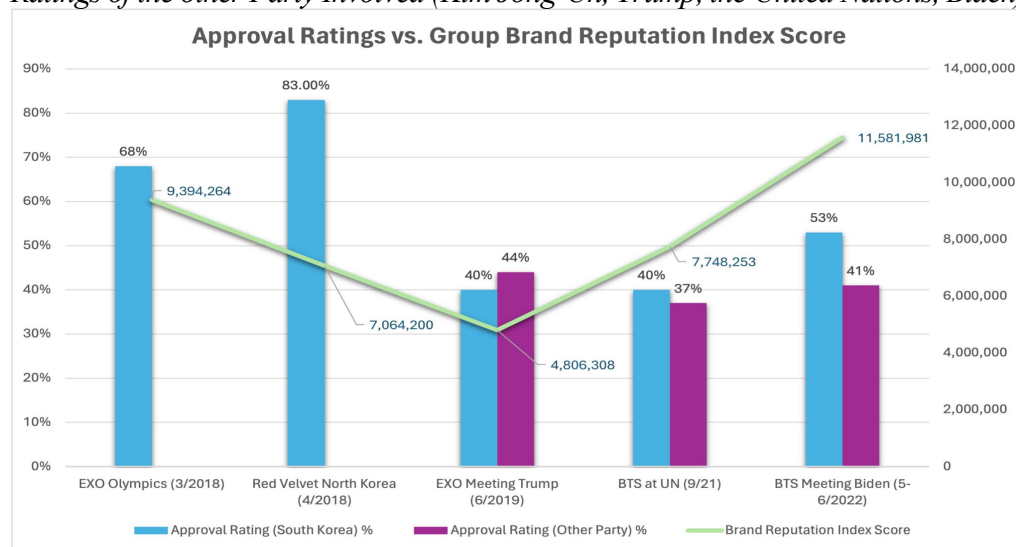
I have chosen here to focus on cases relating to the United States, where this type of diplomacy is most evident. K-pop idols were banned in China until recently, so this form of public diplomacy cannot apply to China, for example (Tai 2023). Since the United States is the global hegemon, all eyes are on the United States, which is why the South Korean government is focused on having K-pop idols meet American heads of state, or attend official business in the United States. In addition, the United States also has the biggest music market in the world, which shows another clear and unique motivation for these non-state actors: to get their group name out there, get more fans, and increase sales (Smirke 2024).

Results

Case Study Analyses

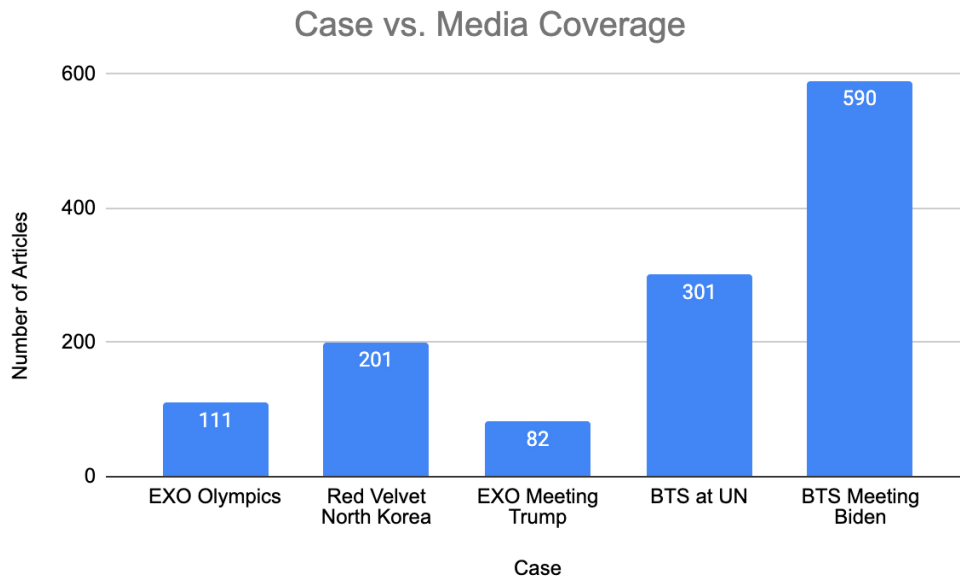
The five cases described above will be compared to corresponding administration approval ratings and K-pop group Brand Reputation rankings to explain variation in soft power gains (Figure 1), as well as measured through press coverage (Figure 2). Figure 3 illustrates the difference in approval ratings for each corresponding administration before and after each case.

Figure 1. *Variation in South Korean Presidential Approval Ratings, and the Approval Ratings of the other Party Involved (Kim Jong-Un, Trump, the United Nations, Biden)*



Note: The line helps illustrate a group's popularity by displaying its Brand Reputation Index score. The cases in this figure are listed in chronological order. EXO Olympics does not have an approval rating, as the Olympics is not a political entity. See Appendix for detailed sources.

Figure 2. Each Case's Media Coverage (Including Newspapers, Blogs, Wire Feeds, Podcasts, Websites, Magazines, Reports, and News Broadcast Transcripts) as accessed through the ProQuest Global Newsstream Database (with above noted Limitations of Latin Characters)

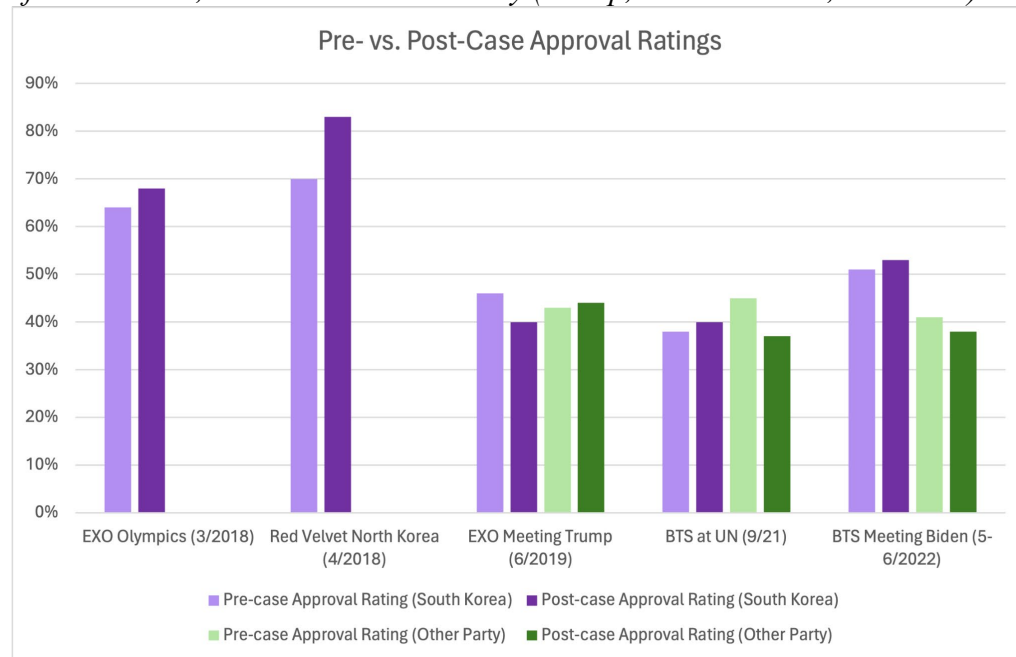


Note: data from ProQuest Global Newsstream⁷.

Figure 2 notably follows the same trends as the Brand Reputation Ranking index score for each K-pop group. Both the Brand Reputation Index and amount of press coverage are useful indicators of a group's popularity, as well as their soft power gained through diplomatic activities. Overall, through the analysis of the amount of press coverage by case, it is evident that more popular groups will result in more soft power gains for South Korea.

⁷Data taken from ProQuest Global Newsstream database, number of articles individually counted by author <https://about.proquest.com/en/products-services/globalnewsstream/>.

Figure 3. *Variation in Approval Ratings of the South Korean President before and after each case, as well as the other Party (Trump, United Nations, and Biden)*



Note: It is useful, in particular, to demonstrate the effectiveness of the North and South Korean summit, of which, Red Velvet's performance in North Korea was part of, with President Moon Jae-in's approval rating going from 70% to 82%. See Appendix for detailed sources.

EXO Olympics

The 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics was very important for North and South Korea bilateral relations, with North Korea competing, and presidential summits to follow soon after. This makes the South Korean government's choice to have EXO perform at the closing ceremony an obvious way to link K-pop with South Korea's national identity and its government internationally. Nation branding is an aspect of soft power, and by broadcasting EXO when the whole world was watching, it is clear that South Korea wants to be associated with these idols, and have them as representatives of South Korea, and Korean culture. The Olympics are also perhaps an obvious example of soft power gains, as international prestige increases when athletes win medals. The Olympics are also a form of cultural diplomacy, with countries and athletes as representatives making diplomatic trips to compete in events. Thus, inserting a K-pop group into this longstanding example of soft power generation results in even more soft power gains for South Korea. In addition, EXO, also known as "The Kings of K-pop" (Allaire 2019), were officially labeled as "The Nation's Pick" by the South Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism after their performance at the Olympics (Gardner 2022). All EXO members regard this performance as the highlight of their career, and with the Olympics' high viewership, it definitely increased EXO's popularity nationwide (Cha 2024a). EXO scored 7,084,200 on the Boy Group Monthly Brand Reputation index, which is much higher than the average 3-4 million (Cha 2024a). President

Moon Jae-in's approval ratings were also at 64% (Gallup Korea 2018c). This case also resulted in 111 articles worldwide, as shown on Table 2.

Red Velvet in North Korea

Red Velvet's trip to North Korea was in response to a troupe of North Korean performers attending the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics a few months prior. South Korea sent a troupe of its own performers, including traditional Korean culture performances, as well as K-pop idols such as Red Velvet. As mentioned in the previous section, K-pop has always played a role in bilateral Korean relations, with K-pop being banned in North Korea, and South Korea using K-pop for its side of "speaker wars" (Sang-hun 2015). Since K-pop is technically banned in North Korea, sending Red Velvet to perform seemed an odd choice. However, this is a prime example of the South Korean government propping K-pop idols up as representatives of the country, and using them as public diplomats. In terms of the trip itself, some theorized that Kim Jong-un facilitated it to appeal to both the United States and South Korea in an attempt to ease sanctions (Associated Press 2018). The group Red Velvet were selected as representatives by Democratic party member Yoon Geong-young, the organizer on South Korea's end, who admitted Red Velvet was the only girl group he knew. In addition, Red Velvet also has the word *red* in their group name, and their popular song "Red Flavor", had potential to appeal to North Korean communist ideologies and symbols (Park 2023b). In addition, Red Velvet have a very palatable concept and image, compared to other groups such as Blackpink, who have a more fierce concept, and would not have been received as well by a North Korean audience.

In terms of soft power gains, as shown on Figure 1, President Moon Jae-in's approval rating in South Korea was soaring at 83%, compared to the same Gallup poll released a month earlier, which was 70% (Maresca 2018). The summit Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un did help with approval ratings and bilateral relations, and some of that can be attributed to Red Velvet and the South Korean troupe's trip to North Korea. Kim Jong-Un's approval rating is inherently unreliable, which is why there is no statistic for the "other party" in Figure 1.

In addition, in April 2018, right after their trip to North Korea, Red Velvet ranked first in the monthly Girl Group Brand Reputation Ranking, with 9,394,264 points on the index (Cha 2018). This is a staggeringly large number compared to normal Girl Group Brand Reputation rankings, with the monthly average being around 3-5 million points on the index (Cha 2024b). This trip also helped to increase Red Velvet's international and domestic popularity, as seen through the Brand Reputation Rankings. This case also produced 201 articles, as shown on Figure 2.

EXO Meeting Trump

When US President Donald Trump went to meet with South Korean President Moon Jae-in for the last day of the G20 Summit in 2019, EXO were also present (Andrew and gray 2019). K-pop idols being invited to official meetings between heads of state show their power as public diplomats, and representatives of South

Korea. EXO were most likely chosen because they had already met members of the Trump family at the 2018 Winter Olympics. At this time, President Moon Jae-in's approval rating was 40%, and President Trump's, similarly, at 44% (Gallup Korea 2019b). EXO's Brand Reputation Ranking was also at 4,806,306, which is around average, due to two members enlisting in the military (Cha 2019). All of these factors resulted in less press coverage than other cases at 82 articles, and inferably, less soft power gains.

BTS at the United Nations

In September of 2021, President Moon Jae-in appointed BTS as special presidential envoys to the United Nations. President Moon even gave the members diplomatic passports, saying that they will serve as representatives for future generations, and culture (Oh and Lee 2021). Though BTS had spoken at the United Nations once before in 2018 and again virtually in 2020 due to a partnership with UNICEF (2018), but this time, they were formal envoys with diplomatic passports. In addition, their global popularity had also increased since their previous interactions with the United Nations. They also filmed a video of themselves performing their new song, further showing non-state actors' unique goals in public diplomacy. In a K-pop idol's case, it is increasing sales and popularity. This diplomatic trip coincided with an all-English song release, making it the perfect venue to promote it in the US, as well as internationally because the US has the biggest music market in the world. As their popularity had increased, over 1 million people watched their 2021 speech live, from all across the world. Notably, the members also promoted public health and the new COVID-19 vaccine, citing it as a reason they were able to travel to the US amidst COVID restrictions (Lee 2021). President Moon's approval rating was 40%, and the United Nations' approval rating was 37%, which is around average (Gallup Korea 2019b). BTS' Brand Reputation score was 7,748,253, higher than the average score (Han 2021). This trip also resulted in 301 articles worldwide, as shown in Figure 2.

BTS Meeting Biden

In late May to early June of 2022, BTS both spoke at the White House and met with President Biden. They were invited to give their thoughts on anti-Asian hate on the last day of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month (Regan and Dailey 2022). Again, the White House was criticized by the public that they could have invited an Asian American artist but instead, invited BTS. This is a clear soft power move on the part of the US, with President Biden's approval rating at 41% at the time, inviting the biggest stars in the world to meet him would absolutely garner him some good press, and positive sentiment with young people (Gallup 2024b). Biden has similarly invited American celebrities such as Olivia Rodrigo to speak at the White House in order to increase his influence domestically, having Rodrigo encourage the younger generation to get vaccinated for COVID-19 (Sullivan 2021). Though he did not appear to be involved in this trip, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's approval rating was 53% (Friedhoff 2022). BTS' Brand Reputation

index score was a staggering 11,581,981, nearly triple the average (Han 2022). This particular case also resulted in the most worldwide press coverage out of all five cases, at 590 articles, shown in Figure 2. BTS had just finished a successful concert tour in the US, and a few days later, would release another album, contributing to their increased popularity from the last case.

Conclusions and Looking Forward

Employing K-pop idols as public diplomats is an intentional strategy by the South Korean government to increase South Korea's soft power internationally. This phenomenon is relatively recent, and has yet to be studied academically in an international relations context. By acknowledging K-pop idols as effective non-state actors in diplomacy, we also acknowledge the recent and fundamental shift in the power game: soft power is now more important than ever, and can be gained through non-state actors.

The present study has synthesized and challenged previous scholars' works and notions of soft power, providing a comprehensive definition of soft power. Expanding on the constructivist school of thought, I have also employed the Nascent School of Diplomacy to explain and analyze the use of K-pop idols as public diplomats, as the Traditional School of Diplomacy does not acknowledge non-state actors. The five cases I analyzed demonstrate how the South Korean government uses K-pop idols as public diplomats, with press coverage as a dependent variable to measure soft power. I used the respective K-pop groups' Monthly Brand Reputation Index Score to quantify a group's popularity, as well as approval ratings of the corresponding administration involved to explain variation in soft power gains. More popular groups will result in more soft power gains for South Korea. Because K-pop is a recent phenomenon, the above analyses contribute to a clearer definition of soft power within the South Korean context.

The South Korean model of celebrity-driven public diplomacy can absolutely be applied to other cases worldwide, but it far surpasses efforts made by other governments in terms of the frequency of this strategy, and international soft power gains. As discussed earlier, using pop culture to increase a nation's soft power is not a new strategy, seen through Japan and the "Cool Japan Strategy", where the government funds the expansion and exportation of anime and manga. This differs from the South Korean strategy because Japan's pop culture is based on fictional characters while South Korea's is based on real people that are musical artists.

The US, as pop culture's global hegemon, also has extreme influence internationally by virtue of its pop culture dominating the world's media. However, a key difference in the American versus South Korean case is that American celebrities do not work with the government as often, and when advocating for certain causes, tend to act as independent actors. Though that is not to say that American celebrities *never* work with the government.

South Korean pop culture is inherently connected to the government, whereas American pop culture developed independently from the American government. Using celebrities as representatives of the state, or in order to accomplish a goal, is

not new, but the extent to which South Korea projects its celebrities on an international scale firmly associated with the state is a novel concept. It can be argued that, say, Chinese celebrities are even more connected to the state than their South Korean counterparts, but due to the nature of Chinese pop culture and the lack of international applicability to this pop culture, a comparison cannot effectively be made.

Analysis of these five cases may help guide future research and enhance our understanding of actions taken by the South Korean government with K-pop idols for the purpose of gaining soft power. Future studies could look at unintended consequences of associating celebrities with the state, as human beings are fallible, and not immune to flawed behavior.

In addition to the Indexes discussed above, it would be helpful for future researchers if a new international pop culture index, focused on soft power, was created to better measure soft power gained through K-pop idols longitudinally, because this data does not yet exist. In addition, content analysis of the press regarding these cases could be employed for sentiment and to determine how much of the articles focus on policy versus the K-pop idols themselves. As more qualitative data becomes available, future research could potentially explore the role of fans, interviews with celebrities or fans, or include sentiment analysis. An even broader comparative study could also look into the countries mentioned in the previous paragraph, as well as others with significant pop culture industries, to further analyze the role of celebrities and their influence on soft power globally. Considering the future of South Korea's soft power, there are many limitations and issues regarding the current state of the K-pop industry itself, specifically with its treatment of women; for instance, if the anti-feminist movement in South Korea continues, they will simply run out of K-pop idols, and current female K-pop idols will retire from the music industry, and go into acting. However, currently, for middle powers such as South Korea, soft power remains a primary source of international prestige and as this study has shown, K-pop idols help with nation branding, act as diplomats, and serve to effectively increase South Korea's influence worldwide.

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Appendix

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