SOFT POWER FOR INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY THROUGH *K-POP* LENS

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ABSTRACT

K-pop, or Korean popular music, has spread throughout the Korean Peninsula and the world in recent decades. Due to the constant expansion of K-pop in many countries, there is a growing scholarly debate about its potential as a soft power instrument of foreign policy. This paper looks to define the concept of K-pop music diplomacy, and the strategies and measures put into practice. It explains how the Korean government has instrumentalized K-pop and supported its foreign promotion as part of a wider public diplomacy strategy aimed at increasing the country's power and prestige. It assesses the areas that contributed to K-pop's internationalization. In approaching the topic from the perspective of K-pop, the paper therefore highlights contemporary methods of soft power in popular cultural diplomacy. The paper shows how state and non-state actors use cultural industries such as K-pop to promote national interests, interact with foreign audiences, and foster the growth of the creative economy. The authors also applied statistical t-test, evaluating the number of performances of K-pop bands at home and abroad from 2019-2023 to analyze their impact on South Korean cultural diplomacy and its positive image construction. The study provides an insight into success, and usefulness of music diplomacy as exemplified by K-pop and found best practices for cultural diplomacy.

Keywords: K-pop, South Korea, Music Diplomacy, Culture, Soft Power

INTRODUCTION

The Korean Wave term was originally termed in the Chinese context towards the later part of 1990," which referred to the increasing trend of organizational Korean popular culture in the Asian region (Jung, 2011; Kim, et al. 2021). Artists pioneered *K-pop* at this time by incorporating elements of other pop music styles, such as hip-hop, R&B, jazz, gospel, and rock music, into Korean styles. Bands like *Seo Taiji* and the *Boys* created some early examples of this type of music (Chen, 2023). The primary focus was on the domestic audience, and it has yet to assume the significant role of a cultural ambassador. It is also important to note that the concept of the Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, has not appeared to be a global phenomenon. In the late 1990s, idol groups and bands such as *H.O.T.*, *S.E.S.*, and *Baby Voice* emerged, primarily catering to teenagers (Lee, Kao, 2021). Their music slowly became popular in other Asian countries, such as China and Southeast Asia, thus creating a platform for *K-pop* bands in the future.

Boy bands and girl bands like *BIGBANG*, *Wonder Girls*, *Girls' Generation (SNSD)*, *2NE1*, and others tried their best to debut and popularize themselves outside Korea. They sent *K-pop* to even more fans within Asia, particularly in Japan and countries in Southeast Asia (Abidin, Jin, 2023; Lee et al., 2020).

It would be in 2010 that videos such as *Girls Generation's 'Genie'* and *'Oh!'* began to go viral online via YouTube. During this time, *K-pop*'s success remained constant (Chun, 2017). Other famous Korean dramas, such as *Winter Sonata*, also played a role in increasing Korea's cultural influence worldwide.

The South Korean government gradually realized the increasing importance of using *K-pop* and *Hallyu* as PR tools for the country and began to fund the expansion of Korean popular culture overseas (Sun, 2024). It is noteworthy that modern pop formations such as BTS, *Blackpink*, and others use social media as a platform for expanding their popularity, with a significant number of fans from different countries (Balraj, Manan, 2022). They have rightly said that they have made *K-pop* truly international. Hallyu, or *K-pop*, is considered a strategic resource for promoting Korea and expanding its soft power in the global community (Putong, 2022). Governments harness popular brands to enhance the image of the country and to sell the country to other consumer brands and other export products.

Evolution of *K-pop*

Thus, *K-pop* has indeed been widely influencing South Korea's cultural diplomacy strategies and the perception of South Korea around the world, as well as its economy. Since the late 1990s, to promote the continuous expansion of state-led cultural diplomacy, South Korea has been actively using the success of the "Korean Wave" to increase the distance between reality and image (Sun, 2024). This specific use of cultural exports like *K-pop* aligns with the concept of soft power, as the state employs strategies like exporting traditional normative culture to enhance its influence (Balraj, Manan, 2022). Among all these factors, *K-pop* not only serves as an effective representation of cultural influence for Korea's soft power, but it also serves as a component of official governmental policies that have contributed to the country's global recognition (Sivanesan, 2024).

Additionally, *K-pop* has actively contributed to numerous social transformations in South Korea, particularly in the post-developmental era. As with Korea's economic development, which resulted in wealth and social issues, *K-pop* has brought about significant changes in society (Oh, Lee, 2014). *K-pop* has also downplayed determined psychosocial benefits to the fans, adding to its sale appeal and

exporting more of Korea's soft power influence on worldwide consumers (Laffan, 2020).

As a soft power, pop culture in particular, *K-pop*, has proved to be a strategic asset for South Korea, besides other cultural exports such as films and TV shows. The Korean Wave, referring to different beliefs exported from Korea, has played an important role in advertising Korea and improving Korea's image in the world (Herningtyas, 2019; Jang, Paik, 2012). This phenomenon has not only boosted the economic development of South Korea but also had a significant impact on the formation and development of the country's soft power and public diplomacy (Lee, Kim, 2020; Matosian, 2021).

Also, the spread of the *K-pop* influence has gone a step higher, placing its foot in Eastern Europe, Austria, and even the Northeast region of India. Thanks to the participatory fan culture that has been associated with *K-pop*, this music genre has spread internationally, thereby becoming one of the crucial aspects of Korean cultural exportation (Marinescu, Balica, 2013; Sung, 2014).

Methodology

This paper employed systematic review and qualitative content analysis to examine the possibility of using *K-pop* in international relations as soft power. Information was gathered from peer-reviewed journals, news articles, press releases, government and agency documents, and white papers from the relevant industries.

Keyword searches were conducted in academic databases like JSTOR and Academic Search Complete, media databases such as LexisNexis and ProQuest, and through general search engines such as Google Scholar. Initial search terms included: *K-pop*, soft power, South Korea, international relation, diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and other related terminology. To gain an insight into the research area, both recent (those which include data gathered within the last 5 years) and classic works were reviewed. For newspaper and magazine articles, blog posts, and editorials, purposive sampling was used to select articles from leading newspapers and magazines based on their country of origin as South Korea, the USA, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. An attempt was made to use both English and native language sources if possible. Source selection was based on key words identifying connections between *K-pop* and international relations.

A statistical analysis method studied *K-pop* band international performances throughout 2019 to 2023. The two-sample t-test evaluated the mean performance numbers between South Korean-only and shows that occurred outside of South Korea. The research data used 23 *K-pop* groups that received equal representation for analysis purposes. For this, the first preliminary check examined if both groups shared equal variance values. The f-test produced a p-value of 0.851 that surpassed the chosen alpha value (0.05). The result showed that the null hypothesis of equal variances remained valid which verified homogeneity between groups. Therefore, the independent two-sample t-test analysis became appropriate because of the small sample population. The test proved suitable because the assumption of normal distribution was validated through homogeneity testing. Thus, the following hypothesis were evaluated:

H_o: The mean number of concerts held outside South Korea (μ_e) is less than or equal to the mean number of concerts held exclusively in South Korea (μ_o), i.e., $\mu_e \le \mu_o$.

H_1: The mean number of concerts held outside South Korea (μ_e) is greater than the mean number of concerts held exclusively in South Korea (μ_o), i.e., $\mu_e > \mu_o$.

By integrating the theoretical literature on soft power and cultural diplomacy with the practical business, government, and media evidence regarding *K-pop* in particular, this descriptive study will endeavor to shed light on the range of forces engaged in and affected by South Korea's cultural influence campaigns.

Results and Discussion

K-pop has surpassed cultural and geographical barriers and has become a highly effective tool of diplomacy. Thus, the transnational fandom that surrounds *K-pop* enables fans around the world to develop cosmopolitan identities (Yoon, 2022). *K-pop* has penetrated several ethnic, sexual, and cultural interfaces and is a connector between distinct groups of people. Thus, with the help of the Korean wave, or Hallyu, South Korea has been actively using *K-pop* as an instrument of public diplomacy to spread Korean culture to foreign countries (Permatasari, 2022). Particularly, *K-pop* fans' participatory culture has long grown to encompass Europe and other areas (Sung, 2014).

These factors highlight *K-pop*'s performance in other jurisdictions, achieved through calculated strategies among other factors (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021). Thus, when analyzed through the lens of the top-down *K-pop* industry strategic plan, the emphasis on content exportation and the absence of government suppression have significantly contributed to its international success (Oh Y.-T. , 2022). Also, *K-pop*'s appeal lies in its incorporation of both Eastern and Western facets, which makes it an appropriate counter to western hegemonic cultural globalization (Oh C. , 2020).

K-pop has had a significant impact on many aspects of society. Specifically, factors such as music quality and celebrity visibility lead *K-pop* fans to desire to visit South Korea (Putong, 2022). Moreover, S. Y. Jung (Jung, 2011) pointed out that the Korean Wave fans' participation in social media is making more *K-pop* content available around the globe. This distribution of content via various internet websites and applications has been a major reason *K-pop* has gained popularity in various countries and cultures. Consequently, evidence shows that *K-pop* contributes to tourism demand, cultural interchange, and networked cross-territorial fan communities, suggesting that its impacts transcend the Korean music sphere.

K-pop's Economic Impact

The global examination of *K-pop* adds a lot of value to the South Korean economy, both in terms of the nation's image visibility and its import-export function. *K-pop* has placed South Korea at the pinnacle of globalization in cultural exportation, redesigning its country's image and boosting its economy (Diao, 2023). The production of Korean pop music began several years ago and has significantly transformed the economic landscape of South Korea (Diao, 2023). *K-pop* and *K-drama* have appeared as Korea's socio-cultural products, significantly boosting the country's global economy and taking the lead in the music industry. Experts attribute the economic boom to *K-pop*'s 'soft power' (Balraj, Manan, 2022). This has eased the popularization of Korean culture, thereby bolstering the development of the nation's brand image. *K-pop* serves as a potent instrument within the South Korean soft power framework, akin to the USA's vastly influential soft power stemming from the Hollywood movie industry (Lee et al., 2020). The government of South Korea has already expanded the financial support for Hallyu, for

instance, increasing from KRW 526.8 billion in 2022 to KRW 844.2 billion for 2023 (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2023) figure 1.

Figure 1 Bar chart representing the budgets allocated for major new projects in various cultural and technological areas (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2023)
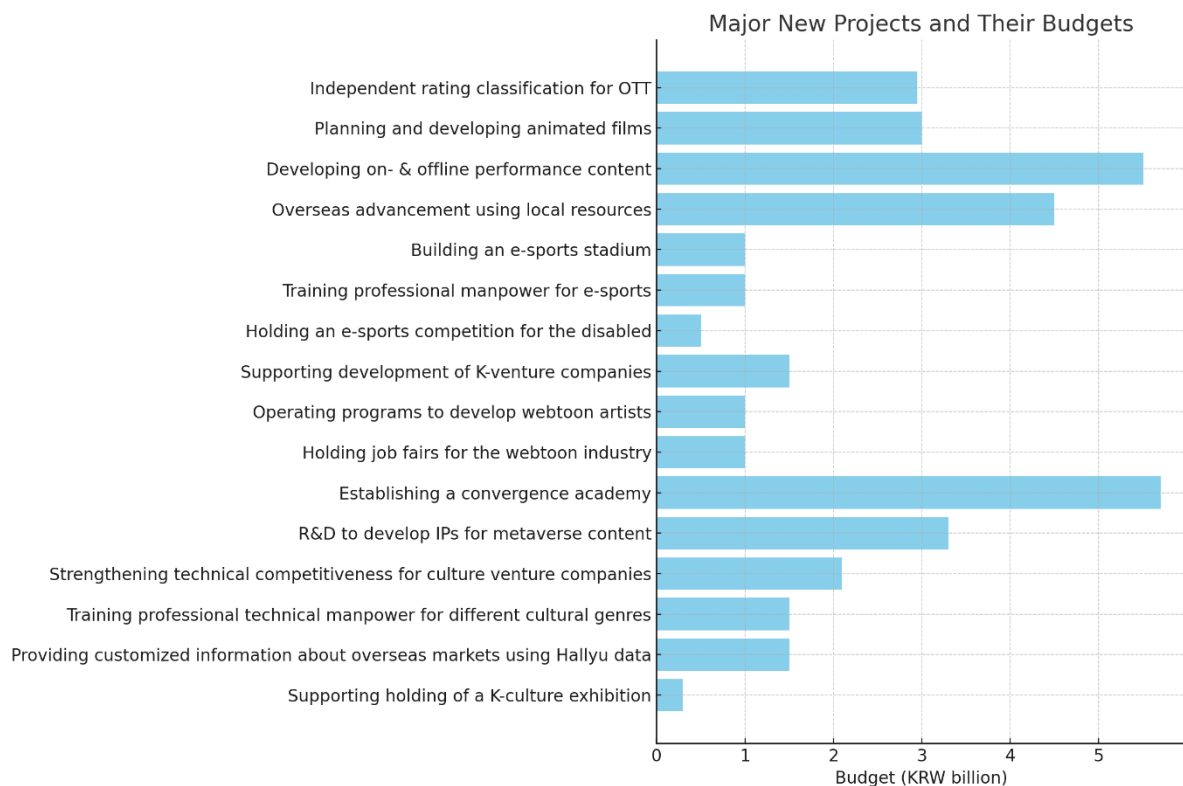
Thus, *K-pop* reflects the idea of modernity with traditional values as in today's South Korea and its rich culture, revealing the progress and breath of the country (Matosian, 2021). As for the social impact of *K-pop*, the Korean Wave, of which *K-pop* is a part, has turned into a vehicle through which a new kind of Korean cultural diplomacy is present in the whole world and strengthens Korea's position in the global community (Jang, Paik, 2012).

The economic and cultural contribution of *K-pop*, which also accounts for the presence of fans outside the Korean peninsula. *K-pop*'s representation of South Korea has not only bolstered the country's economy, but it has also played a significant role in shaping its national brand on the global stage (Sivanesan, 2024). Currently, the performance of *K-pop* artists and groups with other stakeholders to engage in publicity and promotion activities enhances the internationalization of South Korean tourism and exports Korean media content, promoting and strengthening South Korea's position in the global entertainment industry field (Abidin, Jin, 2023).

**K-pop's Cultural Penetration**

K-pop has gone on to create a global impact, as proven by the fact that it is spreading Korean culture, language, and values across the world. A range of factors outlined in the literature explaining the transcultural nature of success can explain all these findings. Firstly, fans outside Korea can easily appreciate *K-pop* because most of its features, which embody the groups' names, do not require a Korean translation to understand, and songs contain some English phrases (Ayuningtyas, 2017). Furthermore, fans engage in subtitles and translations regarding the lyrics and content, making them free from language barriers and promoting equality (Ayuningtyas, 2017).

Furthermore, *K-pop* provides young South Koreans with a sociolinguistic resource to develop their own personas and a platform for social interaction, highlighting the significance of music in social relations (Lee J. S., 2004). The genre originated as a regional cultural musical style, evolved into a widely popular genre that is a part of popular culture, and is enjoyed globally without discrimination (Oh, Lee, 2014). By interacting with

fans and using social networks, *K-pop* has developed virtual communities that link fans regardless of geographic and linguistic barriers, proving the role of fandom as a means of cultural assimilation (Lee et al., 2020). *K-factor* has become

so popular that it has affected the ambitions and professional inclinations of Koreans, clear from the study conducted by Oh, I., & Lee, H.-J. (Oh, Lee, 2014) figure-2.

Figure 2 Future Goals of Elementary School Students (1981 vs. 1999 vs. 2012) based on Maeil Business Newspaper (1981), sample size 3,800 students; Hankyoreh (1999), sample size 100 students; SBS (2012), sample size 1,000 students (Oh, Lee, 2014)
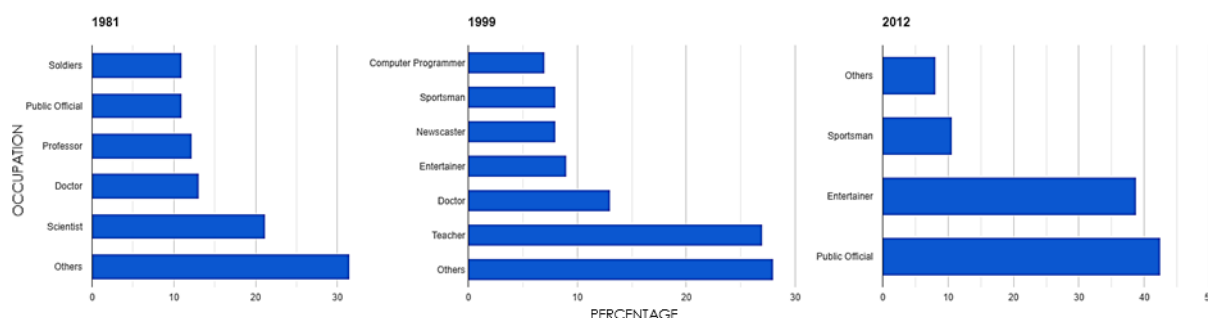
K-pop fans also respond in a supranational manner and have transnational alliances that value and promote Korean music and other forms of culture (Yoon, 2022). This type of entertainment has grown due to the evolving internet technologies that work to take and share Korean pop across the globe (Aisyah et al., 2022). Thus, the linguistic and cultural English mix, with the music refusing to conform to the standards of race, nation, or language, means that *K-pop* contributes to the creation of a more connected and inclusive global cultural sphere (Chun, 2017).

To enhance its standing, South Korea intentionally employs *K-pop* and uses its popular cultural products as diplomatic assets. Korean Wave, which translated into worldwide admiration for the South Korean popular music export known as *K-pop*, as well as the South Korean cinema, are some of the tools used in the country's soft power diplomacy (Jang, Paik, 2012). This phenomenon entails the partnership between state and private entities in which state-funded organizations and state-run organizations run promotional campaigns for South Korean culture internationally (Lee, Kim, 2020). The transition from a domestic Korean music phenomenon to an internationally recognized one highlights several elements, including the industry's structural approach, content exportation, and the absence of government repression in the case of *K-pop* (Oh Y.-T. , 2022).

People are now aware that *K-pop* plays a significant role in shaping and formulating political relations

between countries. For example, the 'Tzuyu Scandal' proves that *K-pop* as an element of the transnational flow can aggravate regional tension and relationships (Ahn, Lin, 2018). When considering social movements concerning *K-pop* groups such as BTS, one exhibits the way the fan base organizes for activism, demonstrating the possibilities of change regarding fan activities (Kim, Hutt, 2021).

Cooperation appears as a dominant method in public diplomacy, where mutual initiatives or activities—the implementation of projects that require individuals from different countries or companies—are stronger and more effective than a monologue, which can be a dialogue (Cowan, Arsenault, 2008). We can discuss the deployment of *K-pop* in diplomatic endeavors within the context of nation branding and public diplomacy, which employ cultural goods like *K-pop* to shape South Korea's global image and enhance its soft power (Kim, Hutt, 2021).

K-pop artists have also been systematically employed as a cultural asset in the promotion of adequate aspect of South Korea's image to the outside world as a progressive and culturally diverse country. BTS amplified this procedure by providing a talk at the United Nations about love oneself and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Kelley, 2018). Other pop stars from the Korean peninsula have also been given similar roles by their government too. This places *K-pop* diplomacy as a course to future orientation, multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion in the world, not excluding many

diplomatic and nation building goals (Drimel, 2022; Valeriano, Nissen, 2022).

K-pop has also been used for more specific and regional diplomatic purposes as well. On this note, there are also other examples where *K-pop* has been used in more specific and actual diplomacy. For instance, *N.O.M*, a *K-pop* band was formed with the intention of showcasing the group to North Korea with an aim of fostering friendly relations between the two Koreas (Suk, Yang, 2024). Other *K-pop* bands that performed in North Korea include *FIN.K.L, Sechskies, Baby V.O.X, Shinhwa, YB, Red Velvet, and Seohyun* (Shrivastav, 2023; Suk, Yang, 2024). Staking on a strategy like this seizes the gravity of the so-called soft power diplomacy capability of *K-pop*.

K-pop's Global Cultural Intentions and their Impact on International Perception of South Korea

K-pop significantly shapes global perceptions of South Korea by influencing popular culture: The genre has put South Korea in the league of countries with good cultural exportation, changed South Korea's image, and boosted its economy (Septiani, 2022). Thus, as the subgenre grows in popularity, *K-pop* continues to contribute to a positive sentiment about South Korea's overall country image and brand value (Kim, Hutt, 2021). Thus, through the music of *K-pop*, the image of the country becomes more appealing in the eyes of potential tourists, creating travel motivation and interest in travelers to travel the country, all proving the connection between pop culture involvement and the destination image and travel intention (Putong, 2022).
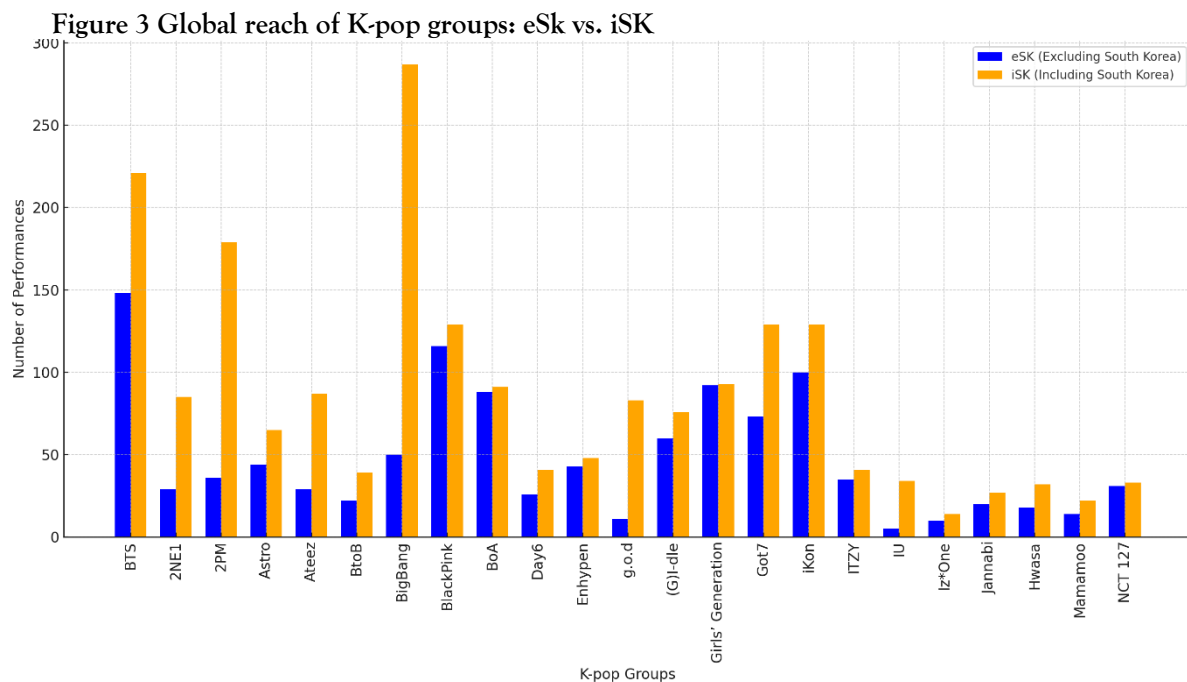
Table 1. K-pop Bands International Performances 2019-23

Group Name	Tours	Concerts	Fan meeting Tours	Showcases	Joint Tours and Concerts	Total Performances (eSK)	Total Performance (iSK)
BTS	152	30	24	10	5	148	221
2NE1	56	3	19	56	4	29	85
2PM	122	49	8	0	0	36	179
Astro	25	10	0	14	16	44	65
Ateez	27	10	3	8	39	29	87
BtoB	10	20	0	3	6	22	39
BigBang	11	5	3	0	0	50	287
BlackPink	8	2	2	0	15	116	129
BoA	77	11	0	0	0	88	91
Day6	10	11	4	1	0	26	41
Enhypen	19	14	2	1	7	43	48
g.o.d	5	6	0	0	0	11	83
(G)I-dle	21	1	5	2	8	60	76
Girls' Generation	39	1	1	5	0	92	93
Got7	38	10	5	8	3	73	129
iKon	7	9	4	2	2	100	129
ITZY	28	0	0	7	0	35	41
IU	3	0	0	2	0	5	34
*Iz*One*	1	7	0	2	0	10	14
Jannabi	7	7	3	2	1	20	27

Hwasa	2	8	0	1	7	18	32
Mamamoo	5	8	0	0	1	14	22
NCT 127	27	3	0	0	0	31	33

Table 1 shows international tours, concerts, fan meeting tours, showcases, and joint tours and concerts which together make around 1100 performances worldwide, whereas total performances were 1,985 which includes performances within South Korea. Figure 3 shows table 1 input in a bar chart which primarily focuses on the comparison between *K-pop* bands' international performances with total performances.

Figure 3 Global reach of K-pop groups: eSk vs. iSK

The percentage of international performances of *K-pop* bands is high 35.67% which shows that the K-factor is concentrating on its global reach and cultural penetration to expand its soft power for a lasting impact.

This study's findings indicated that the average number of *K-pop* performances performed outside South Korea significantly outweigh the number of *K-pop* performances held solely in South Korea. This result was found to be statistically significant with a p value less than 0.05, with a p value of 0.0000. The international performances at higher frequency reflected *K-pop*'s global influence and its contribution to South Korean cultural diplomacy. The data also showed that internationally recognized groups like *BTS*, *BigBang*, *BlackPink* have had so many concerts outside South Korea compared to domestic performances. This trend in this suggests that *K-pop* acts intentionally aimed at international audiences to achieve the widest possible reach and impact.

Additionally, the rise in international concerts corresponded to the broader cultural and diplomatic goals of South Korea, which include international relations and promoting the global reach of *K-pop*. Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected, and the alternate hypothesis (H_1) was accepted. The findings verified that *K-pop*'s global expansion has indeed contributed to South Korea's soft power, improving the country's cultural influence on the world.

Cosmopolitans who have embraced *K-pop* and the international community as their home, admire *K-pop* fans across the nation, indicating the global impact of *K-pop* on the nation's outlook (Yoon, 2022). Additionally, *K-pop*, along with *K-drama*, has significantly improved the country's international image and contributed to substantial economic gains (Septiani, 2022). This has significantly

bolstered South Korea's efforts in soft power and cultural diplomacy. Currently, the advancement of *K-pop* music has become institutionalized as part of South Korea's formal foreign policy, enhancing the nation's soft power and attractiveness globally (Sivanesan, 2024).

K-pop has expanded beyond music to encompass various aspects of society's life. It has brought in shifts in the social construct of the popular music industry, dramatic government support, and aggressive scouting for new *K-pop* stars to provide insights into how *K-pop* is transforming South Korea's post-developmental society (Oh, Lee, 2014; Luo, 2023). People have also attributed South Korea's discovery as a cultural hub to the accomplishments in the *K-pop* genre.

Conclusion

Soft power, as distinct from hard power, deals with the ability of one country to influence other states through attraction and persuasion—and *K-pop* is an excellent illustration of how South Korea has used soft power. We have today's popular *K-pop* groups, like *BTS* and *Blackpink* who have gained popularity across continents and made South Korea's culture and lifestyle more appealing to the young generation all over the world. *K-pop* has also made many individuals to further learn or even find interest in other areas of Korean culture including Korean cuisine, Korean dramas, fashion and the Korean language. The phenomenon has come to be known as the "Korean wave" or "Hallyu" has offered South Korea a strong foothold in soft diplomacy to encourage nations of the world to cultivate diplomatic, economic and cultural ties with it.

Thus, it can be concluded that through idol music, *K-pop* bands and artists themselves have been able to increase the appeal and likability of South Korea on the international level. Therefore, there is the potential to guide *K-pop* 's soft power capacity through careful and deliberate integration into formal diplomacy and into the construction and advancement of a regional agenda that can enhance cultural, social and political ties. This clear linkage offers great insight into the way those involved in the management of popular culture could help enhance a country's diplomacy and peacemaking efforts across the globe.

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