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CHAPTER 1: K-pop and International Relations



(Seventeen 2017)

1.1 Introduction:

South Korea, despite its problematic past, has undergone a fast development in the past decades and is now regarded as one of the most developed nations. A large part of its development comes from the growth of Korean popular culture, mostly known as *Hallyu* (Korean Wave). *Hallyu* is the spread of national cultural products like Korean pop music (K-pop), movies, dramas (K-dramas) on both national and international levels (Jin 2018, 1). *Hallyu* started towards the end of the 1990s as a national phenomenon, to then reach a regional scale in the first years of 2000, with the debuts of some Korean singers and groups, the export of K-

dramas and Korean blockbuster movies to other Asian countries like Japan and China (Joo 2011, 491-494). The Korean government played an important role in the spread of the Hallyu, by establishing Ministries, giving funds to promote entertainment industries, and supporting artists by making them ambassadors of the Korean popular culture abroad (Joo 2011, 496-499). The interesting phenomenon of Hallyu has been used and is being used today to attract attention to the nation. One example is the worldwide famous boy group *BTS* which is conquering the world with its music and ideals and is contributing to raising interest in South Korea as a nation. The group has been selected as a tourism honorary ambassadors for Seoul (2017) by the Seoul metropolitan government (Yonhap 2017). Another example is the Winter Olympics held in Pyeongchang in 2018 which saw the performances of various Korean artists and famous K-pop groups like EXO in front of the entire world. EXO is also one of the most popular Korean groups and it was chosen to perform at the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games. Following this event, the group was selected by the Korean Tourism Organization (KTO under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism) as Korea tourism honorary ambassador to increment tourism (KTO 2018).

The research question that this paper will try to answer is: *How does K-pop function as a political and diplomatic tool in South Korean International Relations?* To analyze how K-pop functions as a political and diplomatic instrument, a critical analysis of the most relevant K-pop group on both the global music scene and the political one, BTS, will be conducted. The reason for choosing to analyze BTS, and in particular the events in which its members participated in, is the enormous success that the Korean idol group has gained in recent years, which makes it an interesting phenomenon to study and understand. BTS, also recognized by many as the biggest boy group in the world, participated in various important public and political events. The methodology will consist of a critical analysis of four public appearances in diplomatic or international political settings of the year 2018, as described and reported within official website, channels, newspaper, and other media outlets which can be found on the Internet. Moreover, to guide the research, five subquestions are also posed: *What message is the boy group trying to send? What are the perceptions given by these appearances, performances, or speeches? How are these appearances related to the political sphere? Is BTS making efforts to be part of the political stage? Can BTS be regarded as a political or diplomatic instrument within the South*

Korean international sphere? In regards to the structure of the thesis, this chapter will focus on the origins of K-pop, the drivers behind its creation and evolution into a global phenomenon, as well as the underline strategies which brought it from the national to the international sphere. Chapter two will then delve into the literature review of the theories of soft power and diplomacy, as well as the interaction between music and politics. The third chapter will explain the method of analysis and the instances which will be analyzed, while the last chapter contains the analysis and conclusion of this research.

1.2 K-pop: from the National to the International Market:

The History of K-pop

Korean popular music in South Korea can be divided into two different periods: from the post-Korean War period until the end of the military dictatorship, and the period following the end of the military regime until the present. In the former Korean popular music was subjected to strict governmental censorship. Many artists' songs were censored for being contaminated by Japanese, North Korean, or Western influences (Oh and Lee 2014, 72-74). Korean music has been influenced by the Japanese and American genres throughout the Japanese colonization of the peninsula and the United States presence in South Korea after 1945, year which signs the end of the Japanese empire and the colonial history of the Korean nation. The prevalent genres of traditional Korean music were ballads, chansons, and trot songs, and their performers usually stood still and dressed in traditional or western clothing styles (Lie 2012, 342-344). Moreover, during this time the main platforms on which music was distributed were only radio and television that reached a fewer audience compared to today's K-pop music, mainly distributed through the Internet and social media platforms to reach a broader audience. Besides, the use of television and radio made it easier for both censoring music content and music piracy, which today is more difficult as the sharing platforms explicitly display copyrights (Oh and Lee 2014, 76-68). After the end of the military regime, the country moved towards liberalization which allowed for new music genres like rock, pop, and rap to be spread. Even though these new genres were present the audience perceived them as alien to their tastes (Lie 2012, 346-348).

However, in 1992 a new Korean band called *Seo Taiji and Boys* was formed and it represented a real break from the previous Korean popular music. The particularity of the band was its bringing together two different music styles, namely hip-hop and rap by mixing them and adding choreographic dances to performances (Lie 2012, 349). This new style which was alien to its national audience became appealing to both South Korea and its neighboring countries. Thus, it represented a clear break from the traditional culture and values of the Korean people and also a real transformation of culture, as Lie phrases it: “K-pop is symptomatic of the cultural transformation of South Korea.” (Lie 2012, 361). Therefore, Korean popular music, now renamed as K-pop, mainly comprises this new type of music style characterized by a mixture of different music genres, choreographic dances, particular fashion style and the mix of Korean and English words. Since the 1950s Korean popular music evolved into K-pop which became a new genre that reached a global audience. Oh and Lee discuss how K-pop drew benefits from the new technological advances like YouTube, but also from the government involvement in supporting Hallyu (Oh and Lee 2014, 72). Since Kim Dae Jung became President of South Korea in 1997 there has been a moving interest towards supporting the cultural sector (Lie 2012, 359).

1.3 The Drivers Behind the K-pop Industry: Entertainment Houses and Market Strategies

In order to fully understand the importance of K-pop, it is necessary to analyze the drivers of its development. Although today the spread of Korean culture is supported by the government through various initiatives, the first ones behind the cultural spread, and in this case behind the music industry are entertainment agencies. Behind the emergence of K-pop as it is known today as a global phenomenon lie companies that brought up individual idols and idol groups. As previously mentioned, Seo Taiji and Boys opened the path towards a new type of music genre. Before the late 1990s, Korean music was mainly addressed to target the domestic market, as music genres were also limited. However, from the late 1990s the industry began to look not only at the domestic market but also at the international market as a target audience. K-pop as a global phenomenon, which also represents a main part of the Korean Wave, was made possible by the development of entertainment agencies, or ‘entertainment houses’ with their

strategies of production and marketing. Some of the biggest music labels include SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment. Among them, SM Entertainment (SME) is the oldest one which was established in 1995 by Lee Soo-man and since then it is considered the pioneer company in the K-pop industry. Many idols from the late 1990s, also remembered as ‘first generation’ of K-pop idols like H.O.T, S.E.S, and Shinhwa all came from SME (Lee and Jin 2019, 19; Pratamasari 2017, 223-225).

The success of these idol groups is partly attributed to the new strategy adopted by the agency. SME was the first company to create a traineeship system to prepare its trainees for their debut into the outside music world. This traineeship, or idol star system was later adopted by all companies (Lee and Jin 2019, 3). Normally, the agencies would scout teenagers from the streets, or by auditions, and then spend from few months to years of training, like in the case of Girls’ Generation and Big Bang’s members (approximately 15 years). During the traineeship, the trainees are taught a variety of skills, as dancing, singing, learning how to speak in public and learn new languages, usually Japanese and English. During this period the agency covers the entire expenses of each trainee until their debut. Thus, companies have a fundamental role in the “production” of idols, from choosing trainees to growing their skills, controlling their progress and daily life, to selling and organizing events like concerts and broadcastings (Lee and Jin 2019, 20-25).

The traineeship turned into a real business model when other entertainment houses began to use it as well (Lee and Jin 2019, 23). In the period before Seo Taiji and Boys, the targeted audience was mainly domestic, however, this began to change in the late 1990s. Agencies started to point at both the domestic and international audiences, with the goal of producing and selling their products globally and this can be understood by the further initiatives taken by the companies. SME was again the first to target the global market with the singer BoA, who was only 13 years old at the time of her debut in Japan. BoA was also the first Korean idol to receive enormous success both within and outside of South Korea. Her training program included a mixture of American and Japanese choreographies, but also learning English and Japanese (Lee and Jin 2019, 24-25; Pratamasari 2017, 223-226). She became instantly famous in Japan, which proved the strategic plan of SM to be a positive one. By including language learning, a mix of

music styles and choreographies, as well as English words in lyrics and titles, quickly moved towards a global audience, starting with Japan and then moving outside of Asia.

Other initiatives undertaken by SME are scouting foreign teenagers of Korean or Asian origins, establishing ties with foreign music companies, musicians, songwriters and choreographers worldwide (Lee and Jin 2019, 5, 23) which contribute to give a sense of international, or more Westernized music that appeals to both Koreans and foreigners.

Moreover, as Hallyu continued to generate attention, entertainment houses began to organize worldwide tours in the 2010s. One example is the SM Town Live World Tour which received the support of the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), a governmental agency supporting the promotion and expansion of Korean content industries. SM Town Live gained enormous success in both the United States and Europe, which led the powerhouse (entertainment company) to host this event yearly. Similarly, agencies like CJ also undertook the global expansion road by organizing Korean Conventions (KCON) abroad, thus bringing K-pop worldwide (Lee and Jin 2019, 25-27). Lastly, the 2010s global expansion of K-pop was also accelerated by the boom of social media platforms, which powerhouses used in their favor. The year 2012 marked the global expansion of K-pop with Psy's music video *Gangnam Style* shared on YouTube. The video was the first to reach more than one billion views worldwide, expanding the K-pop community outside of Korea (BBC 2012; Lie and Jin 2019, 18). Agencies began to open company channels on platforms like Youtube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and so on, posting pictures of their artists, teasers of new music videos and new song releases (Lee and Jin 2019, 29). This strategy made communication with the global fandom community easier, therefore, it is another fundamental strategy of exporting the K-pop abroad and appealing to the global audience.

Oh and Park in *From B2C to B2B: Selling Korean Pop Music in the Age of New Social Media*, argue that entertainment industries have changed their market strategies of production and distribution of K-pop from the beginning of the 2000s until now. As we live in an era dominated by social media, the entertainment industries shifted their strategy from a B2C (namely business to customer) to B2B (namely business to business) type of strategy. B2C refers to the production and selling of customized merchandize of idol groups, concert tickets,

organization of fan meetings, and production of CD albums which can be directly sold to customers. However, alongside this strategy was placed a B2B strategy. This plan includes signing contracts to upload and stream K-pop music on media platforms, signing agreements with local and foreign broadcasting companies, and foreign entertainment companies to increase the idols' popularity on the global stage. Moreover, it also shows how K-pop is not a fully Korean made product as many songwriters and choreographers come from abroad (Oh and Park 2012, 377-380), and also idols are now often scouted from other countries. EXO which debuted in 2011 under SM as a group of twelve boys is one example of this recruitment. EXO's particularity lays in the fact that the group was originally comprised of both Korean and Chinese members, forming two groups: EXO-K (Korean) and EXO-M (Mandarin), each of six members which performed both separately and together in two languages. The reason for creating a twin group was to target the Korean and Chinese audiences all at once, increasing its audience and popularity. When the group was not together, EXO-K focused on promoting itself in Korea, while EXO-M in China (The Korea Herald 2014). However, after two years of its formation, the band decreased to nine members, as three of the four Chinese members left. Since then the group kept only the name "EXO" performing in Korean while including Chinese and Japanese songs in their albums and concerts abroad. However, other than EXO there are many more mixed groups in the K-pop industry. Therefore, the music industry was brought up by entertainment houses that initially focused on the domestic market to then expand and export their products into the global scene through different strategies that make their music and artists globally appealing.

Lee and Jin name the K-pop phenomenon as a transnational one which would not have been possible without the systematic development and guidance of entertainment houses (Lee and Jin 2019, 5). These companies created a hybrid culture, as a mixture of both Korean and other music styles, genres, and English language (Jin 2016, 127). Other academics argue that K-pop lacks creativity and anything inherently Korean, nevertheless, it managed to become a real industry relatively fast since before the middle of the 1990s it did not exist (Seabrook 2012). However, because of these strategies the artists and idol groups produced are argued to be simply a "manufactured commodity which lacks autonomy and authenticity" (Kang 2017, 135). The companies bring up these artists from nothing, most of them do not sing or produce their own

songs, but usually they are given the songs that they will perform, therefore they lack the authenticity that many singers outside of the K-pop industry have. Indeed, the main plan of entertainment houses is to generate positive profits, thus it is a real money business.

An understanding of the importance of the K-industry is given by the reports of the companies' revenues and profits. The Financial Supervisory Service reported the revenues and profits earned by the biggest entertainment companies for the year 2018. Among the "big three" (SM, YG, JYP Entertainment) which are the richest agencies in the music industry features also Big Hit Entertainment, a relatively new company. The total revenue made by SM accounted for 60.5 billion won, YG 28.43 billion, JYP 12.5 billion, and Big Hit 22.45 billion won. Big Hit earned a profit of 78.3 billion, SM of 52.2 billion, JYP of 29.0 billion, and YG of 11.4 billion won (Koreaboo 2018). If the total earnings of the four companies is put together it amounts to about 1 billion of US dollar (Tan 2019).

1.4 The Involvement of the South Korean Government with Cultural Industries

South Korea, since its separation from the North, has experimented different types of approaches in regards to foreign affairs and cultural policy as reported by Kang. The South Korean government focused on nation-building during the 1950s, while focused on the modernization of the nation between 1960s and 1970s, and created policies for the cultural industries with the aim of expanding its cultural production within a globalized world (Ang, Raj and Mar 2015, 375). Since the end of the 1990s, the government has worked into expanding its global visibility to facilitate its economic interests in other countries. The Korean Wave is regarded by many scholars as a product of the government involvement to push towards economic growth. In fact, in the 1990s the government used the creative and cultural industries as a tool of political and economic improvement (Choi and Maliangkay 2015, 3). From the end of the 1990s, the government focused on recreating the national image of the country and its cultural identity through the support of culture. Every government somehow focused on promoting and supporting cultural advancements. In fact, in 1998 President Kim Young Sam's (1993-1998) policies moved towards the liberalization of the market (Kim 2018, 44). Cultural

expansion in a globalized world was seen as a way of contributing to the country's development, therefore Kim emphasized the need for developing cultural industries (Kim and Jin 2016, 5521-5522). The next President Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003) focused on the provision of finances to cultural industries, supporting and sponsoring cultural industry divisions in colleges. Kim viewed Hallyu as a creator of economic growth, which needed to be encouraged and for which he proposed a one billion dollars budget in the year 2000 to promote the cultural sector (Kim and Jin 2016, 5522). Then, Roh Moo Hyun's government (2003-2008) supported cultural industries' creativity and diversity. From 2005 it starts making use of activities of cultural diplomacy (Ang, Raj and Mar 2015, 376). In fact, instead of only focusing on economic development President Roh focused on promoting cultural exchanges through Hallyu to preserve and enhance cultural diversity in East Asia (Kim and Jin 2016, 5523).

However, the last three presidents are argued to have been more involved with the Korean Wave as soft power. President Lee Myung Bak (2008-2013) focused on promoting the image of Korea through popular culture and K-pop was one of the predominant areas (Kim 2018, 44-45). Kim and Jin argued that Lee was the first president to promote Hallyu as a soft power strategy. In fact, in 2009 he created a Presidential Council which focused on Nation Branding, then in 2012, he created a bureau part of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST) to promote Hallyu. The Korean Wave was seen as a tool of soft power to promote Korea at home and abroad (Kim and Jin 2016, 5525). In recent years many K-pop events began to be held abroad, like the K-pop festival of 2016 in Paris which was the world's largest festival of K-pop abroad (Kim 2018, 44-45). The initiative was sponsored by the SK government with President Park Geun Hye (2013-2017) as a way of promoting Korean culture in Europe (Jung 2016). Kim argues that part of Hallyu's success is to be attributed to the government's policies which targeted its production and expansion, however, he also argues that the government lacks a clear soft power strategy (Kim 2018, 44-45). Moreover, the government's ministries like the MCST and Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) have a budget used to promote Korea's image. They focus on promoting the country through campaigns like "Visit Korea" and their websites sponsor the image of the country with information regarding filming locations of famous dramas and locations of big entertainment companies that created the biggest idol groups

(Kim 2018, 45-46). The MCST in order to uphold the need of investing a great amount of money into Hallyu defined it as an “export-led economic development” (Oh and Lee 2014, 85). In 2013 the MCST invested 319 billion won in assisting Hallyu, among which 8.7 billion won was dedicated to its promotion. The overall budget increased 24 percent since 2012 (Oh and Lee 2014, 83-84).

Lastly, Moon Jae In (2017-present), at the time of his election, highlighted the relevance of cultural industries and assured to personally attend cultural events including K-pop concerts to underline the importance that Hallyu represents for Korea (Woodier and Park 2017, 71). In recent years there have been various events in which K-pop idols joined President Moon in his trips. For example, in 2017 CBX, a sub-unit of one of the most famous K-pop groups in Korea (EXO) joined President Moon in Beijing on his first state visit for the Korea-China Economic and Trade Partnership (Hong 2017). This happens again in 2018 when the President invites EXO’s members at the Blue House to greet US President Trump and his daughter (Yonhap 2019). “Soft power is at the foundation of cultural diplomacy” (Suntikul 2019), thus promoting soft power has been one of the core objectives of both South Korean governments and non-government actors such as entertainment agencies which viewed Hallyu in general and K-pop as promoting a certain image of Korea as a powerful tool for both economic and political growth. This chapter focused on analyzing the drivers behind the K-pop industry. Without the constant involvement and desire for more achievements by entertainment houses, this success would not have been possible. Moreover, the Korean government also played a role in promoting Hallyu through specific policies, with the ultimate goal of achieving economic development by the global recognition of Korean culture. The following chapter focuses on soft power and diplomacy which are relevant concepts of this thesis.

CHAPTER 2:

Soft Power and Diplomacy, Music and Politics

2.1 The Interaction of Culture and Politics: Soft Power and Diplomacy

The concept of power is fundamental in international relations, however, similarly to the one of culture is a complicated concept. Power is present in our everyday life, but we are unable to properly define it or measure it. The easiest attempts to define power are the capability of making or opposing changes, and obtaining what we want. In order to better understand it is important to establish power relationships and the purpose of its uses, thus, who has power and what is its purpose. Usually, it is a concept connected to resources that can be concrete or abstract. The general opinion is that for an actor or a country with more resources is easier for it to affect another actor or country which has less resources (Nye 2011, 10-12). The concept of power is at the core of international relations theory, mostly understood as “hard power”, the ability to obtain designated outcomes through force. However, today there are new forms of achieving desired outcomes that do not require using force or coercion. Joseph Nye made a new conceptualization of power and denominated it as “soft power”, opposed to “hard power”, which described in Nye’s words “is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye 2008, 94). The core of soft power lays on the country’s culture, its values and its policies. For Nye, power involves persuasion and attraction which shapes people’s minds. For soft power to work, a country’s culture, high or low culture, or both need to be appealing to people, the political values and foreign policies need to be legitimate. According to him, soft power needs to be considered seriously because it is becoming more and more relevant in today’s world. Recently, technology advances, and the Internet made the use of soft power easier. Therefore, shaping the opinion of the public both nationally and internationally has been made easier by technology, which is what makes soft power relevant today (Nye 2008, 96-99). Li and Hong argue that the theory of soft power is not completely new, but that other scholars before Nye emphasized concepts such as culture, fundamental for soft power. Gramsci argued that ideology and culture rather than violence are better tools to control

the political or economic sphere. Culture is a set of customs that creates meanings for the people of a society, therefore it can be used by political leaders to shape a certain ideology and maintain their position. Morgenthau, a realist scholar, recognized the existence of visible and invisible power and argued the last as capable of improving the national morale of a country. Lastly, Huntington also focused on culture in its Clash of Civilization's theory, arguing that having different cultures brings to division and clashes while sharing a similar culture brings to peace instead (Li and Hong 2012, 48-49).

When talking about soft power it is inevitable to mention public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. This paper understands diplomacy as a soft power tool to export the cultural attractiveness of a nation.

Adam Watson defines diplomacy as “the dialogue between independent states” (Watson 2004, 1). Since states' actions affect each other it is necessary for them to communicate with one another. Diplomacy divides itself into public and cultural diplomacy. Ang and others refer to three notions, soft power, cultural and public diplomacy, as terms of standard use in today's foreign policy.

Cultural diplomacy is normally understood as another dimension of public diplomacy. Their difference is that public diplomacy is more citizen-oriented, while cultural diplomacy is government-oriented. Whereas public diplomacy refers to exchanges or cooperation between countries in which normal citizens or actors of a private sector are the protagonists, cultural diplomacy refers to cooperation and exchanges of ideas and cultural practices between nations in which the advocates are government agents or intermediaries. The aim of cultural diplomacy is to shape and enhance the nation's interests (Ang, Raj and Mar 2015, 366-368). Moreover, cultural diplomacy as described by Cull can take various forms such as cultural gifts (e.g. exhibitions), cultural information (e.g. concerts), cultural dialogue, and cultural capacity building (academic exchanges and artists' exchange) (Stelowska 2015, 63).

Kim in *Bridging The Theoretical Gap Between Public Diplomacy and Cultural Diplomacy*, argues that public diplomacy “addresses foreign public and thereby increases the soft power of a state.” (Kim 2017, 293). Since the beginning of the 2000s, starting with the United States, more countries began to pay attention to public diplomacy as a diplomatic activity to

reinforce their soft power (Kim 2017, 293-294). Soft power refers to obtaining support and attention through communication, attractive and persuasive practices (Li and Hong 2012, 50-51). Making a country's culture attractive and promoting it abroad will be beneficial to the country involved. In fact, by making itself attractive to others it can contribute to shaping its status and achieving its interests.

2.2 Music and Politics - K-pop and Politics

Music is often linked with politics in various ways. It is often shown how the political sphere makes use of popular songs and artists to promote or attract the public's attention. For example, political candidates are often accompanied by songs during election campaigns, which then become soundtracks to their election campaigns. Music has a powerful impact on the listeners, which is why it can be employed for different purposes. Indeed, other than the simple purpose of enjoyment, music can also be used as propaganda and as resisting or promoting something. As mentioned above, nowadays popular songs and famous music artists are often used during political elections to promote the candidates. This type of implication is argued by Street to be a certain way of propaganda (Street 2003, 113-114). As songs can provoke emotional responses in listeners, music becomes a way of shaping the public's opinion and altogether it promotes or redirects the public towards the interests of the people in charge, which in this case would be being elected at the end of the campaign. Music is a tool used during elections in many countries today, and two examples are the United States and South Korea. In the 2016 US presidential elections Katy Perry was chosen as a supporter for Hillary Clinton's advertisement campaign (Reilly 2016). The song accompanying the advertisement was *Roar* whose lyrics regard empowerment and overcoming obstacles, which is also in line with the video ad that concerns the need of being strong and vote for what is right.

However, South Korea's use of music during presidential campaigns is different and directly aimed at attracting every citizen. The campaigns are always accompanied by singing and dancing to attract attention (Um 2017, 194). Each campaign becomes a real parade with voluntary supporters of every candidate who dress up and wear the same color that distinguishes

their candidate. Supporters sing and dance around the busiest places in the city. They also select various songs to target different audiences by age and interests, and presidential candidates occasionally make their appearances in the performances (CNN 2017). During the 2016 campaign of Moon Jae In the popular song *Cheer Up* by TWICE was chosen and its lyrics were modified to address issues that regard both younger and older people. Even though more songs were performed during the campaign, *Cheer Up* became the anthem for Moon's candidature (Frayer 2017). Guenauer argues that using music and dancing increases the possibility of a candidate to be voted (Guenauer 2018, 205). The more attractive and appealing the election campaigns are the higher is the chance that this effort will go in the candidate's favor. These examples in which pop music is used today in linkage to politics is far from being defined as propaganda, but it does probably have a great impact on the public's opinion in shaping their ideas towards a certain candidate. Especially the way in which South Korean campaigns are carried out. Indeed, modifying the songs' with new lyrics addressing important issues gives an idea of what points the future president will want to focus on once elected.

Music can also have a different purpose. Some argue that popular music is a means "which allows groups to establish shared meanings and interests" (Street 2003, 125) and by doing so it creates and strengthens a common identity. "Good music is the expression of something - a person, an idea, a feeling, a shared experience..." (Frith in Dolfsma 1999, 1038). Pop music is a tool used by people to express feelings, ideas, and identity. Besides, it is important to take into account the context in which music is produced. In fact, the social and cultural contexts represent relevant aspects that influence and guide pop music (Dolfsma 1999, 1037-1039). Therefore, there is a strict linkage between the production of pop music and the context in which is produced that contributes to making it successful. In fact, Danaher defines today's popular music as reflecting "the disenchantment of the new generation" (Danaher 2010, 811), meaning it brings together groups of people with similar ideas, feelings and taste, and this similarity creates unity and solidarity and it can give rise to new social movements.

Katy Perry already mentioned above is one American artist who spreads awareness of social issues through music. Perry's music career is divided into two periods, before and after 2008. At the beginning of her career, she was deeply influenced by her Christian background,

while from 2008 the Christian influence becomes absent in her songs. In fact, Perry's new song *I Kissed a Girl* (2008) brings a change of music themes in her repertoire. This song which has been controversial for years dealt with homosexuality. One of her most known songs is *Fireworks* which encourages people to be themselves. Indeed, most of her songs treat themes as self-love and also show support to the LGBTQ community and encourage the empowerment of women of this generation (Hernandez 2017). Similarly to Katy Perry, there are other American artists like Lady Gaga whose music encourages positive changes in society. Differently, in K-pop themes are often focused on love and relationships. However, in recent years more artists started to focus on social issues within their lyrics. BTS is the most well-known group focusing of the message of youth empowerment, personal and social issues of the new generation (BBC 2018). Others are following BTS' lead like *Stray Kids*, whose music message concerns the struggles of going through adulthood, life decisions, and future, showing the listeners that everyone is going through the same rough path in life regardless of it being right or wrong (Herman 2018). The following chapter will focus on the methodology of research and the case study of BTS, looking at the emergence of the idol group as a global phenomenon and the drivers of its success.

CHAPTER 3:

Methodology and the Case Study of BTS

3.1 Methodology

The research question guiding this thesis is: *How does K-pop function as a political and diplomatic tool in South Korean International Relations?* The initial assumption on which the research question is based is that K-pop, in this case BTS, does play a fundamental role in International Relations, and it can function as an instrument in various ways and for different purposes. The methodology will focus on a qualitative critical analysis of four instances in which BTS and K-pop appear. The events analyzed are from the year 2018, as they are the only ones connected to the political sphere, thus are the only ones considered. The method of research will be a critical analysis of the appearances and their representation within the media outlets in which they are reported.

A qualitative critical analysis aims to challenge the current perspectives while offering and creating new knowledge. It focuses on analyzing any type of text more in-depth to better interpret and understand it (Allen 2017, 294-296). More precisely, it will make use of a thematic approach. Owen described the thematic approach as looking for three criteria in a text: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. The first two criteria refer to the presence of the same meaning within the text, a theme, given by the repetition of the same or similar words which reconnect the text to a certain concept or theme. The last criterion instead refers to the existence of words which catch the eye more easily such as capital or italics letters, as well as vocal differences in spoken texts (Owen 1984, 275-276), which in this case will be given less relevance. The themes will serve as a means to answer the subquestions posed in this paper which will then be reconnected to the overarching question of the thesis.

The analysis will begin by describing the events, the participants, and when possible also the way that they are portrayed by newspapers or other media. The subquestions that will be looked at in the analysis are: *What message is the boy group trying to send? What are the perceptions given by these appearances, performances, or speeches? How are these appearances*

related to the political sphere? Is BTS making efforts (pushing themselves into the political stage) to be part of the political stage? Can BTS be regarded as a political or diplomatic instrument within the South Korean international sphere?

The analysis of the thesis will present connection and references to BTS songs, which is possible as a result of familiarity with BTS as a group and its songs. Moreover, this thesis and its research also present a series of limitations such as the impossibility of using Korean newspapers and media outlets for its research due to lack of Korean language proficiency, which limits the use of various sources. Besides, being the methodology a critical analysis, it could be more subjective. Lastly, another possible limitation also addresses the lack of academic studies and research on K-pop as a soft power and diplomatic tool as well as BTS as a group that continues to gain more success worldwide.

3.2 K-Pop and BTS

“No other genre has so successfully harnessed the power of fans on social media to spread the word [...]” (Alexis Petridis for The Guardian, in KOFICE 2018).

Petridis writes on The Guardian about BTS referring to it as a phenomenon instead of a group. BTS is seen as the idol group who managed to spread a new genre worldwide. Petridis' critique recalls the group as a phenomenon whose success comes from various aspects. Music with its particular lyrics is a reason for its success, however, the members' looks and fashion style also do play an important role in making the band extremely successful (Petridis 2018). Both BTS and EXO are recognized for their outstanding dancing performances. In fact, in 2018 Mwave launched a poll on Twitter for the “best K-pop dancer”, voted by more than one million fans worldwide, which saw both groups at the top with BTS' member Jimin reaching 47.5% of votes and EXO's member Kai winning with 47.9% (Mwave 2018). This shows how social media are essential platforms that allow the development of a global fandom that also contributes to its growing fame.

This paper agrees that a part of BTS' success is to be attributed to the typical features

which recognize it as a K-pop group, such as looks, fashion style, choreographies, and more. However, its great success would not have been possible without one more particularity which is to be found within their songs and strive towards awareness of the issues of the current generation. In fact, Korea has a great number of K-pop groups that are nationwide famous and recognized that however, are not recognized outside of Asia.

3.3 Who is BTS?



(KOFICE 2018)

BTS is a boy group of seven members (RM, Jungkook, Jimin, Jin, J-Hope, Suga, and V) which debuted in 2013 under Big Hit Entertainment. The name *BTS* stands for ‘Bangtan Sonyeondan’, meaning *Bulletproof Boy Scouts*. The band is also known with the name of *Bangtan Boys* or *Beyond the Scene*. BTS’ goal is achieving youth empowerment. One of its members, J-Hope spoke about the meaning of the group’s name describing it as “we want to protect our generation’s thoughts and values from the prejudice that pours down on us like bullets.” (Sang 2020). Since its debut, the group quickly raised to the top and became the most

popular Korean group worldwide. Differently from other K-pop groups that focus on themes as love and relationships, BTS' music takes on sensitive thematics like bullying or mental health issues, that resonate with a large number of the population and are not usually treated in this industry (BBC 2018). Indeed, the group's first album focused on the pressure of students taking the exam to become civil servants, a highly recognized profession in Korea. While other songs treated themes like socioeconomic issues and inequalities within the society instead, or problematics of youth employment which is characteristic of the current generation (Sang 2020).

Compared to other famous K-pop groups, BTS comes from a small agency. The company's founder Bang Si-hyuk had previously worked as a composer with JYP and established Big Hit Entertainment in 2005. Bang was interviewed by TIME regarding the success of BTS and he emphasized how the traineeship system and social media are the primary contributors to its success since they created the idol group and contributed to the spread of its music globally. However, BTS' success is also largely attributed to the freedom given to the group members to speak and state their personal opinions (Bruner 2019), as shown by the themes treated within their albums which are not common within the K-pop industry. Since entertainment agencies normally exercise large control on their idols they come to shape their groups' images and opinions to then project them to the outside world.

Among the issues treated by BTS, mental health is probably the most relevant, which comes to question whether the group has agency of its own or if it is somehow pushed by the agency towards making these issues stand out within the public. In fact, since 2017 several celebrities both actors and idol singers committed suicide. Jonghyun, Sulli, and Goo Hara lost their lives because of depression which was underestimated and not regarded as a real issue by their agencies. Sulli and Goo Hara were both victims of bullying on social media. Sulli received negative comments for being a feminist and for not wearing a bra, considered not appropriate within the Korean society (Cho 2019). According to Kwon, a psychologist at Yonsei Hospital, these happenings are to be attributed to the stressful and life draining aspects of the managing system of Korean powerhouses (Dong 2019). However, this is not the only reason to take into account. In fact, mental issues as depression and other sensitive ones like sexual crimes are regarded as taboo in Korean society. Sulli and Goo Hara were victims of sexual abuses and

illegal pornography for which they gained criticism when they tried to speak up instead of full justice. These types of injustice are not only related to celebrities but instead are ordinary. In the recent years, due to the suicides of these celebrities, and the Burnout club “sex scandal” of 2019, which was found to be connected to many celebrities, it has become more relevant to talk about these issues in the Korean society. However, the punishment and law enforcement in these regards are still found to be lacking (Yim 2020). Considering the previous events it is hard to believe that BTS has full agency of the message that the members try to send across since entertainment agencies tend to refrain focusing on certain issues. However, BTS is indeed a unique case. To a great extent, the members are given full agency on their music. However, it is also likely that the agency itself supports and pushes them to treat certain issues as a means of distinguishing the band from other K-pop groups and singers. Moreover, since the group’s debut, all members have been involved in the public scene. In fact, BTS went beyond being a simple idol group, as the music and performances are not the only attractive things. Indeed, their lyrics resonate with the public for supporting the issues of today’s generation and encouraging the youth to take charge of themselves.

3.4 BTS - Beyond Korea

The success and popularity of BTS crossed Asia and reached also the US and Western countries. The group performed with a new song (DNA) at the American Music Awards (AMAs) in 2017 becoming the first K-pop group to perform on an American Awards show (Kim 2017). The following year the new album *Speak Yourself: Tear* reached the top on the Billboard Artist 100 chart, signing the first time that a K-pop group reaches the top of the chart (Sisario 2018). Moreover, between the year 2017 and 2018, after their appearance at the AMAs and other public events, the group also appeared on numerous national television shows in the United States such as *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, *Good Morning America* and more popular shows (Herman 2018). These programs in which the idols appeared to promote and discuss their albums inevitably contributed to the rise of their fame across the United States.

CHAPTER 4:

Analysis

The events taken into consideration for the analysis are four. They connect culture in that it is K-pop and the political sphere. Each instance will be looked at by analyzing the event or text as a whole, focusing on significant words or sentences which can reconnect the texts to certain themes. The events considered are the One Dream One Korea song used for the Inter-Korean Summit, the Generation Unlimited Campaign, the Korea-France Friendship Concert, and the Award of Cultural Merit.

4.1 One Dream One Korea and Inter-Korean Summit:



(Reuters 2018)

One Korea Global Campaign is a global movement, involving a large number of organizations and citizens around the world for the unification of the Korean peninsula. The movement is meant to facilitate the initiatives taken by the government towards a possible future reunification of the two Koreas. It involves different campaigns and events such as international discussions with other countries on Korean history and unification. It also focuses on aspects like

history and identity of the Korean people, empowerment, historical and cultural tours, as well as cultural events involving K-pop (Global Peace, 2015). The first One K Concert, which saw the participation of some of the most famous K-pop groups and solo artists, was held at the World Cup Stadium in Seoul in 2015. During the concert, the artists also performed the new song *One Dream One Korea*, produced for the One Global Korea Campaign, which was released along with an official online video showing many singers harmoniously performing together. Among the singers feature noticeable K-pop groups' singers like BTS (Jungkook), EXO (Baekhyun), Red Velvet (Wendy), Girl's Day (Minah), EXID (Solji), GOT 7 (Youngjae) and more. The official video also includes two more singers, President Moon Jae In and Kim Musong, who were both attorneys at the time. They respectively represented the liberal and conservative political parties of South Korea whose relationship has been conflicting and complicated. However, this also shows how differences and conflicts can be resolved for a major cause which in this case is unification (Global Peace 2015). Lastly, it also includes the participation of the Korea Unification Minister, Yong Pyo Hong.

Below is the first part of the lyrics of *One Dream One Korea* (retrieved from, Global Peace 2015):

*We were never different
 Don't forget that fact
 We fully missed each other
 Let's meet now, I am on my way
 Let's remember once again
 Let's sing our song once again
 For the day we become one
 For our heart beating dream
 I want you. Let us hold our hands*

*You and I
 [...] one dream for one Korea
 [...] The breeze passing my side is one
 That has passed you
 (Global Peace 2015)*

The lyrics are composed by Hyung Suk Kim and Kim Eana, a renowned South Korean composer and lyricist (Global Peace 2015). The entire song can be interpreted as representing three important themes:

Pain, Sameness/Equality, and Unification:

The first three verses recall the history and identity of the Korean people, as well as sharing the same pain of separation. Whether someone is North Korean or South Korean it does not make a difference, because ultimately every Korean shares the same blood, identity, and tumultuous history. Everyone also shares the same soil and sky, which makes them even closer to one another. What matters is that everyone is the same, there are no differences that cannot be overcome, and this is represented by the singers in the official music video.

Not only many different singers joined together to sing for the hope of One Korea, but also two members of opposite parties joined. Moon Jae In represented the Democratic Party, while Kim Musong represented the Saenuri Party (a conservative party). They are the main political parties in South Korea, which are in constant conflict with one another, but these conflicts can be overcome. In fact, the participation of the Ministry of Unification, Yong Pyo Hong, symbolizes the possibility of overcoming any type of difference and conflict, and the possibility of becoming united once again. The third verse seems to remind of the physical division of the two countries, people, and families. The two Koreas are only a separate family seeking to re-embrace one another. Being able to be a single unified nation once again is a dream which this song seeks to achieve. It wants to give hope towards a possible future where Korea will be united.

This event is not particularly linked to the participation of BTS, but it sees a broader representation and use of K-pop in the political sphere. Since BTS as a group is not the main focus here, the subquestions instead address the participants, the lyrics itself, and the use of the song in a political situation. The participants are members of popular K-pop groups, including Jungkook (BTS), but also solo singers and composers. The song itself seems a powerful tool of political and diplomatic use which is emphasized by the official music video and participation of

relevant politicians. K-music is meant to be used for a larger cause, which is unification. Therefore, sending this message across a large audience, obtained through the Internet and live concerts. The official music video is available on Youtube, and a K Concert was held which saw the participation of popular K-pop groups, as well as the performance of the *One Dream One Korea* song.

The fact that the song was used in a diplomatic context shows the relevance of K-pop even more. In fact, the song was used in 2018 to celebrate and honor an important day, which was the first Inter-Korea Summit between North and South Korea after almost ten years, held in Panmunjeom. The closing ceremony, aired by Arirang News, saw a projection of images of the meeting between President Moon Jae In and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un holding hands while watching the video with the background music of South Korea's unification song, *One Dream One Korea* (Hyun Jin Preston Moon 2018). The reporter of Arirang News, an English-language news platform, commented the farewell ceremony by saying:

“It takes a lot more work to thaw the relations between two sides that are so closely linked with much similarities, basically the same root... This is something we should constantly remind ourselves, especially after this very breathtaking performance, reminding us that we are one.” (Arirang News Reporter in Hyun Jin Preston Moon 2018).

The reporter emphasizes the importance of the lyrics of the song *“we were never different.”* According to the words above, the two Koreas have the same origins and are ultimately very similar to one another. Political relations and conflicting ideals between the two countries, instead, are what keeps them apart. However, the lyrics and the performance (official video) are both a reminder of the countries being essentially one due to their similarities and a hope towards bridging the differences that are left. The lyrics, the participation of K-pop singers, politicians, and the use of this song, along with its message, clearly point out how K-pop can be used as a tool towards achieving a goal.

4.2 BTS - Love Myself and Generation Unlimited Campaign:

In 2017 the Korean Committee for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) established a partnership with BTS to launch the global campaign named “Love Myself”. The title of the campaign resonates with the boy group’s album “Love Yourself”, released as a trilogy expressing the different faces of love. The first one *Love Yourself: Her* is about experiencing love for the first time during youth, describing its instances in a cheerful way (BHE, n.d.). The second album *Love Yourself: Tear* comes to realize that true love is impossible to achieve without placing yourself first. Loving someone else comes only after loving oneself (BHE, n.d.). Lastly, *Love Yourself: Answer* is the last album including songs from both albums and additional ones that complete the story (BHE, n.d.).

UNICEF launched the *#EndViolence* campaign in 2013 against violence towards children and teenagers everywhere in the world, and BTS joined it with the *Love Myself* campaign in November 2017 promoting the end of violence and self-love through music (Unicef, n.d). The campaign is in line with the boy band’s theme in its album as it concerns the realization that loving and respecting oneself is the most important way to succeed and make the world a better place for everyone, and BTS’ goal is to spread this positive message through music to the young generation that is struggling because of social and personal issues (Hong 2017). The campaign gained over 2 billion Korean won as of November 2019 through private donations, sales of *Love Myself* merchandise, Line and Kakaotalk emoticon purchases (Love Myself, n.d). The fundings are used to support children affected by “domestic, school and sexual violence” and are also used to prevent such outcomes (Unicef, n.d).

The following year sees BTS on the global and also political scene once again (September 24th, 2018), this time participating at the United Nations General Assembly as Goodwill Ambassadors for the launch of *Generation Unlimited*, a global partnership to raise funds for youth development. The group received the invitation as Unicef regarded BTS’ message as an inspiring mean, as mentioned by the Unicef’s twitter post after the conference (Twitter 2018).



(Unicef 2018)

During the United Nations' conference, BTS' leader (RM) made a public speech about the hardships faced during youth and his career and he also emphasized how the group's *Love Myself* campaign encouraged people to love and respect themselves from the many messages received. The speech was focused on the slogan "*Speak Yourself*". The six minutes speech of RM became popular worldwide and was addressed by a great number of newspapers. Moreover, different schools in various parts of the world began to address this speech as academic material and recognized its importance and persuasive capacities which can encourage students to speak out about important issues (Lim 2018).

The speech can be divided into five different themes: childhood, pain, music, equality, the realization of self-love.

The parts below are taken from the official speech of Kim Nam Joon (RM) given at the United Nations for *Generation Unlimited*, available in full on the UNICEF website and UNICEF Youtube channel (Unicef 2018).

Childhood:

“I’d like to begin by talking about myself [...] I used to imagine that I was a super hero who could save the world.” (Unicef 2018).

RM begins his speech by expressing how grateful BTS’ is for having been invited to the United Nations. After greeting the audience, he briefly introduces his childhood remembering himself as a child from a small town who just like others at a young age, used to dream about becoming an adult. He believed that the world was a place where every dream would come true, and every person would live an ordinary and happy life.

Pain:

“In an intro to one of our early albums, there’s a line that says, ‘My heart stopped when I was maybe nine or ten.’ Looking back, I think that’s when I began to worry about what other people thought of me [...] I began to shut out my own voice, and started to listen to the voices of others [...] My heart stopped, and my eyes closed shut. So, like this, I, we, all lost our names. We became like ghosts.” (Unicef 2018).

The tone of RM’s voice changes when reading these sentences of the speech. In fact, he raises his tone when starting new sentences, as to emphasize their meanings. This change as well as continued pauses he does throughout the speech contribute to give a more emotional discourse that easily reaches and engages with the audience. Kim Nam Joon briefly explains how his life changed from being happy to sad, and how the negative opinions of people weighed heavily on his mind and heart. This feeling of being lost, becoming a “ghost”, is a common one among the younger generation and it is also the reason why the previous *Love Myself* campaign was initiated.

Music:

“But I had one sensory, and that was music. There was a small voice inside of me that said, ‘Wake up, man, and listen to yourself’.” (Unicef 2018).

Music represents a lifeline for the members of BTS and also for many of BTS' listeners. The power of music and lyrics should not be underestimated, because it is what lifted some of the group's members from the darkness and it has the same role for almost all fans of BTS, the Army, to whom later in the speech Kim Nam Joon expresses how grateful and thankful the group is. The name Army stands for "Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth", and it has a link with the name of BTS "Bulletproof Boy Scouts" meaning that the Army is BTS' shield, thus what keeps the group safe and protects it. The Army fandom not only contributes to raising BTS' popularity through music video streaming, sharing, and social media activities, but it also expresses its loyalty to the group by doing charity projects for national and worldwide causes. BTS' members also often donate for charity events in the name of their Army fans (Foong 2019). Moreover, the group's agency, BHE, legally purchased the trademark *Army*, which is usually done for the names or logos of groups instead of fandoms (Lee 2018). However, this initiative could be interpreted as a form of gratitude and also payback to the Army, who contributed to the group's success.

Equality:

"[...] No matter who you are, where you're from, your skin color, your gender identity, just speak yourself. Find your name and find your voice by speaking yourself." (Unicef 2018).

Equality is a status which touches everyone in every part of the world. Unfortunately, often people are underestimated as unequal based on their skin, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and many more aspects. This inequality which is perceived and pointed out can not only lead people to the edges but it can also be extremely dangerous. Thus, it becomes important to encourage those who are struggling with searching and understanding their identity, who they are, those with a lack of self-love or other mental health to talk about these issues. But also that the differences in reality are not real, because we are all equal.

Realization of self-love:

“I’m Kim Nam-joon, and also RM of BTS. I am an idol, and I am an artist from a small town [...] Like most people [...] I have many faults, and I have many more fears, but I’m going to embrace myself as hard as I can, and I’m starting to love myself gradually, just little by little.” (Unicef 2018).

Similarly to many other young boys and girls, RM states that he has made countless mistakes, he has struggled with the fear of failure and of what others thought of him. However, in the end, none of these fears represents an obstacle to him anymore because like other BTS’ members he has learned to love himself for who he is. Loving oneself is not selfish, but it is a way of understanding ourselves, who we are, and what we want in life. It is about learning that the only thing that matters is not what others believe and think of ourselves, but what we “ourselves” think and can make of us.

Connections Between RM’s Speech and BTS’ Songs***The Meaning of “Love Myself” and “Speak Yourself”:***

Another important point to be made is that there are many references to BTS’ songs and albums throughout RM’ speech. Even though they may not be caught by the people who do not listen to their songs, the references can draw them in. At the beginning RM mentions ‘[...] I was a superhero’ (Unicef 2018). This refers to two songs in particular. The first one is *Anpanman*, from the album, *Love Yourself: Tear*, 2018 (Jpopasia, n.d.). While the second one is an older song *Jump*, from *Skool Luv Affair*, 2014 (Jpopasia, n.d.). Anpanman is a Japanese hero with the aim of saving the world, but differently from superheroes like Batman or Superman, he is a weaker one. In fact, Anpanman’s head is made of red bean bread which he gives to people in need and this weakens his abilities by making him unable to use his powers, thus he loses his hero’s ability (Amos and Amos 2018, 87-88). Similarly, BTS members are not real heroes, but they want to save the world, succeed in life, and being able to help others by giving them their music. The word superhero is also present in the song *Jump*, a song that can be seen as a background to *Anpanman*. In the song the boys dream of being superheroes. However, while growing up and

realizing that the world is more complicated and with plenty of obstacles to face, they wish to go back to their younger age in which dreaming was still possible. Lastly, with this song, they also want to convey the message that their dream brought them on the stage and that this is what fulfills all their wishes and brings them happiness. Even though life presents a series of obstacles, they can be overcome and dreams can still be realized.

RM also mentions the line “*My heart stopped when I was maybe nine or ten*” from the song *Intro: O!RUL8,2?*, in the album *O!RUL8,2?*, 2013 (Jpopasia, n.d.). Here everything constituting the surroundings is an obstacle and a disappointment. The protagonist feels lost, but then in the following lyrics of the song, he realized that there is only one life and that it should not be wasted. Everyone can live up to their dreams because it is never late to realize them. People will always judge or think differently, but others’ thoughts should not affect anyone. The lyrics ultimately ask the listeners to look inside themselves and ask themselves what their dream is and what they want to achieve in life. In the speech, RM says: “*We became like ghosts*” (Unicef 2018). The lyrics inspire people to not care about others’ opinions but instead place oneself first.

The line “*Wake up, man, and listen to yourself*” (Unicef 2018) shows a connection to the single album *Wake Up*, 2014 (Jpopasia, n.d.), in which the protagonist wants to choose the best way of suppressing all the conflicting emotions that he is feeling. However, negative thoughts should not win. Even when life seems to be lonely and hard nothing makes it unworthy. Just as in the song the parents call the boy’s name to wake him up from his negative dream, in reality, music calls him to save him from the darkness. The purpose of sharing music is to bring the same positive message to all the people who are struggling with hardships in their lives. BTS aims to inspire people to never give up and to love themselves. Thus, overcome any obstacle through self-love, speaking up about injustices, and at the same time find oneself.

BTS’ message through Kim Nam Jun’s speech, as well as through the idol group’s music, is about “*Love Yourself*” and “*Speak Yourself*”, thus about self-love in a bigger frame. It points out inequalities that exist in society and in the entire world. Identity and discrimination are never separate from the political sphere, which is also why “*Love Yourself*” is not far from being interpreted as a political message. Through this campaign, BTS is not only addressing single

individuals, but also the entire world and what needs to be changed to create a better place for everyone, where there is respect for oneself and others, instead of discrimination and inequalities.

4.3 Korea-France Friendship Concert:

On October 14th, 2018 the worldwide famous group BTS was invited by the Blue House and joined President Moon in its fourth visit to France for a summit with the French President. The group performed in a cultural event, the “Korea-France Friendship Concert”, which was held before the summit and was attended by both government officials and fans (Yonhap 2018). During the concert, the boy group performed two of its most well-known songs: *DNA* and *Idol*. *DNA* is part of the album, *Love Yourself: Her* and it essentially is a love song. However, analyzing the word DNA and part of the lyrics of *Idol*, from the album *Love Yourself: Answer*, they are both connected to the themes present in BTS’ campaign. Especially the theme of:

Self-love:

The DNA is the genetic material that cannot be changed. Thus, emphasizing how people cannot change themselves, but instead learn to accept and love themselves for who they are.

They point fingers at me

But I don't care at all

[...]

You can't stop me lovin' myself

(*Idol* from, Jpopasia, n.d.)

The lyrics points out the realization of self-love, while it also connects to the speech of RM at the United Nations in which he talked about being judged by strangers and how music became a savior from the negative critiques. However, in the case of this event is also important to look at how the event itself was portrayed in the news. In fact, The Korea Herald emphasized

how the concert signed the 130th anniversary of diplomatic relationships between the two countries (Yim 2018) and how BTS' performance became a symbol of this relationship, thus viewing BTS as ambassadors of the Korean culture abroad and in this case in France. The political implication of idols and celebrities as a way of wanting to establish a better relationship between countries (Yonhap 2018), thus enhancing possible interests through public and cultural diplomacy, is evident in this case.



(Yim 2018)

The KOFICE (Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange) included among its overseas correspondent reports the analysis of the French newspaper “Le Figaro” mentioning how the Korea-Friendship Concert with the performance of the most famous K-pop group is a clear “show off” of the country’s soft power by President Moon (Ji 2018). Indeed, the previous achievements of BTS such as topping the charts of the Billboard as well as publicly speaking at the UN contribute to make BTS a diplomatic instrument.

The use of K-pop and more specifically of notorious K-pop groups as diplomatic tools has been also noted by other politicians. For example, Indonesian president Joko Widodo in an interview for Chosun Ilbo referred to the band Super Junior as an “important diplomatic tool”

which serves as a connection between Indonesia and Korea. In fact, the group's leader and SM agency's president were also recognized as remarkable participants for the 2017 Business Summit between the two countries (WTK 2018).

Another demonstration of how K-pop takes relevancy in the political sphere is shown by the discussion over military exemption for BTS. Every Korean male citizen between the age of 18 and 28 has the obligation to enlist in a 21 months military service, essential in the eventual need of defense against a military attack from North Korea. Although it is a legal requirement there are still possibilities of receiving exemptions, like in the case of classical musicians. In 2018 the BTS fan base asked for BTS to be exempted from the enlistment, and the proposal was supported by the Minister of Culture, and Assemblyman Ahn Min-suk who considering the international fame of the group and the economic revenue generated by K-pop supported the idea of exempting both BTS and other significant idols, and called for a revision of these rules. However, the Ministry of Defense eventually discarded the appeal against the exemption (Padilla 2019, Yim 2018).

4.4 Award of Cultural Merit:

Every year the South Korean government holds a ceremony awards for Korean Popular Culture and Art, where outstanding artists such as actors, comedians, singers, and also models are selected for the awards. The awards are divided in Award of Cultural Merit, President's Award, Prime Minister's Award and Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism's Award (Lee 2016). Among them, the Award of the Cultural Merit, is given to an exceptional individual who successfully promotes the culture of South Korea and the development of the nation from within the field of art and culture (Korea Legislation Research Institute, n.d), is the highest.

On October 24th, 2018 BTS' members were selected as recipients of the most prestigious medal which is selected by the President of South Korea. This signed the first idol group to receive this outstanding award. Although previous artists such as singers (Psy in 2012) and actors have been awarded, BTS was the first K-pop idol group to receive it. During an interview for Yonhap, Prime Minister Lee mentioned the "Love Yourself" albums which topped the Billboard

chart twice as well as more explicitly the reason for this selection. Prime Minister Lee mentioned how:

“Many young people overseas are now singing Korean lyrics, one of the examples of (BTS) contributing to not only spreading Hallyu, but also Hangeul [...]” (Prime Minister, quoted by Kim in Yoon 2018).

BTS is more than a simple Korean group, as it succeeded in spreading what is part of the Korean Wave which is K-pop, as well as contributed to the spread and rise of interest in Korean language. Earlier in 2018 the group also received a congratulatory letter from President Moon in regards of their musical achievement, expressed by:

“BTS [...] have a magical ability to turn sadness into hope, and difference into similarity [...] put who they are and how they live into their music, and they are overcoming location and language, and culture and institutions.” (Moon, translated in Metro 2018)

Music, Sameness/Equality, and Self-Love:

“BTS' fan club, 'Army,' unites with its unique energy and tries to go beyond just (consuming) and liking the band by directly understanding (the band) through learning the Korean language,” (Kang in Yonhap 2020).

Music is a clear soft power tool that brings great attention to what is not only the effectiveness of music or BTS but interest in Korean culture. Being chosen as the award recipient by the President also shows the importance that the government gives to K-pop and BTS.

In fact, in an interview on Yonhap, the chief of King Sejong Institute Foundation, managed by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, attributes the enormous worldwide increase in wanting to learn the Korean language to the spread of K-pop, and BTS' songs which increase people's interest in learning the language. This brought the Ministry of Culture, Sports

and Tourism to allocate 33.2 billion won for the year 2019 to open 30 additional King Sejong Institutes abroad, taking the number from 180 to 210 worldwide (Yonhap 2020).

BTS is also named as actual ambassadors for the spread of Korean culture abroad (Yonhap 2018). In fact, BTS seems to go beyond being a simple K-pop group and is instead recognized as an actual phenomenon that unites a global fandom “Army” through its uniqueness. At the same time this increments interest in everything Korean, and this uniqueness also receives support from governmental institutions.

4.5 Discussion and Conclusion

The research question guiding this paper asked: *how does K-pop function as a political and diplomatic tool in South Korean International Relations?* Therefore, it aimed at understanding how K-pop works within the political sphere. Utilizing BTS with its many high relevance appearances, the study concluded that K-pop and BTS are a powerful tool with the ability of making significant changes in society by addressing social and sensitive issues. This thesis showed how K-pop, and BTS in particular, have been involved in different occasions and ways within the political sphere. The perception given by the band is that it seems to be having relatively more freedom compared to other K-pop groups or single idols in the thematics treated in their songs. Thus, this freedom led them to be able to focus on sensitive issues for which they received large acknowledgment both by fans and politicians. Each event has a political side and involvement, which contributes to categorize K-pop as a clear stand of soft power. The South Korean government is fully supportive of K-pop and also BTS, as this popularity can be used to fulfill other goals. In all instances, there is a repetition of the theme of music and also sameness or equality. Music and the lyrics of K-pop are what connects each instance with one another. In the first event, the One Dream One Korea song essentially hopes for a “One Korea” and it is used as a background to the first Inter-Korea Summit. Thus, it is meant to function as a bridge to facilitate what South Korea wants to achieve that is peace and unification with North Korea. The song also emphasized the pain and the similar path that the two countries went through.

In the second instance, music is described as a form of escape from negativity and it wants to encourage every individual to learn how to appreciate oneself and speak up about social injustices, which in many societies are still regarded as a taboo. Thus, the public speech at the United Nations which focuses on self-love highlights how K-pop is both a social and political tool that could bring forward positive changes. The third event takes the form of a cultural exchange concert between South Korea and France, and aims to smooth the relations between the two countries. In this case, the role of BTS, being one of the most well-known Korean cultural exports, in large part due to its music message, becomes an important one.

Lastly, the Award of Cultural Merit designated by the Korean government is meant to acknowledge the efforts of the group that has contributed not only to the awareness of social and personal issues but also to the spread of the Korean culture. In fact, BTS has managed to spread the popularity of K-pop worldwide and achieve significant music awards, as well as contributed to increasing interest in both Korea as a country and Korean language, shown by the opening of more language institutes across the world.

In the literature it has been mentioned how the South Korean government does not possess a clear soft-power strategy, however, the events analyzed recognized the government as supportive of K-pop. It might not be clearly explicit but music and especially K-pop, and BTS in this case, is regarded as a diplomatic instrument to ease international relations and achieve national goals. Moreover, recent years have seen several Korean singers and actors make more appearances in the political sphere, thus further analysis regarding the extent to which the government makes use of Korean cultural products as well as the extent of their success could be a relevant topic for further research.

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