

K-pop Fans as Participants in South Korea's New Public Diplomacy

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Abstract. This paper is situated within the context of South Korea's strategic deployment of its cultural industries as instruments of soft power and the concurrent global rise of digitally networked participatory fan cultures. It investigates how K-pop fans move beyond passive audiences to actively engage in South Korea's new public diplomacy, shaping South Korea's soft power and international image as non-state actors. The research employs a qualitative case study methodology to delve into two different yet complementary fan participation cases—BTS Love Myself Campaign and Kpop4Planet—to illustrate the breadth of fan participation in public diplomacy, from official humanitarian advocacy to grassroots environmental activism. The analysis reveals that through a combination of affect, digital media, and resource-mobilization, K-pop fans participate in South Korea's new public diplomacy and translate their cultural affinity into tangible diplomatic outcomes, enhancing South Korea's soft power influence and international image by projecting values of social responsibility and global citizenship. The paper concludes by suggesting the potential tensions within fandoms and the potential conflict between interests of fandom and state or corporate.

Keywords: K-pop, fans, new public diplomacy, participatory culture, soft power.

1. Introduction

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, represents one of the most remarkable cultural phenomena of the 21st century. As a fundamental component of Hallyu, K-pop (Korean pop music) is a meticulously produced music genre that blends catchy melodies, choreographed performances and visually stunning music videos [1]. Its origin is often traced to the 1990s, with the success of groups like Seo Taiji and Boys, who incorporated American hip-hop and R&B elements into the Korean music scene [2]. The rise of K-pop from a domestic niche genre to global popularity was pivotal to South Korea's cultural ascendancy, however, it was not a sudden explosion but a gradual and deliberate process. The modern K-pop industry as known today was systemized by major entertainment companies like SM, YG, JYP and HYBE established in the late 1990s and 2000s [3]. These companies developed an idol training system [4], grooming young talents for years in singing, dancing, languages, and public presentation, ultimately debuting them in groups designed for mass appeal. This structured approach laid the groundwork for a highly marketable product, which found fertile ground for global dissemination in the digital age.

However, the global spread of K-pop, catalyzed by PSY's Gangnam Style in 2012 and solidified by the unprecedented success of BTS in the latter half of the 2010s, was not merely a triumph of music production and idol cultivation. It was inextricably linked to the parallel development of vast, dedicated, and digitally-savvy global fandoms. K-pop fandoms, such as BTS's ARMY, EXO's EXO-L, and BLACKPINK's BLINK, evolved from passive consumers and recipients into highly engaged communities. They organized on platforms like Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and dedicated forums to stream music videos, coordinate voting for music awards, raise funds for gifts for their idols, and translate content into numerous languages [5]. The organizational prowess and collective identity transformed the fans from individual admirers into a potent and networked collective [6].

This paper argues that K-pop fans' characteristics of global reach, organizational efficiency and deep emotional investment have propelled them beyond the realm of entertainment to become nascent but significant participants in South Korea's new public diplomacy, actively shaping the nation's

international image and influence. This paper seeks to explore this argument by examining how the collective efforts of K-pop fans, driven by affection and social consciousness, have become a significant and often overlooked component of South Korea's public diplomacy.

2. Literature Review

Existing scholarship on this topic can be broadly categorized into three streams. The first stream focuses on K-pop as a tool of state-led cultural diplomacy and soft power. Scholars like Jang and Paik (2012) [7] and Oh (2016) [8] analyze Hallyu as a deliberate strategy by South Korean government to enhance its brand and achieve foreign policy objectives. This perspective often positions fans as receptive beneficiaries of this soft power, crucial for its consumption but not necessarily as active agents in its production [9] [10].

The second stream investigates the sociology of fandom and participatory culture. Research here delves into the internal dynamics of fan communities, their practices, and their labor. Sun (2020) [11] explores fan labor in Chinese context, while Kang et al. (2019) [12] map the collaborative networks within fandoms. Studies by McLaren and Jin (2020) [13] and Yoon (2022) [14] examine the cross-cultural identities and affective bonds that define the K-pop fan experience. This literature excellently explains the how of fandom but less frequently connects these practices explicitly to macro-level diplomatic outcomes.

The third, emerging stream begins to bridge these two fields, examining fan activism and its political-economic implications. Proctor (2021) [15] and Kim & Hutt (2021) [16] directly link the labor of BTS's ARMY to the generation of South Korean soft power. Kanozia and Ganghariya (2021) [17] documented ARMY's philanthropic activism during COVID-19, while Leksmono and Maharani (2022) [18] and Andini et al. (2021) [19] analyze K-pop fan activism in environmental and political contexts in Indonesia and Thailand. Jiang (2024) [20] and Zulkifli (2025) [21] also touch upon this intersection.

Existing research have collectively advanced the understanding of K-pop's role beyond entertainment, highlighting both its diplomatic significance through top-down perspectives and the intricate social structures of fandom through bottom-up perspectives. In particular, the third stream of research has made valuable strides in connecting micro-level fan activities with macro-level public diplomacy outcomes, revealing the potential for fan-driven initiatives to influence public discourse. Despite these valuable contributions, a significant limitation persists. Many studies either lean too heavily on the state-centric view of diplomacy, overlooking bottom-up agency, or they explore fan activism in isolation from the theoretical frameworks of international relations and public diplomacy. Furthermore, while BTS is frequently studied, there is a lack of analysis that incorporates other fan-driven activities which operate with different models of engagement, such as those without direct idol affiliation. This paper seeks to address this gap by synthesizing the theories of new public diplomacy, soft power, and participatory culture to conduct a case study analysis, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of fans as constitutive participants in, rather than just targets of, South Korea's public diplomatic efforts.

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study methodology. Case study analysis is chosen as it is particularly suited for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident [22]. The research question of this paper is exploratory and complex, requiring an in-depth examination of the mechanisms, motivations, and outcomes of fan activities.

A single case study could provide in-depth exploration but might lack comprehensive perspective. Therefore, examining both the BTS Love Myself campaign and the Kpop4Planet movement is adopted. This allows for a more robust analysis by illustrating different modes of participation: one

that is closely aligned with a K-pop group and a partnership between corporation and NGO, and another that is a grassroots activity involving multiple fandoms. The methodology involves a detailed analysis of primary sources from these campaigns, including official website, social media content, and press releases, complemented by secondary sources from news media and academic literature. This approach facilitates a thick description of how participatory culture operates within the framework of new public diplomacy, providing concrete examples to ground the theoretical discussion.

3.1 Conceptual Definition

This paper is grounded in three key concepts. New public diplomacy emphasizes multi-stakeholder participation and two-way communication. Soft power, which is reconceptualized to include non-state and grassroots efforts. Participatory culture explains the collaborative and co-creative nature of K-pop fandom.

3.2 New Public Diplomacy

Traditional public diplomacy was a state-centric, one-way process where governments communicated directly with foreign publics to inform and influence them [23]. New public diplomacy (NPD) represents a paradigm shift. It is characterized by a flow of communication from multiple directions, involving a network of state and non-state actors (including citizens, civil society, and corporations) in building long-term relationships [24]. The USC Center on Public Diplomacy defines it as “the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries” but now acknowledges the actors involved are far more diverse. NPD leverages new communication technologies and recognizes that a nation’s image is not solely crafted by its government but is constantly being shaped by a multitude of voices. South Korea’s embrace of Hallyu is a textbook example of NPD, where the government facilitates and amplifies cultural exports but does not fully control the narrative. [25] K-pop fans, as non-state actors, become crucial agents in this new form of public diplomacy. They engage in relational, two-way communication with global communities, effectively practicing a form of citizen diplomacy that complements or sometimes even operates independently of official government efforts [26]. This paper primarily employs the broad definition offered by Melissen (2005), viewing new public diplomacy as a networked process involving diverse actors. It focuses on analyzing the autonomous role of fans as citizen diplomats within this process, rather than viewing them merely as an extension of government policy.

3.3 Participatory Culture

Henry Jenkins (1992, 2006) developed the concept of participatory culture to describe a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship. In a participatory culture, members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another. K-pop fandoms are archetypes of a global and digital participatory culture. Their practices include creating fan art, writing fan fiction, producing dance covers, translating subtitles (fansubbing), and organizing massive online projects. This culture is not passive, but is built on collective intelligence and communal activity. The skills, norms, and networks developed through the cultural participation are readily transferable to other domains, including activism and diplomacy [27]. The organizational structures, communication tools, and collective identity forged in fandom spaces provide the foundation for the coordinated, large-scale actions that characterize their participation in public diplomacy, such as fundraising campaigns or awareness-raising movements [28]. Building on Jenkins’s core theory and subsequent scholarship on fan practices, this paper defines participatory culture as a set of transferable skills, norms, and network structures that provide the essential infrastructure and agency for fan participation in public diplomacy.

3.4 Soft Power

The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye (1990) to describe the ability to shape others' preferences and attract them through appeal and persuasion rather than coercion (military power) or payment (economic power). It arises from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies. Nye (2019, p. 8) later refined it, stating that soft power is the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes. Unlike hard power, which is wielded by states, soft power can be generated and exercised by non-state actors, including corporations, NGOs, and individual. South Korea's soft power is significantly derived from the global attraction to K-pop. However, soft power is more than possession; it must be converted into influence. This is where the role of fans becomes critical. Their active engagement—from promoting content to organizing charitable acts in the name of their fandom—serves as a primary mechanism for converting the cultural attraction of K-pop into tangible soft power influence, enhancing the positive perception of South Korea [29]. This paper adopts and extends Nye's classic definition, with a particular emphasis on the conversion process. It aligns with the view that soft power can be generated and exercised by non-state actors, analyzing the critical role of K-pop fans in transforming cultural attraction into effective diplomatic influence.

This paper posits that these three concepts are inextricably linked in explaining the phenomenon of K-pop fans' participation in new public diplomacy. South Korea's soft power is the resource, derived from K-pop culture. New public diplomacy provides the theoretical framework that legitimizes and explains the role of non-state actors like fans in international relations. Finally, participatory culture provides specific tools, communities and practices that enable fans to organize effectively and translate their cultural consumption into diplomatic action. Fans leverage the advantages of participatory culture to engage in acts that amplify South Korea's soft power, thereby becoming key participants in the nation's new public diplomacy.

3.5 Case Study

The two cases—BTS Love Myself campaign and Kpop4Planet—were chosen for their complementary contrast, which together capture the diversity and scope of fan participation mechanisms. The BTS Love Myself campaign represents a corporate-aligned, top-down model where a centralized fandom (ARMY) amplifies and rallies behind an official initiative launched by their idols and a major international organization (UNICEF). In contrast, Kpop4Planet exemplifies a grassroots, bottom-up model where a decentralized network of fans from multiple fandoms self-organizes, focusing on issues not necessarily initiated or influenced by the idols, companies or entertainment industry. These two complementary yet distinct models allows for a robust examination of how participatory culture operates under different conditions of resource access and institutional support: one with the immense leverage and resources of a global superstar group, and another that emerges spontaneously from the collective will of the fan community, demonstrating agency independent of the industry core.

4. BTS Love Myself Campaign

On November 1, 2017, BTS and its label Big Hit Entertainment officially signed a partnership agreement with the Korean and Japanese committees for UNICEF, a subsidiary of the United Nations, to sponsor UNICEF's global initiative #ENDviolence [30]. This initiative was built upon the core message of their music, which often addresses themes of self-love, mental health, and overcoming adversity [31]. The campaign aimed to “end violence, neglect and abuse, and to support children and teenagers around the world”. The campaign designed by BTS is not just a one-time event, but aims to establish a fund to protect and support young victims of violence such as domestic violence, school bullying, and sexual assault, and to provide financial support for violence prevention education in

local communities. BTS's platform provides the ability to reach millions of people worldwide so that it can use its digital influence to educate people about violence against children and raise awareness about UNICEF's pursuit to end it [32].

BTS supports UNICEF's programs by donating proceeds from the sale of official campaign merchandise and a portion of album sales, raising a BTS LOVE MYSELF fund, calling on fans and supporters to donate and to post self-loving photos with the hashtag #BTSLoveMyself on various social media platforms. However, the campaign's success was not just a result of the group's immense popularity but a testament to the highly organized and motivated nature of their fandom, known as ARMY. They transcended their role as consumers to become active co-producers of the campaign's global reach. They organized targeted fundraising drives, created multilingual content to explain the campaign's purpose, and used the hashtag #BTSLoveMyself to share personal stories, creating a massive, positive feedback loop that tied the act of being a fan to the act of supporting a humanitarian cause. In response to the core concept of Love Myself campaign, fans used the hashtag #BTSLoveMyself to post self-loving messages and photos on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Weverse, spreading the message of self-love and opposition to school violence and abuse to create an emotional support network and a sense of global social responsibility. Based on the idea of using collective power to contribute to global public welfare, a volunteer group called One In An ARMY was also created by ARMY in March 2018 to support projects related to #ENDviolence and the Love Myself campaign. At the UNICEF Korea Committee booth set up at the BTS Love Yourself World Tour concert venues worldwide from 2018 to 2019, fans were also able to learn about how individuals can protect themselves and each other from violence and bullying [33].

By April 2024, BTS Love Myself campaign has raised US\$6.48 million globally and generated over 15 million tweets under the hashtag #BTSLoveMyself [34]. These efforts were not orchestrated by the company but by dedicated fan groups who used their sophisticated online networks to coordinate and encourage donations. Through a combination of online and offline efforts, the fandom successfully expanded the influence of BTS's collaboration with UNICEF on a global scale, elevating the Love Myself campaign beyond traditional celebrity endorsements and breaking through conventional cultural dissemination pathways. More importantly, it culminated in BTS addressing the United Nations General Assembly twice (in 2018[35] and 2020[36]), where they spoke to global youth about self-empowerment. This event was a pinnacle of cultural diplomacy, placing K-pop act on one of the world's most prestigious diplomatic stages. ARMY's fervent support was the engine that made the campaign a visible and quantifiable success, allowing it to reach this diplomatic apex. Their participatory culture has projected South Korea's association with positive youth messaging and global philanthropy. It demonstrated how a fandom's organized efforts can directly facilitate a non-state entity (BTS/Big Hit Entertainment) in executing a high-impact public diplomacy act that reflects positively on its country of origin. It has become a fan-driven international cooperation platform and one of the most significant public diplomacy initiatives in K-pop history.

5. Kpop4Planet

Kpop4Planet (K4P) is a fan-led environmental movement platform founded on World Wildlife Day in 2021 by Lee Dayeon (a fan of aespa from South Korea) and Nurul Sarifah (a fan of EXO from Indonesia). It was initiated in response to the perceived gap between K-pop's massive global carbon footprint (from album production, streaming, and world tours) and the industry's and fans' responsibility to address climate change. Through K4P, K-pop fans have transformed their passion for music and idols into a powerful platform for climate activism, weaving together online mobilization and on-the-ground actions.

Operating as a non-profit organization, K4P leverages the tools of participatory culture—social media networking, online petitions, and hashtag campaigns—but directs them toward environmental advocacy. Rather than working with entertainment companies, the group's campaigns often criticize them, targeting issues such as the excessive use of plastic in album production, the environmental

impact of concerts, and the lack of sustainability efforts within the K-pop ecosystem. They began with hashtag campaigns and petitions on social media, pressuring companies tied to the K-pop industry—including streaming platforms, entertainment agencies, fashion houses, automakers, and e-commerce giants—to reduce their environmental footprint. A mere month after it established, K4P launched the #Tokopedia4Bumi campaign. The community successfully gathered 2,083 petition signatures to urge Indonesia's leading e-commerce platform Tokopedia, which worked with artists such as Blackpink, BTS, NCT and TXT, to commit to using 100% renewable energy in its data centers, delivery services and offices by 2030 [37].

K4P's activism quickly expanded to the music industry itself. Concerned about the environmental cost of mass-produced albums, K4P launched the campaign "No K-pop on a Dead Planet" in November 2021, followed by the "Plastic Album Sins" initiative in May 2024. The community, in collaboration with other fandoms, used social media to pressure entertainment companies to reduce plastic waste in their album packaging. They used hashtags, wrote open letters, and created awareness-raising content that went viral among fans worldwide. Fans even launched a bold protest campaign on Earth Day 2022, delivering a petition with over 10,000 signatures and returning more than 8,000 unused albums to the entertainment companies to show their demand for greener album options and sustainability in the industry [38] [39]. The campaign succeeded in getting some companies to go for more sustainable packaging solutions [40]. Their persistence bore more tangible results in 2023–2024, when over 11,000 fans from 68 countries petitioned Hyundai Motor Company—another BTS partner—to withdraw from a coal-linked aluminum deal in Indonesia [41] [42]. As a result, Hyundai canceled the agreement, marking a clear win for the movement [43] [44] [45].

With the numbers, social media reach and purchasing power [46], what began as scattered fan-driven campaigns has now grown into a coordinated movement. By 2024, K4P had built an organization of about 10 full-time staff and mobilized a global support network estimated at over 50,000 individuals [47]. Their website documents 9 major climate campaigns, which have garnered participation from 88,376 fans across 223 countries [48], illustrating how a pop culture community has become a formidable actor in global climate activism. While tangible corporate policy changes are slow, K4P is undoubtedly taking small strides towards transforming K-pop industry into a greener one. By holding Korean corporations and the broader K-pop industry to account, K4P engages in a form of critical public diplomacy. Not only are they promoting Korean culture, but they are also actively participating in shaping the ethical and environmental values associated with it on the global stage. Their actions demonstrate that fan participation is not always celebratory, but can also be critical, yet this very critique stems from a deep investment in the culture and a desire to see it embody positive global values, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced and responsible image of South Korea's cultural export.

6. Discussion

To comprehend the profound impact of K-pop fans' participation in new public diplomacy, it is essential to move beyond a simple description of their actions and analyze the core mechanisms that facilitate their collective engagement. This section examines the intricate interplay of affect, digital media and resource-mobilization that transforms passive audiences into active diplomatic agents.

6.1 The power of affect and the wish to help

The strength of modern fan activism lies in its ability to fuse elements traditionally associated with fandom—shared media experiences and a sense of community—with the altruistic motivations of volunteerism and civic action. This blend is particularly powerful for mobilizing young people. The initial psychological driver of fan participation is not a pre-existing political ideology, but rather an emotional bond, or affect, with the artist or media content [49]. This emotional investment is a powerful catalyst for forming a collective identity and, subsequently, collective action. Activism is

only possible when individuals' emotional needs, desire for communication, and collective solidarity converge with shared goals. The emotional connection to an idol, their music, and their journey serves as the common ground that unites a global fandom.

This emotional foundation is not a static state; it is a dynamic force that is channeled into civic imagination and collective action. The individual's love and admiration for an idol creates a strong, personal feeling. This feeling is then amplified and validated through shared experiences with a global community, an imagined community that transcends national boundaries. This communal structure provides a social and emotional safe space where individuals can learn, grow, and develop a sense of shared purpose [50]. When an idol group like BTS espouses a message of self-love and unity, or when a fan group frames a social issue through the values of the fandom, the emotional energy is seamlessly redirected. This redirection allows the fandom to lower the barrier of entry to political participation by making it accessible and engaging, often through creative or fun activities that connect political issues to pop culture. The emotional bond acts as the initial spark, and the community provides the necessary infrastructure to channel that energy into a meaningful, collective wish to help that otherwise might have been intimidating or inaccessible [51].

6.2 The role of digital media and the digital platform

Digital platforms are not merely tools for communication; they are the central nervous system of modern fan movements, enabling a new form of diplomacy that operates outside traditional institutional boundaries [52]. The digital ecosystem is a new arena where non-state actors, including fan communities, wield immense power. These online spaces have allowed fans to evolve from passive audience into creators, organizers, and activists.

The global and transnational nature of K-pop fandoms is a direct result of these digital networks. Unlike formal, state-led public diplomacy, fans leverage their digital fluency and collective voice to strategically hijack, subvert, or amplify narratives to exert pressure on corporate or political actors. They utilize tactics of digital activism, such as hashtag activism, to raise awareness and coordinate efforts on a mass scale. This is often combined with more disruptive, performative actions like virtual sit-ins or circulating petitions to create significant social impact. The Kpop4Planet campaign, for example, strategically targets the nexus of power between an idol, their brand ambassador deals, and the public. By focusing on companies that partner with K-pop artists, the movement directly leverages fan influence to pressure corporations into changing their practices. This strategic use of digital platforms and fan identity allows these movements to bypass formal diplomatic channels and directly influence policy and corporate decisions, demonstrating a real-world impact that challenges the old idea of fans as silent audiences.

6.3 Resource mobilization and collective activism

The case studies of the BTS Love Myself Campaign and Kpop4Planet provide compelling evidence that K-pop fans are not mere channels but active participants in South Korea's public diplomacy. This goes beyond the traditional understanding of public diplomacy as a one-way flow from state to public. Instead, it reflects the principles of new public diplomacy, where non-state actors play a crucial and often self-directed role [53]. As Kanozia and Ganghariya (2021) argue, K-pop fandom, particularly ARMY, has evolved into a form of social movement, capable of mobilizing for causes that transcend entertainment. This mobilization, as seen in the Love Myself Campaign, has a tangible, positive impact on South Korea's international image, presenting it as a country committed to global humanitarian issues [54].

The unique nature of a fandom as a resource pool is its multi-dimensional fluidity, which grants it a high degree of operational agility and resilience. Unlike traditional non-profits, a fandom's resources are not limited to financial donations. They include a constant flow of user-generated content, creative and strategic skills (e.g., how to trend a hashtag), and a vast, decentralized global network of individuals. This fluid resource base allows the movement to adapt and innovate spontaneously. A single viral tweet or a comic explaining a complex issue can trigger a global

campaign, as was the case for Kpop4Planet's music streaming initiative. This fluidity also lowers the barrier to entry for participation even further, as a fan who cannot donate money can still contribute by streaming music, sharing posts, or creating protest art works. The success of these actions reinforces a powerful sense of solidarity, which in turn promotes a stronger commitment to the cause and sustains the effort over time, even in the face of opposition.

United by an affinity for K-pop, these fandoms foster a sense of global community which often mobilized for purposes that transcend music, from mental health to climate action, to build people-to-people bridges and become a part of new public diplomacy. These collective activism enabled by digital platforms and participatory culture have also allowed K-pop fans, as non-state actors, to drive the accumulation of soft power. As Nye (2019) argues, soft power is most effective when it appears authentic and is not solely government directed. Fan-driven initiatives like Love Myself campaign appear vivid and passionate, making their positive message about South Korea more credible than a government-sponsored ad campaign, suggesting that K-pop fans' political participation is evolving beyond traditional forms (Andini et al., 2021). Their work, from organizing charitable donations to raising awareness about climate change, represents a grassroots accumulation of goodwill and positive association that ultimately benefits South Korea. The findings suggest that the success of K-pop as a soft power tool is less about a state's clever marketing and more about its ability to inspire a values-driven global community that is willing to act on its behalf. It transforms the fandom from a cultural community into a nascent transnational advocacy network, leveraging its connection to South Korea to advocate for broader global goods [55].

However, fans' participation exists within a complex tension. In the context of Chinese fans, fan identity can intersect and sometimes clash with national identity, creating a fan nationalism that complicates diplomatic outcomes [56]. Meanwhile, in contrast to American [57], southeast Asian fans and Korean entertainment companies—who are enthusiastic about social movements aimed at elevating the K-pop image and solving social issues important to them—some Japanese fans actively protect K-pop idols from being forced by their foreign fans to donate money and publicly endorse groups advocating for social issues. This autonomous fan behavior of valuing their personal enjoyment clashes with external expectations from other fans. It reveals internal tension within the fandom itself, demonstrating that fan activism is not always harmonious. The case of Kpop4Planet also highlights a potential conflict between fandom and state or corporate interests. Their criticism of Hyundai, a Korean chaebol, illustrates that fan participation does not always align neatly with official diplomatic or commercial goals. This critical stance, however, may ultimately contribute to a more resilient and respected soft power by demonstrating that Korean society is open to critique and engaged in global issues.

7. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how K-pop fans transcend traditional roles as audiences through a combination of affect, digital media and resource-mobilization to evolve into significant participants within the framework of South Korea's new public diplomacy, actively shaping the nation's soft power and international image [58]. The theories of new public diplomacy, which accommodates non-state actors, soft power, which requires mechanisms for conversion, and participatory culture, which provides the toolkit for action, are essential and interconnected for understanding this modern phenomenon. Through analysis of BTS Love Myself campaign and Kpop4Planet, a spectrum of participation from aligned amplification to grassroots critical engagement have been observed. In both cases, fans utilize their organizational prowess and digital identity to execute large-scale actions that project values such as youth empowerment and environmental responsibility onto the global perception of South Korea, being the critical link that converts cultural attraction into diplomatic influence.

Several areas remain for future research, including long-term sustainability of fans' participation, comparative analysis of how fan activism manifest in different political and cultural background, and

ethical inquiries into the commodification of fan labor for diplomatic purpose. The future of fans' participation in new public diplomacy, with its complex interplay of affect, identity, and digital activism, presents a rich and vital area for continued scholarly exploration. As the lines between fandom, culture, and public diplomacy continue to blur, understanding the role of K-pop fans and their participatory networks will be important to comprehending international relations in the 21st century.

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