

## PAPERS

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## The Fight for Korean Abortion Rights through Social Media Activism

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*How do abortion-rights activists in South Korea utilize social media to fight for reproductive rights? This research examines which strategies and frameworks were used by pro-choice social media activists to promote legal change regarding women's abortion rights in South Korea. While it was the Constitutional Court that struck down South Korea's criminal abortion law, the act followed years of extensive work by feminist NGOs in South Korea along with the emerging popularity of the #MeToo movement that began to address the need for safe, legal, and regulated abortion policy. Though previous research has examined the role of feminist movements and traditional NGOs in the reproductive rights movement, the significant role social media activism has played in the recent successes of women's reproductive health rights has been largely overlooked. This research conducts a survey of social media activists and aims to understand the role of online feminist activism in the recent advancement of Korean women's reproductive rights. Through exploring how social media activism worked cross-culturally to gain a critical mass of support to change the tide during the Constitution Court case which decriminalized abortion in 2019, the importance of social media as a tool for mobilizing and organizing activist behavior in the context of Korean society can be better understood.*

### **Introduction to Abortion Law in South Korea**

Within the past couple of years, abortion laws across the world have seen varying degrees of upheaval, most notably in South Korea. As of April 2019, South Korea's criminalization of abortion has been deemed unconstitutional by

Korea's Constitutional Court due to the efforts of pro-choice<sup>1</sup> non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the influence of domestic and international pro-choice movements.<sup>2</sup> Until December 31, 2020, South Korea had to revise its law to decriminalize abortion and add provisions to make the procedure more accessible for all Korean women in need of an abortion. and as of January 2021, the necessary measures were passed to ensure abortion was decriminalized, and the previous laws were repealed.<sup>3</sup> Since 2012, suggestions of the influence of social media activism have been reflected in reproductive rights in South Korea. In the country, the Constitutional Court reversed their previous ruling, which upheld the abortion ban except in cases where the mother's life was at risk, or in cases of rape or incest.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that due to the rise in social media usage and the changing political climate, social media activism may have played an important role in this reversal. Given that the abortion ban has lasted over 60 years since Korea's criminalization of abortion in 1953 and South Korea currently has one of the lowest birth rates in the world, it is remarkable that Korean pro-choice organizations have been so successful in obtaining substantial reproductive health rights over the past decade.

Moreover, a continuing trend relevant for reproductive rights, particularly in East Asia but also throughout the developed world, is the issue of diminishing birth rates.<sup>5</sup> Historically, South Korea has prioritized economic security over female bodily autonomy, which has led to restricting abortion rights as fears about an aging workforce have risen. This questions how South Korea, a country with meager birth rates, utilized social media activism to promote the decriminalization of

1 For most of those who identify as pro-choice, the term pro-choice is an ideology that advocates for a woman's right to have an abortion and to support legislation that provides safe, legal, and accessible abortion services.

2 Sunhye Kim et al., "The Role of Reproductive Justice Movements in Challenging South Korea's Abortion Ban," *Health and Human Rights* 21, no. 2 (2019): 97-107.

3 Yoonjung Seo, "South Korea to Legalize Abortion after 66-Year Ban," *CNN*, April 11, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/11/health/south-korea-abortion-ban-ruling-intl/index.html>

4 Eun-Young Jeong, "Abortion Ban Overturned in South Korea After 66 Years," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/abortion-ban-overturned-in-south-korea-after-66-years-11554966548>

5 James M. Raymo, "Marriage and Family in East Asia: Continuity and Change," *Annual Review of Sociology* 41, no. 1 (April 2015): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112428>

abortion in a country with a history of restricting female bodily autonomy.

Importantly, as South Korea began to re-evaluate its current anti-abortion laws, feminist pro-choice organizations started utilizing social media activism to sustain their cause and garner international support. Before the popularity of the #MeToo movement in South Korea, the issue of abortion was rarely discussed in the general public given the social stigma attached to unmarried women's sexual behavior and bodily autonomy.<sup>6</sup> However, South Korea has had a long and successful history of activism. Due to the influence of South Korea's profound internet-savvy culture combined with the increased popularity of online activism, South Korean activists began to enact massive social change via social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Daum Internet Cafe.

For example, in 2016 and 2017, South Korea's president, Park Geun-Hye, was impeached due to the successful Candlelight Movement,<sup>7</sup> organized oversocialmedia, resulting in one of the largest peaceful protests in South Korean history. Furthermore, in 2016, the global #MeToo Movement gained popularity in South Korea, which further developed South Korea's feminist online activist culture.<sup>8</sup> Along with the #MeToo movement, Megalia, a South Korean feminist online community, emerged in 2015 and became one of the mobilizing forces that confronted misogyny in South Korean society.<sup>9</sup> After feminist organizations began utilizing social media more effectively to combat misogyny and sexual assault against women, pro-choice feminists started using these online activist methods to implement their reproductive rights-focused agendas.

Furthermore, along with social media activism, the changing political and social climate in South Korea has impacted current abortion politics in South Korea. Compared to the political environment during the 2012 Constitutional

6 Sunhye Kim et al., "The Role of Reproductive Justice Movements," 97-107.

7 Sangwon Lee, "The Role of Social Media in Protest Participation: The Case of Candlelight Vigils in South Korea," *International Journal of Communication* 12, (2018): 1523-1540, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/7767>

8 Alice Privey. "#MeToo: South Korea's Social Revolution," *Institute for Security and Development Policy* (blog), June 20, 2018, <https://isdp.eu/metoo-south-koreas-social-revolution/>

9 Euisol Jeong and Jieun Lee, "We take the red pill, we confront the DickTrix: online feminist activism and the augmentation of gendered realities in South Korea," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 706-717, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447354>

Court case where abortion politics were viewed as more taboo and discussed less in public, South Korea's government has undergone a shifting political environment since 2012. Unlike Korea's president in 2012, Lee Myung-bak, the current president, Moon Jae-in, has cultivated an avid human rights-focused image and is significantly more open to criticism regarding women's rights violations. Moon's popularity and association with human rights have allowed for a more open dialogue on women's rights, specifically regarding abortion rights. Given this increased political opportunity structure,<sup>10</sup> Korean feminists have successfully capitalized on these changes through social media activism.

In South Korea, the first mass protest (primarily mobilized on social media) regarding abortion rights was held on October 15, 2016,<sup>11</sup> shortly after the #MeToo movement exploded in the western world. In the same period, various pro-choice rallies were held globally, most notably in Poland. Poland's protests, known as the "Black Monday Protest," circulated among Korean women via social media, and Korean feminists held their own "Black Protest Korea" shortly after. Various online communities, such as Womad, organized these Korean Black Monday Protests by adopting the Polish feminists' slogan, black dress code, and the unifying symbol of the uterus giving the middle finger, which was disseminated all over Korean social media.<sup>12</sup> South Korean feminists' cross-cultural approach to mimic other global activism such as the Black Monday Protests helped pave the way for Korean abortion issues to become internationally recognized and mainstream on social media.

Additionally, Korean feminists not only began to endorse Polish feminist tactics, but they also utilized the Argentinian feminists' pro-choice movement to further spread their own campaign's message and agenda. On August 8, 2018, South Korean feminists held a rally in front of the Argentina Embassy in South Korea to support #Aborto\_Legal in honor of the Argentina abortion protests

10 Marco Giugni, "Political Opportunities: From Tilly to Tilly," *Swiss Political Science Review* 15, no. 2 (2009): 361–367, doi:10.1002/j.1662-6370.2009.tb00136.x.

11 Sunhye Kim et al, "The Role of Reproductive Justice Movements," 97-107.

12 Sofia Lotto Persio, "Women in South Korea Launch Polish-Inspired Pro-Choice Protest," *International Business Times*, October 24, 2016, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/women-south-korea-launch-polish-inspired-pro-choice-campaign-fully-legalise-abortion-1587986>

occurring at the same time.<sup>13</sup> Through social media, South Korean pro-choice organizations put the abortion issue into the public's consciousness while also capitalizing on the international movements co-occurring. Therefore, due to the global traction and constant exchange of cross-cultural strategic borrowing, Korean social media maintained public attention on the issue and increased international media coverage compared to the 2012 abortion court case.

### Literature Review

The phenomenon of social media as a tool for activism does not solely pertain to South Korea but has impacted activism worldwide. Social media has become crucial in mobilizing people from the local, national, and international levels, and activists have begun to embrace this form of transnational online activism. The emergence of digital networks has enabled more efficient communication and protest artifacts (for example, audio-visual content relating to protests such as images and videos) that can be culturally transmitted and contribute to a collective memory to unify individual protestors.<sup>14</sup> Over the past decade, global NGOs have increasingly begun utilizing new media tools such as social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to promote their organizations' mission and increase mainstream media attention.<sup>15</sup>

Social movement scholarship has suggested that more activism takes place online through social media platforms. Firstly, the potential opportunities created for feminist activism due to the anonymity provided by online platforms have enabled more activists to pursue activism in a safe online space. Due to Korean society's patriarchal nature, Korean feminists are commonly labeled as radicals, which negatively depicts Korean feminists and often leads to the defamation of women's reputations and honor. One example of such defamation occurred in 2018 after Irene, a member of the K-pop group Red Velvet, shared a photo online of her reading *Kim Jiyoung Born 1982*. The novel discusses topics such as sexual harassment and the

13 Marge Berer and Lesley Hoggart, "Progress toward Decriminalization of Abortion and Universal Access to Safe Abortions: National Trends and Strategies," *Health and Human Rights Journal* 21, no. 2 (December, 2019): 79–85.

14 Bart Cammaerts, "Social Media and Activism," in *The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society*, ed. Robin Mansell and Peng Hwa (Oxford, UK Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 1027-1034, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/62090/>

15 Hyunjin Seo et al, "Global Activism and New Media: A Study of Transnational NGOs' Online Public Relations," *Public Relations Review* 35, no. 2 (2009): 123–126, doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.02.002.

gender pay gap in Korea, forcing some to view the story as feminist and radical. After her post, she received online harassment from her majority male fanbase and had to remove her photo from social media to remedy the controversy she triggered by promoting a 'feminist' novel.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Irene has never labeled herself as a feminist, so the unprovoked attack by her male fanbase demonstrates the patriarchal restrictions on women's freedom of speech and opinion regarding women's rights in Korea.

Considering that South Korea's abortion debate is characterized by a history of misogyny and concern with controlling women's bodies, providing anonymous social media outlets can ensure activists safe spaces to organize and protest without the risk of defamation or negative consequences. Korea's obsession with labeling feminist ideology as taboo has forced many feminists to rely on social media activism as a strategy to promote their beliefs safely and anonymously.

Secondly, social media activism has also increased organizations' success in connecting different NGOs across time and space. This model of transnationalism establishes connections between non-state actors across borders that share values and a common objective.<sup>17</sup> These transnational advocacy networks (TANs) provide an opportunity for different transnational groups to exchange ideas, resources, and services while also creating a sense of solidarity.<sup>18</sup> These international efforts to influence policy have been utilized since the age of globalization but have increased due to technology's ability to link international organizations together. In South Korea, online pro-choice activists reached out to Irish, Argentinian, and Polish activists who were simultaneously fighting for their reproductive rights. The similar political background in restricting abortion rights in predominately patriarchal Christian countries and the women's shared goal of decriminalizing abortion allowed these groups to partake in cross-cultural solidarity. Through online activism, these groups could pursue their common goals by using social media as a tool for social interaction, connection, and a method for exchanging resources and ideas.

16 Claire Lee, "[Feature] Feminist Novel Becomes Center of Controversy in South Korea," *The Korea Herald*, March 27, 2018, [www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180327000799](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180327000799).

17 Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

18 Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), doi:10.7591/9780801471292.

Overall, transnational advocacy through social media has increased activists' potential for promoting their political objectives and international solidarity. If it were not for social media activism, Korean activists would not have obtained the resources to collaborate with Polish protestors and adopt their Black Monday Protests strategy. Additionally, they would have been unable to demonstrate cross-cultural solidarity to their Argentinian and Irish Pro-Choice activists.

One of the unique mechanisms in which social media connects groups cross-culturally and enables rapid communication is by hashtags. This strategy, known as hashtag activism,<sup>19</sup> ensures broad readership over a short time and allows cross-cultural groups to disseminate information that another group can easily find. This mechanism can be seen in South Korea, where activists consistently used hashtags in Korean and English to reach global audiences. Hashtags in English such as #MyBodyMyChoice, #ProChoice, and #MeToo have all become commonly utilized hashtags on Korean social media. This global strategy allows Korean activists' posts to be exposed to international audiences, and pro-choice online activists worldwide can be exposed to and interact with Korean activists. Without this hashtag activism, it is highly unlikely non-Korean speakers would be exposed to their social media posts, which leads to a decrease in cross-cultural solidarity and fewer media coverage on the issue.

### **Research Question**

Social media activism has proven itself an essential alternative to traditional in-person activism in which women can ensure their anonymity and safety using social media platforms. Online activism provides safe spaces for discussion and debates and can efficiently disseminate urgent information to mobilize and organize protests. This increased protest turnout and encouraged cross-cultural networking with other successful pro-choice organizations and activists. Given past research's emphasis on social media's potential to give women a voice through safe and anonymous measures, has online activism helped activists mobilize and promote abortion rights and, if so, how?

Given the heightened media coverage on South Korean abortion-

19 Ying Xiong et al, "Hashtag Activism and Message Frames among Social Movement Organizations: Semantic Network Analysis and Thematic Analysis of Twitter during the #MeToo Movement." *Public Relations Review* 45, no. 1, (2019): 10–23. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.10.014.



related issues, this research focuses on what online strategies did reproductive health rights in Korea use to draw attention to their cause during the Constitutional Court case of 2019. This project investigates what roles South Korean social media activism played during the 2019 abortion ruling. Due to the increased presence of social media activism over the past couple of years, South Korean feminists have become more active in asserting their reproductive rights online. This resulted in the strategic organization of pro-choice protests and increased media coverage on women's reproductive rights violations that supported the decriminalization of abortion in 2019.

### *Research Methods*

This research was conducted online using an anonymous Google Forms survey to interview various pro-choice feminist social media activists' accounts. The activists were chosen based on those utilizing their page to primarily promote abortion rights-related content using pro-choice hashtags or content on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The applied survey gathered demographic information as well as strategies that these online activist accounts utilized to promote abortion rights-related content. An anonymous 19-question google forms survey consisted of activist-related questions that investigated what types of methods were used during the abortion protests in 2019. The survey includes a range of multiple-choice questions and one short answer question. The majority of questions were multiple choice because of the ability to compare and analyze the results using a number system. The survey link and an introduction of the interviewer and their research were sent to the pro-choice activists' accounts on various social media platforms. These accounts were found using specific popular hashtags relating to abortion rights in Korea such as #mybodymychoice, #blackmondayprotest, #imsinjungdanhapbeophwa (Legalization of pregnancy termination), #naktajejopyejei (abolish anti-abortion law).

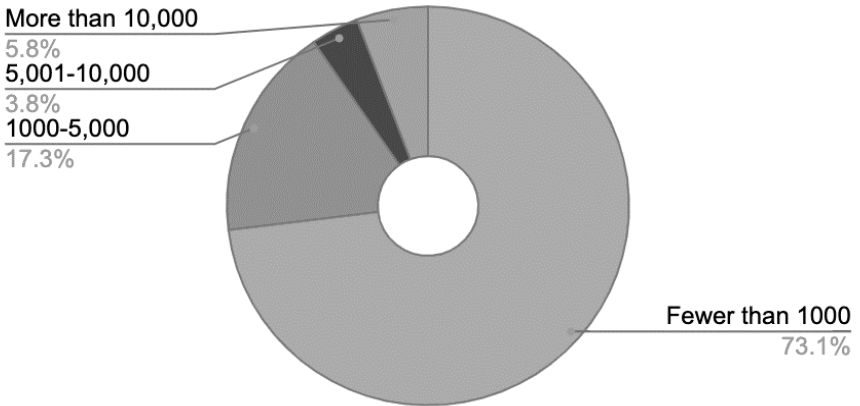
Then, the activists using these popular abortion-related hashtags were privately contacted via direct message on the social media users' accounts. After the survey was sent out to approximately 150 online feminist accounts, 52 responses were anonymously collected from Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Daum Cafe. This research method proved the most efficient as the sample was as big as desired. While the original survey was conducted in Korean, the survey questions have been translated into English for this research paper.

**Results**

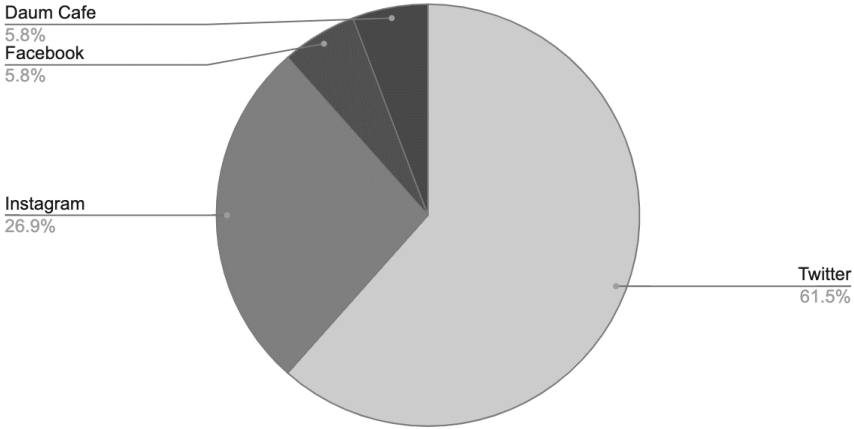
*Survey Demographics*

The results collected from this survey can be divided into two categories. The first aspect of the survey focused mainly on the demographics of the respondents. Regarding the platforms used most prevalently among the respondents, most online feminist accounts hailed from Twitter (61.5%), then Instagram (26.9%), followed by Facebook (5.8%), and Daum Cafe (5.8%). Most social media activist accounts had a tight-knit community, with 73.1% of accounts with less than 1,000 followers. However, 17.3% of accounts had between 1,000-5,000 followers. Overall, while only a minority of respondents had a large following of over 5,000 followers, most of the accounts relied on a reliable yet small platform to spread their activism, highlighting the importance of the informal networks and tight-knit communities provided through social media platforms.

On average, how many followers did each social media account have?



Which social media platforms did social media activists utilize the most to promote feminism and reproductive rights?



Lastly, all respondents were asked when they first began using social media as a form of feminist activism. Most respondents (76.9%) said that they started their social media accounts between 2016 and 2019, which further emphasizes the contention that #MeToo was a mobilizing force for feminism (since 2016 was the year the #MeToo movement became mainstream globally). Only one user (1.9%) had created an account during 2012 when the first Constitutional Court case on decriminalizing abortion occurred, while the last four other respondents (9.6%) had an online feminist account before 2012. Furthermore, Twitter had no trending hashtags during the 2012 abortion debate, and there was significantly lower hashtag usage than during the 2019 case.

However, the possibility that more 2012 posts were later deleted should be acknowledged. Instagram was a relatively new platform during the 2012 trial. Specialized functions such as hashtags were not as common of a feature, making it more challenging to use hashtag activism and make one’s posts viral. Nevertheless, given the lack of hashtags used for abortion rights and abortion-rights-related posts during 2012, these demographics support the findings that there was a lack of a social media presence during the 2012 Constitutional Court case compared to the 2019 Court case. While attributing the possibility that there could have been more 2012 social media users active during the 2012 court case who are no longer active, the main findings support that there was still a noticeable lack of social

media presence regarding the 2012 court case. This suggests a heightened mobilization surrounding the 2019 court case as there was a sharp increase in the number of feminist activists' accounts covering abortion-rights politics.

### *Social Media Activist Accounts' Strategies*

The second phase of the research was analyzing the strategies utilized by these feminist accounts to promote abortion rights on social media. The most common strategies were publicizing upcoming protests or events regarding abortion rights, sharing relevant news articles and headlines, posting relevant hashtags and webtoon comics, and strategic mirroring. In this case, strategic mirroring is a common strategy that Korean feminists often use to mock misogynistic slurs under a comedic light to emphasize the shallowness of sexist behavior that men often portray online. Mirroring allows feminists to react to online misogyny through trolling, sarcasm, linguistic violence, and parodying misogynistic discourse.<sup>20</sup> An example of this would be feminists using purposefully offensive sexist terms and switching their meaning to offend men. This tactic puts men in a vulnerable position and highlights the absurdness of misogynistic behavior. Lastly, participants added that posting pictures of participants at abortion rights protest events was another heavily used strategy. This tactic accurately and actively captures the overwhelming support from women at demonstrations and encourages more women to participate when they physically see other women protesting in pictures distributed online. While some of the women's faces were covered in the photos to protect their identities, this tactic was effective as it demonstrated how massive the support was in protest turn-out. In essence, social media has become essential for mobilizing followers to attend in-person protests and giving people an outlet to support their cause from the comfort of their homes.

As mentioned above, for South Korean users, social media functions as one of the most prevalent methods of disseminating abortion event-related information, especially regarding rallies and protests. According to the survey, social media was considered the most popular method for acquiring specific details about upcoming abortion-rights events, such as the location, time, and expected dress code (usually black for the Black Monday Protests). Specifically, 88.5% of activists claimed that social media was the most common tool to learn detailed information about upcoming events. In comparison, resources such as Daum Cafe (25%) and internet search engines (23.1%)

20 Euisol Jeong and Jieun Lee, "We take the red pill," 708.

were other popular means of obtaining event-related information. Surprisingly, only four respondents (7.7%) reported using women's organizations' websites and offices to access this information. This data highlights that social media has become a more relied upon resource for obtaining activist information as compared to traditional women's organizations, since social media platforms can readily and efficiently disseminate information.

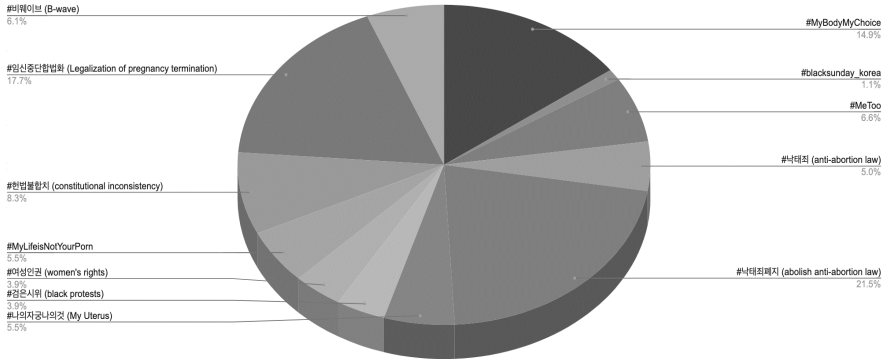
In addition, when asked what they do in situation when they need to find more information about an upcoming abortion-rights-related protest, the majority of activists (42.3%) claimed that they use social media very often to acquire more information. Furthermore, 34.6% of activists noted that they use social media 'almost every time' to obtain information on abortion-related events or protests. Only 5.8% of respondents stated that they rarely use social media to find information. These responses amplify social media's role as an organizational unit for collectively and efficiently disseminating events regarding abortion rights and explaining the successful and timely protests organized over social media throughout 2019.

Another interesting aspect of social media's role in disseminating event-related news was how the users communicated upcoming in-person abortion-related events. Specifically, when asked if they have ever attended and participated in abortion rights events promoted through social media (protests, discussions, fundraising, etc.), most users (53.8%) claimed that they have somewhat often or very often experienced this. On the other hand, a significant portion of respondents (32.7%) noted that they had not experienced a time where they attended an abortion rights event that they previously saw advertised on social media. Despite a substantial number of respondents not being mobilized to participate in events via social media, most have occasionally mobilized to attend protests and other events via social media posts, demonstrating social media's potential for mobilizing followers to be involved activists.

However, when the activists were asked if they ever posted or advertised about abortion rights events, they attended themselves to encourage in-person involvement among their followers, there was a much higher number of respondents who posted advertisements about their own experiences attending abortion rights protests. Twenty-four respondents (46.2%) claimed that they sometimes used this strategy to promote abortion rights, while 12 respondents (23.1%) claimed that they often used it. Also, it should be noted that one of the most cited strategies regarding a post's content was to upload pictures of women at abortion-rights rallies to mobilize the social media

accounts' followers to attend these events. Despite social media not always mobilizing the online activists themselves, the activists were often involved in advertising their own experiences at rallies to mobilize their followers.

Most Popular Hashtags Used



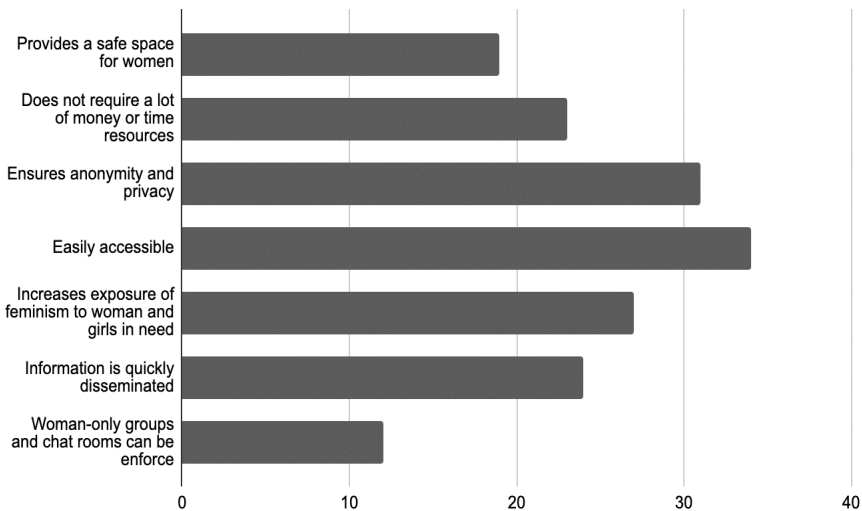
**Lack of social media activism prior to 2019**

Even compared to 2018, there seemed to have been a significant increase in exposure to abortion rights-related posts on social media. One question asked in the survey was how many more abortion rights-related posts users saw in comparison to 2018. 50% of respondents claimed it increased somewhat since 2018, while 28.8% claimed that the number of posts increased immensely compared to 2018. However, given the demographics, while most respondents (76.9%) became active feminists on social media between 2016-2019, there was still a noted increase in exposure to abortion-rights related posts compared to just the year before the Constitutional Court case. Given that over 90% of activists have an account since 2018 or before, the activists' perception in an increase in social media activism is evident. Beyond the difference in social media attention towards abortion rights between 2018 and 2019, there has been a remarkable increase in social media usage as a form of activism compared to the 2012 Constitutional Court case, as most participants (84.6%) became activists in 2013 or later. It is important to note that the perceived increase in posts does not inherently mean an increase in actual numbers of posts but that these activists themselves have become more aware of them.

*Advantages of Social Media Activism*

Overall, social media has been a substantial factor in the increase of abortion rights activism. Given South Korea’s rampant and negative public opinion about feminists, social media has acted as a necessary tool for feminists to stay safe yet actively promote women’s rights. When asked why these activists used social media as a platform for activism, among the respondents’ most popular answers were that social media was extremely accessible (59.6%), it effectively disseminated information (51.9%), it easily maintains anonymity (57.7%), and it provides a safe space for women (34.6%). For example, resources such as Daum Cafe and Kakao talk can provide women-only chat rooms where ideas can be safely exchanged, which ultimately protects the safety of anyone participating in these chats. Facebook groups can also accept or decline pending members, where groups often vet the pending member before being admitted to the group’s page. Additionally, many respondents noted that, unlike in-person organizations, social media could educate women unaware of sexism and misogyny more readily by being exposed to their posts that have started trending or gone viral on their platforms. Often, trending social media posts appear on popular pages through hashtags or several likes, exposing young girls and women to these safe resources without purposefully searching for them.

Why is Social Media a Popular Form of Reproductive Rights Activism?



*Cultural Aspects of South Korean Feminist Activism*

While Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are all internationally recognized platforms, Daum Cafe and Kakao Talk are Korean-owned social media platforms that also played a significant role in feminist activism. Daum Cafe, a South Korean internet cafe, and Kakao Talk, a Korean text messaging system, were other resources to create female-only feminist online chatrooms. These platforms are a pillar of Korean internet culture and have allowed activists an outlet for spreading their message to a Korean audience.

In one question, the respondents were explicitly asked if they have ever gone on to a Daum Cafe to promote upcoming events and protest regarding abortion rights. Twenty-three respondents (44.2%) responded that they had used Daum Cafe to promote abortion rights events. In addition, Daum Cafe has been deemed the second most accessible method of acquiring feminist-related news and event information after Twitter. Furthermore, female-only chat rooms are easily accessible on Daum Cafe, which ensures a private and safe space for women to meet and organize. Activists have also used Kakao Talk to share event information about upcoming abortion rights protests and the platform as a place to share news updates to female-only chat rooms. Overall, the combination of global platforms such as Twitter and Instagram with culturally Korean platforms such as Daum Cafe and Kakao Talk has allowed activists to effectively reach out to a Korean and a global audience, which helped increase international and national awareness and solidarity of Korean women's rights.

*International Solidarity Approach*

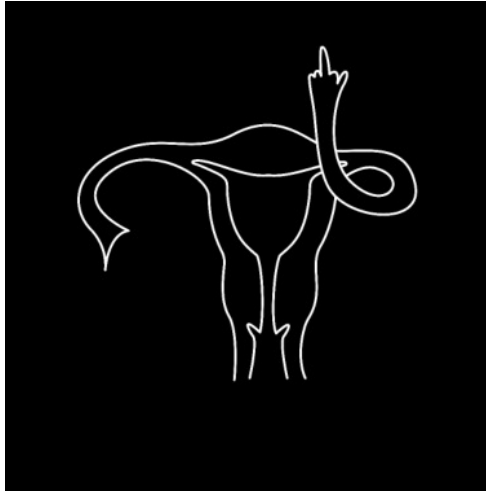
As mentioned previously, South Korean feminists often linked their cause to other global pro-choice movements. South Korea was not only inspired by global pro-choice movements (specifically in Argentina, Poland, and Ireland), but they also capitalized on their successes through the form of international solidarity. By recognizing these global movements, whether the adoption of Polish pro-choice activism or the protests in front of the Argentinian embassy to show solidarity during the Argentinian pro-choice protests, South Korean feminists were able to force their country's abortion ban into the international community's scrutinizing light. Not only did Korean activists' show their support to international groups, but pro-choice activists in Poland, Ireland, and Argentina all interacted with Korean activists' posts. Activists from around the world have created their posts giving updates on the status of the movement in Korea and using phrases such as "with you," and referring to Korean feminists



as their “Korean sisters” fighting for the same rights. These international social media accounts’ references and even sharing of the Korean abortion movement demonstrated how social media promoted cross-cultural solidarity and communication through linking culturally and geologically distant groups.

The survey asked feminist accounts if they had seen or been exposed to news or posts about international abortion rights movements outside Korea during the 2019 Constitutional Court case (for example, the abortion protests in Ireland, Poland, or Argentina). This question aimed to understand the effects of international pro-choice movements in South Korean social media activism. Among the participants, 11.5% of activists said they were exposed to this media daily in 2019, while the majority (30.8%) claimed they were exposed to this type of media a few times a week. A quarter of respondents claimed that they were exposed to news and posts about international abortion movements a few times a month. The strategic and concurrent timing of various global abortion movements increased international coverage on these causes and cultivated a global solidarity for women’s abortion rights.

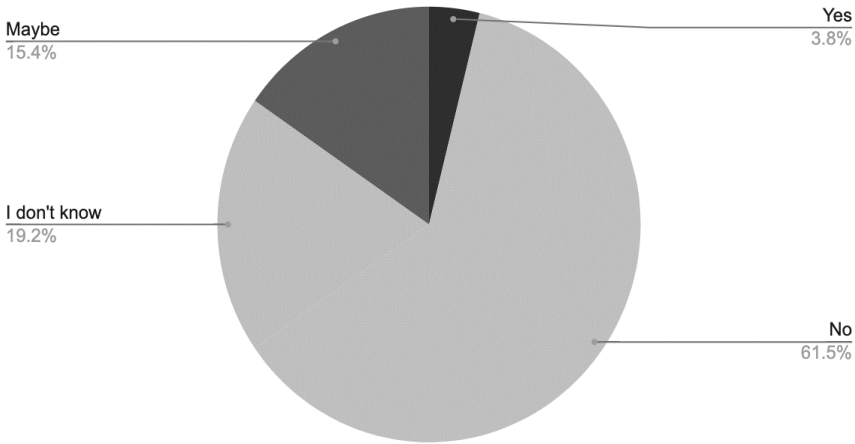
Moreover, participants were shown the image below created during the Polish pro-choice movement and were asked how often they saw this in their social media feed. 51.9% of respondents said they saw the photo often over the past year, while 23.1% claimed they somewhat often saw it. Only 9.6% of respondents claimed they never saw that picture on social media. These results reiterate that references to international pro-choice movements were a common strategy utilized on social media platforms in 2019.



Source: Jim Cooke, *Illustration. Guidelines about women and alcohol*, 2016. From Jim Cooke's illustration website. <https://www.jimcookeart.com/new-project>

While the entire survey unearthed surprising data, the most unexpected response was the last multiple-choice question. The question asked if the users did not have access to social media as a resource, would they still be avid advocates for women's rights. Surprisingly, 61.5% of respondents claimed they would not be activists without social media as an outlet. On the contrary, 3.8% of respondents claimed they would still be activists, while the remainder claimed they were unsure (34.6%). These stark results emphasize that social media is an important outlet for activism on issues such as women's rights. Given the minuscule number of social media activists in 2012 among our participants compared to 2019, the lack of in-person and online organized protest and overall media coverage on the Constitutional Court case in 2012 can be better understood. Because social media was not as commonly used in 2012, many current activists were less able to mobilize themselves and supporters because social media was often the spark that initiated further involvement in this movement. Without social media, many women would not have become mobilized to be activists for fear of reputational setbacks and negative associations with feminism. Therefore, there could have been an immensely lower turnout for the abortion rights protests due to a lack of social media activism. While women in the past have made great strides to fight for their rights without the convenience of safety online activism provides, social media activism provided an outlet for women who may not have been comfortable with in-person activism for several of reasons.

Without social media as a form of activism, would you still be an active feminist?



**Conclusion**

Due to the nature of feminist activism’s creating social stigma and reputational setbacks for activists, social media activism has acted as a bridge and its platforms a shelter where women can freely express ideas and escape the fear of being publicly labeled a feminist. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Daum Cafe can develop communities that include emotional support systems that also effectively disseminate helpful information and provide organized activism. Unlike during the 2012 court case, the 2019 court case had increased media attention and public opinion due to social media publicizing the issue of abortion rights.

Through the strategies influenced by past domestic and international social media activism, these feminist activists had more accessibility to online activism. Strategies such as hashtag activism, online mirroring, webtoons, and female-only group chats have increased exposure to abortion rights activism, leading to more reproductive rights activists. In addition, social media was heavily relied on to strategically organize protests as well as a space to encourage and mobilize followers to become activists. These tactics helped increase in-person protests turnouts, which raised public consciousness on the issue of abortion and increased women to mobilize online and in person. This, in turn, led to the increase of protests and grassroots pushback that increased media coverage globally on South

Korea's anti-abortion law. In addition, the combination of South Korean strategies such as the use of social media platforms such as Daum Cafe and Kakao Talk, as well as the use of mirroring and webtoons, helped make the abortion rights campaign culturally relevant to South Korean society.

Even while cultural relevance was fostered through social media, the network features of these platforms also allowed for the incorporation of internationally minded strategies such as the adoption of Polish pro-choice movement tactics and the avid solidarity protests with Argentina's pro-choice movement. Additionally, South Korea's use of the Polish term "Black Monday Protest," along with the adopted symbol of the uterus as a unifying symbol of women's reproductive rights, encouraged cross-cultural solidarity. These cross-cultural solidarity tactics increased international media coverage of Korea's and other countries' reproductive rights issues by creating a global support system of pro-choice advocates. South Korean social media activism helped foster a new generation of social media activists that bridged the gap between traditional and online activism through cultural and cross-cultural strategies. Social media activism has given more Korean women the ability to open up discussions on abortion rights using internet portals, along with the tools to organize online petitions and in-person protests better to publicly draw the media and the government's attention for legal change. The utilization of social media for event organization, providing safe spaces for discussion and debates, hashtag activism, and resource allocation has impacted the turnout of the Korean decriminalization of abortion in 2019. Further research on social media's role in women's activism will help us better understand how social media activists use of their platforms to increase mobilization and media attention for their cause.

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## The Change and Continuity of the US Asia-Pacific Policy: From Obama to Trump

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*This paper aims to achieve two purposes. First, to discuss the US Asia-Pacific policy from the Obama Administration to the Trump Administration. The second is to compare the similarity and differences between Obama and Trump's Asia-Pacific policy. This paper extracts several hypotheses from John J. Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism. In this paper, I argue that China's activities in the Asia-Pacific were the pivotal factor for the US to alter its Asia-Pacific policy. Since the more China promotes different activities in the region, the more active the US becomes in ensuring its leadership. Besides, after comparing these two strategies, I believe that both were similar. Even there were some discrepancies on the way to implement them, the goal of both strategies was the same.*

### Introduction

Facing the rise of China and the challenges from the Asia-Pacific since 2008, President Obama shifted the US focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific.<sup>1</sup> The Obama administration launched the "Pivot to Asia" Strategy in 2012, which was called "Rebalancing Asia." In Obama's strategy, the administration tried to consolidate the US presence by amplifying the relationship with its Asian allies, promoting liberal values, and integrating China into the US-led international order.<sup>2</sup> However, US officials found that China had become more

1 Other challenges including North Korea's nuclear threat, maritime disputes in East Asia, and other non-traditional security issues such as climate change and public health issues.

2 Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>

ambitious in their goals to dominate the region, thereby marginalizing the US influence in the Asia-Pacific. As a result, the “Rebalancing Asia” Strategy failed to respond to the rise of China during the Obama administration.<sup>3</sup>

After President Trump took office, he found it challenging to ensure the US leadership’s position in the Asia-Pacific since China had accelerated its influence in economic and geopolitical aspects. Therefore, President Trump proposed the term “Indo-Pacific” in 2017, gradually replacing the term “Asia-Pacific.”<sup>4</sup> In Trump’s “Indo-Pacific” Strategy, the administration tried to extend the US influence over the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean by intensifying the US alliance with Asia-Pacific states and engaging with India to slow down China’s economic, technological, geopolitical, and military development. Trump generally rejected the Obama administration’s foreign policy approaches, such as promoting liberal values and multilateralism. However, Trump’s “Indo-Pacific” strategy did, in fact, implement several of the same measures as Obama’s strategy, such as strengthening cooperation with potential partners. Therefore, it could be argued that there were only marginal differences between the two strategies.

This paper will discuss the change and continuity of the US Asia-Pacific Policy from the Obama Administration to the Trump Administration. To achieve these goals, I hypothesize based on John J. Mearsheimer’s theory of Offensive realism. In this paper, I argue that when China posed increasing challenges to the US during these two administrations, US policymakers believed it was necessary to circumscribe the rise of China to secure the US interests in Asia-Pacific.

### **Offensive Realism and the US Asia-Pacific Policy**

This article aims to explore the US Asia-Pacific policy from the Obama Administration to the Trump Administration. Although domestic factors such as populism and decision-makers played a role in the changing US Asia-Pacific policy, the regional security environment was the pivotal factor

3 Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2016).

4 “Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit, Da Nang, Vietnam,” *U.S. Mission to ASEAN*, last modified November 10, 2017, <https://asean.usmission.gov/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>; Da-Jung Li, “Trump’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Meaning and Implications,” *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs* 21, no. 3 (January/February, 2018): 165-169.

influencing the change in policy from Obama to Trump. Some analyses have adopted Neoclassical Realism to illustrate the changing of the US Asia-Pacific policy. Neoclassical Realism argues that domestic conditions such as elite cohesion and domestic pressure play a role in how a state responds to the external environment.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Randall L. Schweller argues that nationalism plays a pivotal role in US foreign policy. Facing the US' power decline and people's reluctance to engage in international affairs, President Trump proposed the "American First" policy that emphasized the US' national interests and economy rather than international affairs. Therefore, President Trump rejected Obama's foreign policy. He no longer behaved generously to its allies; for instance, he required South Korea and NATO states to contribute more to defending themselves. In addition, the Trump Administration pulled out from multilateral organizations, renegotiated trade agreements with US trade partners and started a trade war against China to fulfill the US' interests.<sup>6</sup> Neoclassical Realism emphasizes domestic factors as the reason behind the Trump Administration becoming more retrenched in diplomacy. However, the theory distracts our attention from international pressure as the pivotal factor in the changing US Asia-Pacific policy from Obama to Trump. Whether a president adopted an engagement policy with China or tried to restrict its development, the strategies launched by both presidents needed to address challenges from the external environment.

In that sense, Offensive Realism is more suitable to illustrate the US China relationship during this period. In his work, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer provides a picture of power competition between great powers and the strategies that a great power adopts to ensure its position. Because the international system is antagonistic, there is no one to protect a state from external threats. Axiomatically, survival is the goal for a state to achieve. To ensure states' survival, the only thing states can do is become an expansionist until they become a regional hegemon. In

5 Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 144-172; Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 159-201.

6 Randall L. Schweller, "Opposite but Compatible Nationalisms: A Neoclassical Approach to the Future of US-China Relations," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1, (2018): 23-48; Randall Schweller, "Three Cheers for Trump's Foreign Policy: What the Establishment Misses," *Foreign Affairs* 97, No.5, (September 2018): 133-143.

other words, Mearsheimer assumes that the more relative gain a significant power enjoys, the more security a great power enjoys. However, when there is a challenger that tries to change the status-quo, the existing power will ensure its current interests and position by restricting the power acceleration of the rising power. In other words, the more relative gain a great power enjoys, the more likely the great power restricts its potential rival(s).<sup>7</sup>

To ensure the dominant position as regional hegemon, a great power adopts two strategies against the challenger: balancing and buck-passing strategies. Under the balancing strategy, the existing power tries to balance its rival through internal and external balancing. "Internal balancing" means that a great power enhances its military capability, thus preventing the invasion or provocation from an aggressor,<sup>8</sup> whereas "external balancing" means a great power formulates a "defensive alliance" to increase its influence in the region, thus mobilizing its allies to counter an aggressor collectively.<sup>9</sup> Other than military measures and alliance formation, the US has used the "Liberal Hegemony" strategy to maintain its hegemonic position after the Cold War Era. The US aims to impose liberal values on its rivals,<sup>10</sup> thereby incorporating them into the liberal international order.<sup>11</sup> This is because US policy makers believe that when their rivals or competitors are the members of the order, the US can impose multilateral pressure against them through the liberal international order.<sup>12</sup> Also, they believe that if their rivals or competitors become a democratic state, it is less likely they will start a war easily since they will need to seek prior agreement from their citizens. In other words, the US believes that the promotion of Liberalism helps ensure its leadership of the order. Apart from the balancing strategy, a buck-passing strategy is another way to counter an aggressor. It means a great power trying to pass the responsibility or share the burden with its allies in order to counter the

7 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2014), 29-42.

8 Ibid., 157.

9 Ibid., 156.

10 Liberal values including Democratic Peace Theory, Economic Independence Theory, and Liberal Institutionalism. See: John J. Mearsheimer, *Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

11 Ibid., 1.

12 Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 54-56.



aggressor collectively.<sup>13</sup> A great power can receive two benefits from a buck-passing strategy. First, the hegemon can manage its resources wisely when it relaxes the burden of security guarantee to its allies. Second, this tactic encourages buck-catchers to enhance their capability to defend themselves from an aggressor. In other words, it promotes buck-catchers to be self-reliant.<sup>14</sup>

In 2014, Mearsheimer predicted that keen competition between China and the US is inevitable; he argues that China's enlargement of its influence in the South China Sea and the East Sea are similar to what the US did in the Western Hemisphere during the 1850s. It implies that China is attempting to become the potential regional hegemon in the Pacific region. If China enjoys more relative gain that can challenge the US position, China can no longer tolerate the US projection of its power in the Asia-Pacific and will eventually exclude the US' presence in the Asia-Pacific. Therefore, Mearsheimer provides three possible ways to balance the rise of China. The first is a containment strategy; for instance, formulating an alliance against China. Second, is to slow down China's economic growth. Finally, the "roll-back" strategy which means to weaken China's influence by overthrowing pro-China regimes or fomenting internal trouble in China.<sup>15</sup> Although both President Obama and President Trump adopted different approaches in responding to the rise of China, both presidents aimed to maintain US leadership in the region. President Obama tried to incorporate China into the US-led liberal international order to ensure the US' leadership, whereas President Trump attempted to restrict China's geopolitical, economic, and military development. Therefore, it is worth discussing the change and continuity of the US Asia-Pacific policy from Obama to Trump.

Hence, from the elaboration of the theoretical discussion of Offensive Realism, a general proposition as follows emerges: *The more relative gains a regional hegemon enjoys, the more the regional hegemon restricts the advance of a rising power.* Based on this proposition, the following hypotheses will attempt to explain Obama and Trump's Asia-Pacific strategies.

Hypothesis 1: The more relative gain a regional hegemon enjoys, the more an existing power restricts the advance of a rising power by forming alliances.

Hypothesis 2: The more relative gain a regional hegemon enjoys, the

13 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 158-159.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 387.

more an existing power restricts the geo-political influence of a rising power.

Hypothesis 3: The more relative gain a regional hegemon enjoys, the more an existing power restricts the economic development of a rising power.

Hypothesis 4: The more relative gain a regional hegemon enjoys, the more an existing power promotes its values to a rising power.

### **Obama's "Rebalancing Asia" Strategy**

#### *Goals of Obama's "Rebalancing Asia" Strategy*

In response to the change of the strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific, especially the rise of China, the Obama Administration put more attention on handling challenges in the Asia-Pacific region by launching the "Rebalancing Asia" Strategy. The Obama administration aimed to: (1) amplify the alliances and security partnerships in the Asia-Pacific; (2) engage intensively with the emerging power centers in the region; (3) participate in multilateral institutions and summits; (4) promote free trade; and (5) engage in a productive and constructive relationship with China.<sup>16</sup> The Obama Administration believed that the power competition between the US and China was inevitable. Nonetheless, policymakers of the administration wanted to avoid the self-fulfilling prophecy of the so-called "Thucydides Trap:" wherein which conflict and war between both the rising power and the existing power would be inescapable.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the Obama Administration believed that China and the US had common interests over global and regional issues, such as trade, environmental issues, and nuclear nonproliferation. Although the Obama Administration labelled China as a competitor, they looked for a "positive, constructive, comprehensive US-China relationship" and they adopted an engagement-oriented policy with China.<sup>18</sup>

16 "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, and Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes," The White House, last modified November 19, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/19/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-national-security-advisor-tom->.

17 Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011).

18 Jeffery A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press).

*The Implementation of Obama's "Rebalancing Asia" Strategy*

First, the Obama Administration amplified the existing alliance system in the Asia-Pacific. The US alliance system in the Asia-Pacific maintains the US influence and presence in the region. By providing security guarantees to its Asian allies, such as troop deployment or intelligence sharing, the US can respond to threats and challenges with its allies immediately.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the US can mobilize its allies to address the challenges collectively.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, to amplify the US influence in Asia, the Obama administration committed to shifting 60 percent of its naval fleet to the Asia-Pacific until 2020.<sup>21</sup> In addition, it tried to consolidate the US alliance relationship with Asian allies. In 2014, the US extended the scope of Article 5 of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security to the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands in response to China's military activities since 2012.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, after the North Korean nuclear test in 2016, the US decided to introduce the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea.<sup>23</sup> Also, the US tried to formulate a trilateral alliance with Japan and South Korea. Nonetheless, this proposal failed due to South Korea's opposition.<sup>24</sup> The Obama Administration likewise amplified its power projection in Southeast

19 Challenges such as North Korea's missile threat, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and terrorism in the region.

20 Jennifer Lind, "Keep, Toss, or Fix? Assessing U.S. Alliance in East Asia," in *Rethinking American National Security*, ed. Jeremi Suri and Benjamin Valention (Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-45.

21 "Remarks by National Security Advisor Tom Donilon--As Prepared for Delivery," The White House, last modified November 15, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/15/remarks-national-security-advisor-tom-donilon-prepared-delivery%3e>.

22 "Senkaku islands dispute escalates as China sends out patrol ships," *The Guardian*, 11 September, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/11/senkaku-islands-china-patrol-ships>.

23 "Opportunities and Challenges in the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Republic of Korea Alliances," U.S. Department of State, last modified March 4, 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2014/03/222903.htm>.

24 Jong-Yun Bae and Ki-Jung Kim, "A South Korean Perspective: Seoul's 'Pragmatic' Road to Trilateral Co-operation," *Global Asia* 12, no.1 (Spring 2017): 20-23; Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, "Completing the US-Japan-Korea Alliance Triangle: Prospects and Issues in Japan-Korea Security Cooperation," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 28, no. 3, (September, 2016):383-402

Asia and Oceania. In 2014, both the US and the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) that allows US forces to be deployed to the Philippines' military bases.<sup>25</sup> The US also deployed around 2,500 US troops in Darwin Port in Australia.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the US was able to enlarge its influence in the South China Sea and Oceania effectively.

Second, in the geo-political realm, the Obama Administration attempted to slowdown China's influence by resolving the South China Sea disputes. To address this issue, the administration adopted legal, diplomatic, and military means.<sup>27</sup> For a start, the Obama Administration required all parties to resolve disputes through peaceful and legal measures. When President Obama visited the Philippines in April 2014, he expressed his support of President Aquino III who filed a case concerning China's claim to the nine-dash line to the Permanent Court of Arbitration.<sup>28</sup> By using legal means, the US attempted to delegitimize China's claim related to the nine-dash line and its activities over the South China Sea. Also, Michael Fuchs, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, proposed the concept of "Freeze" during the Fourth Annual South China Sea Conference in July 2014. He required all parties to cease activities and actions that contributed to instability, stop all unilateral enforcement measures which damaged claimants' economic activities.<sup>29</sup> However, China and ASEAN states neglected the proposal as they actively constructed artificial islands in the South China Sea. Finally, facing China's military activities over the South China Sea, the Obama Administration conducted the Freedom of Navigation

25 Jim Wolf, "U.S. plans 10-month warship deployment to Singapore," *Reuters*, May 10, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-singapore-warship/u-s-plans-10-month-warship-deployment-to-singapore-idUSBRE84811E20120510>.

26 Caren Bohan and James Grubel, "Obama boosts U.S. military in Australia, reassures China," *Reuters*, November 16, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-australia/obama-boosts-u-s-military-in-australia-reassures-china-idUSTRE7AF0F220111116>.

27 Ely Ratner, "Course Advancing: How to Stop China's Maritime Advance." *Foreign Affairs* 96, no 4 (Jul/Aug 2017): 64-72.

28 "Remarks by President Obama and President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines in Joint Press Conference," *The White House*, last modified April 28, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/28/remarks-president-obama-and-president-benigno-aquino-iii-philippines-joi>.

29 "Fourth Annual South China Sea Conference," *Department of State*, last modified July 11, 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2014/07/229129.htm>.

Operation four times from 2015 in order to manifest its determination to ensure the freedom of navigation, safety and the open use of the South China Sea. In this operation, the US dispatched vessels and aircraft to patrol the disputed islands. In other words, the US wanted to send a signal to China that the US would enforce international law and that it was willing to protect its allies. The Obama Administration behaved circumspectly in their approach to resolving disputes in order to avoid escalating the tension on the South China Sea. Nonetheless, they behaved responsively rather than proactively in resolving the disputes. Even though their approach helped maintain stability in the South China Sea, they failed to constrain China's activities in the South China Sea.<sup>30</sup> Despite the verdict released by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016 which rejected China's claim over the nine-dash line, China continues to implement militarization in the South China Sea.<sup>31</sup>

Third, in the economic realm, the Obama Administration attempted to maintain its influence in Asia by taking the lead in promoting regional integration in the Asia-Pacific. In 2013, the Obama Administration established a multilateral trade mechanism called the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The Obama Administration aimed to: (1) promote free trade and a rule-based trade environment; (2) protect intellectual property rights and labor rights and; (3) require states to deregulate over enterprises in order to promote fair trade.<sup>32</sup> As Kurt Campbell argued, the Obama administration wanted to take the lead in promoting economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region by establishing the TPP. Furthermore, the US aimed to intensify the security ties with US allies by economic means. Regarding the relationship between the TPP and China, Takashi Terada, a Japanese scholar, argued that the TPP was an inclusive trade bloc that welcomed all states to join. Also, the high standard of regulations of the TPP did not target any state or party. All states needed to fulfill the entry requirements before entering

30 Da-jung Li, "U.S. South China Sea Policy during the Obama Administration." *Prospect Quarterly* 18, no 3, (July 2017): 41-84.

31 T. V. Paul, "Soft Balancing vs. Hard Clashes: The Risks of War over the South China Sea," *Global Asia* 13, No 3 (September 2018): 86-91.

32 Inkyo Cheong, "Beyond the Spaghetti Bowl: The TPP and the Quest for East Asian Regionalism." *Global Asia* 8, No 1 (Spring 2013): 60-70 and; Robert D. Backwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 180-184.

into the TPP.<sup>33</sup> However, Wang Yong, a Chinese scholar, argued that the US aimed to achieve its geo-political and geo-economic interests by promoting US-led economic integration, trying to constrain China's development. He argued that the US aimed to marginalize China by setting up high standard requirements that the Chinese government had found difficult to meet immediately. For instance, the protection of environment, intellectual property, and the reduction of the role played by state-owned companies.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, he argued that the US attempted to marginalize China as an exclusive economic bloc in order to ensure its hegemonic position.<sup>35</sup>

President Obama wanted to take the lead in promoting economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region, thereby ensuring the US leadership in the region. It is undeniable that the TPP was an inclusive trade bloc that did not have any provision to prohibit a specific state to participate. Nevertheless, the US aimed to balance China indirectly by setting up a high standard of entry requirements for the TPP since China took time to fulfill those requirements when Beijing wanted to join it. Also, in his work, Kurt Campbell argued that the TPP served as a tool for the US to bolster strong security ties with US allies.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the Obama Administration aimed to secure US leadership in Asia by promoting economic integration and indirectly balancing China in the economic realm. The Obama Administration managed to reduce the economic interdependence between China and the member states of the TPP by promoting economic integration within the organization. Therefore, the US expected that China would be unable to increase its influence through its economic statecraft.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the Obama Administration increase its influence by gathering its economic allies, thereby isolating China from the US-led economic integration project for ensuring its position in the region.

Finally, in the political realm, the Obama Administration managed to establish a "constructive partnership" with China. The Obama Administration found that China's power acceleration since 2008 posed as a challenge to the

33 Takashi Terada. "It's China's Choice to Join In or Stay Out," *Global Asia* 8, no 1, (March 2013): 57-59.

34 Wang Yong, "The Politics of the TPP Are Plain: Target China." *Global Asia* 8, no 1, (Spring 2013): 54-56.

35 Ibid.

36 Kurt M. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016).

37 Ibid.

US hegemonic position and its dominance in the international order; power competition and distrust developed between the US and China.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, policymakers in the US wanted to avoid triggering a large-scale conflict with China. Furthermore, they believed that both China and the US had common interests on various issues, for instance, trade, environmental protection, and nuclear nonproliferation.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, to reduce the possibilities of triggering a conflict, the Obama Administration saw China as a potential partner for the US to address those issues. As a result, they tried to promote cooperation with China by adopting an engagement policy. Following the logic of the engagement policy, the Obama Administration attempted to invite China to participate in global governance and tried to shape China's policy choices to align with US interests and the existing international order. As a result, it reduced the possibilities of China's intention to challenge the US position.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the Obama administration launched the annual US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue to address issues that both sides needed to face. Both Kennedy Libenthal and Wang Jisi believed that when there was more communication between the two countries, both would be more likely to enlarge their common interests and reduce the likelihood of conflict.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the Obama Administration attempted to promote liberal values in China. For example, President Obama expressed US support for the Occupied Central Movement (Umbrella Movement) in Hong Kong.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Obama's support of Hong Kong was symbolic and did not have significance to the movement. Moreover, it triggered China's dissatisfaction with the US since Beijing believed the US was intervening in China's domestic affairs.<sup>43</sup> In addition, they worried that the promotion of liberal values in Hong Kong impaired China's regime

38 Kenneth Libenthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust* (Washington DC: John L. Thornton China Centre at Brookings Institution), No. 4, March 2012, [http://yahuwshua.org/en/Resource-584/0330\\_china\\_lieberthal.pdf](http://yahuwshua.org/en/Resource-584/0330_china_lieberthal.pdf)

39 Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

40 Ibid.

41 Kenneth Libenthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust*.

42 "Remarks by President Obama at the University of Queensland," The White House, last modified November 15, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/15/remarks-president-obama-university-queensland>.

43 Lesley Wroughton, Arshad Mohammed, "China tells foreign countries not to meddle in Hong Kong," *Reuters*, October 1, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-china-usa/china-tells-foreign-countries-not-to-meddle-in-hong-kong-idUSKCN0HQ4ET20141001>.



survival. As a result, the Chinese government tried to tighten its control on the society to blockade liberal values from entering China. Above all, facing the rise of China, the Obama Administration launched its “Rebalancing Asia” strategy to ensure the US’ leadership position in the Asia-Pacific. Rather than checking the power acceleration of China directly, the Obama Administration adopted balancing tactics (both internal and external) to enlarge the US’ influence. Alliance behavior and Obama’s South China Sea policy help support hypotheses 1 and hypothesis 2. Meanwhile, in the economic realm, the establishment of the TPP aimed to indirectly balance China’s economic influence while simultaneously ensuring the US’ power by economic means, which helps to support hypothesis 3. Finally, in the political realm, the Obama Administration tried to promote liberal values to China. Even though this was done in a symbolic way, this engagement policy still supports hypothesis 4.

### **Trump’s “Indo-Pacific” Strategy**

#### *Goals of Trump’s “Indo-Pacific” Strategy*

When President Trump came into office, he found it difficult to address two pressing issues that impaired the US hegemonic position. First was the power acceleration of China that sought to override the US leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. Another problem was that the power entrenchment during the previous administrations had caused the decline of US power. Therefore, the Trump Administration tried to ensure the US’ position by countering China more actively and passing its burdens to US allies. The Trump administration considered China as the primary threat to the United States that needed to be addressed<sup>44</sup>; the administration labeled China as a “Revisionist Power” that attempted to displace the US leadership, thereby reshaping the existing order.<sup>45</sup> China managed to establish a “Sino-centric order” that fostered economic interdependence with its neighboring states. Due to their economic interdependence, China exercised its economic statecraft to pressure its neighboring states to comply with China’s will.<sup>46</sup> On the one hand, the Trump Administration believed the rise of China undermined the US as the leader.

44 Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 298.

45 “2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” *The White House*, accessed May 1, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

46 Jennifer Lind, “Life in China Asia: What Regional Hegemony Would Look Like,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no.2 (March/April 2018): 71-82



As Oriana Skylar Mastro argues, China attempted to “displace” the US’ leadership position rather than “replace” it; China attempted to override US leadership through a dual-track approach. Beijing participated in the existing international institutions to enlarge its influence, and, in the meantime, it established its own multilateral institutions that attempt to counterbalance the US influence.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, to preserve US leadership, policymakers in the U.S. tried various means to restrict the power acceleration of China. On the other hand, President Trump criticized Obama’s generosity to the U.S. allies that undermined US interests. The Trump Administration found it burdensome to provide security guarantees to its allies who only received US protection without sharing the US’ burden. Therefore, when President Trump took office, he did not allow its allies to take US support for granted; he required its allies to invest more into their national and regional security.<sup>48</sup> In addition, he looked for cooperation between allies that had “a fair share of the burden of responsibility to protect against common threats.”<sup>49</sup>

### *The Implementation of Trump’s “Indo-Pacific” Strategy*

To begin with, President Trump required the US allies to bear more responsibilities to sustain the alliance. He believed that the US provided security guarantee to its allies, such as NATO members and South Korea. However, since they did nothing to contribute to the alliance and regional security, President Trump believed that this situation was unfair to the US. In this case, South Korea was one of the buck-catchers; the Trump Administration required South Korea to contribute more to the US-ROK alliance. President Trump disliked that South Korea took the US’ economic interests and military support for granted. In addition, Trump believed that Seoul’s policy towards North Korea was feckless in keeping North Korea’s aggression in check. Instead, it exacerbated it. Because of that, President Trump held a dubious view over the

47 Oriana Skylar Mastro, “The Stealth Superpower: How China Hid its Global Ambitions,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no 1 (January/February 2019): 31-39.

48 Randall Schweller, “Three Cheers for Trump’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September/October 2018): 133-143.

49 The Department of Defense, 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region (United States, 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

value of deploying THAAD missiles and US troops in South Korea.<sup>50</sup> Not only did President Trump request South Korea to pay more for the maintenance of US military facilities in South Korea, but he also canceled the Ulchi-Freedom Guardian Military Exercise after the Trump-Kim summit in June 2018.<sup>51</sup> Trump's buck-passing tactic to South Korea triggered Seoul's abandonment fear. Although the Moon Jae-in government consolidated the alliance relationship with the US, it tried to enhance South Korea's defense ability to alleviate the abandonment risk. For instance, they tried to develop next-generation submarines, and missile systems.<sup>52</sup> Through the buck-passing approach, President Trump pushed South Korea to enhance its defense capability which helped reduce the US burden in handling the threat of North Korea. Therefore, the US was able to more effectively handle other challenges in the region.

Although President Trump required the US allies to bear more responsibility for their security, Trump attempted to recruit potential partners to join its "Indo-Pacific" strategy. President Trump managed to build an "ambitious partnership" with India to create the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific region."<sup>53</sup> Due to the territorial disputes and India's dubious attitude to China's One Belt One Road Initiative, India became more vigilant of China's economic and military activities in South Asia.<sup>54</sup> Due to that, both the US and India had a chance for closer cooperation. For instance, the US shared real-

50 Victor Cha, "The Unintended Consequences of Success: U.S. Retrenchment from Korea," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 31, no.2 (June 2019): 165-191.

51 Ankit Panda, "US, South Korea Announce Suspension of 2018 Ulchi-Freedom Guardian Military Exercise," *The Diplomat*, June 19, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/us-south-korea-announce-suspension-of-2018-ulchi-freedom-guardian-military-exercise/>.

52 Er-Win Tan, Jae-Jeok Park, and Tomohiko Satake, "Security Hedging Strategies of U.S. Allies and Partners in the Era of Trump: The ROK, Japan and Singapore as Case Studies," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 32, no 2 (June 2020): 163-184; Joon Hyung Kim, "Deterrence, Alliance and Peace-Keeping: An Ambivalent Peace Initiative," *Global Asia* 14, no.2 (June 2019): 34-39.

53 "Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson," *CSIS*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-our-relationship-india-next-century-address-us-secretary-state-rex-tillerson>.

54 Shivshankar Menon. "League of Nationalism: How Trump and Modi Refashioned the U.S.-Indian Relationship," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no 5, (September 2020): 132-139.

time intelligence related to China's and Pakistan's military deployment and activities with India<sup>55</sup> and provided advanced weaponry to India.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, by consolidating cooperation between the US and India in the security aspect, the Trump administration tried to work with India to counterbalance China's growing influence in South Asia and Indian Ocean.<sup>57</sup> Other than consolidating the relationship with India, the Trump Administration engaged with Taiwan because of its determination to counter China. The US avoids recognizing Taiwan formally for the sake of preventing the risk of entrapment, however, the Trump Administration did consolidate cooperation with Taiwan.<sup>58</sup> The Trump Administration enacted three major pro-Taiwan acts that aimed to enhance the relationship with Taiwan, include Taiwan in the "Indo-Pacific" Strategy, and strengthen Taiwan's international presence.<sup>59</sup> In the military realm, the US sold advanced weaponry to Taiwan. The value of arms sale to Taiwan saw a four-fold increase from USD\$2.2 billion in July 2019 to USD\$8 billion after a month.<sup>60</sup> In other words, by amplifying the relationship with Taiwan, the Trump Administration aimed to balance China's influence in the across-Taiwan Strait.

Second, in the geo-political realm, the Trump Administration tried to reduce tension on the Korean Peninsula. President Trump adopted his "Maximum Pressure Plus Engagement" policy toward North Korea, which

55 Alyssa Ayres, "The Economic Times. Seven reasons why COMCASA is so important for India," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-next-us-india-military-ties>.

56 When President Trump visited in India in February 2020, he sold \$3 billion worth of military equipment, including 24 SeaHawk helicopters with Hellfire missiles and six Apache helicopters. See: Steve Holland and Aftab Ahmed, "After raucous welcome in India, Trump clinches \$3 billion military equipment sale," *Reuters*, February 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-usa-trump/after-raucous-welcome-in-india-trump-clinches-3-billion-military-equipment-sale-idUSKCN20J0J5>.

57 Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, "The India Dividend: New Delhi Remains Washington's Best Hope in Asia," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no 5, (September/October 2019): 173-183.

58 Eric Heginbotham and Rajan Menon, "Taiwan's Balancing Act," *National Interest*, 160, (March 2019): 22-29.

59 The administration approved three major pro-Taiwan acts, they are: (1) Taiwan Travel Act of 2017; (2) Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018, and (3) Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019.

60 "US risks China's anger after sealing \$8bn deal to sell Taiwan 66 fighter jets," *The Guardian*, 21 August, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/21/us-taiwan-8bn-deal-66-f16-fighter-jets-china>.

is similar to the logic of the “roll-back” strategy that Mearsheimer proposed. However, instead of seeking “regime change” in North Korea, President Trump looked for a policy change.<sup>61</sup> The administration tried to imitate the path of Vietnam. In other words, the Kim family would maintain its position as the ruling power to North Korea. Meanwhile, both gradually established a closer connection.<sup>62</sup> While this approach did not resolve North Korea’s missile threat, North Korea did not conduct a nuclear test after the Singapore summit. In addition, President Trump focused on handling other agenda items such as trade issues with China.<sup>63</sup> Apart from moderating North Korea’s missile threats, the Trump Administration attempted to formulate a quadrilateral security framework that included Japan, Australia, and India. There were some reasons that the Trump Administration tried to incorporate them into the Quad framework. First, they are geo-politically significant as major powers in the region. Second, they understood the importance of maintaining the “free and open Indo-Pacific.”<sup>64</sup> As a result, when the Trump administration included them in the framework, it helped increase the US influence by solidifying the US relationship with its Asian partners. The formulation of a quadrilateral security framework commenced with ministerial level of Quadrilateral Consultations that helped promote cooperation.<sup>65</sup> However, the US maintained the existing alliance system and solidified the partnership with the US’ Asian partners, rather than formulating a multilateral alliance in Asia.<sup>66</sup>

Third, in the economic realm, President Trump tried to slow down China’s economic development by starting a trade war in 2018. The trade war tried to resolve the trade imbalance between China and the US.

61 Jina Kim and John K. Waeden, “Limiting North Korea’s Coercive Nuclear Leverage,” *Survival* 62, No.1 (February/ March 2020), pp. 31-38.

62 Harry J. Kazianis, “Fire and Flattery,” *National Interest*, 161: 20-27.

63 Kuo-cheng Chang, “The Relationship between China and North Korea after the Trump-Kim Summit: A Realist Perspective,” *Prospect Journal* 20 (October 2018): 39-60.

64 The Department of Defense, *2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*.

65 Ibid.

66 Ping-Kuei Chen, “The Prospects of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia: Managing from the Hub,” *Issues & Studies*, 56, Issue 03 (September 2020): 1-26.

Moreover, it also attempted to ensure the US' national security.<sup>67</sup> After the Trump Administration had launched the Section 301 investigations related to China's trade practice and imposed tariffs against Chinese products such as steel and aluminum in March 2018,<sup>68</sup> they prohibited China from obtaining technological products from the US. For instance, American firms were not allowed to sell telecom equipment to ZTE. In addition, the Bureau of Industry and Security included Huawei on the "Entity List" for the sake of national security concerns.<sup>69</sup> The Trump administration further attempted to prevent Chinese firms from obtaining "dual-use" products because the administration was concerned about China using those products to develop its military capability.<sup>70</sup> After the trade war, friction between China and the US remained tense until the trade negotiation in January 2020. To cease the negative impacts caused by the trade war, both sides agreed to reach an agreement in December 2019 and signed the phase one trade agreement in January 2020. Before starting the phase two trade negotiations, China was required to meet the following criteria: (1) purchase US goods and services, for instance, manufactured goods, agricultural and seafood products, and energy products of no less than USD\$200 billion; (2) require its firms to comply with intellectual property, including to cease forced technological transfers and (3) cease competitive devaluations. In addition, the US wished to verify whether China fulfilled the requirements of the trade agreement

67 "Findings Of The Investigation Into China's Acts, Policies, And Practices Related To Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, And Innovation Under Section 301 of The Trade Act of 1974," Office Of The United States Trade Representative, last modified March 22, 2018, <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/Section%20301%20FINAL.PDF>.

68 Office Of the United States Trade Representative, "Findings Of The Investigation Into China's Acts, Policies, And Practices Related To Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, And Innovation Under Section 301 of The Trade Act of 1974."

69 "Entity List," Bureau of Industry and Security, accessed 17 August 2020, <https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/policy-guidance/lists-of-parties-of-concern/entity-list>.

70 Darren Lim, "The US, China and 'Technology War'," *Global Asia* 14, No. 1 (March 2019): 8-13.; Alexandra Alper and Idrees Ali, "Exclusive: Trump administration says Huawei, Hikvision backed by Chinese military," *Reuters*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-military-exclusive-idUSKBN23V309>

by setting up a dispute resolution system.<sup>71</sup> In other words, the Trump Administration doubted whether China would fulfill its commitment sincerely.

Finally, in the political realm, President Trump showed his indifference to the promotion of liberal values abroad.<sup>72</sup> However, the administration used the issue of Hong Kong as a bargaining chip to counter China after the anti-extradition law movement in 2019. Although former security advisor John Bolton criticized Trump's reluctance in rephending China over the suppression of the movement in Hong Kong in June 2019, President Trump did sign acts related to Hong Kong.<sup>73</sup> This is because Hong Kong's issues involved US national security and interests, pushing the Trump Administration to action in an attempt to prevent sensitive US technology in Hong Kong from falling into China's hands.<sup>74</sup> As such, Trump signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act on November 27, 2019. This act consists of three components: (1) to verify Hong Kong's firms evade both US export control laws and UN sanctions;<sup>75</sup> (2) to verify whether the Hong Kong SAR government and the Chinese government are upholding the commitments from the Sino-British Joint Declaration that ensure civil rights and freedom in Hong Kong and (3) to sanction officials in Hong Kong and China who undermine human rights and Hong Kong self-autonomy. Eventually, after the Hong Kong National Security Law passed on June 30, 2020, the Trump Administration revoked US special treatment to Hong Kong. In other words, the Trump Administration did not consider Hong Kong as a separate entity from China. Without this treatment, China found it difficult to obtain sensitive technological products through Hong Kong; it also helped restrict China's

71 "Agreement between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China," United States Trade Representative, last modified December 12, 2019, <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/US-China-Agreement-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

72 Barry R. Posen. "The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no 2 (March/April 2018): 20-27.

73 John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

74 According to the 1992 Hong Kong Policy Act, the U.S. treats Hong Kong and China separately, Hong Kong enjoys special treatments in terms of trade, tariff and the import of sensitive technology from the U.S. See: ORLC. Chapter 66—United States-Hong Kong Policy. <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim/@title22/chapter66&edition=prelim>.

75 "U.S. Congress. H.R.3289 - Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019," *Congress.gov*, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/3289>.

economic and military development. Namely, security concerns were the primary concern for the Trump Administration to take an active approach to respond to the social movement.<sup>76</sup> Above all, facing the rise of China, the Trump administration launched its “Indo-Pacific” Strategy to ensure the US leadership position in the Asia-Pacific. Unlike President Obama, President Trump adopted a more direct approach against China. To enlarge the US influence, President Trump required US allies such as South Korea to contribute more to the alliance. In the meantime, he engaged with India and Taiwan to enlarge the US influence in the region. Trump’s alliance behavior helps support hypothesis 1. Moreover, President Trump tried to limit China’s influence in the geopolitical realm; he attempted to reduce China’s leverage on the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, President Trump promoted Quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India, mobilizing them to respond to rising China collectively, thus supporting hypothesis 2. Also, in the economic realm, President Trump triggered a trade war against China in order to restrict China’s economic development, supporting hypothesis 3. Finally, Trump’s policy to Hong Kong does support hypothesis 4, but the result is conflicting. The administration tried to protect Hong Kong’s civil rights and liberty, but the main purpose of this intervention was due to security concerns.

### **Comparison between Obama’s and Trump’s Asia-Pacific Strategy**

Since President Trump’s took office, he proposed a term called “Indo-Pacific” and gradually replaced this with the term “Asia-Pacific.” In Trump’s strategy, he attempted to consolidate the ties with allies and India, thereby confronting the existing challenges that the US needed to face. Although President Trump’s strategy attempted to reject Obama’s approach, Trump’s “Indo-Pacific” strategy preserved some elements from Obama’s “Rebalancing Strategy” because both focused on responding to

76 Jie Liu and Congyan Cai, “From Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992 to Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019: The Evolution of the US’s Hong Kong Policy in the Context of the Rise of China,” *Journal of East Asia & International Law* 13, No.1 (May 2020) :7-20.



the rise of China.<sup>77</sup> The following section will compare the two strategies.

To begin with, both Obama and Trump's strategies aimed to maintain US leadership in the Asia-Pacific. Nonetheless, the measures they adopted were different. President Obama adopted a strategy called "Liberal Hegemony" that John J Mearsheimer proposed. The Obama Administration attempted to promote multilateral mechanisms to the Asia-Pacific region. In the meantime, he tried to incorporate China into the U.S-led international order.<sup>78</sup> Obama believed that if China were a contributor to the liberal international order, it would help the US ensure its leadership. By contrast, Trump's "Indo-Pacific" strategy showed his indifference to the "liberal international order." The Trump Administration explicitly indicated that the US should adopt "principled realism" to handle strategic challenges in the "Indo-Pacific" region.<sup>79</sup> In other words, the Trump Administration placed security issues ahead of the promotion of liberal values. The Trump Administration enhanced the US' military capabilities and projection, consolidated the alliance system, and extended partnerships with other "Indo-Pacific" States. By mobilizing the US allies and partners, the US could more effectively meet the challenges in the "Indo-Pacific" region. In addition, Trump preferred adopting bilateralism, because he believed the culprit eroding the US' bargaining power was multilateralism.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the US withdrew from several multilateral mechanisms such as the TPP during the Trump Administration and launched negotiations with its allies and rivals bilaterally.

Second, regarding the alliance behavior between both administrations, they mobilized the US allies to address problems in the region collectively. However, the two administrations treated the US allies in Asia in different ways. The Obama Administration provided more military aid to traditional allies and new partners. For instance, the Obama

77 Renato Cruz De Castro. "From Rebalancing to Competition: The Trump Administration's Grand Strategy for the Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs* 22, no 4 (April 2019): 1-50; Muhammad Saeed. "From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 3, no 4 (Winter 2017): 499-512; and Bilahari Kausikan. "Asia in the Trump Era: From Pivot to Peril." *Foreign Affairs* 96, no 3 (May/June 2017): 146-152.

78 Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner. "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no 2 (March/April 2018): 60-70.

79 The White House, "2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America."

80 Schweller, "Three Cheers for Trump's Foreign Policy."



Administration consolidated the US-ROK alliance by amplifying the trade relationship with South Korea, signing the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) with South Korea in 2011. By contrast, President Trump considered its allies as buck-catchers despite trying to engage with potential partners. President Trump expected US allies to bear more responsibility in maintaining the alliance relationship with the US and expected their trade policy needed to favor the US' interests. For instance, President Trump required its allies such as South Korea to bear more for their national defense.

Third, while both Obama and Trump considered China as a competitor of the US, their approaches were different. Although President Obama considered China as a competitor, he looked for “the positive, constructive, comprehensive US-China relationship.” The Obama Administration tried to engage with China by narrowing the “strategic distrust.” The South China Sea dispute was the issue that bought the biggest chafing.<sup>81</sup> By contrast, the Trump Administration regarded China as a “real enemy” of the United States.<sup>82</sup> The Trump Administration believed China to be a “Revisionist Power” that caused disarray in the region.<sup>83</sup> To preserve the existing international order and the US leadership, the Trump Administration tried to restrict the rise of China. In military and strategic aspects, the Trump Administration not only sought to launch the Quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, India and Australia, but also sought to strengthen its ties with Taiwan in order to blockade China's Belt and Road Initiatives and power acceleration in the geo-political realm—which we can consider as external balancing. Also, President Trump tried to launch a technological war against China to stagnate China's technological and military advancement. Overall, the continuity of both strategies launched by President Obama and President Trump was to ensure the US leadership in the region and to respond to the rise of China. However, Trump's “Indo-Pacific” strategy rejected some elements of Obama's “Rebalancing Asia” strategy that rendered some changes to the US Asia-Pacific policy. For instance, President Trump rejected multilateralism, condition-free support to the US allies, and an engagement policy with China.

81 Li, “U.S. South China Sea Policy during the Obama Administration.”

82 Woodward, *Fear*, 298.

83 The Department of Defense, *2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the changing environment in the Asia-Pacific was the pivotal factor for the changing policy of the US Asia-Pacific policy for both Obama to Trump. The more China advanced in the region, the more active the US was in response to the rise of China. Although the Obama Administration adopted a moderate approach in confronting the rise of China, the administration became more hawkish when China became more self-assertive over the South China dispute. Besides, Trump's "Indo-Pacific" strategy was more explicit in setting up a blockade to China's geopolitical advancement, and to stagnate China's economic, technological, and military development. For the development of the US Asia-Pacific policy from Obama to Trump, international pressure was the pivotal factor in the changing US Asia-Pacific policy. The discussion of Obama's and Trump's alliance behavior in the Asia-Pacific region helps to verify hypothesis 1: the more relative gain a regional hegemon enjoys, the more an existing power restricts the advance of a rising power by forming alliances. Also, Obama's South China Sea policy and Trump's North Korea policy and the formation of the "Quad" help to prove hypothesis 2: the more relative gain a regional hegemon enjoys, the more an existing power restricts the geo-political influence of a rising power. Furthermore, the establishment of the TPP and Trump's trade war against China seems to help verify hypothesis 3: the more relative gain a regional hegemon enjoys, the more an existing power restricts the economic development of a rising power. Finally, although US policy towards Hong Kong under the two administrations did not play an important role in the US foreign policy agenda, overall the US policy toward Hong Kong does support hypothesis 4 (the more relative gain a regional hegemon enjoys, the more an existing power promotes its values to a rising power).

The discussion of the US Asia-Pacific policy from President Obama to President Trump helps support these four hypotheses, and in turn, proves the general hypothesis extracted from the elaboration of John Mearsheimer's Offensive realism as follows: the more relative gain a regional hegemon enjoys, the more the regional hegemon restricts the advance of a rising power. Therefore, Offensive realism helps to explain the US Asia-Pacific policy from Obama to Trump.

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## K-pop, Affect, and Intimacy in Transnational Social Mediascapes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of BTS and Participatory Online Fandom

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*The global phenomenon of Korean popular culture since the late 1990s has been referred to as Hallyu, or the Korean Wave. While early Hallyu focused on the export of television dramas, today's wave is best characterized by the popularity of Korean pop music (K-pop) and its passionate legion of fans. Previous research has explained the popularity of Hallyu through theories of cultural proximity, cultural hybridity, and the use of innovative digital technologies. However, these theories do not place enough importance on the affective and emotional nature of Korean cultural products, nor the use of social media as a public site of emotion and connection for fans. K-pop has been well known as having an international, digital participatory community that utilizes social mediascapes as places of belonging and connection. Social mediascapes serve as transnational interactive communication between fans and artists. Situated within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused social isolation and increased reliance on online technology for human interaction, this study focuses on the normalization of emotional interaction through digital spaces and innovative technology in K-pop. These strengths have allowed the industry to navigate the pandemic while attracting even more fans, despite the cancellation of face-to-face events. Using the globally iconic Korean musical group BTS as a case study, this study draws on secondary data to perform a quantitative analysis of their increasingly intimate online activities throughout the pandemic. Corresponding with this, their fandom growth over a year exemplifies social media as a site of affect and emotion, the*

*participatory power of online fandom, and the future of Hallyu through technological development. These findings can be used to draw broader implications on the growing digitalization of the world and contribute to understanding K-pop's ever-growing global popularity.*

*Keywords: Hallyu, K-pop, transnational fandom, fan-artist relationship, affect and emotion, parasocial relationships, connection and belonging, social isolation, digital spaces, online participatory community, COVID-19 pandemic*

## Introduction

The popularity of Korean cultural and media products has been widely referred to as the Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, in both informal and academic circles. The Korean Wave, which includes music, dramas, films, fashion, food, comics, and online games, has enjoyed international popularity since the late 1990s, especially in neighboring East Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Taiwan. In these countries, Korean dramas are available in the daily programming of free-to-air and satellite television. This technology affordance has encouraged the consumption of Korean cultural products as part of the daily viewing habits of East Asian audiences.<sup>1</sup> According to this pattern of popularity, early *Hallyu* scholars have theorized several discourses to explain the regional and international success of cultural products from a seemingly small, North-East Asian state. These perspectives generally view the Korean Wave through a soft power or neoliberalist, economic lens and posit theories of cultural hybridity, cultural proximity, and transnational flows to explain the Korean Wave's globalizing success.<sup>2</sup> However, these theories fail to account for Korea's cultural products' affective and emotional nature and its growing internationalization through social media as a public site of emotion.

1 Sangjoon Lee, "Introduction: A decade of Hallyu scholarship: Toward a new direction in Hallyu 2.0," in *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Sangjoon Lee and Mark Nornes Abe (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 13.

2 Dooboo Shim, "Hybridity and the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia," *Media Culture & Society* no. 28(1), (2006): 25-44; Yong-jin Won, "Hallyu: Numerous discourses, one perspective," in *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*, ed. Tae-jin Yoon and Dal Yong Jin, (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017), 23-43.

English-speaking academic discourse on *Hallyu* had significantly weakened as scholars in Asian studies, communication studies, and cultural studies claimed that the Korean Wave had been thoroughly analyzed and researched.<sup>3</sup> However, in the latter part of 2006, a second wave of Korean cultural products emerged, referred to by scholars as ‘*Hallyu 2.0*’; as *Hallyu 2.0* began to globalize as an unparalleled cultural phenomenon, the discourse was renewed.<sup>4</sup> Differentiated from the first wave, *Hallyu 2.0* has focused on technological development, the use of social media, and the convergence of creative content – which has subsequently spawned peripheral ‘K’ industries such as K-gaming and K-beauty into the *Hallyu* brand. K-dramas were the primary cultural export in the first wave. In contrast, the growth of *Hallyu 2.0* has been led by Korean pop music (K-pop), whose accessibility through internet video platforms such as YouTube has immensely extended its international reach.<sup>5</sup> Today, the South Korean music market ranks as the sixth largest globally with a 44.8 percent growth, positioning itself as the fastest-growing major market in 2020.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, the K-pop industry’s exports (including tour products) contributed over US \$3 billion to the South Korean economy.<sup>7</sup>

*Hallyu 2.0*’s technological developments and reliance on social media as a distribution channel have allowed for the organization of imagined communities, online intimacy, transnational fandom activities, and the erasure of barriers between producer and consumer. The role of social media as a tool for experience and organizing communities has been highlighted as the world faces social isolation due to COVID-19. On March 11, 2020, the COVID-19 virus was officially declared a worldwide pandemic by the WHO, and governments urgently implemented border control and social distancing

3 Sangjoon Lee, “Introduction,” 14.

4 Dal Yong Jin, “New Perspectives on the Creative Industries in the *Hallyu 2.0* Era: Global-Local Dialectics in Intellectual Properties,” in *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Sangjoon Lee and Mark Normes Abe (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 56.

5 Ibid. 54.

6 International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, “Global Music Report 2021,” accessed November 20, 2021, [https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GMR2021\\_STATE\\_OF\\_THE\\_INDUSTRY.pdf](https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GMR2021_STATE_OF_THE_INDUSTRY.pdf).

7 Yonhap News Agency, “Exports of Korean culture products soar 22.4 pct last year,” *Yonhap News Agency*, April 14, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200414009800315>.

policies to curb the spread of the virus.<sup>8</sup> As a result, face-to-face social interaction, and physical contact as the norms of human interaction have been erased, and communication has been relegated to the cybersphere.

The global music industry, too, has not been exempt from the devastating impacts of the pandemic, with US\$ 30 billion lost in the concert industry alone in 2020.<sup>9</sup> However, for the K-pop music industry, which has been at the forefront of technological innovation and online communication, this increased global shift to community communication via social media has further accelerated its popularity with music promotion, video performances, and digital interaction with fans becoming normalized throughout the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> K-pop fandoms are recognized as a social, participatory culture and emotional space of intimacy for meeting like-minded people. This transnational community relies on social media for interaction, and the increased saturation of K-pop content, as well as the amount of time spent online during the pandemic, has allowed the global K-pop fandom to thrive, expanding its reach further than ever before.<sup>11</sup> Thus, rather than continuing to justify the success of the Korean Wave as one based on previous theories of cultural proximity and hybridity, this paper posits that the continued digitalization of the Korean Wave and its expanding global presence today should be viewed vis-à-vis an affective, emotional and experience-based economy.<sup>12</sup>

In examining the affective, emotional, digitalized nature of K-pop fandoms, first, a literature review on these concepts will be conducted. Then, situating within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper will discuss

8 M. Reza Azarpazhooh et. al, "COVID-19 Pandemic and Burden of Non-Communicable Disease: An Ecological Study on Data of 185 Countries," *Journal of Stroke and Cerebrovascular Diseases*, no. 29 (9) (2020): 2 & 3.

9 Jem Aswad, "Concert Industry Lost \$30 Billion in 2020," *Variety*, December 11, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/concert-industry-lost-30-billion-2020-1234851679/>.

10 Yonhap News Agency, "K-pop album market bullish despite pandemic," *Yonhap News Agency*, October 21, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211015005200315>.

11 Meicheng Sun, "K-pop fan labor and an alternative creative industry: A case study of GOT7 Chinese fans," *Global media and China*, no.5 (4) (2020): 390; Hyunji Lee, "A 'real' fantasy: hybridity, Korean drama, and pop cosmopolitans," *Media, Culture & Society*, no. 40 (3) (2018): 366.

12 Katrin Dovelung, Anu A. Harju, and Denise Sommer, "From Mediatized Emotion to Digital Affect Cultures: New Technologies and Global Flows of Emotion," *Social Media + Society*, (January-March 2018): 1-11.

how virtual connections and online intimacy have accelerated the growth of online, transnational K-pop communities by employing the Korean pop group BTS and their fandom, called ARMY, as a case study. The K-pop industry and its fandoms utilize online spaces as communities for emotional and affective interaction. However, an analysis of the behaviors of all K-pop fandoms is far beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, the author has decided to use only BTS as a case study because they are known for their close connection to fans on social media. As of 2021, BTS has five consecutive wins of Billboard Music Award's Top Social Artist Award, where award nominees are considered based on significant fan interaction, including global music streaming and social engagement.<sup>13</sup> They have also been recognized internationally as Korea's most accomplished musical artists, becoming the first to debut a non-English song at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and the first Asian act to win Artist of the Year at the American Music Awards.<sup>14</sup>

This paper conducted a quantitative analysis to display the increase of online activities and BTS' fandom growth throughout the pandemic. Secondary data were collected from official company notices, social media channels, viewing statistics, and news and magazine articles between March 11, 2020 (the WHO's COVID-19 pandemic declaration date) to June 15, 2021 (the day after BTS' eight-year anniversary virtual fan meeting). BTS' activities and transition to online performances in lieu of face-to-face events, as well as their active social media presence, demonstrate how BTS have successfully transitioned to online technologies to recreate spaces of intimacy. Furthermore, these events and the corresponding development within the fandom community can be applied to *Hallyu* 2.0's international growth and contribute to our understanding of global society's increased dependence on social media and online connections as a place of belonging. Through this case study, this paper seeks to contribute to the understanding

13 Ananya Varma, "BTS wins top social artist at Billboard Music Awards for 5<sup>th</sup> time; debuts 'Butter' live," *Republic World*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.republicworld.com/entertainment-news/music/bts-wins-top-social-artist-at-billboard-music-awards-for-5th-time-debuts-butter-live.html>.; Sun-Ah Shim, "BTS becomes first Asian act to win top honor at AMAs," *Yonhap News Agency*, November 22, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211122004800315>.

14 Franchesca Judine Basbas, "BTS make history as 'Life Goes On' becomes the first non-English song to debut at number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts," *Bandwagon*, December 9, 2020. <https://www.bandwagon.asia/articles/bts-life-goes-on-debuts-at-no-1-on-3-billboard-global-charts-hot-100-global-200-global-excl-us-be-album-dynamite-big-hit-entertainment-korea-november-2020>.

of K-pop, affect and intimacy in transnational social mediascapes, the power of participatory online fandom in *Hallyu 2.0*'s success, and the future of K-pop fan-artist communities through technological development.

## Literature Review

### *Concepts*

In the context of cultural studies, affect is considered to be the performativity of emotion; an emotion that is socially produced, regulated, and shared; and how emotion flows and creates responses. Affect exists outside of a person and is an entity that is relational to the natural world that we engage with; it is something that we *do* rather than have.<sup>15</sup> Emotion, meanwhile, is built into a person as a psychological construct and becomes active in social sharing situations. Emotion is situational and contextual, performed with discursively constructed cultural practices. For emotions to travel and affect, they must be produced into a text. How one is affected by emotions depends on their spatial dimension; that is, how close or far they are to the text.<sup>16</sup> New media technologies both enable the exchange of information and foster globally mediatized emotional exchange. This is referred to as digital affect cultures, as the digital realm constructs a space where participation and orientation are guided by emotional communication. Social media are emotional media, and their core characteristics are based on emotional identification with others and belonging in a collective imagined community.<sup>17</sup> Mediatization plays a crucial role in constructing public opinion, and by acknowledging this, the role of the media in processes of socio-cultural change can be understood. Humans gather around cultural artifacts and organize themselves through their understanding and opinions concerning the artifact, and this organization unites individuals into communities validated through shared and mediatized interaction.<sup>18</sup> In digital affect cultures, these mediatized communications are no longer bound by time and instead allow users to conduct multiple simultaneous interactions unconstrained by distance.<sup>19</sup>

15 Katrin Dovelung et.al, "From Mediatized Emotion," 1.

16 Ibid, 2.

17 Ibid, 3 & 4.

18 Ignas Kalpokas, "Enabling Post-truth: Mediatization and Affect," in *A Political Theory of Post-Truth* (Pivot, Cham: Palgrave, 2019), 57.

19 Ibid, 59.



The self, too, is increasingly becoming mediatized. As the dominant method of interaction transitions to digital encounters rather than face-to-face interaction, the self becomes more existent as a digital representation rather than projected through our physical bodies.<sup>20</sup> This digitalized projection of self is driven especially in social mediascapes, controlled by user interactions. In the context of the K-pop industry, social media drives the interplay between entertainment companies and global fandoms, and reliance on social media is inevitable for interaction between the host (artists) and viewers (fans).<sup>21</sup> Technologies such as the chatbox function on live streaming and video platforms allow for real-time virtual connection that users lack in their actual lives. Not only does the chat function as a direct interaction between host and viewer, but it also connects fellow viewers as they exchange their thoughts and emotions. These arenas provide a safe space that fosters transnational connections and intimacy between the host and viewer, building a strong sense of community, empathy, and affiliation amidst the absence of physical togetherness.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, one of the promises of the Internet is to “bring together isolated, but like-minded people,” making it inseparable from the concept of transnational fandoms today.<sup>23</sup> Fandoms can be defined as a “vibrant, socially rewarding space where groups of people come together to share interests, ideas, and occasionally work to change the world.”<sup>24</sup> It is a social space strengthened by community participation and unity. As Anna Lee Swan writes, “physically dispersed, but affectively connected, K-pop fans around the world have formed a dynamic community that imagines itself as transcending national boundaries.”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps no better example of this can be seen than through the role of social media in *Hallyu 2.0*, as it rapidly promotes the

20 Ibid.

21 Dal Yong Jin and Yoon Kyong, “The social mediascape of transnational Korean pop culture: Hallyu 2.0 as spreadable media practice,” *New Media and Society*, no.18 (7) (2016): 1280.

22 Hyesu Park, “Chapter 3: Korean mukbang wave: Making sense of eating and broadcasting and its techno-mediated narrative environment,” *Understanding Hallyu: The Korean Wave Through Literature, Webtoon, and Mukbang* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 3; Anna Lee Swan, “Transnational Identities and Feeling in Fandom: Place and Embodiment in K-pop Fan Reaction Videos,” *Communication Culture & Critique*, no. 11 (2018): 549.

23 Hyesu Park, “Korean mukbang,” 10.

24 Ibid.

25 Anna Lee Swan, “Transnational Identities and Feeling in Fandom,” 549.

visibility and accessibility of Korean popular culture to the Western world.<sup>26</sup>

### *In Pandemic Times*

COVID-19 has significantly impacted the South Korean music, concert, and tourism industry. A little over a month after the declaration of the pandemic, South Korea recorded its first case of COVID-19, and by February 29, 2020, it became the second most infected country.<sup>27</sup> This situation caused the immediate mass cancellation of live entertainment events amidst social distancing policies.<sup>28</sup> Globally, numerous countries implemented nationwide lockdowns and curfews, effectively halting face-to-face interaction for several consecutive months.<sup>29</sup> The extended length of the pandemic and these policies have caused threats to mental health worldwide as communities remain socially isolated.<sup>30</sup> Now, more than ever, are social media functioning as spaces for emotional connection during a time of physical separation.<sup>31</sup>

## **Scope and Methodology**

### *Why BTS?*

BTS, as K-pop idols, are known to be early adopters of social media. As one of the first K-pop groups to operate a ‘personal’ social media account independent of their company’s official account, BTS have consistently displayed their vulnerable and candid appearances through ‘personalized’ fan interaction. Pre-debut, the group opened their Twitter account and uploaded

26 Hyunji Lee, “A ‘real’ fantasy: hybridity,” 366.

27 Victor Cha and Dana Kim, “A Timeline of South Korea’s Response to COVID-19,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, last modified March 27, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/timeline-south-koreas-response-covid-19>.

28 “Performances, concerts cancelled over coronavirus,” *Yonhap News Agency*, February 25, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200225004000315>.

29 M. R. Azarpazhooh et al., “Covid-19 Pandemic,” 7.

30 Rodolfo Sarracci, “Prevention in COVID-19 time: from failure to future,” *Epidemiol Community Health*, no.74 (2020): 690.

31 *Ibid.* 550.

their first Tweet on December 18, 2012.<sup>32</sup> Just over a month later, the first video-log (vlog) of leader RM sitting in their recording studio and chatting to the camera was uploaded onto their 'BANGTANTV' YouTube channel.<sup>33</sup> Mirroring their Twitter account, the 'BANGTANTV' YouTube channel is separate from their company's official music video distribution channel and presents 'behind the scenes' footage of the members' daily, casual, and intimate interactions. At the time of this paper's writing, BTS have Tweeted 12,762 times and have uploaded 1,633 videos on BANGTANTV.<sup>34</sup> Of course, the production and curation of each post and video are not wholly independent from company control. However, in line with *Hallyu* 2.0, BTS have utilized social media to show 'publicly private' moments, and in doing so, have built a global fandom based on intimacy and emotional connection. This connection has been recognized internationally through their wins of the Billboard Music Award's Top Social Artist Award, beating out US-industry competitors such as Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande, Taylor Swift, Shawn Mendes, and Billie Eilish.<sup>35</sup>

A world tour beginning in Seoul on April 11, 2020 and extending throughout the summer of 2020 was planned to promote BTS' fourth studio album, marking an important seventh year of group activities.<sup>36</sup> However, due

32 BTS (@BTS\_twt), "What's up! It's BTS. Finally, BTS' official Twitter has opened~ Clap clap clap! Before our debut, more weird and fun things that you could have only imagined will be uploaded," December 18, 2012, 2:43 a.m., [https://twitter.com/BTS\\_twt/status/280729943476953090](https://twitter.com/BTS_twt/status/280729943476953090).

33 "130107, RAP MONSTER" January 7, 2013, BANGTANTV, video, 1:44, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srk5\\_rQVmmA&ab\\_channel=BANGTANTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srk5_rQVmmA&ab_channel=BANGTANTV).

34 "BANGTANTV," Social Blade, accessed November 20, 2021, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/bangtantv>; "@BTS\_twt," Social Blade, accessed November 20, 2021, [https://socialblade.com/twitter/user/bts\\_twt](https://socialblade.com/twitter/user/bts_twt).

35 Billboard Music Awards (@BBMAs), "top social artist winners for the FIFTH YEAR IN A ROW !! congrats, @BTS\_twt !! #BBMAs," May 24, 2021, 4:30 a.m., <https://twitter.com/BBMAs/status/1396549134258081792>.; Billboard Staff, "Billboard Music Awards 2018 Nominations: See the Full List," Billboard, last modified April 17, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/bbma/8343598/billboard-music-awards-2018-nominations-list>.; Denise Warner, "Cardi B Leads 2019 Billboard Music Awards Nominations With 21," Billboard, last modified April 4, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/bbma/8505581/billboard-music-awards-2019-nominations>.; "2020 Nominees," Billboard, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.billboardmusicawards.com/2020-nominees/>.

36 "BTS 4<sup>th</sup> Full-length Album Map of the Soul: 7," ibighit, accessed June 16, 2021, [https://ibighit.com/bts/eng/discography/detail/map\\_of\\_the\\_soul-7.php](https://ibighit.com/bts/eng/discography/detail/map_of_the_soul-7.php).

to the exacerbating COVID-19 situation, the 37-date stadium world tour was canceled.<sup>37</sup> Despite these extenuating circumstances, BTS and their company, HYBE, introduced new technologies and varied modes of social media interaction to expand their business models and foster intimacy with fans.

The following section will detail data collected from secondary data sources between March 11, 2020 (the date the pandemic was declared) and June 15, 2021 (the date after their two-day eight-year anniversary concert). It will display how they have facilitated the growth of BTS' digital affect community during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data was collected through official company notices, official and fan social media channels, official press releases, viewing statistics, news articles, and magazine interviews between March 11, 2020 to June 15, 2021. This timeframe has been chosen as the start of the pandemic brought a halt to international travel, and a series of social distancing and lockdowns policies globally, affecting BTS' world tour plans. In addition, BTS' eight-year anniversary virtual fan meeting (an important event to celebrate the connection between artist and fan) is their most recent online live performance with publicly accessible data, as per the time of writing and publishing of this paper.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Recreating Live Events Through Alternative Online Technologies*

On February 27, 2020, two days before Korea ranked as the second most infected COVID-19 country, HYBE announced the cancellation of BTS' Seoul concerts scheduled for April 11, 12, 18 and 19 of 2020.<sup>38</sup> A month later, on March 26, the postponement of the North American leg of their tour (April 25 to June 6, 2020) was announced, and the ultimate decision to completely

37 Ana Monroy Yglesais, "BTS Cancel 2020 Map of the Soul World Tour Dates Due to COVID-19 Restrictions," Recording Academy Grammy Awards News, last modified April 28, 2020, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/bts-cancel-2020-map-soul-world-tour-dates-due-covid-19-restrictions>.

38 Althea Legaspi, "BTS Cancel 'Map of the Soul' Korea Shows Due to Coronavirus Concerns," *Rolling Stone*, last modified February 27, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bts-cancel-map-of-the-soul-korea-shows-coronavirus-959472/>.

reschedule all dates of the world tour was made on April 28, 2020.<sup>39</sup> Despite canceling their 37-date tour, measures to bring performances directly to fans were quickly executed.<sup>40</sup> On April 18 and 19, 2020, BTS held their first at-home concert series, 'Bang Bang Con,' streaming previous concert DVDs for free on their official YouTube channel. The two-day event replaced the cancellation of their in-person Seoul concerts, streaming for nearly 24 hours across the weekend; it attracted a total of 50.5 million viewers and a peak of 2.24 million concurrent viewers at one time across 162 regions.<sup>41</sup> On June 14, 2020, 'Bang Bang Con: The Live' was held to replace their annual in-person fan meeting events. The event was streamed in live from Seoul and was the first collaboration between HYBE and the cloud-based live streaming platform Kiswe, whose mission statement includes "modernizing the fan experience," "audience-driven viewing," and "social-first experience."<sup>42</sup> The platform includes cheer and chat functions that allow audiences to interact live with the artist. For this concert, a six-camera angle multi-view was offered as well as real-time Bluetooth connection technology to BTS' fan light-sticks. This technology allowed for the simultaneous syncing of fan cheering devices, replicating the same technology provided at physical concerts and allowing for a participatory aspect regardless of time, space, and distance.<sup>43</sup> 'Bang Bang Con: The Live' recorded 756,000 concurrent viewers in 107 countries, setting the Guinness Book of World Records for the biggest audience at a paid virtual concert,

39 Althea Legaspi, "BTS Postpone North American 'Map of the Soul' Tour Amid Coronavirus Pandemic," *Rolling Stone*, last modified March 26, 2020. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bts-postpone-north-american-map-of-the-soul-tour-coronavirus-973975/>; Ana Monroy Yglesais, "BTS Cancel 2020 Map of the Soul World Tour Dates Due to COVID-19 Restrictions," *Recording Academy Grammy Awards News*, last modified April 28, 2020, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/bts-cancel-2020-map-soul-world-tour-dates-due-covid-19-restrictions>.

40 BIGHIT MUSIC (@BIGHIT\_MUSIC), "BTS MAP OF THE SOUL TOUR Schedule Information #BTS #BangtanSeoyeonDan #MapOfTheSoulTour, January 22, 2020, 9.00 a.m., [https://twitter.com/bighit\\_music/status/1219771684904792064](https://twitter.com/bighit_music/status/1219771684904792064).

41 Sarah Deen, "BTS' mammoth online concert series BANG BANG CON fetches over 50 million viewers worldwide," *Metro UK*, last modified April 20, 2020, <https://metro.co.uk/2020/04/20/kpop-bts-bang-bang-con-gets-50m-viewers-12581409/>.

42 "Home," Kiswe, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.kiswe.com/>.

43 "Big Hit Entertainment and Kiswe Forge Strategic Alliance," *Kiswe News*, last modified June 8, 2020, <https://www.kiswe.com/news/big-hit-entertainment-and-kiswe-mobile-forge-strategic-alliance>.

and added an estimated 10,000 new members to the official BTS fan club.<sup>44</sup>

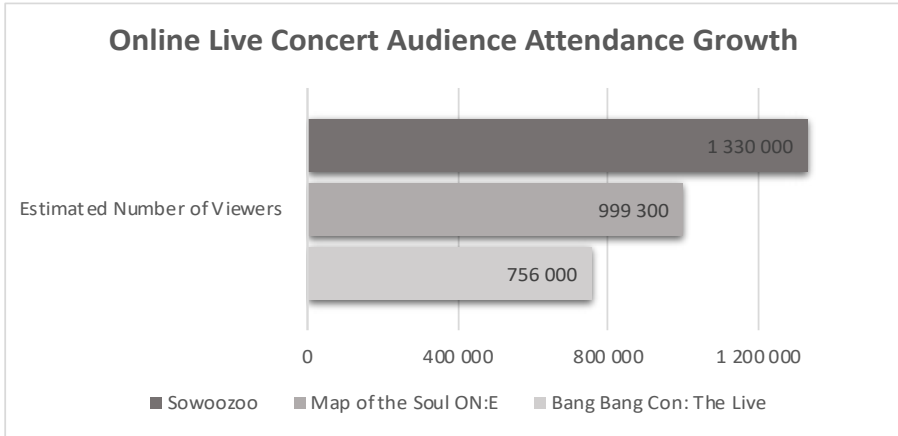
Four months later, on October 10 and 11, 2020, BTS broke their own Guinness Book World Record with their first full-length online concert, 'Map of the Soul ON:E.' Hosted using the same Kiswe technology, the concert introduced the 'ARMY on Air' function, where chosen fans' video and audio were streamed in real-time from their rooms to LED screens on-stage at the Seoul venue. It was the world's first streaming concert to apply both multi-view and 4K/HD technology, attracting 993,000 paid viewers from 191 countries and territories; a 237,000 viewership increase from 'Bang Bang Con: The Live.'<sup>45</sup> On April 17, 2021, one year from the first of the home concert series, 'Bang Bang Con 2021' streamed over eight hours of concert DVDs on YouTube, attracting 2.7 million concurrent viewers; an increase of nearly half a million viewers from the previous year.<sup>46</sup> Finally, on June 13 and June 14, 2021, BTS held their biggest paid online concert yet, attracting 1.33 million paid viewers from 195 countries and regions for their eighth-anniversary commemoration concert titled 'Sowozoo.' Held live at the Seoul Olympic Park Stadium, the sets and venue scale of the concert were the largest to date, with an upgraded version of 'ARMY on Air' that displayed fans individually across hundreds of LED screens in the formation of would-have-been physical concert seats.<sup>47</sup>

44 Dominic Punt, "K-Pop Sensations BTS Set Concert Live Stream Record With Bang Bang Con: The Live," Guinness World Records, last modified July 22, 2020, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2020/7/k-pop-sensations-bts-set-concert-live-stream-record-with-bang-bang-con-the-live-624548>.; Patrick Frater, "BTS 'Bang Bang Con: The Live' Claims Record Viewership for Online Concert," Variety, last modified June 14, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/digital/asia/bts-big-bang-con-the-live-record-online-concert-1234635003/>.

45 "Kiswe Powers BTS' Innovative Virtual Concert 'Map of the Soul ON:E,'" Kiswe News, last modified October 14, 2020, <https://www.kiswe.com/news/kiswe-powers-bts-virtual-concert-map-of-the-soul-on-e>.

46 "Number of Peak Concurrent Viewers on BTS Online Event Surpasses 2.7 mln: Agency," *Yonhap News Agency*, April 18, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210418001100315>.

47 Hye-Min Hong, "1.33 million fans gather for BTS' 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary fan meeting," *Hankook Ilbo*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2021061509220003032?did=NA>.



Graph 1: An increase of 574,000 paid viewers in attendance between the 2020 and 2021 online fan meeting

### *Intimacy, Community, and Online Interactions*

Although seven months elapsed between BTS' latest live online concerts, they participated in numerous pre-recorded online performances for several talk shows and music award shows, including the Billboard Music Awards, the American Music Awards, and the Grammy Award Show.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the seven members (individually or in groups) regularly live-streamed daily activities such as cooking, playing video games, making arts and crafts, practicing instruments, or simply chatting. The first of these candid activities were live streamed on March 26, 2020, via the Korean video platform VLIVE. From then until April 5, 2021, 22 casual live streams were conducted on the platform.<sup>49</sup> For greater global reach, 24 live streams were conducted on YouTube between April 17, 2020, and November 13, 2020, and were labeled with the hashtags #StayConnected and #CarryOn.

48 "BTS (BangtanSeonyeonDan) 'Butter' @ Billboard Music Awards," May 24, 2021, BANGTANTV, video, 3:27, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7lhGz6Bfik&ab\\_channel=BANGTANTV.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7lhGz6Bfik&ab_channel=BANGTANTV.); Noah Yoo, "Watch BTS Perform 'Life Goes On' and 'Dynamite' at AMAs 2020, last modified November 22, 2020, <https://pitchfork.com/news/watch-bts-perform-life-goes-on-and-dynamite-at-amas-2020.>; "BTS (BangtanSeonyeonDan) 'Dynamite' @ 63<sup>rd</sup> GRAMMY Awards Show," April 21, 2021, BANGTANTV, video, 3:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWRMXiHhDjc>.

49 "BTS," VLIVE, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.vlive.tv/channel/FE619>.

While the live streams on YouTube started as daily vlogs, they later functioned as candid footage for the making process of the BE album released on November 20, 2020.<sup>50</sup> During these live streams, the chatbox function of each platform was used to respond to and react to fans’ questions in real-time. Further, BTS uploaded 285 image posts between January 1, 2020, and June 15, 2021, on Weverse, a social media platform created by HYBE exclusively for direct artist-fan interaction. Additionally, they regularly appear on the platform to chat and respond to fans’ posts.<sup>51</sup> On Twitter, BTS made 526 Tweets between January 1, 2020, and June 15, 2021.<sup>52</sup>

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Amount of content uploaded</b>
VLIVE	22 live streams
YouTube	24 live streams
Weverse	285 images
Twitter	526 Tweets

Table 1: Summary of activity across BTS’ social media platforms March 2020-June 2021

These daily activities and live interactions with the members have allowed fans to feel a sense of participation and ownership of BTS’ regular lives, privy to their ‘private’ moments. To add to this perception, the concept of the BE album focused on themes of isolation, loneliness, and ways to overcome the pandemic. Part of the title track ‘Life Goes On’ was filmed at BTS’ dorm and featured casual home clothing rather than the flashy high-end fashion that K-pop usually utilizes.<sup>53</sup> BTS also replaced their annual travel-reality show with a ‘staycation’ reality series featuring the members in a summer house doing activities that are “somewhere between everyday life and leisure.”<sup>54</sup> Footage included fishing, hiking, cooking, and sleeping

50 “BANGTANTV,” YouTube, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/user/BANGTANTV>.

51 “BTS,” Weverse, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.weverse.io/bts/feed>.

52 “BangtanSeonyeonDan,” Twitter, accessed June 17, 2021, [https://twitter.com/bts\\_twt](https://twitter.com/bts_twt).

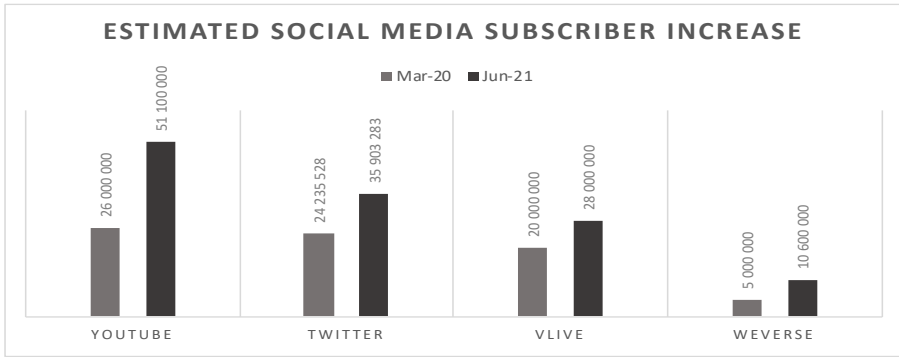
53 “BTS (BangtanSeonyeonDan) ‘Life Goes On’ Official MV,” November 20, 2020, HYBE LABELS, video, 3:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5q5mZbe3V8>.

54 “In the Soop,” Weverse, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://weverse.io/bts/media/category/73>.



and was aired on the Korean cable TV channel JTBC. Extended versions of the free-to-air episodes were uploaded as paid content on Weverse.

Of the 461 days within the research timeframe, BTS-related content was released across 355 days. This content includes their social media posts, reality show airing, online concerts, vlogs, music videos, interviews, magazine spreads, behind-the-scenes videos, DVDs, and advertisements. Notably, new content was released every day between February 21, 2021, and June 15, 2021.<sup>55</sup> As a result of BTS' and HYBE's strategies to produce and promote affective online content, the following estimates have been made of their followership across all social media platforms between March 2020 and June 2021.<sup>56</sup>



Graph 2: Overall, BTS' YouTube subscribers have increased by 49.1%, Twitter followers by 32.5%, VLIVE subscribers by 28.5%, and Weverse members by 52.8%.

### Discussion

BTS have a long history of utilizing their social media channels as affective,

55 "BTS," Google Calendar by choarosa@gmail.com, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://t.co/N6Oqu1suYP?amp=1>.

56 "BANGTANTV," Social Blade, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/bangtantv/monthly>; "@BTS\_twt," Social Blade, accessed June 17, 2021, [https://socialblade.com/twitter/user/bts\\_twt/monthly](https://socialblade.com/twitter/user/bts_twt/monthly); V LIVE (@Vliveofficial), "BTS's VLIVE channel reached over 20 million subscribers VLIVE thanks ARMY from all over the world that showed love for BTS~ If you still haven't followed BTS's VLIVE channel, follow us now [#BTS #BangtanSeonyeonDan #VLIVE](https://channels.vlive.tv/FE619)," June 5, 2020, 12.38 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Vliveofficial/status/1268748890884333568>; "BTS," VLIVE, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://channels.vlive.tv/FE619>.

culturally discursive spaces for community belonging and fandom practices. Nevertheless, the display of increasingly candid activities across their social media platforms during COVID-19 has resonated with audiences and contributed to a mass increase in fandom growth. Throughout the pandemic, with online platforms as the only way of communicating with fans, BTS have increased the sharing of their ‘publicly private’ personas, feelings, and innermost thoughts on a globally publicly accessible forum by providing footage into their personal living spaces, workspaces, and through live streams of their everyday activities. Although BTS have featured their work studios and living spaces before the pandemic, the addition of ‘everyday’ activities and conversations shared with fans within these spaces has enhanced the parasocial fan-artist relationship. It removes their unreachable superstar status and plays a performative role of friendship between the stars and fans. These interactions have further curated a sense of intimacy between artist and fandom. Adopting this communication model in place of face-to-face interaction has created a synergistic environment for attracting new audiences who view these images as BTS’ ‘authentic’ selves. These actions highlight visual intimacy, public vulnerability, and belief in BTS as affective personal leaders. Although most fans cannot directly interact with BTS, they can feel connected through textual viewing, breaching the barrier between public and private spaces, time, and distance.<sup>57</sup> As their influence expands, so too does BTS’ political leadership in these mediatized public spheres, and their ‘selves’ become a commodity to be consumed. Especially in today’s ‘Experience Age,’ exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, online users not only seek to maximize the pleasure of their consumption experience but to believe that they have a stake (or can participate directly) in the process of collective consumption.<sup>58</sup>

The ‘ARMY on Air’ technology used during the ‘Map of the Soul ON:E’ and ‘Sowozoo’ live concerts allowed BTS to view fans in real-time through screens at the concert hall, while fans simultaneously watched BTS (and themselves) through their screens at home. These virtual community meetings present implications for the further deterritorialization and digitalization of K-pop. K-pop as a genre has relied on its global export to its transnational fans for the increase and longevity of its popularity. Pre-COVID-19, a significant portion of K-pop groups’ revenue was based on their performances at live events and corresponding ticket sales

57 Anna Lee Swan, “Transnational Identities and Feeling in Fandom,” 557.

58 Ignas Kalpokas, “Enabling Post-truth: Mediatization and Affect,” 62.

and merchandise sales. However, the transition to online concerts may decrease tour costs in favor of larger revenues through online ticket sales while also reaching masses of international fans who otherwise may never have had the opportunity to experience their favorite stars up-close. As displayed through the case study of BTS, the frequency and accessibility to increasingly intimate K-pop content allows for transnational fandom growth, who rely on social mediascapes as a site of community, affect, and emotion.

### *Dangers of Fandom as Emotionally Charged Spaces*

Even before their official debut, BTS' candid nature and freedom over their 'personal' social media channels allowed them to share more of their lives than the average K-pop idol, consequently attracting a loyal fan community who feel a strong and close emotional connection to the group. However, while the sharing of BTS' 'everyday' and 'natural' lives throughout the pandemic has lent emotional and mental support to the fan-artist relationship, fandom and social media are emotionally charged spaces, and not all interactions within these digital affect communities are positive. With the growth of the group's fandom and investment in the increasingly emotional connection to the artist, leading to the consequent belief that fans have influence or ability to affect their real lives, the digital fandom space has the potential to be a place of negativity and unsavory behavior. The enormous size of the fandom and BTS' continued relevance on social media platforms have more than once led to the spread of rash and incorrect information; ARMY's keen protectiveness towards their stars has been interpreted as online cyberbullying and feeding into the digital 'cancel culture.'<sup>59</sup> Both Western and Korean industry celebrities alike have not been spared from this toxic behavior, and musical collaborations between BTS and other artists have been canceled as a consequence.<sup>60</sup>

While on the one hand, online technologies, and their digital spaces as a site for social gathering and emotional interaction, has served as an important arena to allow global audiences to navigate and overcome feelings of social isolation throughout the pandemic, these spaces and their normalized behaviors also bring with it dangerous implications. Fans'

59 Michele Amabile Angermiller, "Charlie Puth implores BTS fans to end 'toxic internet screaming match,'" *Variety*, July 5, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/charlie-puth-bts-fans-1234698628/>.

60 SBS PopAsia HQ, "BTS fans attack Wale on Twitter," *SBS PopAsia*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.sbs.com.au/popasia/blog/2017/06/27/bts-fans-attack-wale-twitter>.

investment into their parasocial relationships can lead to the overstepping of socially constructed personal boundaries, and an unhealthy reliance on digital affect communities as a place of lived 'reality' in place of real, human society.

### *Study Limitations*

This study is limited by its reliance on the use of a single K-pop group as a case study. The behavior and nature of the relationship between BTS and ARMY is not representative of the way all K-pop idol groups and their fandoms utilize digital affect spaces. The study is also constrained by its' reliance on English language data sources and Korean to English language translations which may subconsciously reflect a Western bias perspective or factual inaccuracies. Furthermore, due to the quantitative nature of this study, the participation of fandom and interaction between fan and artist has only been displayed through numerical data. It has not been able to show how fan-artist interact on the micro-level, nor the actual thoughts, feelings, words, ideas, and behaviors of these communities.

Regardless of these limitations, this study, and its exploration on the reliance of digital affect communities for emotional connection, especially in times of mass social isolation, presents that the increased normalization of these behaviors could further benefit and attract audiences to *Hallyu 2.0* and subsequent Korean waves. Future research should offer a qualitative perspective on how K-pop fandoms participate in social media as an intimate space of affect. Additionally, further research can observe how and if future technological innovations such as virtual reality and augmented reality can be applied to deterritorializing online communities, live K-pop performances, its effect on fan-artist interactions, and fandoms' emotions and behaviors.

### **Conclusion**

Indeed, new media has allowed viewers to transgress linguistic barriers and spatial dimensions with ease through fan-driven live translation blogs, real-time simultaneous subtitling, or official pre-captioned videos. Thus, previous applications of K-pop and cultural proximity may no longer be justified within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the entirety of the world seeks intimacy, emotional belonging, and affect. Technological mediation through BTS' innovative online concerts have deconstructed the boundaries between 'us' and the 'other,' closing the distance between the character onscreen and fans' own lived experiences. Suddenly, attendance

at the events of the world's biggest boy band is no longer dictated by geographical boundaries or language barriers. These technological developments have increased viewers' desires for transnational intimacy and provoked appetites for international media as a part of their daily routines.

Through this research, this paper has sought to display global viewers' increasing dependency on social media as a form of social and emotional connection. While research on *Hallyu 2.0* and the integral role of social media as a mediator between entertainment companies, artists, and fans has been conducted, the innovations learned from BTS' activities and portrayals of the 'authentic,' yet mediatized, and commodified self can be further applied as the K-pop industry continues to digitalize. The case of BTS has shown how social media and digital affect cultures reinforce fan identities and shared experiences between the artist and the community. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper has highlighted the increasing importance of social mediascapes as a place of affect and belonging and shown how *Hallyu* industries can innovate within an environment of increasing self-mediatization, as the boundaries between real and virtual continue to blur.