

**UNIVERSITY OF TURKU**

Sofia Sippala

The Korea image of K-pop fans

**Master's Thesis in Geography**

**Turku 2020**

The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

## UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

Faculty of Science and Engineering

Department of Geography and Geology

**SIPPALA, SOFIA:** The Korea image of K-pop fans

Master's thesis, 81 pp.

30 ECTS, geography

Supervisor: Hille Koskela

August 2020

---

South Korean popular culture has gained global exposure in recent years. Korean popular music, films and television dramas are increasingly consumed by international audiences that do not seem to share any other connections to South Korea. The wave of Korean popular culture is particularly visible on social networking sites and digital media. This master's thesis aims to find out about the images foreign fans of Korean popular culture, especially Korean pop music, have of South Korea. The fans' media practices are also studied, as media strongly impact place image formation. This thesis focuses on the ways Korean pop music is connected to place image construction and reproduction.

The data for this thesis was collected via half-structured thematic interviews with non-Korean listeners of K-pop, Korean pop music. Almost all the interviewees were western and under 30 years old. The interviews were conducted both in South Korea and in Finland. The interview data was transcribed and analysed with qualitative methods. The qualitative content analysis of the textual data was guided by the concepts of place image, place branding and media geography as well as the study objectives.

The fans of K-pop consider South Korea as an independent and modern nation. The images of Korea focus on the urban and the capital of Seoul. The rapid modernisation of Korea is visible on the people, as there is a generational gap between young and old Koreans. The ideas of the masculine are different in Korea because aesthetic beauty is expected from everyone. The fans consumption of K-pop related media is focused on digital platforms. The fans are active and they form fan communities online. K-pop is seen as a highly produced genre that is controlled by large Korean entertainment companies. The companies mould the K-pop stars and music to be as commercially successful as possible. K-pop has some Korea markers, but the genre has become more placeless with the global success. The increasing placelessness of K-pop and the activity of the fans can help to deconstruct the place hierarchy of global popular culture and make it more diverse.

---

Tags: K-pop, Hallyu, place image, media geography

## **TURUN YLIOPISTO**

Luonnontieteiden ja tekniikan tiedekunta

Maantieteen ja geologian laitos

**SIPPALA, SOFIA:** K-pop-fanien Korea-käsitykset

Pro gradu -tutkielma, 81 s.

30 op., maantiede

Ohjaaja: Hille Koskela

Elokuu 2020

---

Eteläkorealainen populaarikulttuuri on levinnyt maailmalla viime vuosien aikana. Korealaista populaarimusiikkia, elokuvia ja televisiosarjoja kuluttaa yhä enenevässä määrin kansainvälinen yleisö, jolla ei vaikuta olevan muita yhteyksiä Etelä-Koreaan. Korealaisen populaarikulttuurin aalto on erityisen selkeästi esillä sosiaalisessa mediassa ja digitaalisilla alustoilla. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on valottaa korealaisen populaarikulttuurin ja erityisesti korealaisen pop-musiikin fanien Korea-mielikuvia ja -käsityksiä. Myös fanien mediakäytöt ovat tutkimuksen kohteena, sillä media vaikuttaa suuresti paikkamielikuvien syntyyn. Tämän tutkimuksen keskiössä on korealaisen pop-musiikin yhteys paikkamielikuvien ja -käsitysten tuotantoon.

Tutkimuksen aineisto on kerätty puolistrukturoiduilla teemahaastatteluilta ei-korealaisten K-pop-fanien kanssa. Lähes kaikki haastateltavat olivat länsimaisia ja alle 30-vuotiaita. Haastattelut tehtiin Etelä-Koreassa ja Suomessa. Haastatteluaineisto litteroitiin ja analysoitiin laadullisten menetelmien avulla. Tekstiaineiston laadullista sisällönanalyysiä ohjasivat tutkimuksen pääkäsitteet (paikkamielikuva, paikkamarkkinointi ja mediamaantiede) sekä tutkimustavoitteet.

Fanit pitävät Etelä-Koreaa itsenäisenä ja modernina valtiona. Mielikuvat Koreasta keskittyvät kaupunkiympäristöön sekä erityisesti pääkaupunki Souliin. Korean nopea modernisaatio näkyy ihmisissä, sillä nuoria ja vanhoja korealaisia erottaa sukupolvien välinen kuilu. Maskuliinisuuden käsitykset Koreassa ovat erilaisia, sillä esteettistä kauneutta vaaditaan kaikilta ihmisiltä. Fanit kuluttavat K-poppiin liittyvää sisältöä pääosin digitaalisen median alustoilla. Fanit ovat aktiivisia ja he muodostavat faniyhteisöjä verkossa. K-poppiä pidetään vahvasti tuotettuna genrenä, jota kontrolloivat suuret korealaiset viihdeyritykset. Nämä yritykset muokkaavat K-pop-tähdistä ja musiikista mahdollisimman myyvää. K-popissa on piirteitä, jotka liittyvät sen Koreaan, mutta genrestä on tullut paikattomampaa globaalin menestyksen myötä. K-popin lisääntyvä paikattomuus ja fanien aktiivisuus voivat auttaa globaalin populaarikulttuurin paikkahierarkian purkamisessa sekä lisätä monimuotoisuutta.

---

Asiasanat: K-pop, Hallyu, paikkamielikuva, mediamaantiede

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. HALLYU – THE KOREAN WAVE</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1.THE KOREAN CONTEXT	4
2.2.WHAT IS HALLYU?	6
2.3.KOREAN POPULAR MUSIC	9
<b>3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND KEY CONCEPTS</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1.PLACE IMAGE	16
3.1.1. Place image as a concept	16
3.1.2. Placelessness and authenticity	18
3.2.PLACE BRANDING	18
3.2.1. Place branding basics	18
3.2.2. Place branding and culture	20
3.2.3. Place branding and the global movement of people	22
3.3.MEDIA GEOGRAPHY	22
3.3.1. What is media geography?	22
3.3.2. Mediatisation	23
3.3.3. Media and spatiality	25
3.3.4. Media and popular culture	26
<b>4. DATA AND METHODS</b>	<b>28</b>
4.1. FUNDAMENTALS OF QUALITATIVE STUDY	28
4.2. INTERVIEWS	29
4.2.1. Interview as a method	29
4.2.2. Interviews in this study	30
4.2.3. The data collection experience	33
4.2.4. Transcription of the interviews	34
4.3. THE EXECUTION OF CONTENT ANALYSIS	35
<b>5. ANALYSIS</b>	<b>37</b>
5.1. IDEAS OF SOUTH KOREA	37
5.2. BRAND K-POP	41
5.3. K-POP RELATED MEDIA USES	45
5.4. K-POP AND THE KOREAN SOCIETY	48
5.5. K-POP AND GLOBALISATION	51

---

<b>6. DISCUSSION</b>	<b>54</b>
6.1. THE KOREA IMAGE OF FANS	54
6.2. FANS' MEDIA USES	57
6.3. K-POP AND KOREA	61
6.3.1. K-pop as a media genre	61
6.3.2. The <i>K</i> in K-pop	63
<b>7. CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>73</b>
LITERATURE	73
OTHER SOURCES	74
PICTURE SOURCES	75
<b>ATTACHMENTS</b>	<b>77</b>
ATTACHMENT 1: INTERVIEW GUIDES	77
A. Interview guide for Korean visitors	77
B. Interview guide for non-visitors	79
ATTACHMENT 2: DATA PROTECTION ANNOUNCEMENT	80
ATTACHMENT 3: PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM	81

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An electronic beat starts and the sky is reflected from sunglasses. The camera zooms a bit back and reveals the rest of the face of the man wearing the sunglasses. The man says something in a weird language. The camera zooms out more and shows that the man is sunbathing at children's playground. The music changes and leads to the second scene where the man, now wearing a black suit and sunglasses, starts rapping in the strange language, as he walks the aisle of a horse stable. A few seconds later, the man is dancing in a way that mimics horseback riding. This is how the music video of the 2012 viral hit Gangnam style begins.

Gangnam style is probably what most people think first when they are confronted with the term South Korean pop music or K-pop. The song, performed by an artist named Psy, broke YouTube records in 2012 and introduced many to the colourful world of K-pop. Since Psy's success, the genre of K-pop has only grown in popularity. Nowadays, it is almost impossible to confront nothing K-pop related when browsing social networking sites on the internet. South Korean pop groups, such as BTS, Black Pink and Exo, perform on western television shows and tour globally. How did this happen?

K-pop has become a worldwide phenomenon in recent years. K-pop is listened by people around the world that do not necessarily share any other connections to South Korea. K-pop and the other forms of popular culture have made Korea a trendy place in the minds of people. People globally listen to K-pop, watch Korean movies or dramas, use Korean skincare products, and eat Korean food. The success of Korean products in the western world, especially, seems quite ground-breaking, because being Asian or from Asia have not been virtues (Parc & Moon 2013). K-pop and other Korean cultural products have a huge following on digital platforms and social networking sites (Jin 2018: 404-405, 410). The global success of K-pop, thus, seems to be connected to advanced media technologies and mediatisation. In the age of digital platforms and social networking services, media texts from different locations circulate freely across the globe (Jung 2011: 170). Audiences can discover and choose media platforms and texts that best suit their needs (Pratt & Jeffcutt 2009; Fast, Jansson, Lindell, Ryan Bengtsson & Tesfahney 2018).

K-pop is not just a funny phenomenon I happened to come across by accident and decided to choose as a topic for my master's thesis. I listen and follow K-pop, and the genre is

dear to me. I only discovered K-pop in my early 20s and after the genre had gained some global success. Therefore, my viewpoint differs from those, who have listened to K-pop during their teenage years and for whom K-pop was hard to access due to a smaller transcultural diffusion. There are some things I have always found interesting in the K-pop phenomenon. First, K-pop has a huge global following and it is everywhere on the internet – Why did I not discover it sooner? Why was not it present in western popular culture and media? Secondly, why people think that K-pop is something inferior to western popular culture products? Why is it acceptable to mock K-pop stars and fans so openly? With these questions on my mind, I realized that K-pop could work as an interesting study phenomenon for my master's thesis.

All cultural products reflect society and its everyday life (Alasuutari 2011). So does K-pop. According to social sciences professor Pertti Alasuutari (2011), cultural studies are often considered to examine interesting and funny phenomena that are irrelevant and marginal in the face of harsh realities of everyday life. I have experienced this same attitude from others (and myself) when discussing my master's thesis. K-pop is fun and weird, but this master's thesis will not surely help me to get a job. However, by studying difference and exceptional phenomena, it is possible to reflect the otherwise dark centre of the normal. The main purpose is then to question and reflect old ways of thinking and widen one's perspective.

This master's thesis applies an interdisciplinary approach to the cultural phenomena of K-pop and the so-called Korean wave. I aim to examine the phenomena from a geographical standpoint, but as geography is such a wide and versatile study field, I locate my viewpoint most towards humanistic, cultural and media geography. All of these share a connection to other fields of human studies, which, I believe, is only strength. A more interdisciplinary approach makes this thesis more interesting and approachable to people who are not geographers, which may offer a chance to unforeseen dialogue.

Because the global wave of K-pop is quite recent, the research around it is also relatively new. Due to my inability to understand Korean (or other East Asian languages), I have not been able to familiarize myself with the possible non-English research literature on the topic. The study of K-pop has been mostly focused on the economic benefits it brings for Korea and tourism, and the phenomenon has also been explored in the field of communications and media studies. As for geography, few studies would examine K-pop by using spatial key concepts. However, the key concepts of *place image* and *place*



*branding*, which I am applying in this thesis, are widely used in geography to study the relations between places and (cultural) products. Place image refers to the beliefs and ideas an individual has about a place (Kotler, Haider & Rein 1993: 141). Place images are personal, but they can also be shared by meaning (Tuan 1977/2007). In place branding, the principles of product branding are applied to a place (Broudehoux 2017: 47). The association of a place with a product or cultural phenomenon, for instance, can bring benefits in terms of increased profit and visitors/buyers (Florida 2002/2004; Morgan, Pritchard & Pride 2004).

The general objective of this study is to examine the images foreign fans of K-pop have of South Korea. This study focuses on the position that K-pop has on the place image construction. The K-pop related media uses of fans are also examined because media has a large impact on place image construction (Adams, Cupples, Gynn, Jansson & Moore 2016; Fast et al. 2018). This master's thesis aims to learn about the position foreign K-pop fans give to the genre concerning South Korea and the ways they perceive the global success of Korean popular music.

This master's thesis aims to answer the objectives with the following research questions:

1. What kind of image do the K-pop fans have of South Korea?
2. How do the fans use media in relation to K-pop?
3. What is the impact of K-pop in (re)producing the place image?
  - 3a. How do the fans perceive K-pop?
  - 3b. How do the fans position K-pop to South Korea?

The results of this master's thesis are used to gain a deeper understanding of the K-pop phenomenon and the behaviour of K-pop fans. The results also aim to shed light to and hopefully bring more acceptance to K-pop and the K-pop fans in the west too. Lastly, I hope that the results of this master's thesis challenge the reader to review their ideas about global popular culture and its spatial hierarchy.

## 2. HALLYU – THE KOREAN WAVE

### 2.1. THE KOREAN CONTEXT

South Korea or the Republic of Korea (ROK) is a middle-sized country in East Asia surrounded by powerful neighbours (China, Japan, Russia) and an unstable northern relative (North Korea). Due to the location, the Korean Peninsula has historically had little power to determine its fate (Snyder 2018: 1-2). After the Korean War (1950-1953), South Korea and the United States agreed on a mutual defence treaty to guarantee the safety and security of South Korea. More specifically, the treaty was made to protect South Korea from North Korean military aggression. The alliance with the US provided South Korea investment and a ready export market. South Korea has gone through tremendous changes in the last 100 years. The war-ruined country has developed into an economic and cultural motor of East Asia and an influential regional power (Paxton 2018). Nowadays, South Korea is one of the top-10 economies in the world. For simplicity, the Korean War is used here as the starting point for modern Korean development.

After the Korean War, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world, and heavily dependent on US support (Snyder 2018). The first decades of South Korea were accompanied by authoritarian rule, corruption, and human rights violations (Paxton 2018). During Park Chung-hee's authoritarian rule (1963-1973) in particular, the censorship and control of media were high. All media production was used as propaganda to emphasize the misery of the wartime and Korean occupation, as well as to imagine a brighter future for the country without communism. The censorship of media officially ended only in the early 2000s (Jin 2018: 416). Park prioritized South Korean economic development and modernization over human rights. The country experienced a rapid industrial development - an *economic miracle* - that started during Park's presidency. The rapid economic development was experienced by some other East Asian nations (Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan) at the same time too (Kotler et al. 1993). These nations are sometimes referred to as East Asian dragons or tigers.

In the late 1980s, South Korea was considered an extremely dangerous country by many (Snyder 2018). The threat of armed conflict with North Korea was high – so high that many opposed holding the Olympics in Seoul in 1988. The Olympics were, however, held and people globally got to see South Korea in their television. Furthermore, many foreign companies entered the Korean market after the Olympics opening the country for western cultural influences (Shim & Santos 2014). The late 1980s was time for domestic changes

too. South Korea transitioned from authoritarianism to democracy, and the first democratically elected president, Roh Tae-woo, took the *Blue House* in 1988. Ever since the democratization, South Korean politics have demonstrated the ideological division between progressive and conservative parties.

Nowadays, South Korea is viewed as a model of successful modernization (Snyder 2018). The nation has transformed from a development aid receiver into a donor within only two generations. The country has maintained its close relations with the US, as North Korea still possesses a military threat. There have been attempts to restore the relations in the Korean Peninsula, but Korean unification remains a secondary concern for the South.

Despite the rapid economic development, traditional Confucian values are still important in South Korea (Jung 2011; Paxton 2018). There is a social hierarchy in which one's position in society is defined by their age, wealth, and gender. People are expected to show respect for those in a higher position. For example, traditional Confucian ethics require women to be obedient to men. Another important cultural concept in Korea, like in other East Asian countries, is the concept of *face*. This means that it is important to avoid putting other people in an uncomfortable situation. It is therefore often better to read the situation and use subtle hints than to confront others straightforwardly.

For many, Korea is still not a fully developed nation (Moon, Ragman & Verbeke 1998: 141). There are, for example, big differences between cities and more rural areas (Paxton 2018). Korea remains one of the most ethnically homogenous nations in the world. Although there are more and more non-Koreans in Korea, it is nearly impossible for foreigners to be included in society. The monoculturalism of the society and traditional values are apparent in the alienation of the LGBTQ+ community. The scene is small, and the individuals face discrimination and legal challenges.

South Korea is a small economy (Snyder 2018: 150). The economic growth has historically been led by export, and the economy is still quite dependent on trade. Nowadays, Korea has an active and highly competitive entertainment industry (Parc & Moon 2013: 127, 144). As globalisation is important for small economies, South Korea tries to gain most of it by utilizing cultural industries for branding purposes (Moon et al. 1998). This means that Korea attempts to build a positive image of itself and gain cultural influence by promoting Korean culture and cultural products abroad.

## 2.2. WHAT IS HALLYU?

The word Hallyu (한류 in Korean) refers to the global success of Korean popular media products (television programs, movies, music) from the 1990s onwards (Paxton 2018: 377). These cultural products are created in the competitive Korean entertainment industry, where different size private companies try to gain a competitive advantage (Porter 1990: 86). From the 1990s onwards, products of Korean popular culture have started spreading from East Asia to North America, South America, Middle East, and parts of Europe

Hallyu can be originated to the success of Korean television dramas and films in Asia (Jung 2011; Jin 2018). Television drama *What is Love?* (1991-1992) and blockbuster movie *Shiri* (1999) are often referred to as the groundbreakers that paved the way for the regional success of Korean television series and films. Another Korean television drama, *Winter Sonata* (2002), gained huge popularity in Asia and made Hallyu a popular cultural phenomenon in Asia. There were some Korean musicians such as BoA (picture 1), Rain (picture 2), H.O.T. and Shinwa that gained the position of a regional superstar in Asia. Some singers tried to conquer the US market too, but they were not successful. For example, Rain was considered too similar to American popstars by the US media. The regional Asian success of Korean popular cultural products, especially television dramas and films, is often considered the first wave of Hallyu.



**Picture 1:** BoA. Source: Nguyen (2009) <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/brainchildvn/4343903762/>>.



**Picture 2:** Rain. Source: Min (2005) <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/photoren/353034752/in/set-72157594430480678/>>.

The second wave of Hallyu started later in the 2000s (Jin 2018: 405-407, 411). In addition to television programs and films, the new wave placed a special emphasis on popular music, K-pop (Kim, Lee & Hahm 2018). One of the key aspects that divide the first and second wave is the circulation of media content. Whereas television, radio and magazines were important to the spread of the first wave Hallyu, the second wave popular cultural products circulated mainly on digital platforms, such as social networking sites. They were, therefore, more easily accessed outside Asia too. Internet and its various platforms made it possible for the international audience to discover and enjoy Korean popular culture easily and cost-effectively (Parc & Moon 2013; Parc, Messerlin & Moon 2016). Furthermore, Korean entertainment companies utilized digital platforms more effectively than Western and Japanese companies, which may explain some of the success of Hallyu.

The third wave of Hallyu is often connected to the global success of singer Psy's (picture 3) 2012 hit song *Gangnam Style* (Kim et al. 2018). The third wave includes even more aspects of Korean culture than the previous waves, and it has made Hallyu a global phenomenon. In addition to K-pop, people globally are drawn by Korean cosmetics,

digital apps, and food. Young people follow the fashion, diets, and lifestyles of Korean celebrities via various digital platforms. Korea-originated things have sometimes become so common that they are not considered especially Korean. This may be the case with some fashion or food trends.

The success of the Korean wave in non-Asian countries is somewhat ground-breaking. Being Asian or from Asia have not been merit in western countries (Parc & Moon 2013). Lately, from the beginning of the century, things have started to change. Asia has become a trendy area in western tastes of fashion, music, films, and food (Morgan et al. 2004: 33). The global success of Korean popular culture has been somewhat surprising to Korea too. The Korean government and related organisations have tried to explain the wave but have not discovered any solid reasons for the success. Some of the guesses have been filtered western values, effective marketing, attractive young men, emphasis on love and romance, and the economic success of Korea. Scholars have had similar thoughts. They connect the success to cultural hybridization, where local Korean culture is mixed with foreign influences (Jin 2018: 412). Because of the interaction, Korean popular culture products represent the globalized local culture. The mixing of global and local culture has altered with different waves. During the first wave, there was less mixing. The first Korean television dramas and films, which gained popularity in Asia, reflected more heavily traditional Confucian ethics and family values compared to the later global successors.



**Picture 3:** Psy. Source: Rinaldi (2012)

*<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/evarinaldiphotography/8099826541/>>.*

The global success of Korean entertainment has, furthermore, been explained with the demanding domestic audience (Porter 1990). Because South Korea does not possess huge natural resources, it has been important to emphasize other industries including the cultural and entertainment industry. The demand in Korea has provided entertainment companies vital information about the audience needs. It is, therefore, easier for the companies to anticipate the needs of foreign audiences and global trends, which gives them a competitive advantage. Furthermore, companies are more likely to look for expanding opportunities in global markets if the domestic competition is intense. Some scholars view the success of Hallyu as a victory of commercial capitalism and Americanisation (Jung 2011: 76-77). Korea's export-orientated economy has merely expanded into popular culture, and modern popular cultural products are planned to emphasize American culture, lifestyle, and ideology. According to Shim & Santos (2014), there is a popular view in East Asian countries to associate North American culture to cosmopolitanism. Americanised cosmopolitan culture is believed to attract tourists and increase sales.

Hallyu is nowadays tightly connected to the Korean economy (Parc & Moon 2013: 146). Hallyu attracts foreigners to Korea and enhances the popular image of Korea and Korean products. Therefore, the Korean wave is not positive just for the tourism industry, but it also has a positive impact on other Korean industries. The government considers successful musicians and actors as brand ambassadors for the *national brand* Korea and hence supports them with subsidies (Parc 2016a).

### 2.3. KOREAN POPULAR MUSIC

Korean popular music or K-pop mixes up Western and Korean music styles (Jung 2011; Parc et al. 2016). There are elements from North American hip hop, Japanese popular music and Western techno genres, and sometimes more traditional Korean instruments and other musical influences. According to Parc et al. (2016: 12), Koreans do not think that K-pop sounds very *Korean*. International fans, on the other hand, think that K-pop sounds Korean or at least vastly different to American pop music (Jin 2018: 414). In addition to the music, an important part of K-pop is visibility such as dance choreographies and fashion. K-pop acts are usually groups that consist of young men or women. Both the group themselves and single group members, *idols*, have their fan clubs. These fan clubs are often referred to as *fandoms*.

Korean popular culture, including K-pop, has been guided by American music trends after the Korean War (Paxton 2018: 4). This was particularly apparent in K-pop from the 1960s to 1980s (Parc et al. 2016: 18). K-pop was copying Western music trends while developing its soundscape. The mediascape was, however, controlled by the state until the early 2000s (Jin 2018: 416). For example, songs that had more than a third of their lyrics in English were banned. The Korean music scene changed drastically in the mid-1990s with the emergence of new star-planning and management companies (Jung 2011: 77-78, 168). These companies hire and train people to become idols with multiple talents (singing, dancing, acting). The first-born and most powerful companies are SM (established in 1995), YG (1996) and JYP (1997). In the late 1990s, the entertainment companies began to contract Korean-American members to the groups for they could speak and rap in English (Parc 2015). Later in the late 2000s, more foreign members to idol groups were contracted from China, Thailand, and other Asian nations. The purpose of hiring foreign group members was to appeal to foreign audiences better. Korean entertainment companies, thus, have globalizing strategies. Nowadays, some idols release songs or albums in English, Chinese and Japanese too.

Some of the first K-pop idols that gained regional popularity in Asia were H.O.T., BoA, Rain, Shinwa, TVXQ and Se7en (Jung 2011: 79, 163-164). Their success was followed by second-wave bands such as Super Junior (picture 4), SHINee, 2PM, 2AM, Girl's Generation (SNSD) (picture 5) and Brown Eyed Girls (picture 6). A wider global audience got a glimpse of Korean popular culture in 2012, as the hit song *Gangnam Style* by the singer Psy (picture 7) went viral. The music video of the song became the most-watched video on YouTube (Parc & Moon 2013; Paxton 2018). The music video gained popularity first among South Asian listeners (Parc 2016b). It was not then that popular in Korea. The major Western success of the music video began after Scooter Braun, the manager of the pop star Justin Bieber, tweeted about it.





**Picture 4:** Super Junior at LG Optimus Super Junior Fan Meeting in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Source: LG 전자 (2011) <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/lge/6414925403/>>.



**Picture 5:** Girls' Generation (SNSD). Source: Pabian (2015) <<https://amymen.tistory.com/1008>>.



**Picture 6:** Brown Eyed Girls performing. Source: Jeon (2013)  
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/42438955@N05/9607763476/>>.



**Picture 7:** Psy performing *Gangnam Style*. Source: Rinaldi (2013)  
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/evarinaldiphotography/8541751128/in/photostream/>>.

The global success of K-pop started with Psy's *Gangnam Style* (Jin 2018: 404-405). After Psy, K-pop bands such as Girls' Generation, Twice (picture 8), Exo (picture 9), Big Bang (picture 10) and BTS (picture 11) increased their global activities. Of these, the boy band BTS has lately become the global face of K-pop. The group made their debut in the US

television in late 2017 on MTV's *American Music Awards*. BTS was, thus, the first K-pop band to perform on an American awards show. Before the music awards appearance, BTS had finished a record-breaking world tour in terms of audience attendance. BTS's global popularity has been partly explained by the band's dedicated fandom *ARMY* that is particularly active on social media. Media studies scholar Jin Dal Young (2018: 410) furthermore recognizes YouTube as *a key factor of the K-pop fever*. K-pop music and music videos are easily accessible on the internet (Parc et al. 2016). K-pop circulates on digital platforms such as YouTube and Twitter with little geographical restrictions (Jung 2011: 170).



**Picture 8:** Twice. Source: 월아조운's (2018)

<<https://mcjoun.tistory.com/entry/180717-%EC%97%B4%EB%A6%B0%EC%9D%8C%EC%95%85%ED%9A%8C-%ED%8A%B8%EC%99%80%EC%9D%B4%EC%8A%A4>>.



**Picture 9:** Exo. Source: Mang2goon (2016) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6tqI2MRQD8>>.



**Picture 10:** Big Bang. Source: YG Entertainment (2011)  
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/officialyfamily/9912490975/>>.



**Picture 11:** BTS at the Billboard Music Awards. Source: Dispatch (2019)  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXESQxznhoc>>.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND KEY CONCEPTS

#### 3.1. PLACE IMAGE

##### 3.1.1. Place image as a concept

*“Places are people, cultures, historical heritage, physical assets and opportunities”*

(Kotler et al. 1993: 2)

*Place* is a key concept in geography which has inspired a lot of geographers to share their ideas of it. Place is usually described as being linked to an individual’s perception and emotional attachment (Fast et al. 2018: 67). Geographer Edward Relph (1976/2008: 29) recognizes that different-scale spatial units can be considered as places: *“places can be a street, community, town, county, region, country or continent”*. Places do not follow a strict classification system. Whereas physical space is often seen as objective, place is then perceived to be the subjective experience of it. According to geographer Yi Fu Tuan (1977/2007: 6, 18) spaces become places as people get to know them better and attach value to them. It is agreed that place is more than just a location (Adams et al. 2016: 5, 136). Places are relational and dynamic, and they have material, existential and social dimensions.

Place images consist of the individual beliefs, ideas and impressions about a place (Kotler et al. 1993: 141). According to urban planning scholar Anne-Marie Broudehoux (2017), place images are conceived, built, or lived. A place image can be a formation of a deep level of emotional engagement that is linked to close knowledge and experience of the place, or superficial, cliché-filled representation when the place is less known to the subject (Tuan 1977/2007: 18). Place images are multiple, complex, and difficult to control. Actions of local political, economic, and religious elites affect place images, but so do media images and narratives and information from relatives and friends (Fast et al. 2018: 217). Place images are constantly remade and negotiated, and they depend on a lot of factors. Place images develop over time as people associate a place with historical events, people, personal experience, other’s experience, and media coverage (Broudehoux 2017).

Because of the overtime collection and gathering of the information that supports the already existing image, place images are difficult to alter (Kotler et al. 1993: 8). Sometimes the image changes because of major external forces which single places have no control over. For instance, technological development, global competition, and political changes can alter the way people see the world. It is more likely for a positive

place image to turn into a more negative one because of uncontrollable and unforeseen negative events. For example, the earthquake and followed nuclear power station accidents in 2011 damaged people's perception of Japan and Japanese products (Valaskivi 2016: 69). Place images affect peoples' attitudes towards products and services from that place, as well as influence the interest in visiting the place (Morgan et al. 2004: 40). That is why local governments try to control the image building processes.

The image of a place, furthermore, depends on the identity of the interpreter (Relph 1976/2008: 45). The place appears different whether the interpreter is an insider or an outsider to the place. Relph (1976/2008: 51-55) has defined different types of insideness and outsideness an individual can experience concerning a place. *Existential outsideness* involves alienation from the place and its people as well as the feeling of not belonging. *Existential insideness*, on the other hand, includes knowing the place and its people, and feeling of belonging and acceptance. By *empathetic insideness*, Relph refers to the understanding of a place and its symbols. Empathetic insideness does not come automatically, but individuals need to train themselves to see and respect the specialities of the place.

Place image is a central concept in humanistic and behavioural geography. In these, place images are studied through the intimate experiences individuals attach to locations (Tuan 1977/2007). Yi-Fu Tuan (1977/2007) describes places being pauses in movement. The pause makes a location to gain value for a person. According to Relph (1976/2008: 41), intimate experiences with places are needed for they give *significance to human existence*. Intimate experiences are different for each, and they are hard to make public. However, even the most unique-felt and highly specific experiences may be shared by meaning. Humanistic and behavioural study in geography focuses on individual thought arising from acquired sensory information (Montello 2016). The information is interpreted in the alight of previously learned structures. The relation between locations and human being are considered dynamic and two-way. Although this master's thesis emphasizes place images as personal and experimental creations according to humanistic and behavioural tradition, Korea-related place images are examined also through the light of place branding and marketing.

### 3.1.2. Placelessness and authenticity

Places that lack connectedness to their immediate surroundings can feel *placeless* (Agostinelli 2017: 6). Placelessness is often connected to exclusion and a feeling of alienation from the space (Relph 1976/2008). These spaces are abstract, a historic and inauthentic in a result of rapid industrialization, and the rise of commercialism and mass media. Shopping centres are often considered as the most notable contemporary example of placeless places in urban environments (Shim & Santos 2014). Relph clarifies in the preface of his book *Place and Placelessness* (1976/2008) that landscapes are not either places or placeless, but rather the two exist in a dynamic balance or tension everywhere.

Defining authenticity is difficult as it is a cultural value that is constantly (re)created (Shim & Santos 2014). Authenticity is selected, and it originates from different interpretations of a place. Authenticity is present in historical sites and traditional performances, but it is also reproduced in the everyday lives of contemporary citizens. It is worth recalling that authenticity and inauthenticity are mere different orders – neither is lower than the other (Relph 1976/2008: 80-82). Inauthenticity is most often connected to trends and mass culture. It is particularly present in industrialized societies and their appreciation of mediocrity and superficiality. Often and stereotypically, authenticity and locality are viewed together as opposites to global and commodified (Degirmenci 2013).

## 3.2. PLACE BRANDING

### 3.2.1. Place branding basics

A brand is a construct that is meant to generate a set of value-adding associations in the public mind (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005). A brand combines the best assets of reality with fantasy (Broudehoux 2017: 47). For the marketing campaign to be successful, the branded product should be associated with great storytelling and mythmaking. In place branding, the techniques of product branding are applied to places.

A place brand is a simplified set of associations related to the place (Kavaratzis & Kalandites 2015: 1368). Therefore, place branding is focused on mental images; the ways people perceive a place (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005: 507). Place brands are not natural nor static entities as they depend on the audience they are made for and time they are made (Kotler et al. 1993; Jonas, McCann & Thomas 2015). Marketers and clients often want to create a risk-averse brand or image that emphasizes the current cultural trends. Marketing of places is a social process that is coloured by historical, geographic, and



political contexts. Although place branding cannot be considered a natural activity, as the key goal is to enhance the reputation and make the place more attractive, places will always have a meaning for people. This means that the name of a place will always bring up ideas even if the place did not have a managed brand.

Place branding has a long history. Places have probably always tried to differentiate themselves positively from others (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005: 506). In the 19th century, the growing competition led places to explore this opportunity more eagerly. However, place promotion by the public sector management agencies has gained general acceptance only from the 1980s onwards. Nowadays, the concept of place branding is increasingly being applied to different locations. According to Kotler et al. (1993: 10), places need to compete these days to gain economic advantage.

Place brands, especially city brands, are often associated with the global competition between local elites to gain the leading market position (Hubbard & Wilkinson 2014). The goal is to make the place more attractive to the types of audiences that have money to spend or invest (Jonas et al. 2015: 190, 192). Places have different brands for different target markets (Kotler et al. 1993: 20, 22). Kotler et al. (1993: 20) mentions five possible target markets for places. These are goods and service producers, corporate headquarters and regional offices, outsider investors and export markets, tourism and hospitality industry and new residents. Because this study focuses on the fans of Korean popular music, I will examine place branding from the perspective of individual people. Not all people are equally attractive to places. Places design their brands to attract certain people and to discourage or avoid others. People places often want to attract with their brand are young professionals, middle-class families, and wealthy visitors (Broudehoux 2017: 45, 48).

Regular people are increasingly being included to brand-making tactics as well because a brand community may bring revenue and invite other people to discover the brand (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005; et al. 2016; Valaskivi 2016). The act of consumption is strongly linked to the way people define themselves. People choose brands to engage with others and to communicate about their interests and values. By choosing a brand, an individual might also wish to enter a community of other brand users that offers feelings of belonging and identity (Jonas et al. 2015: 194). If the brand is place-specific, the individual may grow a feeling of place attachment too. In a place branding context, the residents are often the ones that are wanted to engage in branding efforts (Kotler et al.

1993: 134-135). That is because the behaviour of the residents has a huge impact on the place image of the visitors: Unfriendly citizens can ruin the branded image whereas the hospitality of locals can make the place more attractive.

Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005: 511-512) divide place branding into three traditions. *Geographical nomenclature* is not truly considered place branding, as it only consists of naming a product by its geographical location. The most famous example of this is probably Champagne, the sparkling wine named after the region of production. There is no attempt to attach positive attributes of the place to the product. In *co-branding*, the positive attributes of the place are attached to the product to enhance the brand image. This is apparent in Swiss watches that emphasize the quality and tradition of Swiss production. Lastly, even just *managing the place* can be considered as branding. In this study, I will examine K-pop in light of place branding. Therefore, I will focus only on the first two traditions.

Despite some place brands being very loosely related to the actual environment, the ideal branding process should be based on local identity (Kotler et al. 1993; Uldemolins 2014). The ideal branding narrative reflects the values and identity connected to the location. Place brands that do not bear resemblance to reality are not credible (Morgan et al. 2004: 28-29, 48). On the other hand, brands demand simplification of the complex social, political, and economic reality, which makes it hard for them to include the diversity of interests and values of a place (Broudehoux 2017: 48, 60). To manage a coherent place brand, brand managers need to persuade and work with a variety of interests. Another thing that makes branding more complicated, is the difficulty to measure the real positive impact of it for a place. Therefore, it is hard to evaluate whether all the investments to the image construction pay off.

### 3.2.2. Place branding and culture

Place marketing can alter the identity of a place including the built environment, economy, society, and culture (Hannigan 2003; Jonas et al. 2015). Image construction, thus, materializes in places themselves causing changes to the physical landscape too (Broudehoux 2017: 60). The role of culture in economic life has been realized at least in advanced economies in which this phenomenon is called the *cultural economy* (Pratt & Jeffcutt 2009). The impact of cultural identity in economic life is visible, for example, in the case of Bilbao, Spain, where construction of a modern art museum that is a part of world-known museum concept of Guggenheim (picture 12), gave the city a new identity

and completely revived its image as well as attracted numerous tourists. The use of cultural industries, such as arts, media, and tourism, to enhance the economic development of a place, is a modern way of thinking in contrast to the more traditional way of seeing culture and economy as separate entities.



**Picture 12:** Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Source: Murayama (2016)  
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/naotakem/31273245344/>>.

The impact of the cultural economy has risen from insignificant to a major power (Pratt & Jeffcutt 2009). Nowadays, it is realized that arts and other cultural products of a place stimulate imagination and help to create a positive image and reputation that will attract individuals and investment (Morgan et al. 2004: 10). Cultural attributes such as the local music scene and historical buildings make the place feel more authentic and unique and therefore attract value (Florida 2002/2004). Place brands are then positioned right in between cultural and economic dimensions (Valaskivi 2016: 9-10).

The use of culture and other forms of presentation in place branding is more of an indirect communication strategy (Kotler et al. 1993: 157). This strategy in place branding is slow and its benefits may be hard to measure. It is also possible that the audience of cultural products does not make the connection between the product and the place. In that case, the effectiveness of branding is questionable.

### 3.2.3. Place branding and the global movement of people

Places choose to brand themselves to attract profit in forms of tourists, investment, talent, and trade (Morgan et al. 2004: 28-29, 48). Branding has become more important as the global diffusion of tourists and investors has increased (Broudehoux 2017: 47, 50). A positive place brand is linked to tourism; some even use the number of international tourists as an indicator of brand success (Uldemolins 2014: 3031). Destination branding aims to wake up feelings of attraction, inspiration, and stimulation in a potential visitor.

Places need to have unique features if they are going to attract outsiders (Kotler et al. 1993). Places may try to attract outsiders with their growing industries, pleasant weather and natural settings, and one-of-a-kind history. Security and safety are features that have increasing importance for people when making travel decisions. Thus, places need to have more than just physical attractions to draw people from the outside.

## 3.3. MEDIA GEOGRAPHY

### 3.3.1. What is media geography?

Broadly defined, media are complex networks of humans and non-humans (Adams et al. 2016). These networks form the mediasphere that covers the entire planet. Media networks work on different scales from global to small and local in a way that they affect everyone (Fast et al. 2018: 6-7, 218). Some see media as a potential source of liberation, empowerment, resistance, and social change, whereas for others it represents exploitation, isolation, hegemony, and domination. Media can manipulate the public opinion, but eventually, it is the people that give meaning to media texts (Broudehoux 2017: 55). That means that people are not just perceivers but also active participants. People use media to produce knowledge and identities – often in a way that reinforces social divides and stereotypes. Media also provide platforms to imagine, connect and take a part in public debates. For example, grassroots media can offer platforms for the establishment of horizontal communication networks and collective identities.

Different genres are a typical feature of media (Adams et al. 2016: 5, 27). That means that certain types of media have their norms of representing a text. Journalistic media, for example, use means such as personalization, dramatization, balance, and simplification to represent an issue. Environmental issues are, for instance, represented as an ongoing debate that happens between two equal opposing sides. The audience knows how to interpret texts of different genres based on their prior knowledge (Fast et al. 2018: 65).

Media geography is an interdisciplinary research field that combines geography, media and communications studies, and cultural studies (Adams et al. 2016; Fast et al. 2018). It is sometimes referred to as *geomedia studies* or *communication geography*. The branch of study emerged after the communicational turn in geography and more spatial turn in media and communication studies in the 1960s and 70s. It is, thus, a relatively new research field. In the geographic dimension of media geography, the focus is usually somewhere else than in media per se. Media geography aims to analyse and problematise the relations between different forms of media and spatial creativity, performance, and production. The material, cultural, social, and political dimensions are also taken into consideration. In its more critical branch, media geography is on a mission to expose misrecognition and promote mutual recognition in media.

### 3.3.2. Mediatisation

Media networks have increased their speed and size with technological development (Fast et al. 2018: 238-239). Media has become more intense first with the invention of the telegraph and the telephone, and then on the 20th century with the radio and newspaper being the key aspects of modern societies. In the 21st century, the media environment is more geographically connected than ever and it possesses great possibilities for transcultural dialogue (Adams et al. 2016: 8, 139). Media represent and reproduce popular understandings of power in modern societies by showing certain groups of people and places being close to the centre.

*Mediatisation* is a term that refers to a growing presence of media in individual lives and society's functions (Mediatitokoulu 2015). For an individual, mediatisation may mean the increase in the time they use media devices or content. Furthermore, communication between individuals increasingly takes place on media platforms. Digitalization is a part of modern-day mediatisation (Krotz 2017: 104-105). According to communication and media studies professor Friedrich Krotz (2017: 104), digitalization has led to the emergence of three new types of media: *content-driven*, *interactive*, and *social media*. Content-driven media consist of blogs and podcasts for example. By interactive media, Krotz means digital applications which utilize artificial intelligence such as some computer games or Apple's Siri. Social media refers to social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Mediatisation is an ongoing global metaprocess, which sets up challenges for controlling it and forecasting its future.

The mediascape has changed quite a lot with the development of advanced communication technologies (Adams et al. 2016: 42). New media forms allow the audiences to participate more so that they can be more engaged with the production and distribution of media texts, and they also have a greater opportunity to contest media representations (Broudehoux 2017: 54). Younger generations are especially connected with the new media, which has harmed the popularity of traditional print media (Verboord & van Noord 2016; Jin 2018). *World Wide Web* that emerged in the late 1990s, is nowadays an integral part of everyday life (Fast et al. 2018). Technological development and new digital platforms liberate users from certain spatial restrictions, provide new public spaces and allow to connect with other people regardless of the location or time. On the other hand, the new digital spaces are commercial as almost all content must be distributed through Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and other commercial networking sites (Krotz 2017: 113).

New digital platforms offer consumers a greater abundance of representational texts to choose from (Pratt & Jeffcutt 2009). International studies scholar Jimmyn Parc (2015) describes platforms such as YouTube and Netflix as of *today's exhibition galleries*. People can potentially connect with media texts across the world (Verboord & van Noord 2016; Fast et al. 2018). For instance, a lot of music is in digital format nowadays, which makes it more accessible for the global audience to discover on various music apps. People do not have to rely on the selection of CDs on their local record store or the taste of their local radio disc jockeys. Therefore, digital, and internet-based media can contest the spatial inequality in mainstream media. For example, the global spread and popularity of Japanese popular culture in the 2000s was boosted by the development of media technologies (Valaskivi 2016: 66). Similarly, the fame of South Korean popular culture outside Korea among young generations has been partly enabled by the internet, because it offers access to Korean music and music videos globally (Parc et al. 2016: 8, 12). New media and digitalization, thus, offer an opportunity to reimagine the world and build new cartographies (Adams et al. 2016: 8).

Another dimension to modern media experience is the sharing of media texts and social exchange involved in it (Pratt & Jeffcutt 2009). Digitally engaged audiences communicate and share their experiences on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Adams et al. 2016: 60, 110-119). These more interactive platforms enable people to stay updated and continuously involved. Most entertainment companies promote their products in

social media - virtually all South Korean pop groups have a Twitter account, page on Facebook and a YouTube channel (Parc et al. 2016: 13). Fans feel closer to artists in social media, as there is an opportunity to interact with them there (Verboord & van Noord 2016: 62). Although there is potential to connect and form alternative groupings on the new media platforms, it is more common that people rather nurture their pre-existing social networks and communities than try to engage with foreign cultural spaces, ideas, and people.

### 3.3.3. Media and spatiality

Media are deeply connected to spatiality. Musical and visual texts often awake feelings of belonging and place attachment (Jonas et al. 2015: 194). Media are also a means for a nation to export out its values outside – the global success of popular media texts is one of the features of soft power (Porter 1990; Valaskivi 2016). Media practices, visual representations and the whole industry are shaped by spaces and they shape spaces themselves too (Fast et al. 2018: 8, 10). The interconnection and interplay between media and spaces are complex and varied.

Although it is agreed, in geography at least, that media are always grounded, there is a quite popular view in humanities and social sciences about the capacity of media technologies to liberate humans from their spatial and territorial restraints (Adams et al. 2016; Fast et al. 2018). It is true that texts and narratives, circulated in media discourses, become places beyond physical restraints. Media geography also recognizes the cross-border connectivity of locations enabled by media technologies. However, there are no media without places and spaces, and places and spaces are (re)formed in media. Furthermore, the audience interprets media texts differently based on their location and spatial history. According to Adams et al. (2016: 171), media uses are one of the key practices for constituting a place.

Media systems and structures enable communication, they connect and create geographies (Adams et al. 2016: 1, 7-8). Media coverage defines and shapes places with sounds, sights, and other sensory data, which moulds the way people relate to places. Adams et al. (2016: 7-8) sees this as media and communications leading to thickenings of space in people's minds. Notions of a place are constructed in media by focusing on certain issues, events, and perspectives (Fast et al. 2018: 217). Thus, media shape people's spatial imaginaries and expectations and give social meanings to places. These meanings can have material and political consequences later. People are more open to accepting the

media produced image of a place because it often lacks the bias of clearly promotional material and therefore appears closer to the truth (Kotler et al. 1993; Broudehoux 2017). Mental place image construction in media, then, often falls outside of the control of the traditional place image producers.

Despite the recent development, the global field of popular media culture still has a spatial hierarchy. For instance, the United States and Great Britain continue to dominate the global music network (Verboord & van Noord 2016: 62, 69). The cities of Los Angeles, New York and London are the capitals of music. Coming from these places, continues to benefit artists in terms of exposure and industry connections.

#### 3.3.4. Media and popular culture

Research that focuses on media and mediatization aims to find out about the position of media in culture and society (Adams et al. 2016: 194). Media are an important image-construction agent (Broudehoux 2017: 48-49). Independent media coverage and popular means of representation, such as literature, theatre, film, songs, visual arts, and television, have often greater impact on the popular mind than advertising. That is why media airtime is so vital. Media outlets can work as cultural intermediates defining what is desirable and trendy (Valaskivi 2016). For instance, the international media circulated and covered Japanese popular culture in the early 2000s, which led to the place promoters attaching the popular culture to the Japanese branding strategy. According to media and communications studies scholar Katja Valaskivi (2016: 81), the branding of nations is so intertwined with media that the two are impossible to separate.

Popular music is a media genre that plays with different spatial scales and locations. On one hand, the rules, practices, and markets of popular music are somewhat globally shared (Valaskivi 2016: 111). The Anglo-American pop-rock has defined the genre from the 1950s onwards, and it still sets up most of the trends in popular music (Motti 2007: 322, 324-325). On the other hand, popular music is also local, as musicians from different countries and places add their traditions to trends, sing in different languages, use native instruments, and refer to local social realities in their lyrics. These little differences from the globally shared idea of popular music become markers of locality and thus add to the place image building processes.

Media exposure, especially in popular media products such as film, music, and movies, is an effective marketing tool for places (Broudehoux 2017: 48-49, 56-58). These media



products are powerful mythmakers that attach emotions and desire into places. Representation in popular culture can turn a place into a trendy destination for tourists and enhance the image of the products from that place (Parc & Moon 2013: 146). This happened to Brazilian favelas that became trendy in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Favela refers to the disadvantaged neighbourhoods that are usually built on the hills surrounding a city. Favelas turned glamorous in global mass media after they were used as music video backgrounds for African American pop stars, such as Michael Jackson, Beyoncé, Alicia Keys and Snoop Dogg. Favela trend happened at the same time Brazilian *reality* movies, like *City of God* (2002), gained global popularity. Local authorities were first against the idea of emphasizing favela in foreign media productions, as they feared that it would lead to a negative place image formation – the opposite happened. In 2011, the Disney animation *Rio* gave Brazil and especially the city of Rio de Janeiro another positive boost to the image. The film contributed more to a positive image formation than countless propaganda campaigns before it had.

Another famous example of the impact of popular culture on the reputation of a place is the *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) film series. The movie adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *Lord of the Rings* was shot in New Zealand and directed by a Kiwi director Peter Jackson. The film series gave New Zealand huge global exposure and associated the country with breathtaking natural scenery and adventure (Morgan et al. 2004: 216).

Popular music, entertainers, and celebrities influence place images, and they are increasingly included in place branding strategies as well (Kotler et al. 1993: 215, 217). *Crocodile Dundee* (1987) and the late *crocodile hunter* Steve Irwin represent Australia's wildlife, outback, and adventurous spirit. The city of Manchester features Beatles in its branding, whereas Chicago celebrates basketball superstar Michael Jordan.

## **4. DATA AND METHODS**

### **4.1. FUNDAMENTALS OF QUALITATIVE STUDY**

Qualitative methodology is usually connected to humanistic, soft, understanding, and interpreting studies (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). The qualitative methodology works well in studies that try to explain intangible products or phenomena (Parc & Moon 2013: 132). The aim is to describe a certain phenomenon or event, understand certain actions or give a theoretically valid explanation to a phenomenon. The qualitative methodology therefore often accompanies cultural studies (Alasuutari 2011). Qualitative studies focus more on finding a local explanation of the phenomena than discovering universal truths. Stereotypically, the use of qualitative methods leads to profound information that is hard to generalize.

Methodology, in a wide sense, refers to the way knowledge is created (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). Reality appears different with different guidelines and instruments of study. In a narrower sense, methodology only refers to the use of methods; the ways new information about reality is collected in a study practice. In the narrow sense, the reality is given and unproblematic. The results are defined by the use of methods. In this study, I recognize that the chosen approach has guided the collection of information about reality, and therefore, the reality may appear different than if the information was collected in another way.

There are different traditions to qualitative methodology. The continental European tradition is more philosophically orientated compared to the North American tradition that is more focused on the methods (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). The feminist tradition of qualitative methodology always includes an acknowledgement of study ethics and responsibilities. This study follows the feminist tradition for it recognizes the position of the researcher and the impact of the study setting. The analysis of qualitative data is subjective and it is impacted by factors such as the researcher's philosophical foundation, cultural background and sociodemographic position (Saldana 2011; Shim & Santos 2014).

The qualitative study recognizes the impact of used methods and the user on the results (Saldana 2011; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). There is no objective, pure knowledge, but all knowledge is subjective. The subjectivity is apparent in the study construction, for example, as the researcher chooses it based on their understanding. Therefore, qualitative methodology opposes the assumption that researchers can dedicate themselves to a study

topic without any prior knowledge (Kuckartz 2013). Johnny Saldana (2011: 22), the author of multiple qualitative research guides, writes about the position of the researcher in a qualitative study in the following way: *“who you are (or are becoming) determines to a large extent what and how you research”*.

By its nature, the qualitative study aims to understand (Saldana 2011; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). Understanding means placing oneself in the position or living through the mental atmosphere, thoughts, emotions and motives of the research subjects. Understanding is intentional, and it is always an interpretation. Understanding is based on the previous knowledge or the understandings of the researcher. The qualitative study focuses on people and their constructed world. The study emphasis is on the signs that construct the world for people, and the societal practices that exist through them. Qualitative methodology is, thus, applied to study social reality. The purpose of a qualitative study is to reflect and problematize the conventional ways of thinking and widen one’s perspective (Alasuutari 2011).

Qualitative research is empirical for it emphasizes the data collection and analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). The most common sequence of empirical study starts with the research questions, proceeds to data collection, and finishes with data analysis (Kuckartz 2013). A qualitative study, however, emphasizes the opportunity to revisit previous phases and make alterations if needed. Often, different parts of the study process do entangle to each other (Alasuutari 2011). Therefore, a qualitative study can be non-linear, and different phases do not need to be strictly separated. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) for instance, argue that in qualitative research, there is rarely a need to separate the collection of data and analysis in different sections. I have done so here, as I believe it gives more clarity and structure to this master’s thesis.

## 4.2. INTERVIEWS

### 4.2.1. Interview as a method

The most common data collection methods for qualitative analysis are interviews, observation, questionnaire and collection of information from different documents (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). Interviews and questionnaires are particularly useful in a study setting that aims to find out what people think or why they act in a certain way. In that kind of setting, it is clever to ask the people themselves. The goal of the interview is to understand the studied phenomenon in the perspective of the interviewee.

One advantage of the interview as a method is that it makes it possible to choose participants that have prior experience and knowledge about the topic (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). The interviewees can thus serve as experimental experts (Shim & Santos 2014). As a method, the interview is personal, as the interviewer asks questions of the study subject. The questions can be related to the experiences, thoughts and opinions of the interviewees. Interviews are flexible because there is an opportunity to repeat the questions or use clearer impressions. It is also possible to discuss the questions. An interview aims to gain as much information about the topic as possible. It is important to acknowledge that people live their own stories and may tell many different variations of them depending on the time, situation, place and memory. In addition to the knowledge gained from the vocal answers, face-to-face interviews make it possible to observe the body language and tones of the study subject.

A downside of the interview as a method is that it takes time and requires quite a lot of effort from recruiting the interviewees and designing the interview setting to the transcription of the vocal records into a textual format (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). Furthermore, the interview as a method requires the protection of the informants. Feminist tradition, especially, emphasizes the significance of the interview setting and the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee (Alasuutari 2011). In an ideal interview situation, both parties should be able to face each other as equal subjects. The interviewees should be informed about the study topic and the key themes before the interview. Participation in an interview should be voluntarily, and the interviewee should possess the power to neglect the interview or stop it at any point. No harm should be done to the interviewees, and their personal information should not be revealed to outsiders (Saldana 2011: 25). The information can be only used for research purposes.

#### 4.2.2. Interviews in this study

According to Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018), thematic interviews emphasize people's interpretations and conceptions, and the social production of these conceptualizations. That is why I chose to collect the information for this study with half-structured thematic interviews. I interviewed foreign listeners of Korean popular music. Half of the interviewees had visited South Korea and the other half had not. The interview centred around certain pre-selected themes that rose from the research questions and theoretical framework. The questions were related to visiting South Korea, K-pop, fan practices and the fan community, Korea image, and the relationship between Korea and K-pop

(attachment 1). I also asked the participants specifying questions based on their answers. The format came close to in-depth interviews at times. The interview questions varied a little between the interviewees that had or had not visited Korea. For example, I asked the visitors about their personal experiences in Korea, whereas I could only ask about the imagined or the second-hand perceived experience of the non-visitors. I did not ask all the questions of the interview guides to all the interviews, especially if the topic was mentioned and discussed before in another answer.

The informants in this study are non-Korean listeners of K-pop. As this study is focused on the images and experiences of regular people, who listen to K-pop, the interviewees are experts in the topic in a sense. The interviewees were reached with mixed methods. Some interviewees were reached with a *snowball effect*; I knew potential study subjects before starting the interviews, and these people led me to other possible informants. Other study subjects were reached via announcements on K-pop focused Facebook and Twitter groups. Some interviewees were discovered from K-pop related events. There are a few study participants I approached because I saw them wearing K-pop merchandise. In total, I interviewed 20 people: 10 in Finland and the other 10 in South Korea during my exchange in there. The interviews in Korea were conducted from March to June 2019, and the interviews in Finland were conducted after the exchange, from July to the start of September. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes.

I conducted most of the interviews in cafes in Finland and Korea. A couple of interviews were done in a private space such as my or the interviewee's room. All the interviews were recorded via my smartphone. Permission for that and the whole collection and handling of data were granted in a data protection announcement form (attachment 2) the interviewees read and signed before the interview. The interviewees signed two copies of the form so that one of the copies was left to them if they need to contact me. The data protection form included my phone number and email address.

In addition to the interview data, I asked the interviewees to fill a personal information form (attachment 3) that had a few background questions. The form asked about the gender, nationality, times visited South Korea and time listened to K-pop. Because of the qualitative nature of this study and a small number of interviewees, I did not do any statistical analysis for this data. The background information of the interviewees may help to understand and analyse their answers better. I have collected general information about the conducted interviews in table 1. As I am committed to protecting the privacy of the

interviewees, I will refer to the study subjects only by the age and times visited Korea in the interview quotes in the *analysis* section.

The interviews were conducted either in English or in Finnish depending on the nationality of the interviewee. I interviewed people of six different nationalities of which the largest nationality group were the Finns. Almost all of the interviewees came from western countries. All the interviews with Finns were conducted in Finnish as it was the native language of both the interviewee and the interviewer. The interviews of other nationalities were conducted in English. Some of the non-Finnish interviewees were native English speakers and others were not. The use of a foreign language might have limited the expression of some interviewees. As mentioned above, an interview is a method that allows repeating of questions or discussion about the questions (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). This may have lowered the language barrier.

**Table 1:** General information about the interviews.

Total number of interviews	20
Country of the interview	Finland: 10 South Korea: 10
Interview time variation	29 min – 1 h 33 min
Interviewee age variation	19-36
Interviewee's gender	Female: 16 Male or other: 4
Interviewee's nationality	Finnish: 14 American: 2 Other: 4
Interviewee's times visited Korea	Never: 10 Once: 8 Twice: 2
Interviewee's time listened to K-pop variation	couple months – 19 years

#### 4.2.3. The data collection experience

As Alasuutari (2011) has mentioned, there is always some kind of uniqueness in a qualitative study process. In this study, the data collection was very intertwined with my own experiences in Korea. It is safe to assume that my experiences surely impacted the analysis too. I visited South Korea for the first time in early 2019 and spent around four months in the country as an exchange student at Pusan National University in Busan, the second-largest city in Korea. The exchange remains my only stay in South Korea. My image of the nation changed during the exchange because of my own experiences, other exchange students' stories and the university courses about Korea and East Asia. I believe, this study would look quite different if I did not visit Korea.

I wrote an interview journal during the time I conducted the interviews. The aim was to write down and analyse the interview situations: the feelings, atmosphere, positives and negatives of each interview. The journal emphasized learning from interviews and my personal development to become a better interviewer. One way, I can recognize my development, was that I established a routine in conducting the interviews, explaining the topic of my thesis, and even pacing the questions. I gained more confidence both in my interviewing skills and the whole topic of my thesis. However, I recognize that having an interview routine is not solely positive, as it may discourage any spontaneous notes and interesting side paths (Alasuutari 2011).

Some of the people I interviewed were familiar to me before the interview, and others I met for the first time for the interview. This most likely affected the atmosphere and communication dynamics of the interviews. Some of the interviewees were more reserved than the others, which is why I had warmup questions. These questions were not essential for the success of the interview, but they were loosely related to the topic and gave the interviewees time to get more comfortable with the interview setting. My interview method was close to what Alasuutari (2011) describes as a *humanistic method*. A humanistic interview method aims to form a close and reliable relationship with the interviewees to ensure their honesty. On the other hand, dishonesty and pretending can be valuable parts of an interview too, because they can indicate the values and morals of a person.

Interviews with the people I had met before the interviews were interesting in terms of communication dynamics. In the interview situation, I as the interviewer was quiet most of the time and did not share my own opinions about the topics. This differs from a casual

conversation situation, where the part-takers usually share their opinion and alter the roles of listener and talker dynamically. If I learned something from the interviews, I hope it is the skill to be a better listener. In addition to the planned interview questions, my meetings with the interviewees also included unplanned discussions and outside-the-topic talk, in which the conversation dynamics were more conventional.

All the interviews were conducted without any major issues. I as the interviewer was left with a positive and satisfying impression. I am genuinely excited and positively surprised that the interviewees decided to share so much with me. I believe that it is due to my topic of K-pop. As K-pop still is quite a niche genre in the western world, I suppose it is nice to meet someone in real life that shares the same interest. Although the genre of K-pop unites the interviewees and me, I got to hear a variety of stories and viewpoints.

One thing that I pondered in my interview journal was the concept of expertise. Some of the interviewees had followed K-pop for a longer time than me, which made me question my expertise in conducting this study. Also, as a non-Korean person, it sometimes feels ignorant to try to analyse something that originates from a different cultural context. On the other hand, this study is about the place images of foreign fans, and as a foreign fan of K-pop, I can relate to the interviewees. Furthermore, some of the interviewees seemed to experience similar feelings of lack of expertise if they had not listened to K-pop for a long time nor visited Korea. In these cases, I tried to encourage the interviewees by clearing out that I am most interested in their experiences as fans of K-pop.

#### 4.2.4. Transcription of the interviews

All the interviews were transcribed into a textual format for the analysis. The transcription took more time than expected: I started the transcription after the first interview in March 2019, but only finished the last transcription a year later. Udo Kuckartz (2013) has written about the time consumption of transcribing in the following way: *“even single transcription takes approximately five times longer than the time necessary for the interview itself”*. This was certainly the case in this study. In practice, the transcription consisted of listening to the interview recordings on my mobile device and writing them down on separate Word documents.

The goal of transcription was to modify the vocal records into a textual format as accurately as possible. The English interviews were transcribed into an English text and Finnish interviews into a Finnish text. The spoken language aspect of the interviews was



maintained even in a textual format. As I am more interested in the content of the interviews rather than their form, I chose not to transcribe some parts of the interviews. I left out some casual, outside-the-topic talk and affirming and approving sounds (i.e. *yeah, mhm*) of the interviewer. As my transcribing skills developed during the process, I gained the confidence to leave out some sounds, such as repetition of words or single syllables, from the transcriptions. I left out or modified all sensitive information such as names or dates from the transcriptions to protect the anonymity of respondents. Furthermore, the respondents are only referred with code names consisting of a number and two letters in the transcriptions.

There were words and expressions in some interviews that I could not transcribe. This was due to sudden heightened background noise or a single unclear way of articulation. These parts are marked in the transcriptions. As there were only a few cases, I doubt their ability to affect the quality of the data.

#### 4.3. THE EXECUTION OF CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis is a research tool that enables the analysis of presence, meanings and relationships of certain themes or concepts (Content analysis 2019). Content analysis can be thought of as a single method or as a loose theoretical framework (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). In this study, the content analysis is qualitative to match the qualitative nature of the interviews. In this context, the content analysis can be referred to as *qualitative content analysis* or *qualitative text analysis* (Kuckartz 2013). Content analysis can be used to describe people's experiences and perceptions. The analysis focuses on communication as a picture of reality.

In a nutshell, the content analysis consists of the conceptualization of the textual data and identifying it into categories and their sub-categories (Kuckartz 2013). The identifying units in text, *codes*, can be single words, sentences or passages. The analysis aims to reduce the complexity of data while following certain systematic rules embedded in the study. By dividing the data into categories, it is easier to discover patterns and stories. According to Kuckartz (2013), analysis of qualitative texts cannot escape the subjective understandings and interpretation of the researcher.

I began the analysis by getting familiar with the textual data. This consisted of reading the interviews for multiple times and making notes of any interesting parts. After that, I revisited the research questions and theoretical framework to recognize the key aspects

of this study. A qualitative analysis should be designed to the specific context of the study, which means that the data should be examined through the lens of the theoretical framework and the research questions (Alasuutari 2011; Kuckartz 2013). In this study, the analysis was guided by themes that are closely related to the research questions and the theoretical framework. The themes work as the main categories in the analysis. The five themes, presented in the next section of the thesis, are (1) ideas of South Korea, (2) brand K-pop, (3) K-pop related media uses, (4) K-pop and the Korean society, and (5) K-pop and globalisation.

The next step of the analysis was to recognize and underline the parts of data that belong to each category. I conducted this part of the analysis manually by underlining the codes with different colour pens. All non-underlined parts were left out from further analysis. Some information is always lost when trying to reduce the complexity of data (Kuckartz 2013). Some parts are lost because they are not relevant to the research questions. The information is further simplified as the data is classified to categories.

After the data was classified to the main categories, each category or theme was examined to identify sub-categories. The sub-categories were recognized inductively from the data although I understand that my previous work with the theoretical framework may have had influenced the sub-category formation. The sub-categories are organised in separate paragraphs under each theme in the following *analysis* section.

When the main themes and their sub-categories were recognized, I began to write a concise text of each theme. I studied the interview texts more to discover quotes that support the analysis or work as counter-arguments. I did that because the inclusion of differing arguments increases the trustworthiness of a study (Kuckartz 2013).

The results of the analysis are presented in the next section. The first theme combines the images fans have of the country of South Korea. The second theme then presents the conceptualisation of K-pop the study subjects have. *K-pop related media uses*, the third theme, discusses the ways the fans consume K-pop and K-pop related media content. In the fourth section, the interviewees' ideas of the relation of K-pop and Korean society are presented. The last section combines the views the study subjects have of the globalisation of K-pop.

## 5. ANALYSIS

### 5.1. IDEAS OF SOUTH KOREA

The interviewees located South Korea geographically and culturally to Asia and more specifically between China and Japan. South Korea is viewed almost as an opposite to its northern neighbour North Korea. Whereas North Korea is undeveloped and authoritarian, South Korea is a modern and free society. North Korea possesses a threat to the South, but as the tension between the countries has continued for a long time, the threat does not feel immediate. The image of South Korea is thus constructed with the neighbouring countries. The fans see sameness between South Korea and China and Japan, and distinctions between the two Koreas. Furthermore, South Korea is under the Asian umbrella, which constructs the nation other from the western world most of the interviewees are from.

In its physical setting, South Korea is viewed as a compact-size country with wonderful nature. Many interviewees highlighted the mountains as a beautiful natural feature. It is interesting that interviewees recognized natural features as key parts of the Korean landscape – the visual form of place – but did not mention nature further in the interview. The interviewees thus are familiar with different aspects of the place, but apparently, nature is not a significant part of the personal Korea experience of foreign K-pop fans.

Time seems to have a vital impact on the place image formation of the interviewees. Korea is viewed through past events and actions of future generations. To the interviewees, South Korea is a developed country that is still growing at a fast pace. Many pointed out the incredible development that South Korea has gone through since the Korean War. The development, however, is viewed quite recent. That becomes apparent when studying the division of capital. Seoul and especially its high-end neighbourhood of Gangnam (picture 13) were described to be full of modern glass-walled skyscrapers, whereas the countryside was described as poor and different from the cities. Furthermore, the recent development of the country can be seen from the people. The interviewees recognized a generational gap between old and young Koreans. Old people are shorter, dress differently and prefer shopping at markets. Young people, on the other hand, are more cosmopolitan. They are fashionable and materialistic preferring brands such as Apple and Starbucks. Modern skyscrapers and global (western) brands, furthermore, connect urban and young Korea to the neoliberal cosmopolitan culture which emphasizes

the power of large corporations and reproduces placelessness (Relph 1976/2008: 114, 120).

The interviewees recognized the prevalence of aesthetics in Korea. Appearance is important to Koreans. Koreans see the effort to dress nicely and take care of their skin. Some interviewees that had not visited Korea acknowledged that Koreans have perfect skin. Interviewees that had visited Korea recognized that Koreans are normal and may have conditions such as acne like everyone else. The image is thus affected by personal experiences and sources of information (Tuan 1977/2008; Fast et al. 2018). Aesthetics and appearance are so important in Korea that one of the interviewees referred to the nation as “*the promised land of plastic surgery*” (translated). Appearance may be a way to stand out in a competitive society (Jung 2011: 147). That is why so many alter their looks via surgery or are willing to go through a 10-step beauty routine every evening. Aesthetic values are not strictly gendered as it benefits men and boys too to take care of their skin and even wear makeup. That was something the interviewees found drastically different when compared to their familiar (western) gender norms. The prevalence of aesthetic values in Korea reflects the social and existential dimensions of the place. In a competitive society, appearance is just another way to stand out and gain a competitive advantage.



**Picture 13:** Gangnam district in Seoul. Source: Joop (2009)  
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/10073573@N00/3180266525>>.

As for the social dimension, South Korean people are viewed mostly in a positive light. Koreans are friendly and helpful. However, it can be hard to get familiar with Koreans, as most of them can be shy at first. That may be because of the culture or a language barrier. People do not speak much English in Korea, and none of the interviewees spoke fluent Korean. The barrier between foreign K-pop fans and Koreans constructs the fans as existential outsiders of the Korean society. According to Relph (1976/2008), feelings of alienation from the locals and not belonging are some key features of existential outsidership from a place.

Despite the development and modern technology, most of the interviewees considered the culture quite conservative. Korea has opened to foreign tourists and influences, but society continues to be quite monocultural. Non-Koreans may face discrimination which is silently approved. Banning foreigners from certain spaces and taking pictures of foreigners without consent were some standard practices faced by the interviewees. Therefore, non-Koreans feel exclusion from Korean society. It may be hard to grow an attachment to a place in which one feels alienated. Foreigners may, then, feel a sense of placelessness in Korea.

The conservativeness of the society is furthermore apparent in the strict hierarchy system. Respecting other people, especially your elders and people in higher positions, is built in the language and manners:

*“The way you show your respect, like the changing the way you speak to people”* -  
interviewee age 20, visited Korea.

*“You speak to others in a respectful language and only to your friends and people younger than you in an informal way”* - interviewee age 19, never visited Korea  
(translated).

*“The manners by which you show respect; I think you are allowed to start eating after the eldest has started”* - interviewee age 23, never visited Korea (translated).

*“When you go to a store, the employees may bow a little bit to you”* - interviewee age 20, visited Korea (translated).

Some interviewees had experienced more negative aspects of the age hierarchy. The high social position gives old people the freedom to treat others in seemingly disrespectful

ways without having to apologize for their behaviour. One interviewee that had visited Korea described her experience in the following way:

*“If I’m on the subway, I get pushed a lot by the older people and, you know, back home I’m expecting the sorry [...] I was standing somewhere and this older woman just waved her hand at me to get out of the way”* – interviewee age 20, visited Korea.

Korean culture offers a different behavioural framework for action than the one, interviewees are used to. The interviewees understand and know some social codes of the place, which indicates that they do experience some insiderness to the Korean society (Relph 1976/2008: 51-55). However, the Korean behavioural framework does not come naturally nor feel natural to foreign fans, which again demonstrates their distinction from the place.

The interviewees framed community and the traditional family setting as important ideas in Korea. Young Koreans are expected to get married and then have children. Gender roles and norms are strict. Men are expected to provide, and women should look pretty and be submissive. Traditional framework for genders may, however, be different in Korea than in other places:

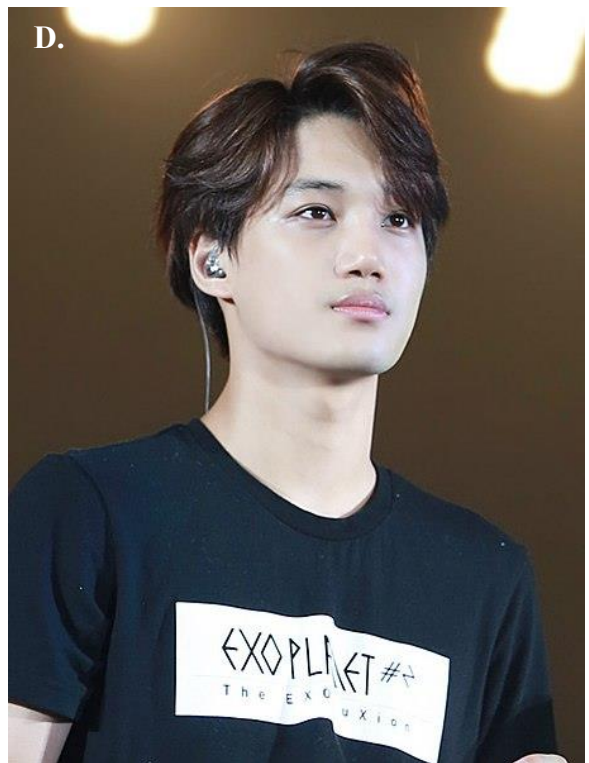
*“Traditional gender role is, of course, different there [in Korea] and here. For example, Korean masculinity seems quite feminine from here, but it doesn’t mean that it’s more progressive. There’s just different framework for genders. I think it’s more important there [in Korea] that people get married and have kids and such”* – interviewee age 27, never visited Korea (translated).

Furthermore, sex and sexuality are taboo topics that are not discussed openly. Individuals of the LGBTQ+ community are not widely accepted by society. Many interviewees pointed out that it is, however, common that friends of the same gender hold hands in public and engage in close physical contact with each other. The interviewees thus recognize the conservative and traditional values in Korea but find the different social norms and performativity a bit confusing. In addition to the knowledge and understanding – insiderness – there is also a sense of outsidersness that colours the image of Korea of the foreign fans (Relph 1976/2008: 51-55).

## 5.2. BRAND K-POP

For most of the fans, K-pop is a media genre that combines music, dance choreographies, (music) videos and the idols themselves. K-pop is produced by the large Korean entertainment companies. Interviewees thus immediately associated K-pop with South Korea although this association may only refer to the geographic origin of the genre (geographic nomenclature) (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005: 511-512). K-pop acts are typically girl or boy groups with various members. Many pointed out aesthetics as an interesting and distinctive feature of the genre. K-pop music videos are well-made and visually appealing, and the idols are glamorous and beautiful. Even the male K-pop stars were described as beautiful and their looks were considered feminine (picture 14). The fans, therefore, find the masculinity in K-pop differing from their built-in ideas of masculinity. K-pop idols set up beauty standards and start new fashion trends (picture 15, picture 16). This was not considered solely positive, as virtually all K-pop idols were considered very slim and having whiter-than-average skin tones. According to some of the interviewees, idols are not good nor realistic role models in that sense.

The most disliked feature of K-pop was the entertainment industry. According to the interviewees, Korean entertainment companies are only interested in making a profit and do not care about ethics or the human rights of their employees. This point of view frames K-pop as exploitative and strongly connected to commercial capitalism (Broudehoux 2017). The whole system of becoming and being a K-pop idol is very manufactured. First, underage teenagers, who want to become idols, compete to become idol trainees for the companies. The trainee period consists of intense training and moulding of the trainees into perfect boyfriend or girlfriend candidates for the fans. The (future) idols need to sign contracts that control and set limitations to dating, diet and phone use, for example. Some interviewees referred to these contracts as *slave contracts*. Idols produced by the entertainment companies are products that are often used to sell even more. K-pop groups and idols promote different products and work as brand ambassadors (picture 17). This side of K-pop is particularly present in Korea, where the faces of idols cover beauty products in stores or groups appear on advertisements on different screens. This use of culture to enhance economic performance (cultural economy) seems to have a stronghold in Korea (Pratt & Jeffcutt 2009). The commerciality of K-pop was not, however, considered solely positive by the foreign fans.



**Picture 14:** Beautiful male K-pop idols. **A.** BTS member Jimin with pink hair and earrings. Source: AJEONG\_JM (2017) <<https://ajeongjm951013.tistory.com/35>>. **B.** BTS member Jin has a necklace and dark eye makeup. Source: BANGTAN BLOG (2014) <<https://bangtan.tistory.com/216> 13.7.2020>. **C.** Shinee member Taemin in a heavenly look. Source: 위드태민::WithTaemin 隨行 (2016) <<https://withtaemin.tistory.com/entry/160228-IFC-Part1-%E3%80%9013P%E3%80%91>>. **D.** Exo member Kai has a clear skin Source: Great Treasure (2015) <<https://greattreasure94.tistory.com/4> 22.7.2020>.





**Picture 15:** Girls' Generation member Yoona at Incheon airport. Idols are commonly filmed outside the airport and their fashion choices are discussed publicly. Source: Sparkle.S (2015)  
<<https://sparkles805.tistory.com/56>>.



**Picture 16:** Black Pink in their stage fashion. Source: F28STAR (2016)  
<[https://f28star.tistory.com/category/%EC%97%AC%EC%9E%90%20%EA%B0%80%EC%88%98/%EB%B8%94%EB%9E%99%ED%95%91%ED%81%AC\\_BLACKPINK%20](https://f28star.tistory.com/category/%EC%97%AC%EC%9E%90%20%EA%B0%80%EC%88%98/%EB%B8%94%EB%9E%99%ED%95%91%ED%81%AC_BLACKPINK%20)>.



**Picture 17:** Girls' Generation posing for LG's TV commercial. Source: LG 전자 (2012)  
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/lge/6705360909/>>.

K-pop idols themselves appeared to the interviewees as regular and genuine people. The idols are young and trained to their full potential in a way that they all possess singing and dancing ability and have a good personality and looks. Almost all interviewees agreed that the idols need to have a certain media personality that is different from the off-screen one. The idols need to be presentable, brand-safe and act like perfect spouse candidates to the fans. Most of the idols are Korean and speak Korean. Despite the presence of the media image, many interviewees pointed out the genuineness of the idols. Idols work hard to please the fans and to produce good music and high-quality performances. Many interviewees recognized a current trend of the idols themselves contributing more to the music production and choreography. It is more common, however, that professional songwriters and producers make the songs for K-pop groups. The fans seemed to feel attachment and positive emotions towards the idols. Therefore, K-pop stars can be considered a value-adding aspect of K-pop (Kotler et al. 1993; Kavartzis & Ashworth 2005). The idols are a mixture of reality and fantasy. On one hand, the idol images are heavily produced by the entertainment companies. On the other hand, idols' presence on social media and the *behind the scenes* content of them on the internet construct the stars as regular and relatable people (Verboord & van Noord 2016: 62).

According to the interviewees, K-pop fans can be difficult to spot outside Korea – especially in western countries. On the internet, however, K-pop fandoms are massive, and it is hard to scroll the most popular platforms without coming across K-pop related content. Digital media were thus considered important for the K-pop communities and the transcultural diffusion of popular culture. The interviewees recognized that there is a stigma in western countries of listening to K-pop. That is why many only shared their hobby on the internet or with few people in real life. The interviewees connected the stigma to the weirdness and unfamiliarity of K-pop and the intense fans. Although K-pop is an example of cultural globalization and transcultural diffusion, not everyone on the planet seem to be welcoming of popular culture products from non-western places. K-pop and K-pop fans are, thus, considered something different and outside the mainstream popular culture in the west.

The interviewees acknowledged that different kinds of people listen to K-pop. However, the most vocal fans that are aggressive and rude seem to get the media attention. The most intense fans are underage teenagers, actively follow a certain group, and thus have time and energy to aggressively defend and support their group. Fans can form strong collective identities around K-pop. This happens, according to the interviewees, on digital platforms and among young people. Stereotypically, the most outspoken K-pop fans are non-Korean girls or young women. Older K-pop fans are perceived as more relaxed and not-so-obsessed with a specific group.

*“People who are 20-30 years old and have a job don’t have the time to hang out on Twitter all the time and start so-called fan wars”* – interviewee age 24, never visited Korea (translated).

The K-pop fandom, therefore, is heavily connected to mediatisation. The fans have adopted digital platforms, and they are active in creating content and communicating with each other online. K-pop fans contest media representations loudly and are not afraid to defend their stance (Broudehoux 2017; Fast et al. 2018).

### 5.3. K-POP RELATED MEDIA USES

The interviewees had different practices concerning the usage of K-pop related media content. Some followed groups actively, some followed a certain group passionately and listened to others more casually, and others just listened to K-pop like any other music genre and did not pay attention to non-music related aspects. There were thus different

levels of collective media use among the interviewees. All interviewees used apps such as Spotify or YouTube to listen to K-pop songs. Music videos were watched on YouTube. Digital services seem to play an important part in K-pop consumption. Some had ordered physical K-pop albums or attended to concerts. For many, K-pop is fun to listen to. It is catchy and sticky, and fun to dance to. Some fans had spent money to K-pop, but the answers demonstrate that it is possible and sometimes more common to enjoy the genre easily and cost-effectively on digital media platforms.

Internet is full of K-pop related content. Social networking sites – especially Twitter, but also Instagram, Facebook and Tumblr – are actively used by K-pop fandoms to share pictures and videos of the idols and to discuss K-pop related topics. This emphasizes the activity and collective identities of K-pop fans. K-pop groups and some idols also have official accounts on most of these sites. There is a possibility to enhanced transcultural dialogue on social networking sites (Adams et al. 2016: 8, 139). Some fans have K-pop fan accounts on social media that are solely dedicated to their favourite idol or group(s). It is common to talk to other fans on social media sites and even make friends with them. There is a slight language barrier between the fans as fandoms are divided into language groups. Most of the interviewees used English or their native language on the sites, but because the fandoms are so massive, many pointed out that they do not know what is happening in more foreign parts of the fandom.

*“It feels like the Korean fans have their own thing and western and foreign fans have their own. [...] I feel like most fan translations are to English, but I’ve also seen translations to Russian, Spanish or German, so one sees that there are subgroups among western or foreign fans. They’re defined by language [...] Especially when you think about East Asia, Chinese fans and Japanese fans; there must be differences in what it is like, what is the fandom like” – interviewee age 24, never visited Korea (translated).*

Although K-pop seems to bring people together beyond geographical restrictions, it is common that fans mainly communicate in familiar cultural settings on digital platforms too. So, K-pop as a media genre can both deconstruct and reinforce social and cultural divides at the same time (Broudehoux 2017: 55).

K-pop related media content can be consumed more passively too. Some interviewees had first come across K-pop on a music forum on the internet or heard it from a gaming live stream. K-pop can be discovered from the videos of various react channels on

YouTube. K-pop is sticky on digital platforms; once you listen to a song or watch a video, your app will start to recommend more similar content. There is always something to recommend as there is so much K-pop related content on the internet. Thus, being a K-pop fan in the era of digital services does not always require massive amounts of effort. Mediatisation seem to have had a huge impact on the circulation of K-pop. More intense circulation of media texts on digital platforms and technological development, with the use of algorithms, support a more personalized and less centralized consumption of media (Jung 2011; Krotz 2017; Fast et al. 2018).

For many, being a K-pop fan does not solely mean the passive consumption of professionally made media content, but also includes a more grassroots level of sharing and consumption, and non-inscribed uses. Fans make funny videos on YouTube which are watched by other fans. Others write K-pop related blog posts. Many interviewees noticed that they use K-pop related content to support their Korean learning. A lot of K-pop content is in Korean, and it is common that fans themselves add English or other language subtitles to videos or translate interviews so that the fans that do not speak Korean can understand too. The interviewees described the learning aspect of their K-pop consumption in the following way:

*“Recently, I’ve started looking up the lyrics and just like reading it, you know, so that’s helping me practise my Korean. Also, like writing down the lyrics just to practice writing [...] I try to pay close attention to like the pronunciation of words [...] try to see like if I understand what they’re saying like without reading the translation”* – interviewee age 28, visited Korea.

*“I study Korean to understand the songs better so that I wouldn’t need to always find translations”* – interviewee age 19, never visited Korea (translated).

Quite a few interviewees also enjoyed the dancing aspect of K-pop. Almost half of the interviewees had learned choreographies to some songs either by themselves or as a member of a hobby group. The dances are often learned just for fun, although some dance groups take part in K-pop cover dance competitions or film and publish their dance covers online. The interviewees are, thus, active in giving meanings to media texts and they consume K-pop media content in non-inscribed ways too (Broudehoux 2017: 55).

Foreign fans rarely followed traditional western media when it comes to K-pop. K-pop is not very present in western media and when it is, it is usually treated ignorantly.

According to the interviewees, foreign media has a Eurocentric and stereotyping view towards K-pop:

*“When BTS was getting popular, I feel like people didn’t understand it or they tried to westernize it [...] At the same time, people were astonished that a band can be this popular, but they’ve never heard about it. Like America or the USA would be the centre of the world”* - interviewee age 24, never visited Korea (translated).

The western attitude towards K-pop has improved lately as K-pop is sometimes played on the radio, and some groups visit big American talk shows and award shows. The US still seems to be the global centre of popular culture (Motti 2007; Verboord & van Noord 2016). Whereas K-pop may be a niche genre in the west, it is mainstream in Korea. It is background music for consumption and television shows and movies. K-pop is thus associated with the Korean reality. Fans often prefer to follow Korean media over foreign media when it comes to K-pop. Non-Korean media is mostly considered exploitative towards K-pop, and as active media users, the interviewees can choose the media channels that best suit their needs.

#### 5.4. K-POP AND THE KOREAN SOCIETY

K-pop is very present in Korea. The music is played everywhere: on the streets, shops, cafes, and bars. K-pop is visible in advertisements starring K-pop idols or groups. A lot of regular day products such as cosmetics, foods or electronics have idols promoting them (picture 18). Furthermore, Korean fandoms buy billboards on metro stations to celebrate their favourite idol’s birthday with posters. K-pop seems to be a prevalent part of the urban Korean landscape. There are quite a few K-pop concerts in Korea. The entertainment companies have their physical headquarters in Seoul. Despite all these signs, the interviewees that have visited Korea did not consider K-pop being an overpowering element. It was present but did not come to your face:

*“You hear it on the streets. There is music in some stores, and sometimes you see some video screens out there. Whenever a BTS member has their birthday, there are always some happy birthday signs [...] It is not maybe that visible in the everyday life though”* - interviewee age 23, visited Korea (translated).

*“Every convenience store, every like make-up store, every clothing store – they’re playing something, so you can’t get away from it. It’s everywhere. [...] Seeing the fans is different; I can’t see the fans”* - interviewee age 20, visited Korea.



**Picture 18.** The commercial side of K-pop. **A.** Girls' Generation member Yoona advertising LG's chocolate phone. Source: LG Electronics (2009) <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/lge/3964651572/>>. **B.** BT21 collection at Line Friends Store in Seoul. The collection is a collaboration between BTS and character brand Line Friends. Source: Jeon (2018) <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/koreanet/41764244625/>>.

K-pop is a visible part of Korea, and the interviewees associated the music genre to the material and social dimensions of the country. K-pop is used to enhance the economy, which again is a key part of modern place branding (Pratt & Jeffcutt 2009). The presence of K-pop in Korea demonstrates both the effects of commercial mass culture and contemporary authenticity (Shim & Santos 2014). The association between K-pop and

Korea becomes authentic as K-pop is so present in the material and social dimensions of the place. In addition to traditional and historical sites, authenticity is also found in the everyday lives of contemporary citizens.

K-pop is a mainstream music genre in Korea. According to the interviewees, all Koreans are aware of it, but many do not listen to K-pop actively. K-pop idols are celebrities in Korea. They star movies, are parts of scandals and impact fashion and trends. K-pop is thus considered an important part of modern Korean culture. Most K-pop songs are universal in their themes and topics, as most of the songs are about love, heartbreak or standing up for a cause. Most songs, therefore, contribute to global culture with their universally shared and neutral values (Shim & Santos 2014). Sometimes the songs reflect Korean society more deeply. The interviewees spot *Korea* in some topics, lyrics, instruments, dance moves and outfits.

*“Traditional like Korean elements or like instruments [...] I’ve seen that they wear traditional costumes sometimes, like hanboks”* – interviewee age 20, visited Korea (translated).

*“Some songs are more connected to Korea than others. [...] some songs have very specific Korea references which are almost impossible to translate; like referencing to places, history or people. [...] I think of BTS’ ‘Idol’ music video which is full of pictures, colours and other things that refer to Korean culture and history”* – interviewee age 24, never visited Korea (translated).

*“They pick up topics that are here in Korea big issues or challenges for the youth like studying and such”* – interviewee age 24, visited Korea (translated).

It seems that things that refer to history and traditions were easier to acknowledge place specific. For example, the music video and live performances of BTS’ song *Idol* feature traditional Korean elements such as traditional costumes, dance moves, musical instruments, and stories (picture 19). These things separate Korea from other places and are thus easier to recognize as authentic Korean. The interviewees used their knowledge about Korea to interpret K-pop media texts. On the other hand, K-pop (re)produces images of Korea by emphasizing certain topics, musical choices and looks.





**Picture 19:** BTS member Jungkook performing intro to the song *Idol*. The outfits of Jungkook’s backup dancers refer to traditional Korean mask dance, *talchum* (탈춤). Source: I DARE U JK (2018) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0c\\_atwJnqY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0c_atwJnqY)>.

According to interviewees, K-pop is a positive thing that benefits Korea. K-pop is a huge business that brings revenue and spreads positive awareness of the nation. K-pop thus transforms into a cultural product that is utilized successfully in place branding (Kotler et al. 1993: 157). The interviewees thought that Korea and Koreans are proud of the global success of K-pop. K-pop groups that do well abroad are celebrated on the news and get to meet the president, for example. Some interviewees wondered if Koreans find it funny that foreigners that do not understand Korean listen to K-pop. The global success of K-pop is, thus, considered surprising but positive. This demonstrates the underlying norm and hierarchy of global popular culture that favours western cultural products (Parc & Moon 2013; Verboord & van Noord 2016).

### 5.5. K-POP AND GLOBALISATION

The interviewees viewed K-pop as something that connects Korea more tightly with the rest of the world. It encourages transcultural dialogue. On one hand, K-pop opens the country to foreign influence and trends as the groups tour the world and communicate with non-Korean fans. The genre also brings foreigners to Korea. Many of the interviewees that had visited Korea chose the country at least partly because of K-pop:

*“If my friend never introduced me to them [BTS], I wouldn’t be in Korea” –*  
interviewee age 20, visited Korea.

On the other hand, K-pop represents Korea to the world and gives more exposure to the country. Korean fashion and skincare spread globally, and there are Korean popular culture events, such as KCon (Korean Culture Convention), held in numerous countries. According to the interviewees, the global image of Korea is changing because of K-pop. The interviewees had, thus, noted the arrival of the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of Hallyu (Kim et al. 2018). In addition to spreading the Korean culture abroad, the fans associate the wave to the growing opening of Korea to global influences.

The interviewees considered K-pop as a current global music trend that still has a lot of growth potential. Some K-pop songs are the most streamed in the world. There are nowadays a lot of international fans, and K-pop can be discovered globally on the internet. This has changed K-pop as more and more idol groups do promotions outside of Korea and have non-Korean members. According to the interviewees, some groups may be more popular abroad than in Korea. Digital platforms have thus liberated K-pop from certain spatial restrictions (Adams et al. 2016; Parc et al. 2016; Verboord & van Noord 2016; Fast et al. 2018). Although the interviewees considered K-pop having growth potential outside Korea, many pointed out that major global success will only be enjoyed by a few big groups, not every K-pop act. Smaller groups will have more opportunities to go abroad though. According to this view, Korea will not develop into a major global music centre soon, and the spatial hierarchy of popular culture will remain.

The interviewees had noticed an increase in English in K-pop as the genre has become more popular globally. The songs may have more English lyrics and words, and some groups release songs which are entirely in English. There are nowadays K-pop idols that speak English fluently. Furthermore, K-pop related content such as music videos or interviews are translated to English by the fans, but increasingly by the content producers too. Fans themselves use English to communicate with the international fandom on the internet. In addition to English, some groups use Chinese, Japanese and even Spanish in their promotions abroad. K-pop has changed to serve the needs of global audiences. The importance of *K* in K-pop seems to be fading, and the association to Korea appears to be developing into a more geographic nomenclature (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005: 511-512). The globalizing of K-pop is making the genre more *placeless* in the eyes of the fans. The increased placelessness is tolerated and critically accepted because it believed to make the genre more accepted and successful worldwide (Shim & Santos 2014).

Placelessness may even help to deconstruct the hierarchy of places in the global popular culture (Agostinelli 2017: 4).

Western countries, especially the United States, are an important market to K-pop. Many interviewees noticed that it is important to make it in the US because the rest of the world follows the US music market and trends. K-pop has always had western or American influence. For example, the interviewees could spot the adoption of North American hip hop culture, and electronic dance music (EDM) in K-pop. Some thought that K-pop has become more westernised with global success whereas others ponder if the genre could be more popular with more western soundscape and appearance. Nowadays, the global success of K-pop is somewhat visible in American popular culture. K-pop groups visit mainstream talk shows and are invited to music award shows. The most successful group, BTS, even tops Billboard music charts and wins prizes at award shows. K-pop takes influence from American music, but according to some interviewees, now it is maybe time for the American record companies to learn from K-pop:

*“When you listen to like American pop music, there’re clear trends that pop music sounds like that this year [...] The mainstream pop music is very similar, but in K-pop, I have always liked that they’re not afraid to borrow from other music genres, from other like ways of creating music”* – interviewee age 25, never visited Korea (translated).

*“I wonder if western record companies will become interested in this K-pop phenomenon, if they will here, in Europe too, begin to create the new boy band”* – interviewee age 20, visited Korea (translated).

The relationship between North American popular music and K-pop demonstrates the transcultural dialogue of popular culture (Valaskivi 2016: 111). The US is considered the trendsetter, but the global success of K-pop challenges the centre position of American popular culture. There is, thus, the tension between difference and sameness, place and placelessness in K-pop (Relph 1976/2008).

## 6. DISCUSSION

In this section, I will examine the results of the analysis in the context of each research question. The results are discussed in light of the key concepts and theoretical framework of this study. The research questions that direct this study are: (1) What kind of image do the K-pop fans have of South Korea?, (2) How do the fans use media in relation to K-pop? and (3) What is the impact of K-pop in (re)producing the place image? (3a. How do the fans perceive K-pop? 3b. How do the fans position K-pop to Korea?). Each following section is devoted to a research question.

### 6.1. THE KOREA IMAGE OF FANS

In a regional context, the fans recognize the tension in the Korean peninsula. However, North Korea was not further discussed in the interviews. South Korea is considered a separate and independent nation which's everyday life is not hugely affected by the northern neighbour. The interviewees did not think that South Korea is dangerous, which differs massively from the ideas of people in the late 1980s (Snyder 2018). Almost all the interviewees are under 30 years old, so they have not experienced the beginning and most intense states of the two Koreas. This underlines the fast changes on the peninsula. South Korea is a modern and technologically advanced country with a flourishing popular culture in the fans' minds, whereas the North remains undeveloped and closed from foreign influences.

The rapid change of South Korean society can also be seen from the people. The interviewees recognized a generational gap between young and old Koreans. There are physical and behavioural differences between them, which indicate a change in material and cultural circumstances. For example, old Koreans prefer to shop in traditional markets whereas young people follow global fashion brands. Young Koreans' attachment to foreign, especially American, brands indicates the appreciation of globalized western lifestyles and the adoption of neoliberal economic values (Jung 2011; Shim & Santos 2014). This again is vastly different from the post-war and authoritarian Korea. The behaviour of old Koreans can feel uncanny to the young foreign fans for whom Confucian social hierarchy does not come naturally. The age hierarchy allows old people to behave differently, and their youths are expected to show respect to them (Paxton 2018). Young Koreans and the young foreign fans are thus more equal in terms of the age hierarchy, which may make it easier to connect with them. For a place branding perspective, young

Koreans can enhance the Korea brand for young foreigners whereas the behaviour of old Koreans can be interpreted as unfriendly and thus damaging to the place brand (Kotler et al. 1993: 22, 134-135).

Although the country of South Korea is viewed as a developed and modern nation, especially compared to its Northern neighbour, there are divisions on a smaller scale. The interviewees pointed out the contrast between urban and rural Korea. Urban Korea, especially the capital Seoul, is associated with advanced technology, skyscrapers, and a busy lifestyle. Generally, high-rise buildings in city centres are associated with the power of large corporations (Relph 1976/2008: 35, 114). Large companies, governments and organizations make their authority visible by dominating the landscape of public places. Furthermore, skyscrapers in the city centres are connected to placelessness of neoliberal economies. Centres of the economy look similar everywhere and demonstrate the power of the same multinational corporations.

Interestingly, the fans mentioned nature when asked about the positive features of Korea, but they did not mention it later at any point. Similarly, the countryside was only brought up when talking about the divisions inside Korea. Nature and countryside, therefore, do not seem to be central to the Korea image of the fans. That makes sense if most of the Korea content the fans get is related to K-pop. K-pop comes mostly from Seoul: the entertainment companies have their headquarters in the city and the idols live there too. The everyday life content the idols post on their social media therefore often comes from the urban Korean environment. This demonstrates the power of media in place image formation (Broudehoux 2017). Media frames and reproduces certain aspects of a place and does not cover other aspects as much (Fast et al. 2018: 217).

The different framework for masculinity confuses a lot of the interviewees. On one hand, the gender roles are traditional in the sense that a man is the head of the family. On the other hand, it is acceptable for men to take care of their looks and have close physical contact with their male friends. Some think that Korean men look feminine. In a western context, these all would be signs of progressive gender relations. But Korea is not progressive in terms of gender equality or LGBTQ+ rights (Jung 2011; Paxton 2018). The western fans are thus not entirely familiar with the impact of the Confucian tradition. According to Jung (2011: 27-28), the Confucian tradition recognizes two types of masculinity: one that is based on physical achievement and another that emphasizes gentle and cultured mentality. This *soft masculinity* is just another framework for gender

performativity, and it does not necessarily include more freedom for individual expression than the masculinity celebrating physical strength. Furthermore, the existence of different sorts of masculinities does not change the Confucian tradition, where men have a higher position in the social hierarchy than women.

The differing concepts of masculinity, especially the prevalence of soft masculinity, seem to attract the fans. The Korean masculinity appears different from a western point of view, which may make it more exciting and exotic. People often look into other places to find something different and exciting that stands out from their everyday lives (Relph 1976/2008: 41-42). If the soft masculinity is interpreted from a western spatial context, it may appear progressive. People with non-normative gender expressions may then feel some sort of connection and attachment to Korea that seemingly accepts and celebrates the diversity of gender. By supporting K-pop that reproduces Korean masculinities, the fans may wish to communicate outside about their progressive values (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005; Adams et al. 2016; Valaskivi 2016). So, in a sense, the soft masculinity enhances the place image in the eyes of K-pop fans. The western fantasy of progressive gender relations is mixed with Korean social reality. By connecting Korea with progressive gender expressions, the fans construct an image of the nation as a forefront of current cultural trends.

K-pop fans' image of Korea is formed by mixing the knowledge and information about Korea to the interpretational framework of their spatial history. Korea is not considered entirely strange or the *other* by the K-pop listeners, even though there are some cultural barriers. Fans rather try to interpret Korea through the familiar or at least try to find an understandable explanation for the differences. In Relph's (1976/2008: 51-54) terms, the fans try to pursue *empathetic insideness* to Korea. The fans try to understand, know, and respect the customs of the Korean society. Furthermore, the fans often try to educate themselves more on Korean culture and language. The fans have attached value to Korea because of K-pop, and therefore examine the nation more in a context of a place than space. The musical texts thus have increased the feelings of place attachment of the fans (Jonas et al. 2015; Broudehoux 2017).

The foreign fans describe Korean society as competitive and capitalist; a place where one's worth can be increased with good looks. Appearance is a feature an individual can have some control over especially when compared to the valuables of the Confucian tradition (age, gender) (Jung 2011; Paxton 2018) The importance of aesthetics in Korea

demonstrate the emergence of a new capitalist economic system that controls social life. Both Confucian and capitalistic values exist in modern Korea, and they can intertwine in unexpected ways. The femininity of male K-pop idols may be the most interesting and apparent example of that. The prevalence of soft masculinity in K-pop will be further deliberated in the third section of the discussion.

The cultural differences may make Korea more appealing as they add uniqueness and distinguish Korea from other places. According to Relph (1976/2008: 41-42), people often look into other places to escape the dullness of their everyday lives. On the other hand, the fans long for familiar signs such as shared language or behavioural codes that would make the place less overwhelming. Korea remains somewhat alien to the foreign K-pop fans, which indicates that the fans experience a sense of placelessness when visiting the country (Agostinelli 2017: 8). That appears as feelings of alienation from the locals and not belonging.

## 6.2. FANS' MEDIA USES

The media practices of K-pop fans are illustrated by the mediatisation, collective use, and active participation. Modern mediatisation and the emergence of digital media platforms are essential to the global circulation of K-pop related content (Jung 2011; Jin 2018). K-pop is discovered, listened, and watched from digital platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, and Twitter. These platforms work as of today's *exhibition galleries* as Parc (2015) suggests. Furthermore, these digital exhibition galleries are less tied to a location, as people across the globe can discover Korean content via their laptop or smartphone (Parc & Moon 2013; Parc et al. 2016). The circulation of K-pop related content on digital platforms is not entirely due to Korean entertainment companies. The fans themselves discuss K-pop on social networking sites, share videos and pictures with other people on the internet and in real life and create their K-pop related content. This demonstrates another effect of mediatisation, the increased importance of media for the social life of individuals (Mediatatokoulu 2015). Young people connect on the internet. The fans use English or their native language(s) to communicate with others. It is common to make friends and engage in transcultural dialogue with people that come from other countries. It is also common just to connect with people who come from similar cultural setting.

The impact of mediatisation on the media uses of K-pop fans comes apparent when examining the emerged new types of digital media. All three types of new media, listed by Krotz (2017: 104), are represented in the media practices of K-pop fans. Fan blogs

work as an example of content-driven media, recommendation-generating algorithms on YouTube and Spotify demonstrate the prevalence of interactive media, and the fandoms use social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to connect. As for interactive media, the digital apps that use artificial intelligence to create personalized recommendations make it easier to discover and consume K-pop. By recommending similar content, the apps minimize the effort needed to discover K-pop by oneself. The increased focus on personal preferences also differs from the practices of more traditional media outlets (Broudehoux 2017: 54). Print media, television, and radio, for instance, often need to serve larger audiences or audience segments. Furthermore, the new digital platforms can contest the spatial hierarchy of mainstream media by recommending the user non-western content. In this context, the new media platforms offer the users an opportunity to reimage the world and build new cartographies, as Adams et al. (2016: 8) has suggested.

The ability to connect with others seems to be especially important to K-pop fans. Western fans recognize that the genre is not mainstream, but rather a niche in the West. It may be difficult to find other K-pop fans in real life and quite a few people respond negatively to K-pop. That is why many fans of K-pop share their passion only with few close friends or on social networking sites with likeminded people. Although the interviewees had different levels of engagement to K-pop fandoms, all recognized fandoms as a vital part of the genre. The fandoms are active on the internet, and they are especially easy to discover on Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr. These platforms thus offer space for the establishment of horizontal communication networks and collective identities (Broudehoux 2017: 55). The fans connect on digital platforms, become friends, and may even meet in real life. The virtual K-pop community may then merge with real life (Jung 2011: 95). The interviewees use fandoms in a global and more local scales. The global fandoms unite fans beyond national borders if they can understand and communicate in English. The more local fandoms are created around native languages. Fans can discuss and share K-pop related content in their first language. The local fandoms are somewhat exclusive, as the fans do not cross the language borders. Although the foreign fans' consumption of Korean music demonstrates transcultural diffusion, the K-pop communities work on familiar and more local cultural contexts too. So, the consumption of K-pop both deconstructs and reinforces social and cultural divides at the same time.



The communal aspect of K-pop rises from shared interest and attachment. As Jonas et al. (2015: 194) states, musical texts often awake feelings of belonging and attachment. The fans connect with K-pop groups and idols, although the intensity of attachment varies between the fans. Furthermore, people define themselves through their consumption (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005; Valaskivi 2016). The fans of K-pop, therefore, connect their identity to K-pop in some ways. For young western fans, K-pop may be a way to distinguish themselves from others and especially from their parents' culture (Jung 2011: 134). The attachment to and identifying with K-pop may explain the intensity of the fans. Online media platforms are among the only places western fans can experience the collective identity of fandoms. Furthermore, the fans can stay continuously updated and involved in these more interactive platforms (Adams et al. 2016: 60, 110-119). Many felt like K-pop is constantly ridiculed both on western mass media and by the people who do not listen to it. The new media platforms are places, where fans can freely express their passion without being judged or questioned. These digital platforms allow fans to contest mainstream media representations (Broudehoux 2017: 54). Furthermore, the K-pop excitement is backed up by the other fans. If someone then mocks K-pop, K-pop group, or an idol on the new digital platforms, they are faced with a collective mass that wants to defend their space and identity.

Although the Korean idols and foreign fans come from different cultural and spatial backgrounds, the technological advancements seem to lower the barriers in between. Fans and the entertainment companies translate the Korean content so that international fans can understand too. Whereas the fan translations emphasize the communal aspect of K-pop, the company-made translations demonstrate the globalizing tactics of K-pop producers (Parc 2015). Translations circulate on the same digital platforms fans use to consume K-pop related content. The idols feel closer when the fans can understand them. The fans recognize that the idols must have a separate media personality, but at the same time, almost all describe the idols as genuine people. One thing bringing idols and fans closer together is the groups' presence on social media. The social media presence allows a chance to interact with the stars (Verboord & van Noord 2016: 62). The content posted by the idols or idol groups feels more authentic than the content posted by the entertainment companies (Jin 2018: 416).

The third illustrative term for the media uses of K-pop fans is active participation. Although the level of activity alters between the fans, all participate somehow. The fans

are, thus, active in giving meaning to media texts (Broudehoux 2017: 55). The fans discuss, share and create K-pop related content on digital platforms, and choose the media environments that best suit their needs. Being a fan of K-pop brings most fans intangible good such as leisure, entertainment, and friendship (Jung 2011: 101). Some fans attend concerts, travel to Korea, or buy K-pop merchandise. These fans, who have money to spend, would be the ideal audience for place branding (Jonas et al. 2015: 190, 192). However, not all K-pop fans are interested in the possession of material goods or consuming money (Jin 2018: 410, 415). The fans use K-pop related content in non-inscribed ways too. The fans learn K-pop dance choreographies and study Korean, for instance. This demonstrates the active participation of the fans as they do not just receive the preconstructed content, but modify, reframe and remix the content in new and unthought ways.

The media uses of K-pop fans are deeply connected to the modern media experience. Fans discuss, share, and make content online. Uses of K-pop fans demonstrate the participatory culture of new media (Broudehoux 2017). People do not just consume the given content, but actively contribute to it (Jung 2011). As all the interviewees are young – most under 30 – they are part of the generation that has grown up with the internet (Fast et al. 2018). They have always had multiple media outlets of which to choose from. They do not need to settle to the role of a passive receiver. Furthermore, people of this generation possess high technological literacy. According to Jung (2011: 93-95), fans have always been fast to adopt new media technologies. The technologies are used *to create amateur media content*. The fan-made content is further circulated among the fans. The circulation of fan-made content among fans demonstrates the horizontal communication networks of the fandoms in new media platforms.

The active role of the fans in media uses challenges the global media hierarchy. The interviewees mentioned that they rather use Korean media to follow K-pop than the western media. The western media often reproduces an image of K-pop that is not appreciated by the fans – if K-pop is mentioned at all. New media forms allow fans to contest these representations (Broudehoux 2017: 54). By selecting alternative sources, the fans can access to entertainment experiences that suit their desires. This kind of activity and freedom of choice is made possible by the advancements in media technologies. Various platforms on the internet offer easy and cost-effective access to media content produced in all over the world (Parc & Moon 2013; Parc et al. 2016). The

new media forms thus liberate the users from certain spatial restrictions (Adams et al. 2016; Fast et al. 2018). People are less tied to the entertainment from their immediate spatial surroundings and rather can choose their place of entertainment.

### 6.3. K-POP AND KOREA

#### 6.3.1. K-pop as a media genre

K-pop is a media genre that consists of a lot more than just music. The large entertainment companies are a vital but hugely disliked feature of K-pop. The companies demonstrate similar values of economic prioritization that are prevalent in Korean society (Jin 2018: 416). Like during the Korean modernization, the economic profit is considered more important than the value and human rights of a person. The interviewees seem to agree with some scholars that have connected the success of produced K-pop to commercial capitalism and Americanisation in Korea (Jung 2011: 76-77). The profit-oriented view covers the culture and entertainment industry in Korea. One reason for that might be the intense internal competition (Porter 1990: 86). According to Porter (1990), there has been pressure to emphasize cultural and entertainment industries in Korea due to the lack of natural resources and their related industries. Entertainment companies, thus, have power in Korea and they are tightly connected to the nation's economy (Parc & Moon 2013: 146).

Another important aspect of K-pop is idols. K-pop idols are extremely good-looking young men and women that seem perfect in almost every way. Fans recognize that the public images of idols are heavily produced and controlled by the entertainment companies. The idols are like polished diamonds: they have gone through intense moulding and carving to look and perform in a way they do. Despite the heavy control of the entertainment companies, the fans find genuineness in the idols, and none considered them fake. The branding of idols has been successful. The idols or the idol groups have accounts on social media via which they can post snippets from their everyday life, behind the scenes content, and communicate with their fans. This kind of presence on social media sites decreases the distance between the fans and idols (Verboord & van Noord 2016: 62). The everyday content makes the idols appear as regular and relatable people (Jin 2018: 416).

K-pop is characterised by aesthetics. Everything in K-pop from the music videos to idols is visually appealing. The prevalence of aesthetic values set K-pop apart from other music genres. The importance of aesthetics became the most apparent to the fans from the looks

of male idols. The interviewees described the male idols as feminine and soft, which differs from the western ideas of the masculine. The masculinity in K-pop works as a great example of the intertwined values of modern Korean society. The feminine male idols most likely are inspired by the Confucian ideals of soft masculinity (Jung 2011: 27-28). Soft masculinity that emphasizes softness and cultural awareness may not appear as threatening as the physical masculinity. As a part of the commercial entertainment business, the idols need to be brand-safe and fit the cultural context (Kotler et al. 1993; Jonas et al. 2015). Selling with physical masculinity might then be a bit too risky in a society in which sex and sexuality are considered taboos. Soft masculinity in K-pop thus both reproduces traditional values and is safe for brand collaborations. This demonstrates the impact of place on a media product, and the connection between media and space (Adams et al. 2016; Fast et al 2018). K-pop is shaped by the values of the Korean society, but at the same time, K-pop produces an image of the Korean society to foreign fans.

K-pop is connected to the global circulation of popular music. K-pop has always been impacted by different music styles around the globe. In addition to the western hip hop and EDM, K-pop has adopted sounds from Japanese pop music too. According to Valaskivi (2016: 111), popular music around the world shares some of the rules, practices, and markers. The fans recognize the Korean lyrics and idols as the most obvious markers of locality in K-pop. Furthermore, some song or music video themes, musical instruments and outfits are considered particularly *Korean* (picture 20). According to the fans, K-pop has become less *Korean* with global success. There are more foreign members, and songs are made in other languages too. The vanishing of local markers with global success fits well with the different waves of Hallyu. Each wave of Hallyu has introduced less Confucian values and more localized global content (Jin 2018: 412). Part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave is the international fandom, for whom the Korean content should be easily digestible. This means more English content and values a global audience can connect to (Jung 2011: 76-77). Despite the recent success of K-pop, the genre remains small in the West. North America is still considered the centre of popular music (Verboord & van Noord 2016: 62, 69). To gain even more global exposure, the K-pop groups need to be successful in the American market first. The more global K-pop gets, the more its association to Korea seems to become just a geographical nomenclature. The *K* in K-pop is, therefore, developing to represent more the geographical origin of the genre, and not as much the characteristics of that place.



**Picture 20:** BTS member J-Hope performing intro to the song *Idol*. J-Hope’s outfit, fan, and the surrounding drums with their *taegeuk* (태극) symbols and dragons refer to traditional Korea. Source: HopeSmiling (2018) <<https://hopesmiling0218.tistory.com/346> 6.7.2020>.

### 6.3.2. The *K* in K-pop

The fans recognize the connection between Korea and K-pop, although the connection seems to be fading a bit with global success. Some themes and topics, the singing language and nationality of idols work as markers of the locality to the international fans. These features of K-pop connect the genre to Korean reality. The markers of the locality also contribute to the place image construction (Motti 2007: 322, 324-325). Some of the markers such as wearing of traditional costumes and references to the Korean history are quite nationalistic, whereas others, like recognizing the struggle of the students, only open for those, who are somewhat familiar with modern-day Korea. The fans, therefore, possess knowledge about Korean history as well as today, and they use this knowledge to interpret the songs. The effort foreign K-pop fans have made to educate themselves about Korea demonstrate their will to experience empathetic insideness to the Korean society. According to Relph (1976/2008: 54), empathetic insideness involves “*opening to the significances of a place*” as well as “*knowing it*” and “*respecting its symbols*”. Empathetic insideness does not come unconsciously, but it requires training oneself to

see and understand the place (Relph 1976/2008: 55). Training oneself requires motivation, which indicates that the fans have found inspiration for understanding Korea in K-pop. By understanding Korean culture and society better, it is also easier to understand K-pop songs and the behaviour of the idols.

K-pop is mainstream in Korea. It is a prevalent part of the everyday Korean soundscape and urban landscape. However, perhaps due to normality of K-pop in Korea, the fans who had visited the country did not find the genre as an overpowering element. K-pop often accompanies commercial activities in Korea: K-pop is played in stores and nightclubs, and the idols advertise all kinds of products. There seems to be a strong emphasis on the cultural economy in Korea. Culture is used to give a positive feel to a product and sell more (Florida 2002/2004; Pratt & Jeffcutt 2009). The interviewees, however, did not view the commercial side of K-pop positively. That might be because commerciality is often associated with unauthenticity (Relph 1976/2008: 80-82). Although the fans recognize that K-pop is produced, they do not think that the idols are ungentle. There is, therefore, a tension between the idea of genuine K-pop idols and the idols selling whatever products.

The interviewees agreed that K-pop is beneficial to Korea. K-pop gets people interested in Korea and Korean products and ultimately the genre pulls visitors to Korea. As visitors are an indicator of a place brand success, K-pop can be considered lucrative to the brand Korea (Uldemolins 2014: 3031). The association of K-pop and Korea further demonstrate the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of Hallyu. Korea has become a globally trendy place in terms of fashion, food, and entertainment (Morgan et al. 2004; Kim et al. 2018). Korea's efforts in place branding via the promotion of Korean culture and cultural products seem to have worked (Moon et al. 1998). The fans of K-pop recognize the connection between K-pop and Korea which makes them more ready to invest their time and energy into understanding Korea and perhaps even visiting the country (Kotler et al. 1993: 157).

Despite the Korea connections, K-pop also includes global and *placeless* features. First, K-pop is impacted by global music genres, and especially the North American music trends. K-pop circulates on the internet and it can be discovered by anyone with an internet connection (Parc & Moon 2013; Parc et al. 2016). The fans of K-pop are international and come from different cultural backgrounds. The fans use English to connect with the global fandom on social networking sites. Most K-pop songs have universal themes of love, heartbreak or standing up for a cause that can be easily enjoyed by a global audience. These culturally neutral presentations do not require previous

knowledge of Korean culture to be understood and consumed. The *sense of place* in K-pop has diminished with the waves of Hallyu. The increase of English and other language content, as well as the hiring of non-Korean idols, have made K-pop less *Korean* in the eyes of the international fans. The fans, however, recognize that if K-pop groups want to achieve global mainstream success, they need to please the dominant North American market first. This might mean more emphasis on American values, looks and soundscapes in the future K-pop. Most of the fans, therefore, critically accept the capitalistic dynamics and increasing placelessness, because it may bring more acceptance and success to the genre (Shim & Santos 2014).

Although viewed quite negatively by the fans, placelessness of K-pop may offer some benefits too. First, placelessness can be used in the deconstruction of the global place hierarchy (Agostinelli 2017: 4, 8). If K-pop is less tied to a place, it does not have to follow the place hierarchy of global popular culture. The placeless features of K-pop that follow culturally dominant trends make the genre more acceptable and easily approachable by the worldwide audience. Furthermore, the placelessness of K-pop gives the audience the choice of identifying with the genre. The interviewees that had visited Korea felt some alienation from Korean society because of the conservative values and the monoculturalism. As modern K-pop demonstrates less Confucian values and more global western content, the western fans can nowadays connect with the genre more easily (Jin 2018: 412). The fans can connect with the idea of youthful and global Korea that K-pop emphasizes and similarly feel little attachment to the other sides of the nation. As Relph has written in the new preface of his book *Place and Placelessness* (1976/2008), factors causing placelessness, such as mobility and commercialization, can *be sources of enhanced diversity* in the postmodern era.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

In this master's thesis, I have studied the images foreign K-pop fans have of South Korea and K-pop. I have also examined the role of media concerning these. The phenomena of K-pop and Hallyu were approached from a geographical point of view with a special emphasis on cultural and media geography. The fans' ideas of Korea and K-pop were studied through the concepts of place image and place branding. The research questions that guided this master's thesis are 1. What kind of image do K-pop fans have of South Korea? 2. How do the fans use media in relation to K-pop? 3. What is the impact of K-pop in (re)producing place image (3a. How do the fans perceive K-pop? 3b. How do the fans position K-pop to South Korea?).

The data for this thesis was collected with half-structured thematic interviews with non-Korean fans of K-pop. The interviews were conducted from March to September 2019 in South Korea and Finland. Most of the interviewees were western and under 30 years old. The interview texts were analysed with qualitative content analysis, and the data were categorized into themes and their subthemes. The analysis was guided by the theoretical framework and the key concepts as well as the research questions.

### 1. What kind of image do K-pop fans have of South Korea?

The fans view South Korea as an independent nation that differs a lot from its northern neighbour of North Korea. Although the tension on the Korean peninsula is recognized, the fans do not put much weight on the Korea relations when thinking about South Korea.

The fans' image of Korea is mostly focused on the urban, and especially the capital Seoul. Nature and the countryside do not seem to get much representation especially if the information about Korea is gained from K-pop related media. Urban Korea represents modernity and development of the nation. The urban landscape of Seoul with its glass-walled skyscrapers demonstrate the power of large corporations and the adaptation of neoliberal economies. Therefore, in the fans' minds, Seoul does not differ much from other global urban centres.

The rapid change in Korea can be seen from the people. The interviewees recognize a generational gap between young and old Koreans. There are behavioural and cultural differences between the generations which indicate, on one hand, of change in the values and, on the other hand, of the Confucian age hierarchy. The more western cosmopolitan



behaviour of young Koreans and their more equal stance to young foreign fans make young Koreans more relatable to the western fans.

Aesthetics is a value the fans connected to the competitiveness of Korean society. Appearance is a feature that can increase or decrease a person's worth, which is why it is important to look good. The prevalence of aesthetic values is, thus, connected to capitalist ideas of people mere economic assets that compete against each other and try to gain economic advantage.

The aesthetic values concern everyone, including men, in Korea. The different physical and behavioural framework for men was something the fans had put a special interest in. The masculinity in Korea differs from the masculine ideals in the west, which may make it more exciting and progressive-looking. The concept of soft masculinity in the Confucian tradition does offer a different framework for action, but it still maintains the old social hierarchy of male superiority.

The foreign fans experience insiderness and outsidership to Korean society at the same time. The fans experience empathetic insiderness because they understand and have learned some signs of Korean society. For example, the fans are somewhat familiar with the Confucian tradition. The fans also experience outsidership or placelessness which appear as feelings of not belonging and alienation from the locals. For instance, the monoculturalism of Korean society and the language barrier produced these experiences.

## **2. How do the fans use media in relation to K-pop?**

Modern mediatisation and digital media platforms are essential parts of the media experience of international K-pop fans. K-pop related content circulates globally on platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, and Twitter. The circulation is not only due to the entertainment companies, but also and to a large extent because of the active fans. Consumption of K-pop is no longer tied to one's location.

The circulation of media content works differently on the internet's platforms compared to traditional media outlets. Due to technological advancements, internet applications use algorithms to offer personalized content and recommendations to users. It is therefore easy for K-pop fans to discover K-pop related content on the internet. The fans do not need to rely on traditional mass media and their curated selection of entertainment.

The fans use digital media platforms to connect. As K-pop still is a niche genre in the western world and a lot of people have a negative view towards it, the most convenient way to find other fans is via the internet. K-pop fandoms on the internet operate as horizontal communication networks and they demonstrate the collective identities of the fans. The fandoms work on more global and local scales on platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr.

Fans may feel an attachment to idols, and they may have connected their identities to K-pop and the fandoms. Technological advancements have had their impact on this too. Fan and company translations to Korean content bring K-pop closer to international fans. Furthermore, the idols' presence on social networking sites makes them feel more genuine and closer to the fans.

K-pop fans' media uses are characterized by active use. The fans discuss, share, and create content on online platforms. They actively choose the media outlets they want to follow. Sometimes the fans consume money to K-pop, but often the consumption of K-pop related content happens quite cost-effectively. The fans are also active in non-inscribed uses: they learn Korean and learn K-pop dance choreographies, for example.

Young fans are familiar with the opportunities of modern technology. They are aware of their power to choose media outlets and contest mainstream media representations. The activity of fans problematises and challenges the global hierarchy of popular culture that favours the western world.

### **3. What is the impact of K-pop in (re)producing place image?**

*How do the fans perceive K-pop?*

The fans associate K-pop with powerful and large entertainment companies. These companies produce K-pop and aim for maximum profit. The fans, thus, connect the companies to commercial capitalist values and Americanisation of modern Korea. The impact and power of the entertainment companies in Korea are apparent to the fans.

The fans have mixed feelings about the K-pop idols. On one hand, the fans realize that the idols are heavily controlled and moulded by the entertainment companies. On the other hand, the idols are still considered genuine. The idols and idol groups' presence on social media brings them closer to the fans and make them seem relatable normal people.

Aesthetics are an important part of K-pop. The visuality of K-pop can be seen from the music videos, dance choreographies, fashion, and the idols. The fans had placed a special emphasis on the looks of male idols. To the western fans, the male idols look beautiful and feminine. The looks of male idols are most likely impacted by the values of Korean society. By applying the ideas of Confucian soft masculinity to the male idols, the entertainment companies can create ambassadors that both reflect traditional Korean culture and are brand safe. If the emphasis were more on the physical masculine, the idols could be considered too explicit for the conservative Korean society. That could make the commercial aspect of K-pop more difficult.

K-pop is connected to the global circulation of popular music. The genre is impacted by different music styles around the globe, and it mostly reproduces stories of love, heartbreak and standing up for a cause that are not specific to a place. There are, however, more Korea references in some K-pop songs, choreographies, and performances. Fans think that K-pop is becoming less Korean with global success, which means that there are less Korean markers. The globalizing of K-pop is accepted because it is believed to bring more success and acceptance to the genre globally.

*How do the fans position K-pop to South Korea?*

The fans see the connection between K-pop and Korea. There are markers of locality in K-pop which fans can understand. Some of these markers are easier to recognize, and others require educating oneself about Korean society to be understood. The fans often experience empathetic insideness to the Korean society, as they have made the effort to understand and know some of the signs.

According to the fans, K-pop is normal and mainstream in Korea. It is present everywhere but does not come across overwhelming. K-pop often accompanies commercial activities in Korea, which indicates the country's emphasis on cultural economy. The commerciality of K-pop is not viewed positively, because commercialism is associated with inauthenticity.

K-pop is seen as positive to the brand Korea. K-pop attracts people to Korean products and even brings visitors to the country. Korea has become a globally trendy area and K-pop is part of this current Korean wave.

Despite the Korea connections, K-pop is getting more and more global and placeless in the eyes of the fans. For instance, the K-pop fandom is international, K-pop content

circulates globally and there is more English content. The placeless features of K-pop are critically accepted as the fans believe that it will make the genre more successful globally. However, placelessness of K-pop can help to deconstruct the global hierarchy of popular culture. The same placeless features can make the genre easier to approach to the people that do not possess much knowledge about Korea. The placelessness, furthermore, allows people to choose the parts of Korea they want to connect with. The placelessness can thus lead to increased diversity in popular culture.

---

For this master's thesis follows a qualitative methodology, it is important to recognize things that may have affected the results. First, place images depend on the identity of the interpreter. The results could have looked different if I interviewed different people. It would be extremely interesting to ask similar questions about Korea and K-pop to non-western fans, Koreans, underage teenagers, or old people, for example. My own experiences as a western K-pop fan and as an exchange student in Korea surely impacted on my interpretation of the interviews and the analysis, as did other factors related to my personal history and identity. Most importantly, my inexperience in conducting a study may have led to many mistakes and unnecessary hardships that I do not realize even now writing this conclusion.

As Alasuutari (2011) has stated, the end of one study can be a beginning to a new one. The Korean wave has gained new layers as I have been writing this master's thesis. K-pop is more and more visible in the global western popular culture, as the idol groups visit American television and do collaborations with western artists. Even the traditional American curators of popular culture - the Grammys and the Oscars - have recognized the Korean wave. BTS was invited to perform at the Grammy Awards 2020, and the Korean movie *Parasite* (*기생충*, 2019, directed by Bong Joon-ho) won the Oscar for best picture in 2020, being the first non-English movie to do so (Buchanan & Barnes 2020). Furthermore, the international K-pop fandom is making headlines by being active on social networking sites. The K-pop fans have, for instance, loudly supported the Black Lives Matter movement and pranked a Trump rally by reserving seats and not showing up (Roberts 2020). A lot is going on and the Korean wave does not seem to slow down soon. The wave, thus, offers countless research opportunities about popular culture and

cultural products, fan practices and digitalization. Only time will show whether the Korean wave is going to keep growing like a tsunami or break like a normal sea wave.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my gratitude to the interviewees for sharing their stories and views with me. This master's thesis would not have been possible without you.

Lastly, I want to thank every single person that has helped me with my thesis. Thank you for your insightful comments, speculations, interest, and motivating words.

## REFERENCES

### LITERATURE

- Adams, P. C., J. Cupples, K. Gynn, A. Jansson & S. Moore (2016). *Communications/Media/Geographies*. 201 pp. Routledge, London.
- Agostinelli, G. (2017). Nato fuori posto: Exploring placelessness in Dean Serravalle's "The Buried Tree". *Open Cultural Studies* 1, 4–16.
- Alasuutari, P. (2011). *Laadullinen tutkimus 2.0*. 4th ed. 331 pp. Vastapaino, Tampere.
- Broudehoux, A.-M. (2017). The autonomous and concentrated production of mental place images. In: *Mega-Events and Urban Image Construction*. Routledge, London.
- Degirmenci, K. (2013). *Creating Global Music in Turkey*. 142 pp. Lexington Books, Lanham.
- Fast, K., A. Jansson, J. Lindell, L. Ryan Bengtsson & M. Tesfahney (2018). *Geomedia Studies: Spaces and Mobilities in Mediatized World*. Routledge.
- Florida, R. (2002/2004). *The Rise of the Creative Class*. 434 pp. Basic Books, New York.
- Hannigan, J. (2003). Symposium on branding, the entertainment economy and urban place building: Introduction. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27, 352-360.
- Hubbard, P. & E. Wilkinson (2014). Welcoming the world? Hospitality, homonationalism and the London 2012 Olympics. *Antipode* 47, 598-615.
- Jin, D. Y. (2018). An analysis of the Korean wave as transnational popular culture. *International Journal of Communication* 12, 404-422.
- Jonas, A. E. G., E. McCann & M. Thomas (2015). Molding and marketing the image of the city. In: *Urban Geography: A Critical Introduction*, 184-205. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester.
- Jung, S. (2011). *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*. 232 pp. Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong.
- Kavaratzis, M. & G. J. Ashworth (2005). City branding: an effective assertion of identity or a transitory marketing trick?. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 96, 506-514.
- Kavaratzis, M. & A. Kalandites (2015). Rethinking the place brand: the interactive formation of place brands and the role of participatory place branding. *Environment and Planning A* 47, 1368-1382.
- Kotler, P., D. H. Haider & I. Rein (1993). *Marketing places*. 388 pp. The Free Press, NY.
- Krotz, F. (2017). Explaining the mediatisation approach. *Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture* 24, 103-118.
- Kuckartz, U. (2013). *Qualitative text analysis: A guide to methods, practice and using software*. 174 pp. SAGE Publications, London.
- Moon, H. C., A. M. Ragman & A. Verbeke (1998). A generalized double diamond approach to the global competitiveness of Korea and Singapore. *International Business Review* 7, 135-150.
- Morgan, N., A. Pritchard & R. Pride (2004). *Destination branding*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 314 pp. Elsevier, Oxford.
- Motti, R. (2007). Ethno-national pop-rock music: Aesthetic cosmopolitanism made from within. *Cultural Sociology* 1, 317-341.
- Parc J. & H.-C. Moon (2013). Korean dramas and films: Key factors for their international competitiveness. *Asian Journal of Social Science* 41, 126-149.
- Parc, J. (2016a). The effects of protection in cultural industries: The case of the Korean film policies. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 1-16.
- Parc, J., P. Messerlin & H.-C. Moon (2016). The secret to the success of K-pop. In Christiansen, B. & F. Kasarci (Eds.), *Corporate Espionage, Geopolitics, and Diplomacy Issues in International Business* (pp. 130-148). IGI Global, Hershey.

- Porter (1990). The competitive advantage of nations. *Harvard Business Review*, 73-93.
- Pratt, A. C. & P. Jeffcutt (2009). *Creativity, innovation and the cultural economy*. 280 pp. Routledge, Oxon.
- Relph, E. (1976/2008). *Place and Placelessness*. 3rd ed. 156 pp. Pion Limited, London.
- Saldana, J. (2011). Genres, elements, and styles of qualitative research. In J. Saldana, N. Beretvis & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research* (pp. 3-30). Oxford University Press, New York.
- Shim, C. & C. A. Santos (2014). Tourism, place and placelessness in the phenomenological experience of shopping malls in Seoul. *Tourism Management* 45, 106-114.
- Snyder, S. (2018). *South Korea at the Crossroads*. 355 pp. Columbia University Press, NY.
- Tuan, Y.-F. (1977/2007). *Space and Place*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. 235 pp. University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota.
- Tuomi, J. & A. Sarajärvi (2018). *Laadullinen tutkimus ja sisällönanalyysi*. 2nd ed. Tammi, Helsinki.
- Uldemolins, J. R. (2014). Culture and authenticity in urban regeneration processes: Place branding in central Barcelona. *Urban Studies* 51, 3026-3045.
- Valaskivi, K. (2016). *Cool nations: Media and the social imaginary of the branded country*. Routledge, New York.
- Verboord, M. & S. van Noord (2016). The online place of popular music: Exploring the impact of geography and social media on pop artists' mainstream media attention. *Popular Communication* 14, 59-72.

## OTHER SOURCES

- Buchanan, K. & B. Barnes (2020). 'Parasite' earns best-picture Oscar, first for a movie not in English. *The New York Times*, Feb 2, 2020. Accessed 12 August 2020. Available at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/09/movies/parasite-movie-oscars-best-picture.html>>
- Content analysis (2019). *Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health*. Accessed 26 October 2019. Available at <<https://www.mailman.columbia.edu/research/population-health-methods/content-analysis>>
- Kim, E.-Y., K. M. Lee & H.-E. Hahm (2018). 'Third Korean wave' becomes part of everyday Japanese life. *Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and Korean Culture and Information Service*. Accessed 30 April 2020. Available at <<http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=159139>>
- Mediataitokoulu (2015). Mediakulttuuri. Accessed 21 April 2020. Available at <[https://www.mediataitokoulu.fi/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=321&Itemid=413&lang=fi](https://www.mediataitokoulu.fi/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=321&Itemid=413&lang=fi)>
- Montello, D. R. (2016). Behavioral Geography. Accessed 24 November 2019. Available at <<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199874002/obo-9780199874002-0069.xml>>
- Parc, J. (2015). Wrestling with or embracing digitalization?. *ECIPE European Centre for International Political Economy*. Accessed 7 April 2020. Available at <<https://ecipe.org/blog/wrestling-with-or-embracing-digitization/>>
- Parc, J. (2016b). Beyond geo-blocking: "Gangnam Style" is not just for Gangnam. *ECIPE European Centre for International Political Economy*. Accessed 7 April 2020. Available at <<https://ecipe.org/blog/beyond-geo-blocking-gangnam-style-is-not-just-for-gangnam/>>
- Paxton, N. (2018). *The rough guide to Korea*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 406 pp. Rough Guides.
- Roberts, P. F. (2020). Are K-pop fans the new Anonymous? Don't count on it. *Forbes*, Jun 24, 2020. Accessed 12 August 2020. Available at <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulfroberts/2020/06/24/are-k-pop-fans-the-new-anonymous-dont-count-on-it/#13ccd84c42f2>>



## PICTURE SOURCES

- 월아조운's (2018). 180717 열린음악회 트와이스. July 17, 2018. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at <<https://mcjoun.tistory.com/entry/180717-%EC%97%B4%EB%A6%B0%EC%9D%8C%EC%95%85%ED%9A%8C-%ED%8A%B8%EC%99%80%EC%9D%B4%EC%8A%A4>>
- 위드태민.: WithTaemin 随行 (2016). 160228 IFC Part1 【13P】. February 28, 2016. Accessed 13 July 2020. Available at <<https://withtaemin.tistory.com/entry/160228-IFC-Part1-%E3%80%9013P%E3%80%91>>
- AJEONG\_JM (2017). 170222 가온. February 22, 2017. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at <<https://ajeongjm951013.tistory.com/35>>
- BANGTAN BLOG (2014). 슈가의 시선 – 하루만. April 4, 2014. Accessed 13 July 2020. Available at <<https://bangtan.tistory.com/216>>
- Dispatch (2019). 방탄소년단(BTS) 디스패치 HD 대방출 포토 슬라이드 #31. May 1, 2019. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXESQxzhoc>>
- F28STAR (2016). 20161119 블랙핑크 멜론뮤직어워드. November 19, 2016. Accessed 21 July 2020. Available at <[https://f28star.tistory.com/category/%EC%97%AC%EC%9E%90%20%EA%B0%80%EC%88%98/%EB%B8%94%EB%9E%99%ED%95%91%ED%81%AC\\_BLACKPINK%20](https://f28star.tistory.com/category/%EC%97%AC%EC%9E%90%20%EA%B0%80%EC%88%98/%EB%B8%94%EB%9E%99%ED%95%91%ED%81%AC_BLACKPINK%20)>
- Great Treasure (2015). 150816 The EXO'luXion in Hongkong. August 16, 2015. Accessed 22 July 2020. Available at <<https://greattreasure94.tistory.com/4>>
- HopeSmiling (2018). 181201 MMA. December 2, 2018. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at <<https://hopesmiling0218.tistory.com/346>>
- I DARE U JK (2018). 181201 MMA - IDOL INTRO 방탄소년단 정국 BTS JUNGKOOK Focus. December 1, 2018. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0c\\_atwJnqY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0c_atwJnqY)>
- Jeon, H. (2013). Korea\_2013World\_Rowing\_Championships\_31. *Korea.net / Korean Culture and Information Centre*. August 24, 2013. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/42438955@N05/9607763476/>>
- Jeon, H. (2018). Line\_FriendsStore\_BT21\_06. *Korea.net / Korean Culture and Information Service*. June 8, 2018. Accessed 13 July 2020. Available at <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/koreanet/41764244625/>>
- Joop (2009). Gangam / 강남구. January 5, 2009. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/10073573@N00/3180266525>>
- LG 전자 (2009). 뉴 초콜릿폰(윤아). September 15, 2009. Accessed 21 July 2020. Available at <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/lge/3964651572>>
- LG 전자 (2011). LG 전자, 'K-POP 열풍' 물고 아시아시장 공략 강화. November 28, 2011. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/lge/6414925403/>>
- LG 전자 (2012). LG 시네마 3D TV 새 모델 '소녀시대' 영입. January 13, 2012. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/lge/6705360909/>>
- Mang2goon (2016). [직캠] 160618 수원 K 팝 콘서트 - EXO ( 몬스터 ) 4K. June 18, 2016. Accessed 22 July 2020. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6tqI2MRQD8>>

- Min, R. R. (2005). Bi (Rain). April 30, 2005. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at  
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/photoren/353034752/in/set-72157594430480678/>>
- Murayama, N. (2016). Museo Guggenheim, Bilbao. November 17, 2016. Accessed 6 July 2020.  
Available at <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/naotakem/31273245344/>>
- Nguyen, C. (2009). BoA. June 28, 2009. Accessed 12 July 2020. Available at  
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/brainchildvn/4343903762/>>
- Pabian (2015). 151230 2015 KBS 가요대축제 소녀시대. December 30, 2015. Accessed 6 July 2020.  
Available at <<https://amymen.tistory.com/1008>>
- Rinaldi, E. (2012). Psy. October 18, 2012. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at  
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/evarinaldiphography/8099826541/>>
- Rinaldi, E. (2013). Psy. March 9, 2013. Accessed 6 July 2020. Available at  
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/evarinaldiphography/8541751128/in/photostream/>>
- Sparkle.S (2015). 150610 윤아 YOONA 인천공항출국. June 10, 2015. Accessed 21 July 2020.  
Available at <<https://sparkles805.tistory.com/56>>
- YG Entertainment (2011). BIGBANG\_Extraordinary\_20's. December 23, 2011. Accessed 22 July 2020.  
Available at <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/officialygfamily/9912490975/>>

# ATTACHMENTS

## ATTACHMENT 1: INTERVIEW GUIDES

### A. Interview guide for Korean visitors

#### The Korea image of K-pop fans

Sofia Sippala

#### Interview guide 1

- 1. "Warm-up questions" about travelling** (Are you interested in travelling? Have you travelled a lot? Where have you been? Where would you like to visit? How do you select your travel destinations? Have you got any special travel memories?)
- 2. Travelling to Korea** (Why are you in Korea? What do you do in Korea (vacation, studying, working etc.)? Where in Korea would you like to visit and why? How long will you stay in Korea? How long have you been in Korea now? Have you visited Korea before? How has it been in Korea? What kind of expectations did you have, why? Have your expectations been met; how or how not? Has your image of Korea changed? What things do you like or dislike about Korea? Are you planning to come back?)
- 3. K-pop, being a fan and the fandom** (What comes to your mind when you think about K-pop? How would you define K-pop? Why do you listen to K-pop, what makes it special? What themes/values are present in K-pop? What do you like or dislike about K-pop? Which K-pop groups/artists do you listen to? What are K-pop stars like? How did you discover K-pop? How do you follow K-pop? How does it feel like to be a K-pop fan as a non-Korean person? Are you a part of any K-pop fandom, why / why not? How and where does the fandom work? How are K-pop fans like? Do you also listen to other music genres and/or are you a part of other fandoms? Has listening to K-pop have had any impact on your life? How do you see the future of K-pop?)
- 4. Korea image** (What kind of country South Korea is? What comes to your mind when you think about South Korea (people, places, events etc.)? What do these things tell you about Korea as a country? What is the culture like in Korea? What values do you associate with South Korea, why? Are you interested in Korea (outside K-pop), why / why not? Do you follow what is happening in Korea (politics, events, fashion etc.)? How do you follow? How is it going for Korea? Do you have any contacts in Korea (friends, family etc.)? How are Koreans like?)

5. **K-pop and South Korea** (What do you think about the global success of K-pop? How has it impacted Korea? How is Korea present in K-pop? What kind of image does K-pop give of Korea? How is K-pop present in Korea (or is it)?)

**Anything to add, questions?**

## B. Interview guide for non-visitors

### The Korea image of k-pop fans

Sofia Sippala

#### Interview guide 2

1. **"Warm-up questions" about the K-pop event/group** (What is it? Have you visited before / been a member for a long time? How did you find it? Why do go/are a member? What usually happens?)
2. **Travelling to Korea** (Are you interested in travelling to Korea? What would you do in Korea (vacation, studying, work etc.)? Where in Korea would you like to visit, why? How long would you like to stay? What do you think it is like in Korea, why? What is it not like in Korea? What things do you like/dislike about Korea?)
3. **K-pop, being a fan and the fandom** (What comes to your mind when you think about K-pop? How would you define K-pop? Why do you listen to K-pop, what makes it special? What themes/values are present in K-pop? What do you like or dislike about K-pop? Which K-pop groups/artists do you listen to? What are K-pop stars like? How did you discover K-pop? How do you follow K-pop? How does it feel like to be a K-pop fan as a non-Korean person? Are you a part of any K-pop fandom, why / why not? How and where does the fandom work? How are K-pop fans like? Do you also listen to other music genres and/or are you a part of other fandoms? Has listening to K-pop have had any impact on your life? How do you see the future of K-pop?)
4. **Korea image** (What kind of country South Korea is? What comes to your mind when you think about South Korea (people, places, events etc.)? What do these things tell you about Korea as a country? What is the culture like in Korea? What values do you associate with South Korea, why? Are you interested in Korea (outside K-pop), why / why not? Do you follow what is happening in Korea (politics, events, fashion etc.)? How do you follow? How is it going for Korea? Do you have any contacts in Korea (friends, family etc.)? How are Koreans like?)
5. **K-pop and South Korea** (What do you think about the global success of K-pop? How has it impacted Korea? How is Korea present in K-pop? What kind of image does K-pop give of Korea? How do you believe K-pop is present in Korea (or is it)?)

**Anything to add, questions?**

## ATTACHMENT 2: DATA PROTECTION ANNOUNCEMENT

### Collection and usage of personal data for a master's thesis in geography, Department of Geography and Geology, the University of Turku

Data protection announcement: Data from the interview is collected and used only for this master's thesis about the Korea image of k-pop fans. The interview (including the voice recording, possible notes and text transcription) will be preserved until the thesis is ready and accepted. Data is processed and stored in the candidate's personal, password-protected, device. Data will be used according to the data protection regulation and in a way that fulfils the non-profit mission of a university.

Your name will not be used in the master's thesis and you cannot be recognized from it.

You can contact the candidate about the information you have given (please give contact information). The master's candidate is Sofia Sippala; she gives you more information on request (p. +358 40 xxxxxxx / e. [sofia.k.sippala@xxx.fi](mailto:sofia.k.sippala@xxx.fi)).

By signing this document, you permit the master's candidate to use your data in the ways described above:

---

Signature

---

Print name

---

Date and place signed

## ATTACHMENT 3: PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM

### Personal information sheet / Taustatietolomake

The Korea image of k-pop fans / Sofia Sippala

*Number of the interview / Haastattelun numero:*

Age/Ikä:

Gender/Sukupuoli:

Nationality/Kansalaisuus:

Have you visited South Korea; how many times? / Oletko käynyt Etelä-Koreassa; kuinka monta kertaa?

How long have you listened to Korean pop music? / Kuinka kauan olet kuunnellut korealaista pop-musiikkia?