

K-Pop and Soft Power: A Study of Cultural Influence

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RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent has the South Korean government driven the promotion of K-pop as an instrument of soft power globally?

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

The South Korean government built structured institutional support for K-pop through KOCCA, which operates 25 business centers across 22 countries, and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which allocated KRW 18 billion specifically to K-pop within its 2023 K-content budget. The 2024 Framework Act on the Promotion of Hallyu Industry formalized this support in law for the first time, mandating cross-ministry coordination. BTS appeared at the UN General Assembly as Special Presidential Envoys, and government agencies actively documented and promoted collaborations between K-pop artists and Western musicians.

The state was a structural enabler. It was not the creative driver.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL DRIVERS

Entertainment companies HYBE, SM, JYP and YG built the product through multi-year artist development programs and multi-platform releases spanning music, performance, merchandise and social media. YouTube, TikTok and fan translation networks created virality that no embassy could orchestrate. Research in consumer psychology shows K-pop uses staged scarcity, randomized rewards and parasocial bonding to build dopamine-driven engagement, sustaining repeated exposure to Korean cultural content across global audiences.

The attraction mechanism was built by private industry, algorithms and fans. The state built the scaffolding around it.

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

South Korea ranked 11th on the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2026, with cultural influence cited as a primary driver. K-pop was the first concept associated with Korea for eight consecutive years in government surveys since 2017. The K-Content industry generated KRW 165 trillion in revenue in 2025, outperforming the sports industry by nearly double.

CONCLUSION

The South Korean government created the conditions for K-pop's global expansion through infrastructure, legal frameworks, coordinated policy and national branding. But the soft power itself was generated by what private companies produced, what platforms amplified, and what fans chose to adopt as identity. The state enabled. It did not create.