

## Seoul's Paradiplomacy To The Global Public: The Involvement of Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS) in the Tourism Industry

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to analyze the use of the Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS) as an instrument of the paradiplomacy of Seoul, South Korea, in promoting the city's tourism to the global public on economic and cultural aspects. Seoul's paradiplomacy in promoting tourism is motivated by efforts to attract global public attention and to encourage foreign tourists to make Seoul a tourist destination. For that purpose, the Seoul Metropolitan Government has collaborated with various K-pop artists, such as BTS, in its paradiplomacy practice. This study uses transgovernmentalism, foreign relations, paradiplomacy, and art as theories and qualitative research as a method by taking data directly and indirectly. Direct data are obtained from interviews with several informants, while indirect data are obtained from studies of relevant documentation and literature. This study finds that BTS becomes an instrument of Seoul's paradiplomacy in tourism promotion. The researchers also discovered that the Seoul Metropolitan Government has restructured the Seoul Tourism Organization from a public-private partnership and government-invested institution to one that can increase the city's competitiveness in tourism and Meetings, Incentive Tours, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE), as well as contribute to Seoul's economic development by revitalizing tourism-related industries.*

**Keywords:** *Paradiplomacy; BTS; tourism; Seoul.*

### Introduction

As the development occurs at the global level, the actors involved in establishing foreign relations are not only states (Nye & Keohane, 1971) but also non-state actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations. Even celebrities and sub-national actors, like provinces and cities, have also been involved in the practice of international relations. The involvement of non-state

actors, celebrities in this case, in the realm of international relations has also been increasing. The involvement of celebrities has been proven to go beyond state affairs; the celebrities have been further involved in sub-state affairs, such as paradiplomacy.

The image of a country is built to provide benefits politically, economically, culturally, etc. (Saliu, 2017). Likewise, paradiplomacy tries to build a good image of a city in front of the global public by utilizing various instruments. In this

research, Seoul names one of the most popular K-pop idol groups from the Republic of Korea or South Korea, namely Bangtan Sonyeondan, or popularly known as BTS<sup>1</sup>, as the Seoul Tourism Ambassador to promote the culture and beauty of Seoul to the global public.

K-pop's global popularity stems from the Hallyu Wave phenomenon that first occurred in the mid-1990s after South Korea established diplomatic relations with China in 1992. Since then, Korean pop music and TV drama series have gained immense popularity in the Chinese-speaking community (Korean Cultural Centre UK, n.d.). In 1997, the Korean TV drama series "What Is Love?" was broadcast by the main broadcaster in China, namely China Central Television (CCTV). The drama was ranked second in all-time imported video content in China. In this period, the term "Hallyu Wave" or "Korean Wave" first appeared, which refers to the global public madness toward Korean culture (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism and Korean Culture and Information Service, 2020).

K-pop, a popular music culture from South Korea, is used as an instrument of diplomacy at both national and local levels. The Seoul Metropolitan Government uses this opportunity to promote the city. In this study, the K-pop idol group that will be the main focus is Bangtan Sonyeondan, or famously known as BTS, where the Seoul Metropolitan Government has appointed them as Seoul Tourism Ambassadors since 2017 (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism and Korean Culture and Information Service, 2020).

The success of BTS is related to an explicit strategy of the government of the

Republic of Korea. The role of Hallyu in South Korea's economic policy was first mentioned in 2001 in a speech by then-South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, who called it a "chimneyless industry" and "an engine of economic development that creates high added value with relatively little investment of resources compared to other industrial developments." During the leadership of President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2007), South Korea's main national goal was to become one of the "world's top five content powers by 2010," and hence, the Korea Content Creative Agency (KOCCA) was founded in 2009 to promote and support the production of Korean popular culture content. South Korean big businessmen (chaebol), who have close ties to the government, have begun to turn their attention to the media and creative industries (Suntikul, 2019).

In that context, BTS is considered the most successful Korean pop culture producer and is proven to have greatly contributed to South Korea's national economy. Besides selling music, merchandise, and concert tickets, BTS also managed to attract more tourists, who are BTS fans, to South Korea. In 2017, it is estimated that around 800,000 tourists to South Korea, or about 7 percent of the total number of visiting tourists, were motivated to visit the country because of their fondness for BTS (Suntikul, 2019).

In addition, BTS has also been active as Seoul's honorary tourism ambassador since 2017. The Seoul Tourism Organization (CEO Rhee Jae-sung) strives to promote Seoul's tourist charms and content with the support of promotional videos from global superstars, the BTS. Seoul's tourism promotional video "Visit Seoul" featuring

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<sup>1</sup> BTS (방탄소년단) is a Korean male idol group managed by Big Hit Entertainment in Seoul.

BTS was broadcasted via Youtube, Instagram, and Facebook (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2019).

This issue is in the researchers' special interest, particularly in understanding BTS' contribution to the implementation of Seoul's paradiplomacy. The involvement of non-state actors, or sub-state actors in this case, in the practice of international relations cannot be denied and may continue to increase in the future. Therefore, research on related matters is needed.

The involvement of local governments in the international realm has continued to increase in recent years, a phenomenon known as "paradiplomacy." This can happen due to changes at the national level and the international system, as well as in political and economic development. The emergence of globalization and the rise of transnational regimes, particularly in the area of regional trade, have eroded the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs and, in a similar way, have changed the division of responsibilities between central and subnational governments. Globalization has economic, cultural, and political dimensions. Modern communication technologies that continue to develop and the dominance of global culture have eroded national cultures and the role of the state in promoting and protecting them (Aldecoa & Keating, 2013).

The first academic work on sub-national activities in the international relations realm appeared in the early 1970s. However, at that time, the issue was still not well conceptualized, and no specific terms were defined in academic discourse. In the 1980s, a new idea called "paradiplomacy" as a concept emerged, which means the involvement of sub-national governments.

In general, and particularly in academic literature, paradiplomacy is referred to as the involvement of a country's constituent units (local governments) in international affairs, such as a province in Canada, a state in the United States, and, in this research, Seoul as the capital city of South Korea. Local governments play an active role in international affairs in different ways, they make ways for trade and cultural missions abroad, sign treaties and agreements with foreign and non-state actors, and in some cases challenge the official foreign policy of their central government through statements or actions (Kuznetsov, 2015).

According to Hocking (1993), the concept of paradiplomacy was created to strengthen the differences between the central and local governments and to emphasize the elements of conflict between the two that accompanied the development of this concept. For Hocking, however, such an approach is incorrect. It would be better to place sub-national or non-central governments in a "complex diplomatic environment." Hocking (1993) contends that local government is intricately linked to other actors in the international relations realm.

According to Tavares (2016), there are four models of paradiplomacy: ceremonial, single-themed, global, and sovereign (Tavares, 2016). First, ceremonial diplomacy emphasizes image over content or hospitality over pragmatism. Some actors are very focused on image-building and public relations in conducting their external relations. The ceremonial paradiplomacy is best illustrated between twin cities, towns, or states, with non-binding cooperative arrangements made between subnational governments in geographically and politically different areas to promote cultural and commercial ties.

Second, single-themed paradiplomacy has a higher reach than ceremonial diplomacy. This is especially the case when local governments are united by their desire to discuss cross-border issues or are driven by the goal of promoting trade and attracting foreign investment. Third, global paradiplomacy refers to a large number of subnational governments having larger portfolios and engaging internationally with diverse interests and agendas. They are not monofocal and tend to participate in international debates or adopt cooperation agreements in various fields, such as environment, culture, infrastructure, and trade. If the local government is competent internally in the material domain, it will automatically become competent externally. Therefore, the adjective "global" is used in both functional and geographical senses.

Finally, sovereign paradiplomacy shows that not all political entities that hold diplomatic apparatus are independent countries, but all independent countries have diplomatic apparatus. In this case, paradiplomacy should be referred to as "protodiplomacy," a term that refers to "the exercise of international relations by non-central governments with the aim of establishing a fully sovereign state." Protodiplomacy "represents diplomatic preparations for future secession and international diplomatic recognition of such events." While paradiplomacy is considered a normal activity, reflecting the degree of autonomy afforded to subnational governments, protodiplomacy is often seen as illegitimate or at least dangerous to the integrity of the state (Tavares, 2016).

Foreign relations in Seoul are carried out in front of the global public through paradiplomacy. Paradiplomacy

carried out by the Seoul Metropolitan Government is a type of global paradiplomacy because it is aimed at the global public. In practice, BTS has contributed to Seoul's paradiplomacy as an instrument through its appointment as an ambassador for Seoul Tourism, where BTS promotes the charm of Seoul and South Korean culture through a tour guide website created by the Seoul Tourism Organization called Visit Seoul.

### **Method**

This study answers the question, "What is the contribution of BTS to Seoul's paradiplomacy to the global public in the tourism industry in cultural and economic aspects?" In order to answer the question, the qualitative research method is the appropriate one to use. Referring to the method, as explained above, this research explores and understands the meaning of the topic raised so that it will produce an interpretation obtained after analyzing the data as the endpoint.

Researchers collect primary and secondary data by conducting interviews. An interview is conducted to obtain information about the phenomenon—the object of study in this research. In addition, the interview also serves to see the phenomenon from the point of view of the informant. To fulfill the data and information needs of the research, the researchers propose interviews with academics based on their expertise. Furthermore, the researchers also interviewed several BTS fans who are members of ARMY to collect primary data sources.

In collecting secondary data sources, researchers carry out data collection techniques from journals, books, scientific articles, documents, and related websites. Through this literature study, researchers hope to get more data

and information about the related phenomena. In addition, several other instruments used to support research are books, journals, articles, newspapers, the Visit Seoul website, the Seoul Tourism Organization website, the Seoul Municipal Government website, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism website of the Republic of Korea, and various written works related to the topic raised in the research. Researchers triangulate data by examining and comparing data obtained from various sources.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **BTS as Seoul's instrument in paradiplomacy**

Looking back over the last four hundred years, we see that new actors appear on the world stage in cycles. States no longer have a monopoly on the status quo of the international system, although they still play a vital role. International organizations emerged as full-fledged global actors in the late nineteenth century and were followed by multinational corporations in the mid-twentieth century, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in the 1980s, then terror groups, religious communities, transnational global publics, and, nowadays, celebrities. Likewise, sub-state entities such as cities and states are becoming new international actors on the global stage (Tavares, 2016).

Nowadays, the involvement of celebrities in the phenomenon of international relations in the global arena is increasingly widespread, and they are further involved in the practice of paradiplomacy carried out by the sub-state. This is supported by the writings of Der Derian (1987), who argues that interdependence with celebrities is another form of paradiplomacy (Der Derian, 1987) (Aldecoa & Keating, 2013)

Der Derian's statement refers to the existence of city or regional paradiplomacy activities that involve celebrities in order to increase their leverage or boost their image by using popular public figures (Mukti, 2021). In this regard, this research attempts to describe the contribution of BTS as honorary tourism ambassadors of the city since 2017. More precisely, BTS, as part of the cultural instrument used in Seoul's paradiplomacy, has promoted the city's tourism sector to the global public through a promotional video released widely. In the promotional video, they encourage the audience to make Seoul their first destination when traveling (Minji, 2020; Mukti, 2021).

BTS has an important role in Seoul's global marketing strategy. As previously explained, Seoul Global Marketing aims to attract more international visitors to Seoul through various promotional activities with K-pop idol stars such as BTS (Seoul Tourism Organization, 2022). Hong Jae-sun, director of the Seoul Tourism Organization's Global Marketing Team, hopes that the idol group BTS will attract a lot of attention (Yue, 2020). In achieving that goal, BTS featured in promotional videos titled "Seoul Life" in 2017, "My Seoul Playlist" in 2018, and "Live Seoul Like I Do" in 2019, playing a big role in promoting Seoul's tourism globally (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2020).

Each slogan of the promotional video contains a diverse campaign message: "Seoul Life" and "My Seoul Playlists," inviting viewers to embrace life in Seoul as Seoulites. However, "Live Seoul Like I Do" takes it a step further by involving foreign tourists who have firsthand experience of enjoying Seoul to appear as narrators, encouraging people to "Live Seoul Like I Do." The director of

the Seoul Tourism Organization said that the campaign featured a unique set of features that were "relatively relatable" because the global artist group BTS delivered a message inviting viewers to Seoul in a promotional video and Seoul attractions were presented to the world from the point of view of foreigners currently living in Seoul or who had experience in Seoul before (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2019).

As previously mentioned, there are several factors that contribute to the paradiplomacy practiced by a local government, such as cultural, political, and economic factors. Therefore, the contribution of BTS in this research is divided into two, the cultural aspect and the economic aspect, as the underlying factors for Seoul's paradiplomacy.

### **Seoul's Paradiplomacy Strategy in Promoting the Tourism Industry**

The Seoul Metropolitan Government has had positive results from its activities in international city networks, such as CityNet, WeGO, and C40. Through this international city network, the Seoul Metropolitan Government has shared innovative policies and strengthened its global network. The city diplomacy efforts of the Seoul Metropolitan Government consist of policy sharing, cultural exchange, staff exchange, and promoting tourism (Yi & Song, 2019).

As previously mentioned, the main focus of Seoul's global paradiplomacy in this research lies in the Seoul Municipal Government's efforts to promote the city's tourism. This is related to the background of Seoul's paradiplomacy which has been described in the previous discussion as well, in which the Korean local autonomy system introduced in 1995 has encouraged local governments to differentiate themselves through

individual destination marketing strategies to actively promote their cities to create their own image of Seoul by concentrating more on strategic overseas marketing practices (Kim & Eung-Pyo Kim, 2011).

Scientific work written by Michelmann and Soldatos (1990) shows that many paradiplomacy practices carried out by local governments are designed to promote trade, investment, and tourism. As paradiplomacy must be placed in parallel with national goals, the non-political nature of paradiplomacy usually focuses on economic and cultural aspects. When economic and cultural aspects of tourism meet, paradiplomacy becomes the right instrument to promote tourism (Mukti, 2021). Likewise, the Seoul Municipal Government designed its paradiplomacy to promote the city's tourism to the global public. The Municipality of Seoul has focused on diverse tourism marketing strategies to attract foreign tourists (Hong, Pan, & Keum, 2008).

In order to increase the city's competitiveness in tourism, the Seoul Metropolitan Government restructured the Seoul Tourism Organization from being a government-invested company and a public-private partnership to a fully government-funded institution in 2018. As an organization specializing in city marketing, the Seoul Tourism Organization aims to bring more international visitors to Seoul by increasing the city's competitiveness in terms of tourism and Meetings, Incentive Tours, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE), as well as contributing to the economic development of Seoul through revitalizing tourism-related industries. The Seoul Tourism Organization is expected to strengthen its public function in promoting and leading the sustainable

development of Seoul's tourism industry (Union of International Associations, 2021).

There are five main strategies of the Seoul Tourism Organization, including revitalizing Seoul tourism so that it is more integrated with everyday life, promoting the creation of a sustainable tourism ecosystem, setting the foundation for future development and "new normal" tourism, ensuring a safe tourism infrastructure for all people, and improving the ability of the organization as an institution that serves the public interest.

In addition, the Seoul Tourism Organization has also implemented overseas marketing strategies in an effort to promote Seoul tourism to the global public. Integrated Digital Marketing for Seoul Tourism, which was implemented by creating and distributing viral content for Seoul tourism that reflected the latest digital marketing trends; operating and promoting 8 (eight) channels of social media content related to Seoul tourism for Facebook, Instagram, WeChat, and others; and running a promotional group, Global Seoul Mate, which is made up exclusively of foreigners.

Other Seoul Global Marketing strategies include the creation and distribution of Seoul promotional videos, as well as collaboration with the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). The collaboration between the two parties includes producing and distributing Seoul promotional videos, operating booths promoting Seoul tourism in conjunction with global K-pop concerts, and running special promotions in major international cities. Presentations and Participation in Overseas Exhibitions activities include presenting Seoul tourism in major cities around the world, participating in exhibitions, and promoting Seoul tourism

to 620 tourism industry officials and 1.1 million exhibition visitors (as of 2019), as well as marketing Seoul internationally.

Integrated Digital Marketing for Seoul Tourism leads the operation of integrated digital marketing to introduce Seoul tourism in better ways as well as attract global public attention to Seoul. They take advantage of efficient forms of marketing specific to digital platforms, including the creation and dissemination of viral content that reflects marketing trends and consumer demand, the expansion of the communication network through eight different social media channels, and the establishment of a collaborative social media marketing team, Global Seoul Mate, consisting exclusively of foreign residents. This effort is made to maximize the impact of Seoul's tourism promotion activities for each targeted market as well as to motivate every potential tourist to visit the city of Seoul.

Seoul Global Marketing aims to attract more international visitors to Seoul through various promotional activities. Their main goal is to become an effective image-setter of Seoul Tourism on the global market through integrated marketing that includes the production and distribution of Seoul promotional videos, operating the Seoul Tourism promotion booth in conjunction with global K-pop concerts in Seoul such as BTS, as well as carrying out promotions, especially in big international cities.

The Seoul Tourism Organization has strengthened its position in the world tourism market by establishing a global network with UNWTO. This policy leads to the development of research projects with global partners and an increase in the tourism value of Seoul. Both UNWTO and the Seoul Tourism Organization have committed to promoting tourism as an

instrument for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this regard, Seoul has also hosted the Seoul International Fair and Sustainable Tourism Forum since 2016, where the forum raised themes such as "Fair Sustainable Tourism to Achieve the SDGs" and "Fair and Inclusive Tourism: Building Cities for All" with the aim of overcoming the problem of over-tourism that is growing along with the increasing number of tourists around the world. By delivering presentations on Seoul tourism in major cities and participating in exhibitions, the Seoul Tourism Organization promotes Seoul's main charms and resources to travel agencies and major local media. This is one of the most important marketing strategies to promote Seoul directly to potential tourists and build the foundation to strengthen Seoul's image as a tourist destination (Seoul Tourism Organization, 2022).

The Seoul Tourism Organization strives to promote "Seoul, the optimal city for medical tourism," where people can experience world-class medical technology and medical services in Seoul. In order to create a reliable environment for medical tourism in Seoul, the Seoul Tourism Organization operates help desks (offering reliable information as well as convenience for medical tourists and supporting translation coordinators and airport shuttle services) and translator training courses. In addition, the organization develops Seoul-style health content and co-markets with Seoul Medical Tourism Alliance partners. In addition, they also encourage the operation of training programs for overseas medical staff and public-private partnerships in sharing all medical-related activities in order to improve the global status of Seoul Medical Tourism.

In order to serve foreign tourists who want to visit Seoul, the Seoul Tourism Organization provides a tour guide through Visit Seoul who is ready to guide tourists in various aspects ranging from K-food to cafes and festivals. The explanation above shows that the Seoul Municipal Government applies various strategies in its paradiplomacy practices that lead to the global public, where all of their efforts are carried out through the Seoul Tourism Organization, which specifically regulates Seoul's tourism.

### **Conclusion**

Seoul's paradiplomacy practice consists of policy sharing, cultural exchange, staff exchange, and promoting tourism to the global public. The Republic of Korea's local autonomy system, introduced in 1995, has encouraged local governments to differentiate themselves through individual destination marketing strategies, including the Municipality of Seoul, which since then has tried to build an image as a world hub city and carry out various strategic overseas marketing efforts to attract foreign tourists. For this purpose, the Seoul Municipal Government is trying to develop the city's paradiplomacy toward the global public through various policies. Paradiplomacy can be seen as an instrument to promote local tourism. In promoting the city's tourism sector, the Seoul Municipal Government fully funds the Seoul Tourism Organization. The contribution of BTS as part of the Seoul Municipality's global paradiplomacy cultural instrument can be seen from their appointment as Seoul Tourism's Honorary Ambassador in 2017. Besides, BTS is also part of the Seoul Global Marketing Policy of the Seoul Tourism Organization, with a responsibility to attract the attention of the global public.

Marketing Seoul Global has several strategies, such as producing and disseminating Seoul promotional videos; operating Seoul tourism promotion booths in conjunction with global K-pop concerts; and running special promotions in major international cities. In this regard, BTS has played an important role in Seoul's tourism promotional video as well as in the operation of Seoul's tourism promotion in conjunction with its music concerts. In 2017, BTS became the main star in Seoul tourism promotional videos titled "Seoul Life" and "My Seoul Playlist" in 2018 and "Live Seoul Like I Do" in 2019. Furthermore, the BTS concert in 2019 with the theme "Love Yourself: Speak Yourself" attracted 130,000 viewers from all over the world.

In this paper, the researcher would like to convey some suggestions. The global paradiplomacy of the Municipality of Seoul involving K-pop stars in their tourism marketing efforts tends to only be received positively among young people who are fond of Korean popular culture. Therefore, there is a need for an approach or a strategy to reach other targets, particularly those who are not into K-pop. For other researchers who would like to research related topics, it is suggested that they use more diverse supporting data from books, articles, or other references outside of what has been used in this paper. It is due to the limited availability of research related to celebrity involvement in paradiplomacy and, thus, requires more insight.

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