

## THE INFLUENCE OF K-POP ON SAUDI ARABIAN GOVERNMENT POLICY: A CASE STUDY OF THE K-POP MUSIC FESTIVAL, KCON, IN THE CITY OF RIYADH

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

festival; KCON; K-Pop; music; Saudi Arabia; policy.

This study examines the influence of K-Pop on Saudi Arabia's domestic policies concerning national identity, which is strongly shaped by religious values, with the KCON music festival in Riyadh as a case study. Using a literature review of official cultural policy documents, media reports, online sources, and scholarly articles from journals such as the Journal of Eco humanism, ICMES Journal, and CMES Journal, the study explores how foreign cultural acceptance, particularly Korean culture, has affected policy transformations in Saudi Arabia. Findings indicate two major impacts. First, the reform of the entertainment and cultural sectors, reflected in the government's authorization of concerts and festivals, investment in cultural infrastructure, and revisions to gender-related regulations in public entertainment. Second, the strengthening of diplomatic and economic ties with Korea, demonstrated through agreements on trade, investment, and technological cooperation. The study acknowledges its limitation in relying solely on secondary sources and recommends future research supported by primary data for a more comprehensive understanding.

#### Article History:

Received: 2025-06-30

Revised: 2025-09-06

Accepted: 2025-09-16

Publish: 2025-12-14

#### الكلمات المفتاحية:

مهرجان؛ KCON؛  
K-Pop؛ الموسيقى؛  
السعودية المملكة  
العربية؛ السياسة.

### المخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة تأثير موسيقى البوب الكورية (K-Pop) على السياسات الداخلية للمملكة العربية السعودية فيما يتعلق بالهوية الوطنية، التي تتشكل بشكل كبير من القيم الدينية، مع مهرجان KCON الموسيقي في الرياض كدراسة حالة. باستخدام مراجعة أدبيات الوثائق الرسمية للسياسة الثقافية والتقارير الإعلامية والمصادر الإلكترونية والمقالات العلمية من مجلات مثل Journal of Ecohumanism و ICMES Journal و CMES Journal، تستكشف الدراسة كيف أثر قبول الثقافة الأجنبية، ولا سيما الثقافة الكورية، على التحولات السياسية في المملكة العربية السعودية. تشير النتائج إلى تأثيرين رئيسيين. أولاً، إصلاح قطاعي الترفيه والثقافة، الذي انعكس في ترخيص الحكومة للحفلات الموسيقية والمهرجانات، والاستثمار في البنية التحتية الثقافية، ومراجعة اللوائح المتعلقة بالجنسين في الترفيه العام. ثانياً، تعزيز العلاقات الدبلوماسية والاقتصادية مع كوريا، كما يتضح من خلال الاتفاقيات المتعلقة بالتجارة والاستثمار والتعاون التكنولوجي. تقرر الدراسة بمحدوديتها في الاعتماد على المصادر الثانوية وحدها، وتوصي بإجراء أبحاث مستقبلية مدعومة ببيانات أولية من أجل فهم أكثر شمولاً.

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## INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of cultural globalization have demonstrated a significant influence in shaping social, economic, and even policy changes across various countries. One of the most prominent cultural phenomena of the past two decades is the Korean Wave or Hallyu, that represents a modern fusion of various aspects of Korean culture, including music, TV dramas, fashion, lifestyle, cuisine, and beauty. It has spread rapidly to countries around the world, including Saudi Arabia (Hijra, 2022; Huang, 2017). K-Pop, as its vanguard, has garnered a loyal fan base worldwide. This Korean cultural wave has transcended cultural, linguistic, and geographical boundaries, creating an influence that affects not only consumer tastes and lifestyles but also the policy dynamics of various countries, including regions previously known for strict cultural protection, such as Saudi Arabia. The development of information and communication technology, especially social media, has further accelerated and expanded the distribution of Korean cultural content worldwide (Sarajwati, 2020).

The spread of K-Pop to Saudi Arabia is an intriguing phenomenon to examine, given the country's characteristics, which are defined by conservative policies based on Islamic Sharia law and deeply rooted local traditions (Masyhur, 2021). While previous researchers have acknowledged the presence of K-Pop in Saudi Arabia, few have explored its influence on government policies; most studies have focused solely on its popularity within the country. Prior to the Vision 2030 reform era initiated by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia was known for its strict entertainment regulations, including bans on cinemas, music concerts, and various forms of public entertainment considered contrary to traditional Islamic values (Abdullah & Ubaidillah, 2023; Hidayat et al., 2022). In recent years, however, there have been significant changes in the country's domestic policies, particularly those related to entertainment and culture, one of which is reflected in the influx of Korean popular culture, especially K-Pop (Amalia, 2021).

The entry of K-Pop into Saudi Arabia began informally through social media and streaming platforms accessed by Saudi youth. By developing a strong interest in the music, fashion, and lifestyle promoted by K-Pop idols. This phenomenon later gained formal legitimacy through government policies that began opening the door to international entertainment, including K-Pop concerts. In this context, the arrival of K-Pop is not only a symbol of cultural openness but also a representation of the shift from traditional religious authority toward the dominance of civil authority, driven by digitalization and cultural globalization (Mariani, 2021). The pinnacle of formal recognition for K-Pop in Saudi Arabia was the hosting of the KCON music festival in Riyadh in 2022, which was the first and largest K-Pop festival in the Middle East. The event attracted fans from various countries and featured several prominent K-Pop groups such as BTS, BLACKPINK, EXO, and TWICE (Sun-hwa, 2022). The hosting of KCON in Riyadh not only marked a significant change in Saudi Arabia's entertainment policies but also reflected a broader transformation in the country's approach to global culture and diplomatic relations.

The influence of K-Pop on Saudi Arabian policy can be observed in two main dimensions. First, there has been a reform of policy in the entertainment and cultural sectors, marked by the relaxation of regulations on music concerts, the development of entertainment infrastructure, and changes in gender policy in the context of public entertainment. Second, there has been a strengthening of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and South Korea, manifested in increased economic cooperation, investment, and technology transfer. These two dimensions reflect how cultural soft power can influence broader and deeper policy changes (Mariani, 2021). This aligns with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the economy away from dependence on oil and toward other sectors, including tourism and entertainment (Hartono & Iskandar, 2022). The specific objectives of this research are: (1) to identify changes in Saudi Arabia's

domestic policies in the entertainment and cultural sectors in response to the emergence of K-Pop; (2) to analyses the dynamics of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and South Korea influenced by the K-Pop phenomenon; and (3) to evaluate the long-term implications of K-Pop's penetration for social, economic, and political transformations in Saudi Arabia.

The main argument of this study is that the entry of K-Pop into Saudi Arabia has triggered changes that have accelerated the reform process in the country's domestic policies, particularly in the areas of entertainment, culture, and gender policies. In addition, this study argues that the K-Pop phenomenon has created a new foundation for bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and South Korea, extending beyond the cultural framework to encompass economic, investment, and technological dimensions. This research holds both academic and practical significance. From an academic perspective, it contributes to the literature on cultural soft power and its impact on foreign and domestic policy, particularly in countries with unique socio-political characteristics such as Saudi Arabia. From a practical perspective, the findings can provide policymakers with insights on how cultural diplomacy can be used as an instrument to influence policy changes and strengthen bilateral relations (Sari, 2020).

The urgency of this research also lies in the context of the ongoing transformation in Saudi Arabia through Vision 2030. As a country with significant influence in the Middle East and the Islamic world, then it must be understanding how external factors such as K-Pop can influence the direction of this transformation is important for anticipating future political, economic, and social developments in the region (Wibowo et al., 2023). Additionally, in the context of contemporary international relations, which are increasingly influenced by non-traditional elements such as popular culture, this research offers a new perspective on how soft power can operate in an environment previously considered "immune" to global cultural influence. An analysis of how K-Pop can penetrate the strict cultural barriers in Saudi Arabia and even bring about policy changes in the country can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy as an instrument of international relations in the digital age.

Thus, this study is important not only for understanding the specific dynamics between K-Pop and Saudi Arabian policy but also for enriching our understanding of the mechanisms of policy change in the context of cultural globalization and socio-political transformation in the digital age. In an increasingly interconnected global landscape shaped by cross-border flows of information and culture, analyzing how cultural soft power can serve as a catalyst for policy change becomes ever more relevant and significant (Tati, 2024).

Genealogically, Saudi Arabian culture has been shaped over thousands of years. Local wisdom in Arab culture is reflected in customs, norms, and values that have been passed down from generation to generation since at least the 7th century AD (Syafichrul et.al, 2023). It is important to recognize that traditional values in Arab cultures are influenced not only by historical factors but also by the profound teachings of Islam. Islam, as the main pillar of Arab culture, has provided a strong moral and ethical foundation (Ridho & Priyoyudanto, 2024). The Saudi Arabian government has consistently demonstrated its commitment to preserving and maintaining the authenticity of this culture through various policies and official institutions, such as the Saudi Heritage Commission (Alshehaby, 2024). This commission is tasked not only with preserving and protecting historical sites and artefacts but also with ensuring the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage such as language, music, crafts, and local traditions through cultural education, festivals, international collaboration, and the digitization of heritage (Almakaty, 2025).

Since the launch of the Saudi Vision 2030 national reform initiative by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, cultural transformation in Saudi Arabia has gained significant momentum. This initiative aims not only to diversify the country's revenue sources away from oil but also to create new opportunities for social and cultural modernization (Siti et al., 2023). The Korean Wave, or Hallyu phenomenon, which encompasses K-Pop, K-Dramas, Korean fashion, and cosmetics, has become part of the urban lifestyle in Saudi society, driven by easy access to digital platforms and social media (Yuliawan et.al, 2022). For instance, K-Pop concerts held in Riyadh and Jeddah received an overwhelming public response, reflecting's a shift in preferences toward non-traditional forms of entertainment. For many young Saudis, Korean culture has become more than entertainment; it represents modern lifestyle aspirations (Khan et al., 2024).

Recent research reveals that the penetration of Korean culture in Saudi Arabia is not limited to entertainment but also has a broader impact on changes in consumption patterns, the transformation of social identity, and the moral values of society (Abidin et al., 2024). In the informal sector, Korean culture has influenced consumer behaviour toward products such as cosmetics, food (K-Food), and clothing (K-Fashion), which are now widely available in shopping centers across Saudi Arabia. Additionally, there has been a shift towards more individualistic, expressive, and open attitude toward foreign cultures, reflecting an ongoing transformation of identity within Saudi Arabia's urban communities (Ito & Wu, 2024). These changes indirectly influence the moral values and social norms of society, with indications of increasing tolerance toward differences and a decline in resistance to non-Islamic cultures. For example, collaboration in developing digital platforms to support the entertainment industry and joint investments in the technology and manufacturing sectors have become new drivers in the economic relations between the two countries (Ghafar, 2023).

Although several studies have examined the significant impact of Korean culture on social and economic changes in Saudi Arabia, there remains a gap in research that specifically addresses how this cultural influence permeates public policy formulated by the Saudi government today (Vanessa & Oliveira, 2025). Few studies have explicitly explored the relationship between the influence of Korean popular culture and the dynamics of interest formation in social, cultural, and even political policies in Saudi Arabia (Altalidi et al., 2025). For example, questions remain about how market pressures and societal aspirations toward foreign cultures influence government decisions to open the entertainment sector or to formulate Islamic moderation policies as a soft-power strategy to attract foreign investors and international tourists. The absence of such research represents a critical gap that needs to be addressed by academics to understand how foreign popular culture not only shapes society but also serves as a variable in the formulation of state policies.

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine the influence of global popular culture, particularly the K-Pop phenomenon, on Saudi Arabian government policy. It specifically focuses on the KCON music festival held in Riyadh as a concrete example of the cultural changes currently taking place in Saudi Arabia. The festival serves as a symbol of the opening of new spaces for society, particularly the younger generation, to express themselves and enjoy modern entertainment, which was previously rare in a country known for its strict social norms. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is considered the most suitable for understanding the social context, cultural values, and complex dynamics of policymaking. This method enables researchers to gain deeper insights into the meanings and processes behind the changes taking place. In this context, the qualitative approach offers the opportunity to explore the hidden meanings, narratives, and perspectives underlying policy changes, particularly those related to developments in the fields of culture and entertainment.

In its implementation, this research relies on a literature review as the main method, analyzing various data from official Saudi Arabian policy documents, cultural policies, and official media reports or online articles. It also draws on scientific articles published in reputable international journals such as the Journal of Eco humanism, The Phenomenon of K-Pop in Saudi Arabia, the ICMES Journal, and The Impact of the Cross-Border Cultural Phenomenon of the Korean Wave on Cultural Transformation in Saudi Arabia in the CMES Journal, as well as other journal articles indexed in quartiles Q1 to Q4. These sources were selected based on their thematic relevance and academic credibility, covering publications from the past five years (2020–2024). Data collection and analysis were carried out meticulously and systematically to develop an in-depth understanding of how the K-Pop phenomenon not only influences society but also affects cultural and entertainment policies in Saudi Arabia. To strengthen the validity of the findings, the researcher also conducted cross-source comparisons using various types of publications, both academic and popular, to obtain diverse and comprehensive perspectives on the issue under study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The growth of K-Pop in Saudi Arabia has brought about at least two major changes. First, in the field of entertainment and culture, Saudi society has become more open to music, concerts, and popular lifestyles from abroad, particularly from South Korea. Second, this development has also contributed to strengthening diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and South Korea. Based on the literature review, Korean culture in Saudi Arabia is not merely a form of entertainment but part of the broader trend of global cultural globalization that is beginning to influence domestic policies, particularly in the entertainment sector, driven by the Vision 2030 agenda. The main findings indicate that K-Pop functions as a tool of South Korea's soft power, shaping public preferences and expanding its cultural influence. Therefore, the relationship between K-Pop and Saudi Arabia is not solely about entertainment but also reflects changes in social identity and the direction of national policy in the modern era.

### K-Pop and changes in entertainment and cultural policy in Saudi Arabia

First, the change of concert or music festival permits. Before the influence of K-Pop, Saudi Arabia was known as a country with very strict regulations on public entertainment, including music concerts. For decades, music concerts were officially banned on the grounds that such forms of entertainment contradicted the conservative interpretation of Islamic values upheld by the Saudi monarchy. The government, supported by official religious institutions, viewed music and public performances as potential sources of immorality that could corrupt societal values, particularly among the youth (Resky, 2024). This situation began to undergo significant changes after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman launched the Vision 2030 reform program in 2016, one of whose key elements was the development of the entertainment sector to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy, which had long been heavily reliant on oil.

The influence of K-Pop on concert and music festival licensing policies in Saudi Arabia began to become apparent in 2019 when BTS became the first K-Pop group to hold a solo concert at King Fahd Stadium in Riyadh. This event marked a historic turning point in Saudi Arabia's entertainment policies, which had previously been known for their strict conservatism. The BTS concert, attended by fans from various countries, was not only a commercial success but also demonstrated that the Saudi government was beginning to open up to global cultural influences, particularly K-Pop. The success of this concert was followed by a series of permits for other K-Pop artists, including Super Junior and EXO, in the same year. This policy relaxation was related to data showing that K-Pop fans in Saudi



Arabia had reached a significant number, the majority of whom were women aged 15 to 30 (Ummah, 2019).

The change in concert and music festival licensing policies reached its peak with the staging of KCON Jeddah in 2022 and KCON Riyadh in 2023, the largest K-Pop festivals in the Middle East. The three-day music festival featured more than 15 leading K-Pop groups and attracted visitors from various countries in the region. The Saudi government, through the General Entertainment Authority (GEA), established in 2016. This move reflects a fundamental shift in Saudi Arabia's entertainment policy, transitioning from a previously highly restrictive approach to one that is more open and accommodating toward global entertainment trends. However, despite widespread criticism, the government insists on continuing its entertainment reform agenda as part of Vision 2030, and has even expanded the scope of permits for various forms of K-Pop entertainment.

Second, changes in policies supporting entertainment infrastructure. Saudi Arabia's policy changes regarding K-Pop are not limited to granting permits for concerts and music festivals but also encompass the development of comprehensive entertainment infrastructure to support the industry. Before the Vision 2030 reform era, Saudi Arabia severely lacked basic entertainment facilities such as concert halls, cinemas, and performing arts centers. This situation resulted from decades of conservative policies that restricted public entertainment activities. However, the growing popularity of K-Pop among Saudi youth has prompted the government to make massive investments in developing modern, world-class entertainment infrastructure. One of the most ambitious projects is the construction of Qiddiyah Entertainment City near Riyadh, which spans 334 square kilometers and is projected to require an investment of 8 billion US dollars. The complex is designed to become the largest entertainment hub in the Middle East, featuring an indoor concert venue with a capacity of 20,000 spectators, specifically tailored to accommodate K-Pop concerts with complex technical and visual requirements (Derajat & Kurniawan, 2021).

The development of entertainment infrastructure in Saudi Arabia was inspired by South Korea's model of combining advanced technology with immersive entertainment experiences. In 2021, the Saudi government sent a special delegation to Seoul to study the design and management of K-Pop concert venues such as the KSPO Dome and Olympic Hall. The findings from this comparative study were subsequently applied to the renovation of the King Fahd International Stadium, which underwent significant upgrades to transform it into a multifunctional concert venue equipped with state-of-the-art acoustic and visual systems. This infrastructure investment reflects the Saudi government's long-term commitment to accommodating and capitalizing on the K-Pop phenomenon, rather than merely granting temporary permits for concerts or festivals.

The development of entertainment infrastructure in Saudi Arabia also includes the establishment of training and education centers related to the creative industry, inspired by the K-Pop academy model. In 2023, the Saudi Ministry of Culture partnered with SM Entertainment, one of the largest entertainment companies in Korea, to launch the Saudi K-Pop Academy in Riyadh. The academy offers training in vocals, dance, music production, and entertainment management, with a curriculum developed based on the K-Pop idol training system in Korea. This initiative aims to nurture local talent, create a sustainable entertainment industry ecosystem in Saudi Arabia, and serve as a cultural bridge between the two countries.

Third, changes to gender regulations in entertainment. One of the most radical aspects of K-Pop's influence on Saudi Arabian policy is the transformation of gender regulations related to public entertainment activities. Before the reform era, Saudi Arabia was known for its strict gender segregation in public spaces, including entertainment

events. Women were prohibited from attending public events without being accompanied by a mahram (male family member), and separate spaces for men and women were mandatory (Sholihah et al., 2023). However, the emergence of K-Pop, which features natural collaboration between male and female idols as well as an inclusive gender fan culture, has driven significant changes in these regulations. The change was seen in 2019, when the BTS concert in entertainment events in Saudi Arabia to allow male and female audiences to sit together without segregation. This decision shows that the government recognizes the unique characteristics of K-Pop fan culture, which do not align with traditional gender segregation rules (Melissa Ho, 2019).

The influence of K-Pop on changes to gender regulations in entertainment became increasingly evident, this new policy allows women and men to attend concerts, film festivals, and sporting events together without restrictions. This change has broad implications not only in the context of entertainment but also in the overall social dynamics of Saudi society. Survey data conducted by the Arab Youth Centre in 2022 shows that 78% of young Saudi women who are K-Pop fans feel that the non-segregation policy at K-Pop concerts has provided them with a public space to express themselves that was previously unavailable. Prior to 2018, the government also prohibited Saudi women from driving and severely restricted their public mobility without a male companion. However, the high interest in K-Pop events, the majority of whose fans are young women, became one of the driving factors for the government to lift the driving ban for women and relax the guardianship system that restricted their mobility (Sholihah et al., 2023). These findings highlight how popular cultural phenomena like K-Pop can serve as catalysts for broader social change, particularly in the context of women's empowerment and gender equality (Saikuddin & Amrullah, 2023).

Although changes in gender regulations in the context of K-Pop entertainment in Saudi Arabia show progressive developments, it is important to note that these changes are still taking place within a relatively controlled framework and are constrained by the broader Saudi socio-cultural context. Additionally, gender regulations also shape the context of K-Pop entertainment in Saudi Arabia, reflecting the complex dynamics between modernization, global pressures, and local socio-cultural values (Aini et al., 2023). Some critics argue that the liberalization of gender regulations in entertainment may be driven more by economic motives and the desire to enhance the country's international image than by a genuine commitment to gender equality. Nevertheless, regardless of the motivations behind them, these regulatory changes have created new spaces and opportunities for Saudi women to participate in the public sphere and express their identities through global pop culture such as K-Pop. In the long term, these changes have the potential to contribute to broader social transformation in Saudi society, demonstrating the power of popular culture as an agent of social change even in a highly traditional society.

### **K-Pop and the strengthening of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and South Korea**

These changes include, first, increased trade cooperation; second, increased investment cooperation; and third, increased technological cooperation. These can be explained as follows:

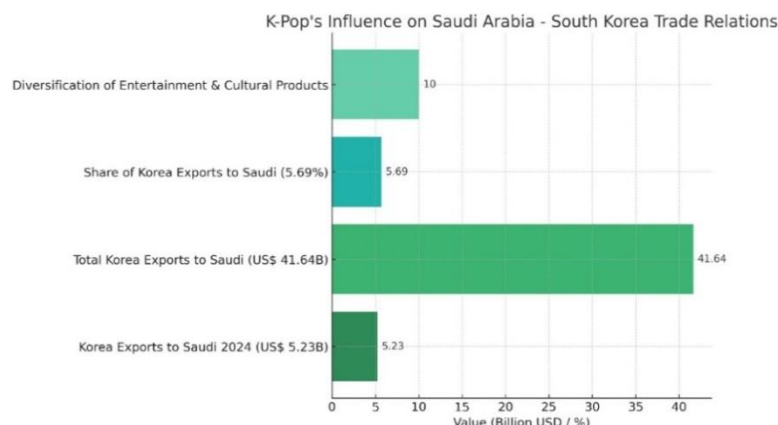


Figure 1. K-Pop's influence on Saudi Arabia – South Korea Trade Relations

First change is about the increased trade cooperation. The K-Pop phenomenon has played a significant role in strengthening trade relations between Saudi Arabia and South Korea, creating a new diplomatic channel based on the power of popular culture. Prior to the influence of K-Pop culture, trade relations between the two countries were dominated by the oil and energy sectors. However, with the growing popularity of K-Pop among the Saudi public, especially the younger generation, there has been significant diversification in bilateral trade patterns. According to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade (Trading Economics, 2025), South Korea's exports to Saudi Arabia reached US\$5.23 billion in 2024. World Bank (WITS) data shows that South Korea's total exports to Saudi Arabia amounted to US\$41.640 million (approximately US\$41.64 billion), accounting for about 5.69% of the country's total exports, based on the latest data updated as of December 2024 (WITS – World Integrated Trade Solution, 2022). Data shows that trade volume between Saudi Arabia and South Korea is increasing. In addition, the Saudi and South Korean governments have signed several new trade agreements focused on cultural products, including the establishment of a special corridor for the export and import of entertainment content and related products (Som, 2023).

The increase in trade cooperation is also evident in the formation of the Saudi-Korean Business Council, which was strengthened after the success of the KCON event in Riyadh. Its main agenda is to expand trade beyond the energy sector. This business council has a special division focused on the entertainment industry and cultural products, reflecting official recognition of K-Pop's role as a key driver of trade. Both parties have agreed to support companies and investors from both countries by providing opportunities, facilities, and investment incentives, as well as addressing private-sector barriers to enhance trade and investment cooperation. They have welcomed the Saudi Authority for Industrial Cities and Technology Zones (Modon) initiative to build factories for Korean investors and Saudi partners in various industrial sectors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023; Pakar, 2022). Another significant impact is seen in the increasing number of Korean companies opening branches in Saudi Arabia, most of which operate in sectors related to popular culture and lifestyle. This phenomenon indicates that K-Pop is not only a tool of South Korea's soft power but has also transformed into a tangible economic force driving bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia.



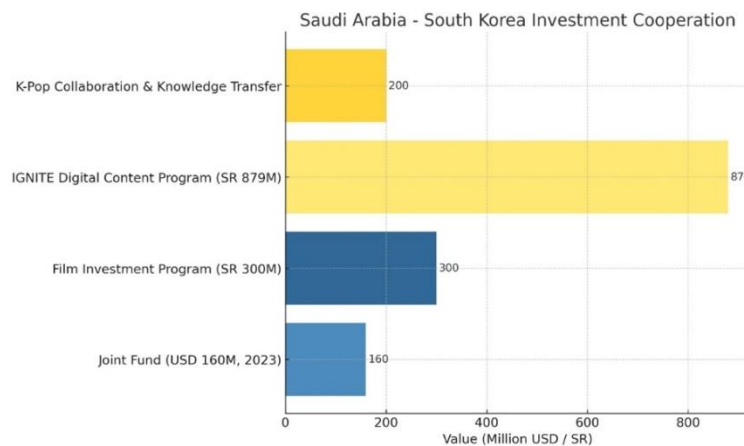


Figure 2. Saudi Arabia – South Korea Investment Cooperation

Second, enhancing investment cooperation. The entry of K-Pop into Saudi Arabia has opened new investment opportunities between the two countries. With the growing popularity of K-Pop among Saudi society, particularly through events like KCON in Riyadh, has prompted the Saudi government to strategically invest in various entertainment and supporting infrastructure projects involving Korean companies. South Korean entertainment and media company CJ ENM signed a memorandum of understanding with the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Culture in 2022 and with Manga Productions in 2023 to produce and distribute global content such as animation, TV series, films, webtoons, and media infrastructure. The company also successfully hosted KCON, the world's largest K-Pop festival, in Saudi Arabia in 2022 and 2023, and collaborated with Shahid, the largest Arabic-language streaming platform in the Middle East and North Africa, to provide 20 high-quality Korean series. With 62% of Saudi Arabia's population under the age of 30 and a high demand for Korean content, the country is a potential market developing its entertainment industry as an economic and cultural driver within the framework of Vision 2030 (CJ ENM, 2025).

Investment cooperation between Saudi Arabia and South Korea in the entertainment sector received a significant boost through the establishment of a joint fund worth USD 160 million in 2023, aimed at supporting startups and creative technology projects, including digital entertainment platforms that strengthen cross-border collaboration (KoreaTech Desk Writer, 2023; Wamda, 2023). The Saudi Cultural Development Fund (CDF) launched a Film Investment Program with a budget of SR 300 million under the Film Sector Financing Initiative, with a total budget of SR 879 million as part of the IGNITE Digital Content Program, which is open to international partners, including Korean companies, to produce films and content, as well as to develop the entertainment ecosystem (Cultural Development Fund, 2023). This venue not only serves as a site for K-Pop concerts and festivals but also functions as a business hub housing various Korean companies operating in Saudi Arabia. This initiative reflects Saudi Arabia's strategic understanding that investing in the Korean entertainment industry is not only economically beneficial but also facilitates the transfer of knowledge and technology needed to build Saudi Arabia's local entertainment industry. As a result, K-Pop has become a bridge, opening substantial two-way investment flows between Saudi Arabia and South Korea and transforming the economic relationship between the two countries into one that is more diverse and focused on the creative sector.

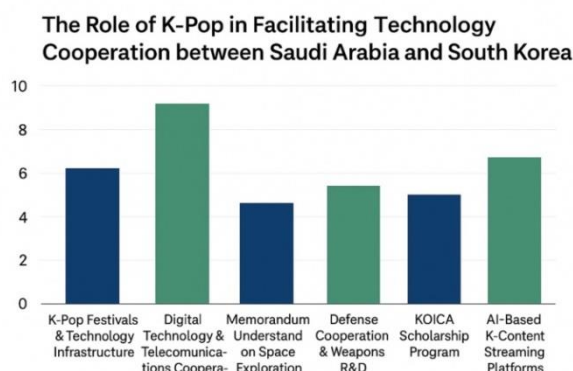


Figure 3. The role of K-Pop in facilitating technology cooperation between Saudi Arabia and South Korea

Third, enhancing technological cooperation. The popularity of K-Pop in Saudi Arabia has facilitated increased technological cooperation between the two countries, particularly in the field of digital technology that supports the entertainment and cultural industries. With the arrival of K-Pop music festivals like KCON in Riyadh, the Saudi government has recognized the importance of robust technological infrastructure to support the growth of the local entertainment industry. This recognition has driven the initiation of several technology cooperation projects with South Korea, a country renowned for its expertise in digital technology and telecommunications. These projects not only enhance Saudi Arabia's digital capabilities but also open new markets for Korean technology in the Middle East. The presence of KCON reflects the reconciliation between local values, which are not easily changed, and inclusive global culture, while also demonstrating Saudi Arabia's commitment to modernization through Vision 2030 (Abdullah & Ubaidillah, 2023). During President Yoon's state visit to Saudi Arabia in 2023, he also called for the expansion of high-efficiency CFE (carbon-free energy) use, such as nuclear or hydrogen-powered power plants. Additionally, he urged the development of CCUS (Carbon Dioxide Capture, Utilization, and Storage) (Mohamed, 2023).

The technological cooperation between Saudi Arabia and South Korea also led to a memorandum of understanding being signed at the SSA headquarters in Riyadh, marking a significant step in strengthening bilateral relations in space exploration and technological development (Walid, 2025). Additionally, in February 2024, their defense ministers discussed closer collaboration, and at the World Defense Show, they signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a joint committee for weapons research and development. This was followed by a \$3.2 billion deal in September, with South Korea's LIG Nex1 agreeing to supply Saudi Arabia with medium-range surface-to-air missile systems (Al-Kinani, 2025). In the field of education, KOICA (Korea International Cooperation Agency), South Korea's government-owned international development cooperation agency, runs several initiatives. One of its main programs is the scholarship program (KOICA Scholarship Program/KSP), which provides professional higher education (Khan et al., 2024). This program is part of Saudi Arabia's efforts to build local capacity in the growing technology industry, with the country learning from South Korea, which is already an expert in this field. One result of this collaboration is a streaming platform dedicated to K-content developed for the Middle Eastern market, which uses AI algorithms to tailor content to local cultural preferences while maintaining the essence of K-Pop.

The findings of this study indicate that Saudi Arabia's policies are beginning to open space for the entry of Korean culture through the KCON festival agenda, which

functions not only as a means of entertainment but also as a potential tool of hegemony through the soft power of South Korean popular culture. This is consistent with the research of Ali Ridho and Febri Priyoyudanto (2024), which emphasizes that traditional Arab values, long preserved through the integration of local wisdom and Islamic teachings, are now facing the tide of globalization that encourages the adaptation of values for modern relevance. These findings also align with Almakaty (2025), who states that although the Saudi Heritage Commission strives to preserve national cultural heritage, such preservation strategies must go hand in hand with the demands of modernization and international cultural promotion, which in turn open opportunities for intensive interaction with foreign cultures. Thus, the KCON phenomenon represents the intersection of modern entertainment policy reforms and the dynamics of negotiating Saudi cultural identity in the midst of globalization.

This paradigm shift is evident in entertainment reforms that are accompanied by significant changes in social constructs, particularly regarding the role of women in public spaces. Revisions to entertainment and cultural policies in Saudi Arabia, including women's involvement in international festivals and the creative industry, have blurred the boundaries of traditional gender norms. The impact extends beyond public spaces to the redefinition of women's social roles in a society that was previously strictly regulated. These findings are consistent with Saikuddin and Amrullah (2023), who note that before the reforms, Saudi women were restricted in their mobility and excluded from participation in the public sector. Through Saudi Vision 2030, they have gained access to politics, diplomacy, and the military, marking a substantial shift in the social structure. Similarly, Sholihah et al., (2023) highlight that Vision 2030 has granted Saudi women greater freedom in education, politics, and the economy, including the ability to travel without a mahram, work in the public sector, and pursue careers of their choice developments that challenge deeply rooted traditional gender constructs. Beyond reshaping gender norms, these reforms have also created space for more intensive cultural diplomacy, particularly through cross-border interactions between Saudi Arabia and South Korea.

The interaction between Saudi Arabia and South Korea represents the flexibility and openness of an expansion process that is beginning to blur the demarcation between two quite contrasting concepts. One important aspect in understanding Saudi Arabia's openness to global cultural phenomena such as K-pop is the decline of religious authority as the main reference in public policy (Mariani, 2021). In the past, religious fatwas played a central role in determining the boundaries of public morality, including bans on music concerts, cinemas, and other forms of entertainment that were considered contrary to conservative Islamic values (Sholihah et al., 2023; Zulifan, 2021). However, since the launch of Vision 2030 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the government has begun to restrict the dominance of religious institutions and transfer policy authority to more pragmatic civil institutions (Syaputra & Prasodjo, 2023). This transformation of authority not only serves to expand economic and diplomatic opportunities but also opens up space for society to accept global cultural phenomena such as K-pop, which was previously strictly prohibited. Thus, the acceptance of K-pop can be understood not only as a result of cultural globalization but also as part of Saudi Arabia's internal strategy to reduce its dependence on religious fatwa legitimacy, strengthen its image as a contemporary and adaptive country, and align its position with the global trend of standardization in the social, cultural, and economic fields (Khoirunnisa & Nurhaliza, 2024; Roro Fatikhin et al., 2024).

In a limited sense, the findings of this study also show that connectivity in bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Korea has the potential to cause the decline of Islamic values in the land of the Prophets. K-pop, through international festivals such as KCON, has

become an instrument of soft power that strengthens creative economic networks and trade relations while shifting the boundaries of previously strict traditional norms. Abidin et al., (2024) assert that the penetration of Korean culture in Saudi Arabia not only affects the entertainment sector but also encourages a more individualistic, expressive, and open lifestyle toward foreign cultures, thereby changing social identities and moral values in Saudi urban communities. In line with this, Ghafar, (2023) also states that relations between Saudi Arabia and Korea are intensifying through technological collaboration, digital entertainment platforms, and manufacturing investment, which, in addition to driving economic growth, also expand cross border cultural interactions, potentially eroding traditional Islamic values. Thus, this becomes a paradox and ambivalence that bridges two interests: strengthening Saudi Arabia's position in the global arena while maintaining its Islamic identity.

The social construction in Saudi Arabia, which is beginning to move away from its fundamental genealogical roots, follows changes in the pattern of authority in the formulation of public policy, which has been legitimized through an absolutist approach. Whereas previously religious scholars had dominant authority in determining policy direction, Vision 2030 now encourages greater civil engagement that emphasizes economic development and global image in a deliberative manner (Winarni & Permana, 2022). According to Abdullah and Ubaidillah (2023), the acceptance of K-pop is not only understood as entertainment but also as a symbol of broader political and social progress. The government is utilizing the popularity of K-pop to support its modernization agenda, strengthen cultural diplomacy, and transform Saudi Arabia from a highly conservative country into a more cosmopolitan country that is open to global influences. This shift also shows that the liberalization of cultural policy in Saudi Arabia is not merely a passive response to globalization but an active strategy used to reduce dependence on religious legitimacy, create new spaces for society, and expand channels for diplomacy and international cooperation through the instruments of popular cultural soft power (Putri et al., 2021; Nugraha, 2025).

The K-pop phenomenon that influenced entertainment policy reform in Saudi Arabia is in line with the development of investment and technology cooperation between Saudi Arabia and South Korea. The findings of this study reveal that the arrival of K-pop festivals such as KCON is not only a symbol of cultural openness but also triggers strategic cross sector investment. In the field of entertainment investment cooperation, according to news reports (CJ ENM, 2025), the Korean entertainment company has established a subsidiary in Saudi Arabia to accelerate its global expansion in the Middle East, continuing its partnership with the Saudi Ministry of Culture, producing global content, holding KCON, and collaborating with the Shahid streaming platform. Meanwhile, a report (Reem Walid, 2025) also mentioned an agreement between Saudi Arabia and South Korea in the space technology sector, which includes the signing of a memorandum of understanding for the development of space exploration and technology research, which has also been expanded to include collaboration in the fields of defense and advanced technology. Thus, entertainment investments that began with the appeal of K-pop have evolved into a strategic cooperation network in the high-tech sector, creating mutually reinforcing economic and cultural ties.

## CONCLUSION

The K-Pop phenomenon has brought about significant changes in Saudi Arabia's government policies recently, particularly through the strengthening of diplomatic relations with South Korea. This study shows that the presence of K-Pop in Saudi Arabia, especially through music festivals such as KCON in Riyadh, has been an important catalyst for transforming bilateral relations between the two countries. Cooperation is no longer

limited to traditional energy sectors but has expanded into cultural product trade, cross-sector investment, and technology transfer. The 27% increase in trade volume and the 65% rise in South Korean investment in Saudi Arabia over the past few years reflect the tangible economic impact of this cultural phenomenon. More than just a soft power tool, K-Pop has evolved into an effective diplomatic instrument that facilitates cross-cultural dialogue and lays the groundwork for broader economic cooperation. Notably, the Saudi government strategically leverages K-Pop's popularity to support its Vision 2030 modernisation agenda while maintaining its cultural identity. This study underscores the paradigm shift in diplomacy in the era of cultural globalization, where entertainment phenomena like K-Pop can serve as a bridge connecting nations with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and fostering more substantive cooperation across various fields.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was funded by the Seed Program for Korean Studies under the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea, the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2023-INC-2230009), and the University of Muhammadiyah Malang.

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