

Exempting K-Pop Idols from Military Service

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Abstract

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This research paper examines the ongoing debate in South Korea regarding the exemption of K-Pop idols, particularly BTS, from mandatory military service. It delves into BTS's significant economic & cultural contributions to South Korea, estimated at billions of dollars annually & their role as a soft power. This paper outlines the history & current policy of mandatory military service in South Korea, a culturally sensitive topic due to the ongoing conflict with North Korea. It explores existing exemption criteria, including those for athletes & classical artists who enhance national prestige & discusses cases of successful exemptions & not so successful evasions within the entertainment industry. With this research in mind, my key argument is the lack of standardization & clarity with the current exemption policies, which has led to perceived inequality. The paper proposes six policy recommendations to reform the Military Service Act & concludes that through implementing these recommendations the South Korean military could

establish a more transparent, equitable & relevant military conscription policy that acknowledges diverse national contributions & adapts to contemporary societal needs.

On June 13, 2013, a group of 7 young boys with dreams bigger than what the entertainment industry was ready for, made their debut, & changed the path of K-Pop forever. Bangtan Sonyeondan, or internationally known as BTS came from humble & uncertain beginnings. Big Hit Entertainment, the company BTS debuted under, struggled financially & disbandment loomed over their shoulders when success didn't come as easily or quickly. It took years for BTS to breakthrough to international audiences & garner respect in their home country as well as the industry. There's a star quality that BTS has that no other group could imagine duplicating. BTS' impact is so massive they brought the South Korean economy an estimated 4.65 billion to South Korea's GDP, which is enough to be in the same league as Korean brands like Hyundai & Samsung (Lyu, 2024). BTS has essentially become a soft power through their music, album sales, western artist collaborations, diplomatic campaigns, & most importantly through their fanbase, ARMY. So when it came time for the eldest member to enlist in the military, it sparked a global conversation on whether BTS should serve in the military or be exempt from their birth right duties. Exemption is not a new phenomena, but has always been a culturally sensitive topic due to the ongoing war between North Korea & South Korea. In my research, I will address BTS' background & contributions to the South Korean economy, the history of mandatory conscription, case studies of those in the entertainment industry who have successfully been exempted, policy surrounding conscription & conversations about conscription as a whole. Doing this will help me answer my questions of, *Should there be an exemption policy in place for South Korean 'Idols' & if so, what criteria needs to be met for termination of their mandatory enlistment?* With the war between the North & South at a long standing stalemate, it would also be beneficial to know, *should policy be reformed to meet the needs of South Korea's*

changing society, or is the threat of North Korea too great to make military service optional?

These are some of my burning questions that I will answer through this research.

Background

Bangtan Sonyeondan, which means bulletproof boy scouts in Korean, is a group that represents their namesake unwaveringly since their debut. Prior to debuting as a K-Pop group, prospective members have to go through rigorous & oftentimes controversial training conditions just for the possibility of debuting into a group. When a trainee signs to train at an entertainment company they are essentially agreeing to long term, usually unfair conditions known as a “slave contract”. Slave contracts are restrictive & bind a trainee who typically starts out in the industry as a teenager & is controlled in every aspect by the company they are signed to (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). Some trainees have entered contracts that are valid for more than ten years, that is until a company finally got sued. In 2008, a duo from the boy group TVXQ, sued SM Entertainment, a major entertainment company otherwise known as the Big 3, more on this later (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). TVXQ was under an unfair 13 year contract that barred them from earning any money from albums that sold fewer than 500,000 copies (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). The following year, the Korean Fair Trade Commission established a rule that contracts can only last up to 7 years (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). In 2017, the fines that companies could legally demand from trainees or members for cancelling their contracts was reduced (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). Nonetheless, despite the changes, contracts in the Korean entertainment industry are still predatory. Companies still take almost the entire earnings of new performers to compensate for training & launching a group. It takes years to develop a trainee into star quality with training often consisting of singing lessons, rap lessons, dancing, acting, learning how to speak foreign languages, how to perform, plastic surgery & overall just looking the part (Valge & Hinsberg,

2019). It took G-Dragon, member of the popular boy group Big Bang, 11 years of training at YG Entertainment before he made his debut in Big Bang (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019) which at the time of his debut he had just turned eighteen years old. Slave contracts don't just control the training aspect of a trainees life, but also their personal lives as well. Trainees have to live in a dormitory, are often prohibited from communicating with their parents & friends, they can't date, they can't go out if it's not urgent, what they eat is controlled, & they are worked to a point of exhaustion for typically 20 hours a day (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). This can obviously stir up issues with mental health such as anxiety, depression & eating disorders. With South Korea being one of highest rated countries for suicide, it's not uncommon for idols to also commit suicide in order to escape predatory contract obligations. In 2017, Kim Jong-hyun, member of popular boy group, SHINee, committed suicide (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019). Jong-hyun had suffered from depression for a long time so it didn't matter how successful he became with SHINee or how loved he was by so many fans, the pressures of maintaining that success is insurmountable on a developing brain. With BTS, their start in the industry was a little more unconventional in comparison to other boy groups. BTS debuted under an unknown company called Big Hit Entertainment. As a trainee, the popular entertainment groups to join at the time were YG Entertainment, SM Entertainment & JYP Entertainment, otherwise known as the Big 3. The Big 3 companies dominated the industry & are known for starting the K-Pop wave & expanding it to Japan & other global music entertainment markets (Gaines, 2022). Groups that debuted under these companies under the peak of their influence are Super Junior, BIGBANG, SHINee, Miss A, 2NE1 & Girls Generation. These groups dominated the music scene in the late 2000's early 2010's, making these three companies the most powerful & successful companies to debut within the entire Korean entertainment industry (Gaines, 2022). That is until Big Hit Entertainment

entered the conversation. Big Hit Entertainment (Now Big Hit Music with HYBE Corporation as the parent company) was founded in 2005 by Bang Si-Hyuk also known as Hitman Bang who originally worked for Park Jin-young, the founder & CEO of JYP Entertainment. Hitman Bang helped JYP form the group 2AM, but eventually left JYP Entertainment to break out to forge his own path (Bruner, 2019). In the beginning, Big Hit Entertainment was unable to reach that level of Big 3 success & had tried & failed with several K-pop acts before landing on BTS. Much like other trainees, the members that form BTS underwent their own individual journeys in the trainee system before debuting. The leader/rapper, Kim Namjoon (stage name: RM), rapper/producer, Min Yoongi (stage name: SUGA) & dancer/rapper, Jung Hoseok (stage name: J-Hope) were among the first to join Big Hit Entertainment in 2010 in hopes of forming a hip-hop group. Hitman Bang reconsidered his approach with a more business model in mind & thought an idol group would make more sense than a hip-hop group, so when other trainees left & Namjoon, Yoongi & Hoseok stayed behind, he opened the door for auditions to create a more well rounded idol group (Bruner, 2019) That is when the remaining 4 members, Kim Seokjin (stage name: Jin), Jeon Jungkook, Kim Taehyung (stage name: V) & Park Jimin completed BTS with their vocal abilities & idol image. BTS ultimately debuted on June 13, 2013 releasing several albums that dealt with relatable themes of oppression, prejudice, love, loss, youth & self-love (Choi, 2023). They maintained mild mainstream success over the course of their album & concept releases in South Korea but didn't reach international success until 2017. BTS were the first K-Pop group to win a trophy at the Billboard Music Awards, beating six time winner, Justin Bieber for the Top Social Artist award (Gaines, 2022) & performing on the mainstage at the American Music Awards as the first Korean act to do so (Choi, 2023). Since 2017, BTS has continued earning awards, adapting their sound, lyrics & style, reaching new heights &

commanding the music space both domestically & internationally. How they were able to do this can be largely attributed to the loyalty of their fandom, ARMY. Adorable Representative MC for Youth or otherwise known as ARMY, is BTS army sized fandom that took on a different way of promoting the group. BTS entered the digital space fairly early in their debut to interact with fans & share more of their daily life on Twitter, Youtube & other social media platforms (Shin, 2023). This was something other companies weren't doing as much because Big Hit had financial limitations, so the traditional large-scale promotions seen with groups in the Big 3 were avoided (Shin, 2023). BTS communicated as sincerely as they could with their fans because from the beginning they understood how powerful a fan & idol relationship is (Shin, 2023). Between 2018 & 2021, BTS digital success through the loyalty of their online fandom pushed albums & songs to be number one on the Billboard Hot 100. Essentially, everything BTS touched went platinum because in every aspect of their career, ARMY was at their side making sure they broke records & got the recognition they so desperately deserved. BTS is estimated to have generated 41.86 trillion won (\$32.6 billion) over the past decade & has attracted around 800,000 foreign tourists to Korea each year (Lee, 2023) This economic impact has not gone unnoticed by the South Korea government, in 2018 each member was awarded the fifth class Hwagwan Order of Cultural Merit (Kelley, 2018). In 2021, South Korean president Moon Jae-in appointed BTS as honorary diplomats giving them Special Presidential Envoy to attend the 76th United Nations General Assembly where they performed their latest track, Permission to Dance & gave speeches on UNICEF's work of ending violence against the youth (Le, 2021). This was a calculated move by the South Korean government because BTS exerted different levels of influence that traditional public diplomacy was unable to do, thus South Korea took the initiative to exert their soft power resources through K-Pop (Le, 2021). President Moon also had other tools up his

sleeve with the enactment & passage of the BTS Law. Before BTS member Jin who is the oldest of the group turned 28, it was required for all able bodied Korean males to enlist in the Military by the age of 28. South Korea's National Assembly was enamored by BTS' global success & revised the Military Service Act (Choe, 2021). Under the revised law, K-pop entertainers who have received government medals for helping spread the country's cultural influence globally can apply for deferment of their military service (Choe, 2021). BTS Law allowed all members to postpone their service until aged 30, which allowed BTS to perform as a group for a few more years (Choe, 2021). The conversations surrounding BTS deferment instead of exemption have been widely criticized by fans, claiming unfair treatment & denial of privilege given the global phenomena BTS has garnered when olympians have been granted exemption (Choe, 2021). Unfortunately, BTS members one by one went off to serve in the Korean Army, the shortest duty obligation of the branches, starting in December of 2022. BTS staggered their enlistment & pre-recorded a lot of content so that ARMY wouldn't be without the members for too long. They are set to make their comeback as a full group in June 2025. Although BTS wasn't able to escape their military service obligation, many Koreans have. In fact, it's not as uncommon as one may think, many Koreans have either been exempted for enhancing national prestige, sustaining grade V or VI injuries, or through classic evasion. Either way, exemption is not a new concept but has warranted many critical conversations surrounding military service.

Exemptions

Since the Goryeo Dynasty, military forces have been maintained both professionally & under mandatory conditions in order to fight against foreign enemies that invade Korea's borders (MMA, 2025). The state of the military has changed & evolved over different historical periods such as the Japanese invasion & through the Korean War, but the structure we see today is

similar to what was established in response to the division of the Korean Peninsula. South Korea has had an official mandatory military conscription requirement since 1957 in order to solidify a ready military force in the wake of ongoing tensions with North Korea (Hosabettu, 2023). Under Article 39(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea it states “that all citizens shall have the duty of national defense under the conditions as prescribed by the Constitution. The Military Service Law mandated by the Constitution prescribes that all male citizens of Korea must sincerely fulfill the military service duties as defined by the Constitution and by Article 3(1) of this Law. This is the conscription system based on universal conscription concept. These two clauses form the basis of the military conscription system of our country, and the compulsory conscription is possible based on these clauses” (MMA, 2025). Article 8 says that “all men shall be enlisted for the first citizen service when he attains the age of 18 years” (Matsuo, 2023). In regards to exemption, men who are found incapable of performing military service due to disease or mental & physical incompetence are placed in grade 6 through examination which is the only grade that completely exempts a man from enlistment (Matsuo, 2023). Article 14 of Military Service Act says this about physical examination grades “the director of each regional military manpower office shall issue any of the following military service dispositions on persons who have undergone a draft physical examination (including those who have undergone a physical examination at a military hospital) or a physical examination for volunteers for active duty service. In such cases, for persons who have undergone a physical examination for volunteers for active duty service & attained 18 years of age, a disposition for military service shall be issued to them only when their physical grade is determined at Grade V or VI” (Military Service Act, 2025)

1. Persons falling under any of Physical Grades I through IV: To be enlisted for active duty service, supplementary service or the wartime labor service, based on their qualifications, such as educational background & age;
2. Persons falling under Grade V: To be enlisted for the wartime labor service;
3. Persons falling under Physical Grade VI: To be exempted from military service;
4. Persons falling under Physical Grade VII: To undergo a follow-up physical examination.

Under Article 60 of the Military Service Act in regards to postponing conscription the act says “The director of a regional military manpower office may postpone the conscription or call-up of a person who has undergone a draft physical examination or a follow-up draft examination, who falls under any of paragraph (1) 1 through 3 or falls under any of the following” (Military Service Act, 2020)

1. A student who attends a high school or higher;
2. A person who is taking a prescribed course at a training institute;
3. An outstanding person to enhance the national prestige in the fields of sports, & public culture & arts.

So with these articles in mind, there have been exemptions for individuals who do not have a grade IV examination & also those who have brought South Korea national prestige through sports or arts. A striker from the Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, Son Heung-min, won his team exemption when they took victory at the 2018 Asian Games (Wilson, 2020) Son Heung-min & teammates were exempt from serving the full 21 month military service, but still has to serve a shorter period (Wilson, 2020) The language of exemption is quite tricky because exemption means you are no longer obligatory to do something, but someone like Son Heung-min was told he was exempt, but only for part of his service, thus creating confusion with

the language of exemption. The issue I see with exemptions & the way it's talked about in the media, is that people who win certain competitions that have provided exemptions in the past, these individuals still have to apply for exemption & that could be approved or denied. Although individuals that apply are more likely to be denied since exemptions are rarely given out but if they are given out, there are catches behind it such as still having to serve in some capacity. One of those catches is serving on alternate duty. Those who require daily training like musicians, dancers & athletes can utilize their specialties for public service duty (Park, 2023). Public Service duty lasts 34 months which is longer than active duty service in the Army but they can still be active in their fields through volunteer hours after they complete their four weeks of basic training (Park, 2023). One of the ways to be recommended for public duty service is winning at least the second prize at one of the recognized music & dance competitions (Park, 2023). For athletes it's winning at least the third prize in Olympic Games or the first prize in the Asian Games, which would also make them eligible for alternative public service (Park, 2023). The alternate duty system for artists & athletes was introduced back in 1973 but standards have changed since it was first enacted by expunging the eligible competitions from 123 in 2008 to 36 in 2023 (Park, 2023) An example of this is Olympian Shin Yu-bin won the bronze medal at the Paris Olympics which makes him eligible under the current policy to be exempt from active duty military service but still perform service through alternative duties such as public service (Korea Times, 2024). What I've noticed about exemptions under this policy is that each case is treated differently, there is no standardized process other than the vague alternative duties, what someone does under those circumstances seems to differ. With someone like Son Heung-min he did not have to complete 36 months of alternative duty, he did 3 months of service & went back to his normal soccer activities (Wilson, 2020). Whereas those who win competitions but are

instead recommended for public service duty which is 34 months can still engage in their musical or dance training but are serving a longer service obligation. BTS Member Min Yoongi (SUGA), is currently on a type of public service duty where his enlistment period is much longer than the other members of his group. This isn't because of his contribution to the national prestige of South Korea or winning anything musically, but because he suffered an arm injury where he underwent shoulder surgery in 2020, giving him grade IV in his medical examination & making him eligible for alternate service as a social worker (Kim, 2023). This alternate service is actually 21 months instead of the required 18 months for able bodied men. Another case of alternate service with a K-Pop Idol is that of Choi Seungcheol (stage name: SCoups) from the 13 member boy group, Seventeen. Seungcheol tore his anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee joint & underwent reconstructive surgery to repair his ligament (Cha, 2024). He has been undergoing physical rehabilitation & has currently resumed group activities, but this surgery resulted in a Grade V examination where he is exempt from mandatory military service during peacetime but is required to perform labor in support of the military in case of war (Cha, 2024). The reason I share these different cases of exemption through alternate service, public service or some other agreement is that it's not standardized enough. The injuries Yoongi & Seungcheol underwent are similar & both required rehabilitation before being able to return to group activities. I've personally gone to a Seventeen concert & saw Seungcheol perform on stage, dance & do everything that was necessary of him as an Idol performer, but he was granted exemption during peacetime but Yoongi was not. Could that be because there was more time to heal between when Yoongi got his grade vs when Seungcheol got his? I also question what they define as peacetime, because as it stands North & South Korea is still an ongoing conflict with no peace treaty so I find this piece in Article 14 to be problematic when evaluating someone to

be a grade V. The Military Manpower Administration (MMA) also needs to create a standard & more precise language on exemptions. The term exemption gets headlines when you see it in news articles, but if you dig deeper, there are layers to how exempt an individual is & it doesn't always meet the definition of an exemption. Exemption in the oxford dictionary is defined as "the process of freeing or state of being free from an obligation or liability imposed on others". So when exemption is seen in the headlines, but they aren't free from their obligatory duties, it's misleading. With those who have won awards in music, dance or sports competitions there is even more variability, some serve twice as long as they normally would but still get to perform their skills & abilities, while others only have to serve a fraction of their obligation. Because this isn't standardized, it creates a subgroup of inequality in an already unequal system. What I mean by this is people like BTS who brought national prestige to their country but in ways that aren't recognized by the Military Manpower Administration they still had to serve their 18 months (Yoongi with 21 months). Sports & other forms of art like classical music & dance competitions are recognized, creating an outdated system entirely. This system has been criticized for disproportionately benefiting men for focusing on their achievements in specific international competitions such as the Olympics & Asian Games (Korea Times, 2024). Based on these different cases, I would recommend the following policy options in support of reforming the Military Service Act:

1. Standardize the Language & Define Exemption:

- **Rationale:** The Military Manpower Administration (MMA) should establish clear, concise & consistent definitions for all categories of alternate service that is lawful, accessible & plainly written in public databases. The term exemption should be reserved only for cases where an individual has no military service obligations regardless of

peacetime or wartime status. The current use of exemption in media & within policy descriptions such as the Military Service Act is misleading. As proven in cases such as Son Heung-min & Shin Yu-Bin who have different variations of exemption, having clearer language will improve public understanding & reduce confusion.

2. Modernize & Re-evaluate Exemption Criteria Based on Economic & Cultural

Contributions:

- **Rationale:** The criteria for alternative service or modified service obligations based on national prestige should be broadened to include K-Pop Idols. K-Pop groups like BTS have brought in 1.1 billion generated from consumer goods which is based on 1 in every 13 tourists who came to South Korea for BTS in 2017 (Taylor, 2022). The current system disproportionately favors athletes and classical artists, neglecting the significant impact BTS & other K-Pop groups have as a soft power. In 2018, Hyundai Research said BTS was contributing more than 3.6 billion to the South Korean economy every year which is equivalent to 26 midsize companies (Taylor, 2022). If BTS were offered alternate service, they were projected to have contributed \$29.4 billion if they didn't have to serve on traditional active duty (Taylor, 2022). This reformed policy would recognize a wider range of contributions that would create a more equitable system.

3. Establishing a Clear and Standardized Processes for Alternate Service:

- **Rationale:** The Military Manpower Association should develop standardized & transparent guidelines for alternative service duties such as including the duration of service, the types of activities that can be performed during service, & the criteria for placement in alternate service. The duration of alternate service should be consistently

aligned with the 18 months of active duty service, unless there are specific justifications for longer durations (i.e. extended recovery periods due to injury, failure to comply with guidelines, etc.). The varying lengths and conditions of alternative service, as seen in the cases of Son Heung-min, Shin Yu-jin, Min Yoongi (SUGA), & musical/dance winners highlight a lack of standardization. This can lead to perceptions of unfairness & confusion surrounding one's future with military service & their civilian career.

4. Define the Peacetime/Wartime Distinction for Grade V Exemptions:

- **Rationale:** Due to the ongoing tensions & lack of a formal peace treaty with North Korea, the distinction between peacetime & wartime service obligations for individuals with a Grade V physical examination should be analyzed for careful considerations. These terms should be clearly defined based on historical nuances & the current state of the conflict between the North & South. The current ambiguous definition of peacetime & wartime in regard to the aftermath of the Korean War, make the application of Grade V exemptions potentially unfair to those who have been given Grade I-IV examinations.

5. Ensure Transparency & Due Process in Exemption and Alternative Service Decisions:

- **Rationale:** The application & decision-making processes for exemptions & alternative service should be transparent, with clear pathways for individuals to understand the criteria so they can appeal decisions if need be. Each case should be evaluated based on clearly defined standards, minimizing subjective interpretations. The current system appears to lack a standardized process, leading to varied outcomes even in seemingly similar situations. Increased transparency and due process will foster greater trust in the system.

6. Regularly Review and Update Exemption and Alternative Service Policies:

- **Rationale:** The Military Manpower Administration should establish a mechanism for regularly reviewing & updating their military conscription policies, including the criteria for exemptions and alternative service, to ensure they remain relevant to South Korea's evolving social, cultural, and geopolitical landscape. This review process should involve public consultation & expert input & evaluations. The current policy, with its emphasis on specific historical achievements, appears to be outdated. Even with the addition of the BTS Law of pushing the maximum age to enlist to 30, is not enough. A regular review process will allow for necessary adjustments to reflect contemporary realities and national priorities.

Through implementation of these recommendations, South Korea can move towards a more transparent, equitable, and relevant military conscription policy that better reflects the diverse ways in which individuals contribute to the nation's prestige & national security.

Evasion

With reports of lawful exemption & alternative service, there are also cases where people have evaded service through fleeing the country, obtaining dual citizenship, repeating their duty obligations, or reporting false information. One of the biggest cases of evasion was with K-Pop singer PSY who is best known for his contribution to South Korean culture with his song Gangnam Style. PSY, or also known as Park Jae-sang served his military service twice. The law at the time required conscripts to serve for 24 months in active duty dependent on the service branch but PSY avoided his initial term through substitute military service by serving at a private company & performing concerts while working at said company, neither of which he was

qualified to do so (Lee, 2007). The Military Manpower Administration notified him that his service at this private company from 2003-2005 did not count, & he had to serve the 24 months again, totalling in 4 years of military service (Lee, 2007). In 2018, Soccer player Jang Hyun-soo submitted falsified documents to cover the required 544 hours of community service following his gold medal win at the 2014 Incheon Asian Games (Korea Times, 2024). His exemption conditions had him undergo four weeks of basic training & then 500 hours of community service over a three year period (Roh, 2018). Since he falsified documentation he received a lifetime ban from playing on a national team, was required to pay a 30 million won (\$26,448) fine & was given an additional five days of compulsory service (Roh, 2018). Another case of evasion was more direct with K-pop singer Steve Yoo, also known as Yoo Seung-jun who debuted as a soloist in 1997. Steve Yoo evaded military service by leaving South Korea in 2002 for a concert, & acquiring US citizenship, thereby losing his Korean nationality (Kim, 2025). This move was presented with a lot of backlash which consequently led to him being banned from entering South Korea (Kim, 2025). Steve Yoo filed a total of three administrative lawsuits over the years but has since issued a lawsuit against the Ministry of Justice for denying him issuance of a visa to enter South Korea (Kim, 2025). The Korean consulate general in Los Angeles refused to issue him a visa due to his evasion of military duty being a case that could “harm the interests of the Republic of Korea” & pointed to the possible negative effects surrounding draft-dodging sentiment (Kim, 2025). His visa will continue being denied because his ban is still valid, which is why he is suing the Ministry of Justice now (Kim, 2025). This case is still ongoing, & the conclusion of this recent lawsuit seems to still be in the works. These cases of evasion are particularly interesting & speaks to the conflicting views on mandatory conscription & how some people try to evade their duties as a Korean citizen.

Reform to mandatory conscription

As of 2022, where 49 countries still have conscription, South Korea is the one who is most technologically, democratically & economically advanced (Zadro, 2022). Since South Korea is still technically in a state of war, the need for manpower in order to deter a North Korean invasion is still needed in today's economy (Zadro, 2022). Over the past 70 years, South Korea has modernized at a faster rate than the North, resulting in economic superiority & thus rendering a complete North takeover to be inconceivable today (Zadro, 2022). However, as we have seen with evasion, not everyone is on board with serving their country. The views on this matter are quite diverse & changing as the years go by. When students from Seoul National University were asked their opinions of mandatory military service, they all had similar sentiments. One student said he believed it was a “necessary evil to combat the threat of foreign invasion” (Zadro, 2022). Another student said that the “mandatory military service was created after the division of the country post-korean war & I consider it to be an institution for preparing for war & a speedy reaction to emergency situations” (Zadro, 2022). One student also attributed historical incidents like the Japanese occupation, the North Korean & Chinese invasions & recent incidents of North Korean aggression with nuclear weapons testing as reasons for the need of conscription (Zadro, 2022). But one student pointed out that it's hard to view the state that is taking your rights away for around 2 years as a good thing, especially in today's society where liberty & individual freedoms are so important, & military service can be viewed as a conservative interruption to a liberal society (Zadro, 2022). This interview concluded with the same student saying “we need to find a way forward with conscription that infringes on individual rights as little as possible with the consideration of everyday citizens” (Zadro, 2022). Maybe it is time to modernize the military system & take on a different approach to maintaining

strength in face of invasion. In order to fully understand mandatory military service on a globalized scale, how other countries handle similar circumstances can make the evaluation of South Korea's future stronger. In Europe, after the end of the Cold War, countries began transitioning from conscription to all-volunteer forces. With the influx of countries joining NATO in the 1990's & early 2000's, the need to downsize & transform their military forces aligned with the state of their new alliance (Jonsson et al., 2024). Countries such as Norway, Finland, Denmark, Estonia, Austria & Switzerland maintained their conscription due to a number of reasons but some of those being existing threats from state & non-state actors, the country's geography, geopolitical location, population size, historical background, experiences & perceived security environment (Jonsson et al., 2024). Time, context & the degree to which a country faces national security challenges induces the need for prompt & continuous transformation of military forces (Jonsson et al., 2024). For example, the Baltic states & Finland either share borders or historical tensions with Russia. Russia who has annexed Crimea in 2014 & is still currently at war with Ukraine, has created an environment where conscription is still needed in neighboring countries (Jonsson et al., 2024). Switzerland however has adopted armed neutrality & has not joined the European Union or NATO making their stance on conscription different than the Baltic states (Jonsson et al., 2024). Each country has their own way of going about conscription so we'll just look at a few for comparison. Estonia for example has a population of 1,330,068 with 3,100 of that population in basic military training, has mandatory conscription for men, voluntary for women, with a length of service of 8 or 11 months (Jonsson et al., 2024). Norway has a population of 5,391,369 with 8000 of that population in basic military training, has selective gender neutral recruitment style, with a service time between 6-18 months (Jonsson et al., 2024). Switzerland has a population of 8,667,088 with 17,000 of that

population in basic military training, has mandatory conscription for men, voluntary for women, with a length of service to be around 5 months (Jonsson et al., 2024). Although it's difficult to compare European countries to South Korea who has around 51 million in total population, with 625,000 service members in active duty & 3 million in reserve (Garamone, 2025), the similarities still exist. Norway's length of service is in close range with South Korea, Switzerland & South Korea both being constitutional republics with highly developed economies & diplomatic relations, & Estonia being a former of the Soviet Union, has a history of conflict & tension with their aggressor & neighbor Russia which is similar to South Korea's relations with North Korea. These similarities are important to note because it gives some slack to South Korea in the discussion surrounding conscription or exemptions & the need to fully revamp the military system. Unfortunately for South Korea, change to their military force is already here but seeing the major effects to recruitment is on the horizon due to the plummeting birth rates. South Korea has the world's lowest birth rate with it being 0.78 children per woman over a lifetime (Bae, 2023). To maintain current recruitment levels, the South Korean military needs to enlist or conscript 200,000 soldiers a year (Bae, 2023). In 2022, fewer than 250,000 babies were born, so assuming about a 50-50 male-female split then that means in about 18-20 years when those children are of age to join the military only about 125,000 men will be available for the 200,000 spots needed to maintain strength (Bae, 2023). Women are currently not conscripted in South Korea but they can volunteer. Only about 3.6% of the current military force is women, showing a low voluntary turnout (Bae, 2023). Russia's war in Ukraine has shown the world that sheer manpower is not enough, the battlefield needs to be modernized so some of the ways South Korea is dealing with a manpower crisis is turning to technology (Bae, 2023). Of the 360,000 soldiers that made up Russia's pre-invasion ground forces which included conscript & contracted

personnel, 315,000 of them were killed on the battlefield. This is because Ukraine's usage of drones & high tech weapons supplied by western partners have aided in the deadly toll on Russia's force numbers (Bae, 2023). However, South Korea has been slower in making this transition because there was no urge due to the amount of manpower they have had over the decades (Bae, 2023). Obviously this is changing, so in response, South Korea has been developing unmanned military equipment, including medium altitude unmanned aerial vehicle (MUAV) & unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) (Bae, 2023). South Korea is also considering tapping into their large reserve population to fulfill shortfalls in the active duty sector (Bae, 2023). After South Korean men finish their 18 to 21 months of mandatory military service they become reservists for eight years (Bae, 2023). During this time they are called back into assigned units once a year to be reminded of their positions & duties (Bae, 2023). After their eight years of reserve duty, they are subjected to participate in civil defense training every year until the age of 40 (Bae, 2023). There have also been unconventional means to increasing manpower which is through the policy proposal of exempting men who have three or more babies before the age of 30 (De Guzman, 2023). The conservative People Power party has plans for this policy enactment but the policy has only been reviewed & not yet finalized (De Guzman, 2023). Cho Kyu-suk, a coordinator at the Seoul based Center for Military Human Rights thought the proposal wasn't totally irrational (De Guzman, 2023). Conscription can play a factor into limiting men from having families & Cho's organization has analyzed economic discontinuance in households where a sergeant is paid 676,100 won (about \$500) which is way below the average a household spends per month which is 2.64 million won (about \$2000) because of military service (De Guzman, 2023). On the opposite end, women's rights activists have slammed the conscription exemption idea because it's only benefiting men, claiming that the problem was not low birthrate

but discrimination (Rashid, 2023). The discrimination faced here is that women's careers are interrupted after giving birth & it's not a natural course of action for men to share childcare housework (Rashid, 2023). There is also a gender wage gap in South Korea & women face a lot of challenges in balancing work & family life (Rashid, 2023), so policies only benefiting men is the wrong way to tackle the manpower issue. It's very clear that South Korea needs to evolve their current systems to adapt to the prevalence of self expression values & widening of opportunities in order to maintain societal support (Jonsson et al., 2024) Estonia & Lithuania have implemented individual application systems to adapt to societal changes & meet personal needs & expectations. Doing this puts some freedoms back into the individual where they are volunteering for an obligation, offering options that give them more control over their life trajectory while also increasing agency (Jonsson, 2024). South Korea gives you from age 18 to 28 (Unless you fall under the BTS Law category, until age 30) to enlist, providing some freedom of when the individual decides to go. The issue here is that South Korea heavily relies on the male population to fuel their numbers, although women can volunteer, women are less likely to want to join due to the masculine culture that is structurally integrated & just overall gender differences & lack of respect for women being in a male dominated space (Jonsson et al., 2024). Norway for example has a gender neutral conscription system which has led to higher participation in female participants over countries that have mandatory male & voluntary female recruitment style (Jonsson et al., 2024). Having gender neutral conscription has led to positive impacts between men's attitudes toward women in the military (Jonsson et al., 2024). Norway was able to show in a study where they used mixed gender rooms in the military, & found that mixed-room environments have been associated with greater openness among men towards women in leadership positions, combat roles, & mixed team deployment, thus indicating that

conscripts who live in mixed-gender rooms develop a greater appreciation for gender equality in society (Jonsson et al., 2024). This is something South Korea could take into account with reforming their military, but one thing they do have that is unique in the defense sector is the alliance between South Korea & the United States. After the Korean peninsula gained independence from Japanese colonial powers post World War II, early Cold War tensions lead to the Soviet Union occupying the North & United States forces occupying in the South (CFR, 2023). This led to an attempt by the Soviet Union backed by China to reunify the peninsula under communist rule, thus leading to the United States & United Nations Command to provide support in the South, this conflict is otherwise known as the Korean War (CFR, 2023). The Korean War ended in a ceasefire & an agreement that divides the Korean Peninsula at the thirty-eighth parallel known as the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) as a fortified buffer between the North & South (CFR, 2023). To this day, North & South Korea remain at war because a formal peace treaty was never signed (CFR, 2023). United States involvement in South Korea led to the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty which ensures United States defense of South Korea against external aggressions & commits to U.S. military presence in South Korea (CFR, 2023). This alliance has evolved into a globally comprehensive strategic partnership in maintaining stability & fighting against communism in the Indo-Pacific (Dept of State, 2025). To deter North Korea's provocations & attacks, the U.S.-ROK alliance maintains a strong defensive military posture that includes annual joint exercises, combined command structure, robust military sales & close consultative relations between U.S. & ROK leadership (Dept of State, 2025). The United States is highly involved in supporting the modernization efforts in South Korea & has exported \$3.4 billion in defense articles to South Korea in the 2019 to 2021 fiscal years (Dept of State, 2025). South Korea's military is in a lot of ways influenced by the United States with similar rank, unit

structure, training & operational goals to just name a few. However, the United States military is not a conscripted system, it is a professional organization that is voluntary for both men & women ages 17 to 42 depending on branch & waiver approvals. The United States treats the military organization like any other federal career which comes with lucrative benefits that provide stability, freedom, flexibility, & skilled labor opportunities that are transferable to civilian careers. So what is preventing South Korea from offering the same system of benefits that the United States has going on? I can safely assume that South Korea simply does not have the budget allocated in their military spending to do so. The Biden-Harris Administration for fiscal year 2025 submitted to Congress a proposed defense budget of \$849.8 billion (DOD, 2024). This budget goes toward a lot of priorities such as security deterrence through weapons, missiles, technology, investments such as pay increases, facility funding, & other defense capabilities (DOD, 2024). South Korea's defense budget for 2023 was \$48.3 billion which is 8.9% of its total government expenditure (Trade, 2023). Their budget priorities as laid out by the Yoon Suk-yeol administration includes mostly reinforcement & defense capabilities in response to North Korea's nuclear & missile threats, training an advanced artificial intelligence force, & establishing high-tech war capabilities while expanding defense exports (Trade, 2023). No where in their defense budget did I see priorities of their personnel which is a staunch difference between South Korea & the United States priorities. It's very clear that the United States has a bigger budget because they are a global power allowing for greater investment in technology, training & their personnel that South Korea doesn't have. However, that doesn't mean South Korea can't better allocate their government spending or more of it in a different way. In response, I have recommended the following policy options for a stronger force with freedom & liberties kept in mind:

1. Implement a transition towards a mixed voluntary-conscription system with increased incentives for voluntary service.

- **Rationale:** South Korea's declining birth rate demands a shift away from a purely conscripted force to maintain sufficient personnel numbers. Through offering competitive salaries, clear career progression opportunities within the military, & comprehensive benefits packages that are similar to the US model even if scaled down due to budget constraints, South Korea can attract more male & female volunteers. This would reduce the reliance on conscription which would alleviate the burden on young men, & potentially lead to a more skilled and motivated professional organization. The conscription component can & should be retained but scaled down to fill remaining needs & ensure baseline readiness.

2. Adopt a gender-neutral conscription system.

- **Rationale:** Expanding conscription by including women will help address the looming manpower shortage due to the low birth rates while also promoting gender equality within the military & society. Norway's experience as a gender neutral conscripted force demonstrates that integrating women into military service can foster a more inclusive environment & positively influence men's attitudes towards women in traditionally male-dominated roles. While this implementation may face resistance, the scaling down of conscription numbers through the offering of benefits to both the conscripted & voluntary force, may entice more women to instead volunteer & thus cutting down on the need for conscription. Including women in military service is a necessary step to ensure the military's long-term viability & changing of societal norms.

3. Accelerate the investment in military technology and automation to offset manpower shortages.

- **Rationale:** Artificial Intelligence is the future & adapting the military to include modern technology in warfare is of utmost importance. The conflict in Ukraine highlights the need for technology, & cuts down on the need for manpower. South Korea is already moving in this direction, but accelerating the development and deployment of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), & other advanced technologies can reduce the need for a larger force. Focusing resources on cutting-edge defense capabilities will not only address the birth rate challenges but also enhance South Korea's defense capabilities against North Korean threats.

4. Reform the Reserve to be more actively integrated & regularly trained.

- **Rationale:** With a large reserve force, South Korea has a significant asset that can be better utilized. In the United States, the reserves acts as a part time force but trains monthly & supports the active duty on deployment exercises. Instead of annual recalls, implementing more frequent & realistic training exercises, with the opportunity to hone in on skill development through education & specialized roles, can ensure the reserve force is truly prepared for rapid deployment in a crisis. Providing benefits to the Reserve force similar to the U.S. Model will also entice those in reserve status to either stay in or volunteer for active duty. Doing this would provide a more robust secondary line of defense & potentially reduce the pressure on active duty.

5. Introduce flexible conscription options & pathways that minimize disruption to individual lives and careers.

- **Rationale:** In acknowledging the concerns raised by students regarding the impact of conscription on individual liberties & career trajectories it is crucial that South Korea maintains societal support by adapting to new generations. Exploring options that allow individuals who aren't in the arts, sports, or in specialized careers to fulfill their service in different capacities such as cyber security or in the tech space, offering shorter conscription periods or service that can be broken up, or offering more flexibility in the timing of service (similar to Estonia's individual application system) could make conscription less burdensome & more aligned with individual needs.

6. Increase the financial compensation & benefits for conscripted soldiers to better reflect the economic climate

- **Rationale:** The significant disparity between a conscript's salary & the average household expenditure creates financial hardship for many families. There are also gender wage gap disparities that make women unlikely to want to raise a family. While a full transition to a U.S. model of a professional military with comparable salaries might be financially challenging in the short term, incrementally increasing the compensation for conscripts & addressing the gender pay gap would acknowledge the value of their service & alleviate some of the economic burden on them and their families. This could also improve morale and public perception of mandatory military service & entice more women to join if they know they are being paid the same as their male counterparts.

Exempting K-Pop Idols

This research began with BTS' humble beginnings & their explosive journey to being the most internationally recognized group in South Korea through their contributions to the economy & industry, but left off on their eventual decision to enlist in the ROK Army. What's missing is

what led to this decision & the government's role in it. Speculation about BTS enlistment started in early 2020 before the world went on lock down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The eldest member Jin had positive remarks about military service during their fourth full-length album press conference saying “I think military service is a duty as a Korean citizen, & I will respond at any time if the country calls” (Yonhap, 2022). Yoongi (SUGA) the second eldest member, briefly touched on the topic of military service in his track “What Do You Think?” from his solo mixtape in May 2020 with lyrics stating “Woo woo, we’ll be sure to go to the military when it’s time, so all the bastards who tried to sell our name to freeload off us, shut up” (Yonhap, 2022). Yoongi’s response is more telling of the deep rooted feelings felt about military service & the government using their name & fame to push their political agenda. It was clear the group was becoming restless & the COVID-19 pandemic caused a lot of uncertainty surrounding their enlistment. 2020 was a changing point in BTS career, it was the year they were going to go on a highly anticipated world tour for their album Map of the Soul 7 but had to pivot by cancelling the shows & doing a concert online because of the lockdown. 2020 was also the year BTS member Jin was planning on starting his enlistment but from the success of their first english single Dynamite & the enactment of the BTS Law that pushes the age of enlistment from 28 to 30 altered the groups focus for the next 2 years. BTS released another full length album at the end of 2020 called BE which gave hope to ARMY’s that BTS wasn’t going anywhere they were here to stay even if they were faced with enlistment. Unfortunately, military service still loomed in the background, & although they had the BTS Law in their back corner, the narrative shifted within the National Assembly on talks of possible exemption that gave the fanbase ARMY’s a newfound hope to their future as a group. The K-pop industry voiced the need to allow globally recognized pop artists to do alternative service & some lawmakers were in support of it but there

was still a lack of clarity (Yonhap, 2022). Once COVID restrictions started to fall, BTS went on a 3 city tour called Permission to Dance On Stage where they performed in Seoul, Los Angeles, & Las Vegas with each city getting 4 nights of performances by all 7 members of the group. Their LA shows began on November 27th, 2021 & wrapped up on December 2nd, 2021 & grossed \$33.3 million & sold about 214,000 tickets over the span of 4 days at SOFI Stadium (Rathi, 2021) Not only was this SOFI Stadiums highest grossing engagement but also the highest grossing run of shows period in nearly a decade (Rathi, 2021) BTS broke more records in LA by earning the biggest Billboard Boxscore & being the first band to win the biggest box score in California but they were also the first primarily non-english act to earn over \$20 million in a single engagement in history (Rathi, 2021). Their performance in Las Vegas & Seoul held the same history breaking stats. They also broke the box office with their Permission to Dance on Stage: Seoul concert coming to the theaters which pulled in \$32.6 million from 3,711 cinemas in 75 countries in one single day (Aswad & Rubin, 2022). This wasn't a typical screening but a live stream of BTS' concert at Olympic Stadium in South Korea (delayed screen for some locations given the time difference) (Aswad & Rubin, 2022). For a market comparison, "BTS Permission to Dance on Stage" managed to crack the top five in domestic box office charts despite playing in fewer than 1000 locations (Aswad & Rubin, 2022). The concert landed in third place behind Robert Pattinson in "The Batman" which collected \$66 million from 4,417 venues over the weekend. (Aswad & Rubin, 2022). Ticket prices for BTS Permission to Dance on Stage went for \$35 in the U.S. & Canada which is much higher than the average movie ticket of \$9, but the steeper than average prices didn't seem to deter fans from enjoying the concert in theaters (Aswad & Rubin, 2022). The pandemic made it difficult for people to travel to see BTS live in concert, so giving fans access to a live viewing at the cinemas gave an alternate experience that

fans anywhere can enjoy (Aswad & Rubin, 2022). The Permission to Dance On Stage Tour brought in a lot of hype & speculation on if BTS would expand their tour to a world tour after how successful Seoul, Los Angeles & Las Vegas went. Airports all over the world began participating in online campaigns on Twitter tagging BTS to come to their city, thus engaging ARMY's & trending hashtag #AirportTwitter (HT, 2022) BTS never went on a world tour, but they instead took the role as Ambassador to the World Expo 2030 in which Busan is hoping to host. This role provided yet another opportunity to see BTS in concert called BTS "Yet to Come" in Busan. This concert, which ended up being free, drew in 55,000 fans into Asiad Stadium (Lee, 2022). Busan is one of four cities in the running to host the World Expo, a world fair proposed to take place in 2030 (Lee, 2022). So when BTS was appointed as honorary ambassadors for the Busan World Expo 2030 bid, fans knew immediately that this was a way for the government to use BTS for another political cause, but regardless of the circumstances, it was another longwaited reconnection between BTS & ARMY's (Lee, 2022). 2 days later, following the high of the Yet To Come concert, BigHit Music shared in an official notice on October 17, 2022 that the members of BTS will be fulfilling their duty & performing their mandatory military service (Bowenbank, 2022). Initiating the process first is with the eldest member Jin & the rest of the members will be following suit, staggering their entry to service in order to promote their solo activities. This announcement left fans distraught, but BTS did their best in order to prepare the fans for whatever happens. BTS' company BigHit urged the National Assembly to come to a decision, saying that the BTS members are suffering from the lack of clarity since bills that would grant exemptions from active duty military were still pending at the parliament (Yonhap, 2022). Lawmakers remained divided over the issue during their parliamentary audit into government officers dealing with military affairs (Yonhap, 2022). In a public survey of 1,018

adults nationwide by the pollster Realmeter, 60.9% of respondents answered that they support the bills calling for including K-pop artists in the exemption program, whereas 34.3% were against them (Yonhap, 2022). BTS ultimately made the decision to serve citing a lot of pressure & burden over the situation since their military service became a nationwide issue that was constantly up for debate (Yonhap, 2022). So the question still remains, should K-Pop idols be exempt from military service, & if so under what criteria? Was BTS going forth with their service a missed opportunity for South Korea's economy on what could have been if they went through with exemption? Based on several factors, I would argue that yes, BTS not being exempted from their full duty was a missed opportunity for South Korea & yes, K-Pop idols should be exempt from military service, but only under specific criteria. It's a missed opportunity for BTS, the fans, & South Korea as a whole. BTS is a soft power, they promote culture & language through their music & content (Hosabettu, 2022). BTS is actively involved in increasing tourism where they were a part of a government initiative "Live Seoul Like I do" that draws tourists to the band members favorite locations in Seoul, (Hosabettu, 2022) thus increasing tourism with 800,000 foreign tourists coming to South Korea annually (Lee, 2023). BTS global recognition spans into diplomacy where they were invited to the United Nations General Assembly to deliver a speech to launch Generation Unlimited, an education program for young people around the world (Hosabettu, 2022). They were also invited to speak at the White House in May 2022, to speak on hate crimes against Asian Americans & discuss issues concerning representation & anti-Asian discrimination with President Biden (Hosabettu, 2022). BTS' reach diplomatically has pushed South Korea to be with the top dogs like the United States because they now have the ability to wield power & global influence through appeal, culture & influence rather than economic or military power (Hosabettu, 2022). Without BTS promoting as a group,

Big Hit Music's parent company, HYBE, stock dropped more than 25% & has not fully recovered (Associated Press, 2022). Although sales did not disappear entirely due to staggering BTS solo activities, & pre-filming content, the generation of sales through new business ventures isn't as big as it was when the group was fully together (Siddiqui, 2023). This was a huge loss on South Korea's end, but with BTS coming back as a group in June 2025, their return is highly anticipated & could bring in larger audiences, tourists, & economic impact to the country. As far as exemptions for K-Pop idols goes, there are several factors contributing to my reason as to why I think K-Pop idols should be exempt:

- 1. Global Recognition of K-Pop**

- The k-pop industry is a giant cultural asset to South Korea (Hosabettu, 2022). The majority of popular media is dominated by American culture, so the implementation of K-Pop in western media helps South Korea foster a competitive economy. This is also known as Hallyu, meaning Korean wave, which gained popularity & momentum in the mid 2000's through the remarkable success of the Korean music industry & coincided with the rise of the internet, social media & the birth of a new generation (Kim, 2022). Hallyu has even spilled over into South Korea's diplomatic relationship with North Korea (Hosabettu, 2022). In 2018, K-pop girl group Red Velvet performed for Kim Jong Un at a widely televised cultural exchange event in North Korea's capital Pyongyang (Hosabettu, 2022). Kim Jong Un was shown speaking with the members of Red Velvet signalling publicly that South Korean culture & media were enjoyed by Kim, thus opening an avenue of cultural diplomacy (Hosabettu, 2022). Unfortunately, North Korean law bans South Korean media in any capacity, but South Korea media such as K-drama's & K-Pop are commonly smuggled across the border into North Korea. Those who are caught will

face fines, jail time or worse – execution (Hosabettu, 2022). Despite the risks involved with consuming South Korean media, the North Korean public are avid consumers & credit South Korean media to disillusioning them of the false image that has been fed by North Korea for decades (Hosabettu, 2022). This is an important factor to note in the argument for exempting K-Pop idols because K-Pop can be used as a tool in forging alliances with enemies as seen with Red Velvet visiting North Korea. Although that moment alone didn't change any trajectory of the North & South relationship, it's a pathway to opening the door of cultural exchange that is crucial for peace keeping.

2. Cultural Merit Awards: BTS is the Standard

- I don't believe every K-Pop idol deserves to be exempt just because they are in the industry, but I think BTS should be the standard as to what groups should do if they want to be exempt. Since no one in the K-Pop space has been exempt based on contribution, I'm proposing criteria based on BTS accomplishments that almost had them exempt:
 - a. For a K-Pop Idol to be exempt from active duty service, they need to have won Hwagwan Order of Cultural Merit, a prestigious award that recognizes significant contribution of culture & language globally. The Order of Cultural Merit was “created to award both Korean & foreign personnel in recognition of their outstanding meritorious contributions in their fields of diplomatic service, military affairs, social relief, development of national economy & other services rendered in the interest of the improvement of national welfare & productivity” (Korean Medals, 2025). So if a K-Pop idol is awarded this that means they have contributed at the same level BTS has & deserve to be exempted. Given that BTS is the only K-pop group to be awarded this merit, it's a tough act to follow. With

the current law set in place to exempt gold medal winning athletes in the Olympics & Asian Games, as well as classical artists in music & dance, Idols should be considered in this category since individuals in the arts & entertainment sector have already faced exemptions.

- b. K-Pop idols should also bring in a substantial amount of financial support to the South Korean economy to meet exemption criteria. BTS has brought in an estimated \$5 million annually just from concerts, album sales, & merchandise (Gunaratne, 2025). If other K-Pop groups are able to generate this revenue they should be considered for exemption.
- c. K-Pop idols should also meet the criteria of having some diplomatic relations, whether being an ambassador for Seoul tourism, or getting involved in the diplomatic space by spreading good hearted messages that inspire or change the youth. Since K-Pop groups mostly target the youth, having their audience involved in the spread of diplomatic campaigns in fostering good will would not only benefit the group, but the country they are representing, which is South Korea.

As for the argument against exempting K-Pop Idols, I understand that military service has been required since the aftermath of the Korean War, & is generationally a part of Korean culture. Every male has gone through it, so those who don't are generally looked down upon in society. The beautiful thing about culture is that it changes & adapts with every new generation. Maybe right now it's seen as a right of passage in manhood, but as the societal, economic, & political environment changes, the needs for mandatory service will also change. Many countries are pushing away from mandatory service in order to adapt to the current climate. Due to South

Korea's unique circumstances with North Korea, I don't think very many changes to the conscription system will happen anytime soon, but due to the low birth rates impacting manpower, decisions for reform will need to be made sooner rather than later.

Conclusion & Discussion

The debate surrounding mandatory military service & exemptions for international K-Pop sensations like BTS highlights critical tensions & a much needed conversation between South Korea's national security & its expansive cultural influence. While equitable factors for military service holds a significant amount of weight on Korean society, it's undeniable the unprecedented economic & cultural contributions K-Pop has on South Korea. Unique cases like BTS, warrants careful consideration on this matter. The financial impact being in the millions annually, coupled with their role as cultural ambassadors, elevates South Korea's global standing. This suggests that their activities as a group serve the nation in distinct but an equally valuable capacity. BTS enlistment & inadequate response by the South Korean government sparked widespread discussion which revealed diverse perspectives on national security, duty, artistic distinction, & economic priorities. Moving forward, I think the government should establish clear standards & criteria for exemption. Given the cases of exemption I looked at, each one varied in exemption criteria & length of service that has added to the confusion & unfairness that already plagues exemption. K-Pop also falls under arts & entertainment, so those who exhibit exceptional contributions in their genre should be considered for exemption the same way athletes & classical artists are. The lessons learned from BTS showcase the need for a flexible & more forward thinking approach to the military that recognizes that South Korea is an evolving landscape with global influence & unique value that their cultural icons bring to the country. K-Pop is a soft power & should be better utilized in this space. As for military service

in general, I'm not opposed to mandatory service. I think it's necessary in some cases but I don't think it's entirely necessary in South Korea's case. I do think South Korea should always maintain a ready force, but there are other ways of doing that. I mentioned implementing a hybrid model or a model similar to the United States. Although our populations differ in size, South Korea is capable of implementing a voluntary force with benefits like the United States on a much smaller scale. The culture surrounding men enlisting is something that is hard to break & not everyone would be on board with a complete erasure, but I think having a hybrid model could be something that society could understand. This would be something I'm interested in following up with in collecting data through surveying the Korean population on their thoughts on implementing a new system for military service. Some limitations I found within my research is that the literature existing on this topic is still new & difficult to find. The conversation surrounding BTS being exempt from military service only started picking up speed in 2021 & 2022. The conversations have since died down since not even BTS who fulfilled all these amazing side quests, aren't immune from military service. I think the general consensus is that regardless of contribution, you will have to serve in the military in some capacity. This is fine, but having exemptions for those in other entertainment industries such as sports or classical music, makes this topic unfair so I do think more people should be talking about it to continue bringing awareness. K-Pop idols bring in just as much to the table as athletes or classical musicians do. So the perception surrounding K-Pop by non listeners is that it shouldn't be taken seriously & that only young girls care about it. In reality, K-Pop is a soft power, it reminds us that cultural exchange, economic influence & political leverage can be sought after through supporting boy & girl groups. It also shows just how powerful the youth can be in spreading the

message, streaming content, buying merchandise, attending concerts, creating community online,
that without the fans, K-Pop wouldn't be the global power it is today.

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