

The Symbolic Role and Communicative Implications of K-Pop Culture at Protest Sites in South Korea

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This study conducts an in-depth analysis of the communicative impact and symbolic significance of K-pop fandom culture on South Korea's collective civic action, focusing on the impeachment protests held in front of the National Assembly in Yeouido immediately following the declaration of emergency martial law. Whereas past protests were "material protests" that attempted to force intentions through the physical sheer force of crowds, the post-martial law protests demonstrated a qualitative transition into "cultural protests" that diffuse values through cultural empathy and affective solidarity. In particular, the youth (teens and 20s) K-pop fandom—who had been subjects of social ridicule at the lowest rungs of South Korean society since the 1990s—emerged as the primary driving force of this civil movement based on their subcultural practices of "solidarity and sharing" alongside "mass sing-alongs (ttechang) and joyous celebration." Utilizing qualitative methodology, this study analyzes protest dynamics through the frameworks of cultural communication, spatial politics, and evolutionary anthropological solidarity theory. Findings indicate that protesters resisted authoritarian violence by expressing individual plurality through "light sticks" and "individualized flags" instead of traditional candles and organizational banners. Furthermore, their cultural practices led to mutual learning with middle-aged generations (40s and 50s) through playlist exchanges, achieving unprecedented generational integration. Although foreign media highlighted this as "peaceful and friendly solidarity," this study warns against the hazard of "material politics," wherein established political entities attempt to instrumentalize the autonomous cultural protests of the youth. Ultimately, this paper discusses how the evolved civic consciousness underlying popular culture operates as new social capital to overcome democratic crises, offering an extension to traditional social movement theories.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Problem Statement

Throughout its process of compressed modernization, South Korean society has evolved a unique grammar of collective action through a trajectory of democratic struggles against state authoritarianism. The violent physical clashes involving Molotov cocktails and tear gas during the military regime of the 1980s settled into a normative framework of non-violent peaceful protests through the 2008 Candlelight Vigil against U.S. beef imports and the 2016 impeachment rallies against President Park Geun-hye. However, even within this historical evolution, the outward format of protests largely remained within traditional boundaries dominated by unified crowd formations filling massive squares, red organizational banners, and solemn, resolute activist songs.

On December 3, 2024, at midnight, the sudden declaration of emergency martial law plunged South Korean society into immense shock and turmoil. This was not only a national disaster impacting the economy, society, diplomacy, and politics, but also an unprecedented event that threatened the very foundations of democracy believed to have been firmly established since the 1987 democratization. Nevertheless, South Korean society demonstrated a remarkable level of democratic resilience amidst this unprecedented violent crisis. The martial law declaration was rendered void within six hours as the National Assembly passed a resolution demanding its lifting, followed by the passage of a presidential impeachment motion on December 14—the third in South Korea's constitutional history.

Within the critical trajectory of these 11 days, the most noteworthy element was the dynamic movement of civil society operating behind formal political developments—specifically, the "qualitative evolution of protest culture." The millions of citizens who filled the precincts of the National Assembly in Yeouido on December 7 and 14 presented a protest grammar completely distinct from the solemn and grim struggles of the past. As

major international media outlets (AP, Washington Post, BBC, etc.) reported that the demonstrations resembled "a dance party or a K-pop concert," these protests manifested a seamless synthesis of festival and resistance.

Major protest sites transformed from spaces of solemn struggle into sensory, carnival-like spaces reminiscent of K-pop concerts. In place of organizational banners from labor unions or political parties, micro-flags representing individual identities and daily lives fluttered in the air. Amidst solemn chants, the lights of idol light sticks and the collective sing-alongs of contemporary pop music resonated throughout the crowds.

Past protest sites in South Korea functioned primarily as "material spaces" attempting to enforce collective goals through physical presence and numerical dominance, where arts and culture were consumed merely as auxiliary tools for mobilization. In contrast, the 2024 protests in Yeouido advanced into genuine "cultural protests" that communicated ideal values and social agendas through cultural empathy. At the center of this movement were youth in their teens and 20s—the primary consumers of K-pop—who had historically endured social ridicule. Replacing red union flags with customized personal flags, and swapping traditional candles for multi-colored idol light sticks, these youth illuminated the darkness against state violence.

This phenomenon cannot be dismissed as a temporary trend or an entertainment-driven anomaly. It represents a structural shift resulting from South Korea's popular culture achievements being injected directly into the public political realm. Crucially, youth who had long been marginalized by the cultural prejudices of older generations emerged as autonomous subjects at the forefront of democratic protest.

1.2. Research Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to analyze the evolution of South Korean protest culture following the emergency martial law declaration within the conceptual framework of a paradigm shift from "Material Protest" to "Cultural Protest," examining its scholarly and social implications for

South Korean democracy and civic communication.

Specifically, this study sets forth three central research questions:

What are the communicative characteristics of "cultural protest" as opposed to traditional "material protest," and how did K-pop operate as an essential medium for empathy?

How did subcultural fandom practices—such as light sticks, self-made flags, and peer-to-peer sharing cultures—generate new social meanings in terms of spatial politics and symbolic interactionism?

How did the distinct cultures of the youth and older generations achieve affective integration at protest sites, and what is the political efficacy of "friendly solidarity" viewed through an evolutionary lens?

Moving beyond traditional political sociology, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach integrating popular culture studies, evolutionary anthropology, and spatial communication theories. Through this synthesis, the paper cautions against the instrumentalization of youth culture by institutional politics while proposing future directions for democratic civil movements.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Paradigm Shift in Protests: From "Material Protest" to "Cultural Protest"

In traditional social movement theories, protests were conceptualized as processes of physical mobilization aimed at expressing collective grievances and pressuring policymakers. Historical South Korean protests exemplified "material protest", characterized by the display of physical force—such as crowd size, spatial occupation, and confrontation with police—to compel political outcomes. Under this regime, individual agency and micro-level experiences were submerged within mass organization, reducing cultural elements to mere tools for agitational solidarity.

Conversely, New Social Movement (NSM) theory (Melucci, 1996) posits that contemporary collective action moves beyond the distribution of material

resources to focus on the production of symbolic meanings, the expression of identities, and the reconfiguration of cultural norms in everyday life. The "cultural protest" observed post-martial law originates from this theoretical inflection. Rather than exercising physical threat or coercion, cultural protests diffuse social values through shared aesthetic codes, emotional empathy, and playful practices. Here, everyday safety, peace, and horizontal solidarity replace grand ideological slogans as the primary vocabulary of resistance.

Cultural protests rely on empathy as their core mechanism. By borrowing universal popular culture codes (music, dance, fandom play), they gently transfer values of democracy and peace to external observers. As Melucci emphasized, contemporary movements prioritize identity expression over macro-level power acquisition. The fact that K-pop served as the primary medium replacing speeches and chants in South Korea's public squares confirms the evolution of protests into high-level cultural communication.

2.2. Subcultural Inversion and Re-evaluation: From Pop Culture to Protagonists of Civil Society

Since its emergence in the 1990s, K-pop fandom has faced continuous othering by mainstream South Korean discourse. Youth fans, particularly young women, were frequently dismissed as irrational, emotional consumers under patriarchal social norms.

However, move beyond passive consumption, fandom practices represent active political agency trained in solidarity and self-organization (Lee, 2018). Having developed resilience against societal prejudice, youth fandoms experienced historical triumphs through self-organized actions—such as coordinating long waits for television tapings or organizing streaming campaigns to influence music charts. This accumulated "collective efficacy" converted into robust social capital during political crises. As seen during the 2008 candlelight vigils led by young female students ("candlelight girls"), youth remain the demographic most sensitive to threats against everyday safety and peace. Responding to state violence first with fear, and

subsequently with structured indignation, this demographic demonstrated civic agency congruent with contemporary South Korean narrative empowerment.

2.3. Social Movements from an Evolutionary Anthropological Perspective: "Survival of the Friendliest"

Faced with authoritarian martial law, the primary apparatus deployed by citizens was heightened solidarity and kindness. Evolutionary anthropological insights from Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods' *Survival of the Friendliest* (2020) offer a powerful framework for this dynamic. Hare argues that *Homo sapiens* survived and flourished not through physical dominance or violence, but through evolutionary capacities for cooperation, empathy, and friendliness.

At the protest sites, citizens spontaneously operated relief trucks distributing free food and heating pads, pre-paid local small business accounts to offset merchant losses, and actively guarded one another's safety. Against cold state violence, citizens deployed warm hospitality and friendly solidarity. Extrapolated from fandom practices of distributing free custom merchandise (goods) at concert venues, this altruism expanded into the public sphere, proving that friendliness can serve as a formidable force for democratic evolution against physical oppression.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

To interpret the multi-layered meanings of the post-December 2024 protest culture, this study employs a qualitative methodology. Decoding the atmosphere of protest space, emotional interactions among participants, and symbolic cultural codes requires a contextual, interpretive approach rather than quantitative reduction.

This study addresses the following Research Questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do individualized flags and light sticks affect entry barriers to protest participation and the formation of collective identity?

RQ2: How do K-pop and fandom culture mediate intergenerational empathy and affective integration, translating them into political action?

RQ3: How do attempts at political instrumentalization by institutional entities weaken or transform the spontaneity, autonomy, and solidarity of cultural protests?

3.1. Data Collection Strategies

Participant Observation: The primary researcher conducted direct participant observation at rallies held near the National Assembly in Yeouido and Gwanghwamun Plaza, Seoul. Accumulating over 20 hours of observation across 3 days, field notes were recorded focusing on spatial dynamics within youth assembly zones, open-mic platforms, and community sharing trucks.

Discourse Analysis of Media Coverage: Foreign media articles framing the movement as a "cultural protest" (e.g., AP, Washington Post, BBC, The Guardian) were collected to analyze global framing. Secondary data included academic presentations (e.g., Prof. Suk-Kyeong Hong, Seoul National University, Dec 14, 2024) and published participant interviews.

In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with three purposively selected key informants (a social activist, a professional musician, and an applied music professor) who actively participated in the protests.

Semiotic Analysis: Semiotic decoding was applied to protest soundscapes (interleaved playlists of activist songs and K-pop tracks), slogans on individualized flags, and visual lighting patterns produced by light sticks.

3.2. Analytical Framework

Collected textual and observational data were categorized along three major thematic axes:

Deconstruction of Space and Semiotics (Transition from organizational banners to personal flags, and candles to light sticks).

Affective Generational Integration (Playlist sharing, mutual learning, and historical world-building via cultural media like the film *12.12: The Day*).

Global Reception and Boundaries of Instrumentalization (International framing and warnings against "material politics").

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Spatial and Symbolic Democratization: Semiotic Analysis of Flags and Light Sticks

Past protests dominated public squares with unified institutional symbols. Large red banners

[Table 1] Comparison between Traditional Material Protest and Contemporary Cultural Protest

[Traditional Material Protest]	[Contemporary Cultural Protest]
• Large Red Union Banners	• Micro-Flags (Individual Identities)
• Wax Candles (Solemnity/Fragility)	• Battery Light Sticks (Plurality/Vibrancy)
• Concentrated, Hierarchical Space	• Decentralized, Pluralistic Networks
• Single-Way Agitational Speeches Alongs	• Interactive Playlists & Mass Sing-Alongs

Instead of massive organizational banners, micro-flags featuring daily narratives filled the square. Inscriptions referencing pet names, job-seeker anxieties, or personal hobbies asserted that ordinary individuals themselves were valid public speakers, allowing unaffiliated citizens to occupy the space autonomously.

Concurrently, physical symbols underwent technical modernization. The candle—symbolizing solemnity, self-sacrifice, and vulnerability to wind—was replaced by battery-powered idol light sticks. Light sticks represent durable, safe, and controllable modern semiotic devices. The multi-colored illumination produced by diverse idol light sticks visually manifested "unity in diversity"—preserving pluralistic fandom identities while unifying under the overarching goal of defending democracy.

Spatially, the protests shifted from static road blockades to decentralized, pluralistic networks. Unaffiliated individuals holding light sticks dispersed throughout the area while maintaining interconnectedness, constructing a novel political landscape that redistributed public spatial power.

4.2. Symbolic Democratization: "We Are Autonomous Individuals, Not Mobilized Groups"

deployed by labor unions and civic organizations highlighted collective power and organizational hierarchies. However, these institutional symbols presented psychological entry barriers to unaffiliated citizens, limiting movement expansion.

The 2024 protests demonstrated a fundamental transformation in both symbolism and spatial usage:

Whereas previous rallies sought a collectivist spectacle uniting the crowd under "one voice," the 2024 Yeouido assemblies functioned as a mosaic of autonomous individuals. Micro-narrative flags displayed statements such as "Pet Owner Coalition," "Job Seekers Association Interviewed Day After Tomorrow," or specific idol fan clubs. This signified the dissolution of traditional activist movement conventions. Youth participated as self-determined individuals rather than delegates of formal organizations.

Furthermore, light sticks demonstrated that participants were not passively mobilized by political organizations; rather, they chose to support democratic values with the same passion applied to supporting their favorite artists. As The Washington Post noted, financial districts filled with bankers transformed into an ocean of light stick illumination, creating a novel trend of political resistance out of tools historically reserved for music concerts.

4.3. Transfer of Senses and Language of Empathy: K-Pop and Mass Sing-Alongs

K-pop acted as the primary catalyst engaging younger demographics. Songs such as Girls' Generation's Into the New World, Aespa's Whiplash, and tracks by G-Dragon and

BLACKPINK's Rosé transformed political assembly spaces into festival sites.

This sonic integration reconfigured protest communication from top-down agitation to multidirectional empathy. The narratives embedded within K-pop songs reflect youth anxieties, structural hardships, and hopeful resilience. Replacing rigid political rhetoric with collective sing-alongs lowered psychological barriers, elevating protests from solemn grievances to empowered celebrations of popular sovereignty.

4.4. Intergenerational Mutual Learning and Affective Convergence

A compelling outcome of these assemblies was intergenerational integration. Middle-aged participants (40s and 50s) occupied the same space alongside youth in their 20s and 30s. Rather than experiencing friction, these demographics engaged in mutual recognition.

Older participants acknowledged the cultural leadership of younger generations, learning K-pop lyrics and streaming playlists via smartphones. Concurrently, youth embraced traditional activist anthems (e.g., March for the Beloved) and retro pop songs (Amor Fati). This cross-generational empathy was reinforced by shared cultural references, such as the blockbuster historical film 12.12: The Day (Spring of the Seoul). Media consumption enabled younger generations to internalize the trauma of past military dictatorships, prompting swift, emphatic resistance when martial law was declared in 2024.

4.5. Socialization of Altruistic Fandom Practices: Proof of Friendly Solidarity

Despite hundreds of thousands of participants gathering in concentrated urban spaces, the assemblies maintained strict non-violence and civic order.

Food trucks operated by citizens distributed free warm refreshments, while participants shared heating pads and cleared litter thoroughly prior to dispersal. This behavior directly reflects the evolutionary concept of "survival of the friendliest." Fandom practices of mutual care, peer

sharing, and voluntary logistics—cultivated within subcultural concert spaces—transferred into civic practices, establishing a highly mature manifestation of civic engagement during a national constitutional crisis.

4.6. Warning to Political Circles: Do Not Degrade "Cultural Protests" into "Material Politics"

This study explicitly cautions against institutional political attempts to co-opt autonomous youth protests. Youth mobilization did not stem from blind allegiance to established political parties, but from a determination to protect democratic norms when institutional trust reached a breaking point.

Political attempts to appropriate youth participation for party power displays ("material politics") risk alienating participants. The foundational drivers of cultural protests are autonomy, horizontal communication, and voluntary solidarity. Should institutional political actors reduce citizens to passive objects of mobilization, civic engagement will decline into cynicism. Political institutions must remain responsive, listening to civil society with the same adaptability demonstrated in the democratic square.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

This study demonstrates that the core momentum driving the post-martial law impeachment rallies was a qualitative paradigm shift from traditional "material protests" to subculturally informed "cultural protests."

The principal findings of this study are as follows. First, K-POP music and idol light sticks functioned in protest settings not as mere instruments of physical mobilization but as sophisticated communicative signs mediating participants' quotidian suffering and aspirations for democracy. The cultural legacy of fandom—once derided—was transformed into a symbol of communal solidarity in moments of crisis, suggesting that cultural resources can be reconstituted as the affective and symbolic foundations of political resistance.

Second, the disappearance of the large banners that traditionally dominated protest spaces was compensated for by a proliferation of individualized flags, which lowered barriers to entry and demonstrated, through the political topography of the square, that any citizen could become an agent of democratic defense. This aggregation of small markers promoted the democratization of spatial politics and enabled a re-interpretation of collective action forms and participant subjectivities.

Third, practices of care and sharing derived from concert culture diffused norms of consideration and altruism, operating as an effective means of nonviolent resistance against violent repression. These affective capacities facilitated emotional convergence across generations, thereby enhancing the movement's sustainability and potential for expansion.

The observed shift from commodified, object-centered protest to culturally inflected protest in the aftermath of the emergency martial-law episode opened new possibilities for overcoming democratic crisis. The spectacle of the so-called "K-rallies," which attracted international attention, illustrates how Korean popular culture, when coupled with a mature civic sensibility, can serve as an instructive global example.

Nevertheless, this cultural achievement warrants careful scrutiny. Of particular concern is the attempt by established political actors to co-opt youth-driven, playful cultural protests as instruments of material politics aimed at demonstrating political strength. Young people's presence in the square stemmed not from blind loyalty to any party but from an urgent, voluntary commitment to democratic values; the moment politics objectifies or instrumentalizes their culture, the fragile political efficacy newly reclaimed by youth risks reverting to disappointment and cynicism.

Political actors and civil society must therefore reflect upon and respect the democratic values embedded in cultural protest—namely, spontaneity, autonomy, horizontal communication,

and compassionate solidarity. Public institutions should cultivate the flexibility to respond to the everyday voices and cultural sensibilities generated by youth, just as politicians attune themselves to the playlists young people create.

In conclusion, the tender luminous solidarity raised by citizens during the crisis of December 3 demonstrated the possibility of democratic restoration in the Republic of Korea. Ensuring the durability of that light is a remaining social and political responsibility. Future research should closely examine the prospects for institutionalizing such cultural resistance and the mechanisms through which political co-optation may occur.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions:

Theoretically, this study expands traditional social movement frameworks by empirical demonstration of how everyday subcultural practices convert into public democratic social capital. Practically, it highlights a model of civic engagement rooted in empathy, joy, and horizontal communication that offers insights for global civil society facing democratic backsliding.

Limitations and Future Research:

As a qualitative study based on immediate field observations and media discourses, these findings may not fully represent all protest demographics. Longitudinal research is required to examine how autonomous youth participation influences formal institutional politics over time. Future studies should incorporate larger, mixed-method sample sizes to further formalize the theoretical mechanisms of cultural protests.

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7. Appendix: Interview Questionnaire

Introductory Questions

1. Personal Information and Educational Background: Please introduce your age, academic background, and family environment.

2. Please briefly introduce your background regarding popular culture, fandoms, or social movement experiences.
3. Observational Context: What were your initial impressions and points of interest when first observing light sticks utilized at protest sites?
4. Media and Global Impact: What role did transnational fandom networks and social media play in the international dissemination of light stick protests?
5. Socio-Political Implications: What long-term impacts will youth leadership, intergenerational solidarity, and the politicization of cultural resources have on South Korean politics?

Core Questions

1. Theoretical Interpretation: Through what theoretical framework (e.g., framing, collective identity, cultural recontextualization) do you interpret the repurposing of light sticks for political protests?
2. Historical Continuity: What distinct factors differentiate the 2024 light stick assemblies from past candlelight movements?
3. Affective Politics and Performance: How do you explain the mechanisms through which K-pop-based performances drive emotional solidarity and political mobilization?
6. Critical Perspectives: What limitations, concerns, or criticisms exist regarding light stick protests (e.g., message dilution, commercialization, internal division)?

Exploratory and Closing Questions

- What policy or civil society recommendations would you emphasize?
- Ethics: Re-confirmation of anonymization protocols, data management rules, and destruction of raw interview data post-publication.

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