

ELENI ALEXANDRI

The Phenomenon of K-Pop:
A Place of Reality and Fiction



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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

1. Alexandri, Eleni 2022. K-Pop as (mis)representation of Korean culture. *International Journal of Marketing Semiotics and Discourse Studies*. 10(1): 1–20.
2. Alexandri, Eleni 2023. A spectacular world of modeled reality. In: Kõvamees, Erik; Miyamoto, Oscar; Randviir, Anti (eds.). *Concepts for Semiotics II*. (198–225). Tartu, Estonia: University of Tartu Press. 197–224.
3. Alexandri, Eleni 2024. The illusionary world of K-Pop. In: Tragel, Elli Marie (ed.). *Explorations in Dynamic Semiosis*. Switzerland: Springer Nature. pp. 291–311.
4. Alexandri, Eleni (forthcoming). The intersemiotic space of K-Pop. *Semiotica*

1. INTRODUCTION

The focus of the present dissertation is the examination of the global phenomenon of K-Pop through the lens of semiotics. My research outlines an analytical distinction between K-Pop as a cultural phenomenon and as a dynamic industry, which is expanded and supported in the subsequent chapters and throughout the entirety of my work. I perceive K-Pop as a realm of dualities, contradictions, and semiotic tension: a system that both facilitates and restricts identity formation, oscillating between the promotion of national and cultural identity in a manner of continuity, while simultaneously overshadowing a more diverse heritage and cultural tapestry. K-Pop is commonly known as the music genre originating in South Korea, gaining popularity over the last few decades; it is characterized by a combination of diverse music styles and the amalgamation of international trends with national instruments and music traditions. Additionally, K-Pop is popular for its visual aspects, including the eccentric fashion choices of artists, the vibrant and maximal aesthetic of the music videos, and the thoroughly synchronized choreographies. Furthermore, visual appeal is an important criterion for promoting artists and forming groups. As a matter of fact, it is common within K-Pop industry for a group member to be assigned the role of ‘visuals’, meaning that based on (Korean) beauty standards, they are the one having the biggest probability in captivating the attention of the audience and securing new fans (Mackenzie 2019: 7; Besley 2018: 217).

K-Pop is part of the umbrella term “Korean Wave”, or “*Hallyu*”, which refers to the overall export of culture and the soft power tactics of South Korea. Within this broader term, apart from K-Pop, there are also K-dramas, Korean beauty and cosmetics, Korean cuisine, video games, even subway operations, and e-government systems (Rhyu 2015: 106–107). This cultural export had a significant impact on the country across multiple domains, and as *Hallyu* evolved into a global phenomenon, its influence also expanded beyond South Korea and the Asian continent. After a delay of around ten years from the emergence of K-Pop, the domestic academic community of Korea began a serious examination of the Korean Wave, and in particular K-Pop (Chae and Lee 2024: 127). The comprehensive analysis of Chae Suk Jin and Lee Jung-yup (2024) reveals the trajectory of academic interest within the country, showcasing a rapid surge in publications, particularly during the 2020s, as well as the most prominent thematic categories, which underscore the most notable topics of analysis over the last two decades. These thematic categories encompass the analysis of K-Pop’s historical and socio-cultural context, textual analysis of the audiovisual and natural language (lyrics) of K-Pop, the examination of industry’s formation and marketing strategies of mediation and circulation, focus on gender studies and sexuality within K-Pop, the investigation of its influence on Korean culture and tradition, and the advantages of employing K-Pop in an educational settings (Chae and Lee 2024: 137). Similarly to the expansion of K-Pop, which began with its rising popularity in neighboring countries and subsequently spread to all

continents, the international academic community soon began treating the phenomenon as a serious subject of research, mirroring the trends noticed in domestic academic literature.

The present thesis is a continuation of long-term research on K-Pop, starting in 2019 with my enrollment in the MA program of Semiotics. Commencing my studies and delving into the world of semiotics, I decided to set as my object of investigation a topic I was interested in and familiar with. Soon, I discovered that this choice was more than fitting, recognizing that the K-Pop industry and, more generally, the Korean Wave offer a rich ground for exploration, while also being a growing area of research, since the phenomenon is still active and expanding. From the outset, it was particularly interesting that the K-Pop industry seemed to dance precisely between various contradictions. A vehicle for the advertisement and communication of Korean culture, but also a phenomenon that is criticized as inconsistent with the country's national identity and values. A space of true talent and authenticity, but also a paternalistic system of methodically tailoring and molding idols. A colorful world of glitter and glamour, so bright that it overshadows the image of society and its problems. While my MA thesis, *Semiotic Analysis of K-Pop: The Making of BTS Universe* (Alexandri 2021), is a formal structural analysis, examining the construction of BTS's poetic world and tracing its evolution into a transmedial universe that carries invariable themes and motifs, the present work is taking a turn to the pragmatics and focuses on how the context of K-Pop is impacting the cultural and social sphere where it is embedded in.

A big inspiration and influence that fueled this dissertation is the concept of spectacle, as presented in the work of Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle* (2014 [1967]). Spectacle, briefly speaking, is a constructed mediated reality, an image of the world that can never be fully experienced. A more thorough elaboration on the concept and its significance in the present work will follow in the next subchapters; however, here it is essential to note that the description of this new type of religion that was illustrated by Debord, founded on the "monopoly of appearances" (2014 [1967]: 4), piqued my interest. In addition, the role of stars, in the sense of prominent figures, functioning as agents of the spectacle and supporting its prevalence, stood out to me. Finally, the idea that domination and hegemony through controlling the spectacle, rather than sovereignty gained by brute force or economic oppression, seemed to relate to the soft power tactics of modern society. My personal interest lies in the author's revealing descriptions of the structure of the spectacular system itself, its mechanisms, power dynamics, and the overall impact at the collective and individual levels. Hence, an initial premise was formed, which needed to be tested: "Could the K-Pop industry be viewed, or considered a spectacle?" However, I wanted to extend beyond the study of the phenomenon's structural aspect and beyond a pure 1:1 analogy, verifying or rejecting the idea that the industry could be an example of a spectacle. Ultimately, the initial observation of patterns and the original hypothesis organically evolved into a fundamental component of my theoretical framework. To date, the K-Pop industry has been merely characterized as a spectacle, or an "econo-cultural spectacle" (Choi and Maliangkay 2015: 9), either using the word

colloquially, or simply referring to the term. Gooyong Kim's work, *From Factory Girls to K-Pop Idol Girls* (foreword by Douglas Kellner), particularly states the idea that Guy Debord's spectacle "captures how K-pop has contributed to strategic innovations for neoliberal development, characterized by the production and consumption of images..." (2019: 12). Nonetheless, no further analysis was conducted utilizing this theoretical framework. The selection of the Debordian concept enables simultaneous examination of the phenomenon's structural and pragmatic dimensions, especially through semiotic analysis. Spectacle allows for a discussion of (pseudo-)participation and agency, mediation that replaces social life, and brings forward the issue of (pseudo-cyclical) time, reinforcing and illustrating clearly the understanding that time is the new currency, and attention is the new capital. Simultaneously, as a national-specific commodity with a tightly managed, paternalistic idol system, spectacle assists in the discussion of the role of stars, not as simple performers but as agents within this regime. Lastly, commencing with the viewing of spectacle as a modelled reality based on the direct and unmediated world, the element of spatiality and the need to envision the topology of K-Pop came to be. Thus, it became possible to perceive the K-Pop industry as an infrastructure of soft power and a place of semiotic tension; a methodically structured system of regulated visibility, attention economy, mediated cultural access, with a strong emphasis on the cultivation of illusionary, affective intimacy and idol-centric desire.

It is important to note that the application of the Debordian theory does not seek to provide an explanation for the totality of K-Pop, but rather serves as a diagnostic framework for certain industrial and mediating mechanisms and forces. The adapted implementation of the framework facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the industry's structure and function, its role in South Korea's soft power, and the examination of the industry's influence on culture and identity. The diagnostic approach ultimately reveals how spectacle enforces, constrains, curates, arranges, and instrumentalizes a broader, richer, and more complex semiotic field, as seen in the following chapters. Debord's theory is not implemented wholly by adopting every facet of the author's description of the spectacular realm. In the following chapters, my perspective on spectacle clearly allows for the inclusion of meaning-making processes and the coexistence of diverse interpretations within the spectacular domain. As mentioned, the aspects of Debord's theoretical framework that appealed to me, and those I did employ, focus on the internal mechanisms of the spectacular structure, power dynamics, and their effects at the collective and individual levels. In addition to the more flexible application of the theory and the necessary adaptations for its beneficial and effective use in analyzing a global phenomenon within a contemporary mediated environment, I have proposed my own theoretical expansions, motivated and inspired by the research object (Alexandri 2023).

Therefore, I decided to investigate K-Pop as a place of reality and fiction, with 'place' referring to the theoretical use of the term, addressing the industry's impact as a factor in the development, establishment, and communication of identity, encompassing personal, social, or national identity. Finally, following the analysis

of mechanisms employed by the industry, the effect on various agents, and its impact on the socio-cultural milieu, I aimed to bring forward the spatial dimensions of K-Pop, elucidating how it delineates and asserts its territory, both nationally and internationally. My work seeks to answer the research question: **How does K-Pop produce, organize, and mediate culture, and how are identities formed, negotiated, constrained, and experienced within the K-Pop place?** This overarching question eventually gave rise to more focused and narrowed inquiries addressed in my publications, along with the following sub-questions, which remain to be addressed through the cumulation of my work in this introductory chapter of the thesis, which are:

- How are parasocial interactions organized by the industry, and how do these interactions affect the different agents and their identities?
- How does the expansion of K-Pop affect the social aesthetics and identity of Korea, as well as its national identity?
- How does the spectacular industry become a soft power instrument, and how does it simultaneously eclipse and promote culture?
- What is the topology of K-Pop and its different analytical models?

As aforementioned, K-Pop has already been analyzed by various fields, and among the common topics of investigation are the cultural and historical context, the impact on national identity, fandom formation and participation, and the structure of the industry. However, there still remain aspects of K-pop that are unexplored, and academic inquiries to be raised. Chae and Lee (2024), in their literature review, noted that the research on K-Pop is lacking in interdisciplinarity, a connection to broader cultural studies and music studies, and the development of new theoretical frameworks suited to the investigation of K-Pop. The present dissertation contributes to bridging this gap not only through its transdisciplinary nature, but also by offering a semiotic synthesis across targeted and established, however fragmented, lines of inquiry. Additionally, the selection and proposed expansions of the theoretical framework, along with the formulation of the spatial models of K-Pop, were constructed based on the subject of investigation, expectantly addressing the aforementioned gap in targeted research and the creation of theories pertaining to K-Pop.

Following this brief introduction, the next chapter aims to elucidate the main concepts and key terminology essential to this work. Subsequently, I will clarify the study's methodological framework and present the findings of my investigation. The discussion and results chapter is organized according to the original concept I formulated for this research at the outset of my Ph.D. program, dividing the analysis into three levels: macro, meso, and micro. I refer to this as a triptych model of impact, comprising three interconnected categories of identity implications, crises, and distress, thereby systematically addressing the primary research question concerning the negotiation, constraints, and experiences of identities within the place of K-Pop. The macro level concerns the industry's influence on

the wider cultural landscape and Korean national identity. The meso level ‘zooms in’ on contemporary Korean society, situated at the center of this triadic model, as it encompasses both cultural elements and the phenomenological perspectives of people within the collective. Lastly, the micro level refers to the influence at the individual level and the industry’s effect on the development of personal identity. Finally, I will revisit the dissertation’s research questions and suggest potential future directions for this research.

2. MAIN THEMES AND KEY TERMS

In this chapter, I will clarify the primary concepts, essential terminology, and foundational theories that informed my conceptual framework. I will commence with the topic of my investigation, K-Pop, providing a comprehensive literature review analysis and an overview of the genre's evolution into a global phenomenon. Defining the many aspects of identity is crucial for the analysis based on the previously mentioned triptych model of impact. National identity, national branding, contemporary myth-making, the flexibility of the notion of nationhood, and soft power pertain to the macro level. Social and collective identity are elucidated for a comprehensive understanding, and practical application at the meso level, whilst personal identity regards the micro level of the model. Subsequently, I will provide a thorough look at the theory of spectacle and the concept of identity. Finally, I will outline the terms of space and place, highlighting their significance as essential analytical concepts in my work.

2.1 K-Pop

K-Pop as stated already in the introduction, refers to the music genre originating from South Korea, denoted by the prefix 'K-'. In addition to being a nation-adjacent cultural product, its distinct aesthetics and prominent visual identity set it apart from the broader pop music category. The inception of K-Pop may be dated back to the 1990s, when three main variables converged, leading to the creation of the genre and the wider Korean Wave: Seo Taiji and Boys, Lee Sooman, and the Asian financial crisis. In 1992, the boy band Seo Taiji and Boys appeared on MBC, competing in a singing talent show with their song "Nan Arayo". The judges deemed their performance unsatisfactory, to say the least, giving the group the lowest score in the show's history. Nonetheless, Seo Taiji and Boys managed to deliver, in the span of one performance, something unusual and original for the Korean cultural landscape: a fusion of hip-hop, R&B, and dance music, accompanied by a synchronized, dynamic choreography. Boy bands and girl groups performing pop songs backed by lively dance routines were already popular globally, especially in the USA by then; however, this amalgamation of genres and the unexpected dance moves of Seo Taiji and Boys were entirely innovative for South Korea in the 1990s. (Korean Culture and Information Service 2011; Mackenzie 2019; Morelli 2001)

Moreover, it was not only the audiovisual experience that captivated the audience and attracted attention to the debuting group, but also the distinctiveness of their lyrics, which criticized the educational system and the hypocrisy of contemporary society (Shim 2006). This offered the audience a breath of fresh air after an extended period of censorship and rigid regulations imposed by previous governments on the music industry. The importance of this freedom of speech in lyrics makes it clear that, to comprehensively grasp the three variables contributing to the emergence of K-Pop, it is necessary to examine them within

a historical framework. This will elucidate the socio-cultural implications, underscoring the trajectory that led to K-Pop becoming today's global cultural phenomenon.

Korea has a long history of wars and occupations. Early Korea and its inaugural kingdom, Gojoseon, is believed to date back to 2333 BCE, according to the legend of Tan'gun found in the collection of folk tales, myths, and historical records *Samguk Yusa*, or in English, *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (Korean Overseas Information Service 1986: 7–8; Lee 2005: 34–35; Seth 2011: 16). While a National Foundation Day is celebrated in modern Korea in honor of the country's establishment rooted in this legend (Korean Overseas Information Service 1986: 8), it is important to differentiate between myth and reality, interpreting the tale of Tan'gun as a narrative of the first ruling class and the significance of environmental elements in agricultural prosperity (Lee 2005: 35). While “the first historical record of Gojoseon dates back to the 7th century B.C.” (Lee 2005: 36), and the “earliest uncontested date for a political entity called Choson¹ is 109 BCE” (Seth 2011: 17), discovered pottery from the early neolithic period, indicates the existence of tribes, nomads, and proto-states much earlier, and their developing shared culture (Korea Overseas Information Service 1986: 9). Korea succumbed to Chinese domination in 108 BCE, after being attacked by the Han Dynasty. The occupation lasted approximately 400 years, followed by an extensive period during which Korea functioned as a tributary state of China, exhibiting varying degrees of independence and autonomy until the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, when “China recognized Korea as an independent state” (Seth 2011: 246). The period from roughly 1238 to 1620 was characterized by numerous invasions by northern nomads (Rhyu 2015: 21), while in 1910, Korea was colonized by Japan. This is regarded as “one of the two great tragedies of [Korean] modern history” (Seth 2011: 256), alongside the subsequent division of the Korean peninsula. The occupation lasted until the conclusion of World War II, with North Korea under Soviet occupation and South Korea under American occupation (Seth 2011: 309–312). June 25, 1950, marked the onset of the Korean War, a devastating civil war that lasted for three years, resulting in the split of the peninsula along the 38th parallel. After the catastrophic war, South Korea found itself governed by a strict military regime. Park Chung-hee's dictatorship successfully prevented the country's collapse, revitalizing and expanding the economy by focusing on agriculture and later transitioning to heavy and chemical industries in the 1970s (Rhyu 2015). Nonetheless, Park Chung-hee's dictatorship was a stringent regime, succeeded by the even harsher rule of Chun Doo-hwan. In May 1980, civilians revolted against the authoritarian regime during the Gwangju Uprising, which was aborted by the government's bloody repression, resulting in estimated losses between 170 and 2000 people (Ross 2018: 88). Ultimately, democratization was established in 1987 (Rhyu

¹ Choson, here refers to the same kingdom called Old Choson, or Gojoseon in other sources, depending on the transliteration. The term ‘old’ or the prefix ‘Go’ serves to differentiate the inaugural kingdom of Korea from the Choson/Choseon/Joseon period of the 14th century.

2015, Ross 2018), granting the Korean people freedom, while leaving them ravaged by a history of adversity and conflict.

This historical overview is intrinsically linked to the contextual understanding of what are considered to be the three principal factors in the creation of K-Pop, alongside the evolution of Korean music, the inevitable cultural exchange with various nations, and the rapid development of South Korea. Additionally, it is linked to the creation of myths such as “the miracle on the Han river”, or “Korean phoenix: a nation from the ashes” (Rhyu 2015: 12), and the narrative of Korea’s ascent from poverty to prosperity, which is also reflected in the mythmaking of K-Pop.

Returning to the remaining two variables that factored into the birth of the genre and the broader Korean Wave, it is now possible to discuss Lee Soo-man and the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s. Following the conclusion of World War II, South Korea remained under American control, with U.S troops remaining for an extended duration to maintain peace with North Korea. While celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe and Louis Armstrong were traveling to Korea to entertain and uplift the soldiers, the American Forces Korea Network commenced broadcasting, popularizing Western music among the Korean youth (Korean Culture and Information Service 2011: 50). However, the Korean military regime perceived this exposure as antithetical to national culture, tradition, and Confucian philosophy. The 1960s and 1970s were marked, correspondingly, by the impact of rock music, particularly the Beatles, and the spread of an anti-war, anti-conformist, hippie ideology in response to societal issues and the generational gap (Korean Culture and Information Service 2011: 52–57). Lee Soo-man was among the artists of that time, seeking inspiration from the Western music industry, and went on to form one of the first Korean heavy metal bands in 1980, only to be suppressed by the authoritarian administration and strict playlist censorship across media platforms (Kallen 2014: 8). He ultimately relocated to Southern California to pursue his studies, giving up his dream of becoming a music artist (Kallen 2014: 9). During his time in the USA, Lee Soo-man witnessed the inception of MTV, in 1981, and got enchanted by the fashion, vibrant colors, and editing techniques of the music videos. He concluded that this phenomenon should be introduced to South Korea (Kallen 2014: 9). Fortunately for him, the authoritarian state soon diminished after his return to his homeland, giving him the chance to implement his dreams. In 1988, Lee Soo-man established SM Entertainment, which became one of the most significant and influential companies in the K-Pop industry. Simultaneously, he communicated his proposition to decision makers and stakeholders that music has the potential to become a cultural export. Nearly ten years later, South Korea was significantly impacted by the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Despite the numerous policies and civilian initiatives aimed at economic recovery (Rhyu 2015; Yun 2017), the country continued to struggle to compete with other nations and sustain itself in the global market, as it was following a long period of occupations and a very destructive civil war. During that period, it became imperative to find a lifeline to prevent the nation from a financial collapse, which led to the conception of culture as an

export (DK Eyewitness 2023: 32). The stakeholders and government officials' decision to implement this plan was supported by the government's active involvement through funding and subsidy programs (Kim 2021: 24). The investment in culture as an export proved successful and profitable, hence as South Korea continues to grow as a leading economy, a content-driven industry has arisen, supported by trillions of won, and presently serving as a crucial contributor to Korea's GDP expansion (United Nations 2024). Currently, K-Pop and *Hallyu* have transcended their initial role as mere survival strategies, emerging as crucial catalysts for the national economy, Korea's visibility, and the expansion of inbound tourism. Consequently, K-Pop has established its own myth and, as a successful industry, has also developed its own structural and operational model, which I will elaborate on in the discussion and results chapter.

The thorough investigation by Chae Suk Jin and Lee Jung-yup (2024), as mentioned, has revealed the domestic trajectory of academic interest over the last two decades, which, in turn, is reflected in global scholarly trends. A substantial body of literature examines the economic success of K-Pop and the Korean Wave, the inbound tourism, and the social transformations that ensued from the phenomena's popularity (Bae et al. 2017; Lim & Giouvris 2017; Messerlin & Shin 2017; Oh and Lee 2014; Seo and Kim 2019; Shin and Kim 2013; Xiaowei 2009). Another prevalent approach comes from the fields of gender studies and feminist theories, including examinations of masculinity, femininity, and sexual orientations in the realm of K-Pop (Maliangkay 2013; Lin & Rudolf 2017; Oh 2015; Oh and Oh 2017; Oh and Kim 2023; Phillips and Baudinette 2022; Trzcińska 2024). Media studies have shown significant interest in the transmedia storytelling strategies employed in K-Pop (Haessler 2021; Khin and Sangkhamanee 2025; Lazore 2021; Pathirannahelage et al. 2025). From a semiotic perspective, the majority of studies focus on the symbolism and narrative structure of K-Pop music videos, predominantly drawing on the work of Roland Barthes (Irianti 2025; Lee and Ryu 2025; Rawa et al. 2024; Sylphania et al. 2025). Ultimately, concerning the aspect of identity, there has been considerable interest in national identity; however, the majority of studies predominantly concentrate on the identities of the fandom, the translocal international community, or particularly localized demographics and the influence of K-Pop on specific nationalities (or the Korean diaspora), primarily in relation to adolescents and young adults (Cheriyah and Hadi 2022; Ismail and Khan 2025; Ju and Lee 2015; Koh and Baek 2020; Kusuma et al. 2020; Oplustilova et al. 2022; Oh 2020; Oh and Oh 2022; Swan 2018; Williams 2016; Yoo 2023; Yoon 2019; Yoon et al. 2020).

The analysis of Chae and Lee (2024) identifies several literature gaps: a lack of interdisciplinarity, an insufficient connection of K-Pop to the broader cultural context, and the need for theoretical frameworks specifically designed for the study of the K-Pop phenomenon. In light of this observation and the preceding literature review, I argue that multiple factors distinguish my work from other K-pop-related research. Initially, I examine K-Pop as a semiotic object within a framework rooted in the Lotmanian semiotic tradition, and I provide a semiotic synthesis of disparate knowledge about K-Pop, thereby enhancing epistemic

clarity. Secondly, the transdisciplinary nature of my work offers a comprehensive and spherical understanding of the topic under investigation. Moreover, incorporating spectacle as a pivotal element of my conceptual framework guided the analysis of the K-Pop industry, which, to my knowledge, has not been done previously. Finally, the proposed expansion of existing theories and the formation of original analytical models directly derived from the topic of examination, specifically the suggested extensions of Debord's and Jenkins' theories, as well as my own models, namely the triptych model of impact, and the topology of K-Pop, which will be detailed in the subsequent subchapters.

2.2 Spectacle

In 1967, the French philosopher Guy Debord presented his work *The Society of the Spectacle* (2014 [1967]), describing a dimension of reality, an upside-down world, consisting of fragments of objective reality, reassembled to form a new sphere of existence which can only be observed from afar (2014 [1967]: 2). It is an enticing reflection of reality that lures spectators and entraps them; almost a new type of religion, where “what appears is good” and “what is good appears” (Debord 2014 [1967]: 4). “Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the result and the project of the present mode of production” (Debord 2014 [1967]: 3) and through its various facets, such as news, entertainment, propaganda, etc, manages to dominate social activity and reality. Debord notes that spectacle should not be understood as a simple collection of images or as a purely spectacular extravaganza; rather, it is a materialized worldview in which reality manifests via mediation, and spectacle transforms into reality. Throughout the manuscript's nine chapters, the author sheds light on the society of spectacles, harshly criticizing modernity and examining the impact of the pseudo-world on identity, autonomy, the perception of time, historical amnesia, production, politics, capitalism, and ideology.

Spectacle relies on four fundamental features that facilitate and sustain the operation of the pseudo-world: the importance of visual modality, the function of stars (prominent figures), the elements of distance and isolation, and, finally, the spatiotemporal dimensions within the realm of spectacle. “Since the spectacle's job is to use various spatialized mediations in order to *show* us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight” (Debord 2014 [1976]: 6). As noted by the author, sight is an unreliable means of perceiving reality; people can be easily deceived and influenced by carefully crafted images, which is precisely the vulnerability that spectacle exploits, cultivating a misleading sense of certainty and trust in the mediated world. The trust and power over the audience, turning individuals into devotees of the “pseudo-world” and the newly formed “pseudo-needs” are further reinforced by the role of stars. Presented as the epitome of success and perfection, they set the goals, aspirations, and dreams for the audience while promoting an unachievable lifestyle. They embody hollow promises that instill hope for a better future, luxury, and

opulence, while simultaneously fostering and securing an increasing need for consumption and engagement with the mediated reality, a substitute for the life that remains unattainable. However, it is important to note that according to Debord, the stars, as agents of the spectacle, are “clearly the enemy of [their] own individuality as of the individuality of others” (2014 [1967]: 24), and furthermore, in the regime of the upside-down world “even the deceivers are deceived” (2014 [1967]: 2).

Life becomes unattainable due to the supersession of spectacle and the mediated nature of reality. The spectacle, according to Debord, was created by society’s lack of unity. As the author described, there is a paradoxical situation where individuals are becoming more and more separated from social activities and the objective reality, only to seemingly become united again as the audience of the mediated world: “[s]pectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other” but the spectacle “reunites them only *in their separateness*” (2014 [1967]: 10). Hence, in isolation, individuals become enchanted by the realm of spectacles, engrossing themselves in the portrayed reality and their own imaginations, replacing their social life and human interactions with an exposure to the pseudo-world. This diverts attention from genuine social issues and pathogenies of our modern world, while simultaneously, isolation obstructs the potential for scrutiny and questioning developed through social contact of what is presented as real and truthful.

The acceptance and trust in the depicted world are furthermore enforced by spectacle’s “monopoly of appearances” (Debord 2014 [1967]: 4) and the vast distance between the audience and the mediated reality. Distance is a byproduct of separation, and while in our (post-)modern times geographical distances have been nullified by technology, the distance between the spectator and the audience remains the same. As per Debord, “[i]mprisoned in a flattened universe bounded by the *screen* of the spectacle, [...] the spectator’s consciousness no longer knows anyone but the *fictitious interlocutors* who subject him to a one-way monologue” (2014 [1967]: 116). Monologue is the key term here, since it reveals the impossibility of audience input. The mediated world cannot be experienced or lived and cannot be affected or changed. This positional distance contributes to the sense of validity and trustworthiness, since it resembles an authoritative figure that cannot be questioned.

Finally, Debord examines the spatiotemporal dimensions of spectacle. The author places considerable emphasis on the temporal realm, examining time and history closely, both cyclical and irreversible time, to ultimately introduce the concept of pseudo-cyclical, consumable time, wherein recirculation is not determined by the natural environment (as in cyclical time), but by industrial production. “Consumable pseudocyclical time is spectacular time, both in the narrow sense as time spent consuming images, and in the broader sense as image of the consumption of time.” (Debord 2014 [1967]: 83). Life’s moments are commodified and commercialized to cultivate pseudo-needs and to mend the unfulfilled desires of the audience through mediation. Time transforms into a commodity and a currency itself.

The spatial dimension is less developed, albeit it maintains an uninterrupted relationship to time. Debord describes the spectacle as a map that mirrors an identical reflection of the world it depicts and mediates, and explains how “*the free space of commodities* is constantly being modified and rebuilt in order to become ever more identical to itself, to get as close as possible to motionless monotony” (Debord 2014[1967]: 90). The motionless monotony suggests two significant aspects regarding the operation of the spectacle. ‘Motionless’ signifies an unbroken, uninterrupted state, a preservation of the status quo, and a production line that persists and thrives. On the other hand, ‘monotony’ means uniformity, homogeneity, agreement, and absence of diversity or polyphony. There is only a single grand narrative communicated and accepted.

Guy Debord was a founder member of the Situationist International, an organization of avant-garde artists, intellectuals, and revolutionaries, established in 1957, a decade before the publication of the *Society of the Spectacle*. Debord’s aphoristic critique of society, significantly shaped by Hegel and Marx, and inspired by the Letterist International and, of course, the Situationist International, has faced criticism from numerous intellectuals over the years. In 1988, Debord released *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, in which he addressed and articulated several criticisms and expanded on his prior positions. Two years later, Russel Berman, David Pan, and Paul Piccone published their discussion on Debord’s spectacle and his subsequent commentary. They intensely condemned both manuscripts, calling out the hypocrisy of Debord and the Situationists as elitists and “ideologists *par excellence*” who are “bitching and moaning about the spectacle in the cafes of Paris and Brussels.” (1990: 87). The authors emphasized the conspiracy-theory aspect of the spectacle, and furthermore *Comments*, the idea of the spectacle’s inevitability and inescapability, and the portrayal of the audience as gullible and mindless humans.

However, I argue that Debord did not seek to terrorize the reader or regard the audience as foolish. As a Situationist, Debord perceived life as distinct from mere survival, and through the collaborative works of his organization, the potential to escape and disrupt the spectacle’s dominance remained. Creating spontaneous situations, practicing *dérive*, or the technique of *détournement*, pursuing authentic desire, and engaging in social praxis and “unitary urbanism” are methods that may counteract the spectacle (Plant 1992; Bunyard 2018). Mere theoretical critique was considered unreliable, since in many instances it might also be seen as a form of contemplation on mediation and representation, or as serving the spectacle itself, reinforcing and reproducing its control and structure. Consequently, theory must be unified, “sent into battle at the right time”, and “die in the war of time” (Debord 2003 [1978]: 150), yet manage to evolve into social practice. Furthermore, Debord did not portray the audience as credulous but highlighted individuals’ vulnerability to immersion and absorption and the consequent alienation. “The individual who has been more deeply marked by this impoverished spectacular thought [...] will essentially follow the language of the spectacle, for it is the only one he is familiar with; the one in which he learned to speak.” (Debord 1990 [1988]: 31). Thus, Debord proposes that the spectacle

forms the discourse itself, providing directives and constructing a language through which life is viewed and interpreted. This seemingly grim and unavoidable reality, as described by the author, is intended to raise awareness and serve as a cautionary tale, suggesting a level of optimism and confidence in the individual.

Besides these criticisms, numerous scholars not only apply Debordian theories and recognize the legitimacy of the *Society of the Spectacle*, but also revisit and expand on the original framework. A prominent example is Douglas Kellner and his work *Media Spectacle* (2003). Kellner employed a more moderate approach in his analysis of spectacles, which he argues encompass mass media, entertainment, modern architecture, sports events, and even the reporting of terrorism and crime by news outlets. The author introduces the term ‘megaspectacle’ to describe narratives disseminated, covered, and transmitted through all available communication channels, deliberately diverting the audience’s attention and distracting the public from the actual social issues. In parallel to Debord’s original work, the themes of alienation, distance, and viewers’ immersion in the mediated world are evident; however, an additional aspect presented by Kellner is the element of ‘pseudo-participation’, meaning the illusion of viewers’ capacity to influence and intervene in the spectacle.

Kellner examined several contemporary spectacles; nevertheless, the case of O. J. Simpson in the fourth chapter of the book (2003: 93–125) highlighted some additional complexities that I find particularly intriguing. The analysis showed how spectacles influence perception, extending beyond mere distraction of attention, and, through close observation of Simpson’s trial coverage, it became possible to identify the various contexts in which the narrative was situated or affected. The trial was primarily covered by television and print media; however, it quickly evolved into an internet spectacle, occupying a vast portion of the digital landscape. It was also transformed into a spectacle of commodification and commercialization, a celebrity spectacle that offered media outlets a profitable opportunity to secure advertising deals and exclusive interviews that would further enhance their ratings and sales. Ultimately, it became a spectacle of class, race, and gender equality, sparking discussions and conflicts over these topics in the wake of Simpson.

Finally, an aspect relevant to this dissertation that also resonates with my personal perspective and interest in spectacle as a theoretical framework is Kellner’s concept of a ‘diagnostic critique’ (2003: 27–30). The author argues that a critical analysis of media spectacles, an inter- or transdisciplinary research exploring these phenomena, is beneficial for establishing a more comprehensive understanding of our sociocultural domain. The analysis of media spectacles can reveal the concealed and unfulfilled desires of people, their fixations and fears, and the overall pathogenies of contemporary society. Hence, the examination of spectacles can equip individuals with the tools to navigate media culture with caution and awareness, understanding the significant influence on needs, behavioral patterns, and identity formation.

Another important contribution that I would like to acknowledge is the work of Tom Bunyard, *Debord, Time and Spectacle* (2018). The author stresses the

significance of time, and specifically history, in the interpretation and implementation of Debord's theoretical framework. Bunyard warns against shallow or simplified readings of Debord, as well as analyses that reduce spectacle to mass media, entertainment, and advertising, or to a mere critique of modern capitalism. His work provides an exhaustive examination of Debord's body of work, including his correspondence², in connection with the ideas and art of the Situationists. Bunyard prominently highlights, early on in his book, the three degrees of spectacle, described by Debord in one of his letters from 1973 (Bunyard 2018: 22–25). In his correspondence with Jaan Kloosterman, Debord addresses some inquiries concerning the reality and structure of the spectacle and identifies (namely) three degrees of the spectacular realm (Debord 2005: 50). Bunyard elaborates on these degrees in his work, clarifying that the first one, of “simple technico-ideological appearances”, is the media-driven layer that shapes and molds pseudo-needs and the overarching discourse (2018: 23). The second degree of “the reality of the social organisation of appearances” refers to the blueprint and impetus of the spectacle's system, which encompasses the mode of production and the facilitation of capitalism (Bunyard 2018: 23). Finally, the third layer is the “historical reality”, wherein spectacle is ingrained, and it regards the alienation of individuals not only from social life and communal activities, but also from history itself (Bunyard 2018: 23–24) – a notion strongly emphasized also in the *Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 2014[1967]). These degrees illustrate the complexity of spectacles, in which capitalism might be regarded as the core force in both their emergence and their operation. The media-driven extravaganzas serve as instruments to attain spectacle's goal, while historical amnesia and lack of genuine lived experiences are the consequences of the new reality.

My contribution to the theoretical framework of the spectacle is detailed in my publication “A spectacular world of modeled reality” (Alexandri 2023), where I demonstrate the spectacle's continued relevance in contemporary society and examine the conditions and foundations on which it exerts a profound influence on individuals and larger communities. Following a literature review and tracing the evolution of the concept, I focused on the key features of spectacles and, finally, introduced the paper's thesis, which conceptualizes spectacles as modelling systems. This perspective on spectacle was intended to uncover the type of modelling system that spectacles embody and offer a semiotic approach to the concept. For this endeavor, apart from the Tartu-Moscow school tradition, a fundamental contribution was the concept of ‘supersession’, as introduced by Hongbing Yu (2021). Supersession articulates that the notion of an objective reality is yet another model that could be replaced (superseded) by another, as long as the new one is deemed more advantageous, pertinent, or alluring. While my work follows the Debordian concept of an all-encompassing mediated world that shapes desires, identities, and even perception, I argue that disengagement

² There is a book series of Guy Debord's correspondence, dating from September 1951 until November 1994, in a span of several publications, most of them printed by Librairie Arthème Fayard.

and escape from the spectacle stem from media literacy and cultural awareness, thereby aligning more closely with Kellner's diagnostic critique. Finally, my work, "The illusionary world of K-Pop" (Alexandri 2024), specifically analyzes the characteristics of the K-Pop industry that would render it as a spectacle, examines the subjective perspectives generated within the said spectacle, and how these perspectives correspond with or diverge from theories of identity development and perceptions of reality.

2.3 Identity

According to Hall (2011 [1996]), identity and identification are inherently social, emerging from the comparison and contrast between oneself and the Other. Furthermore, the scholar asserts, drawing from the Foucauldian 'discourse', and the work of Stephen Heath, that identity is not a natural process (in the literal sense, that is, dependent on nature), and cannot be understood in a vacuum. It is constructed within discourse, shaped by negotiation, and influenced by power dynamics and ideologies. "Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (2011 [1996]: 6). Hall argues additionally that identities are essentially representations of one's positioning within the broader system and are a process of articulation of becoming rather than a state of being. A complementary approach is provided by Simon Frith, who writes: "Identity is not a thing but a process – an experiential process which is most vividly grasped as music" in a sense that "music, an aesthetic practice, articulates *in itself* an understanding of both group relations and individuality" (2011 [1996]: 110–111).

The sentiments expressed in these quotations reflect a perspective on identity that aligns with semiotic theory. It follows the concept of representation and the recognition that elements within a system change and grow, being both influenced by and transformative through interactions and power dynamics. It relates to the process of autocommunication and self-description. Nonetheless, the sentiments also align with Debord. They stress the impact of discourse on identification, and the cultivation of knowledge through the language of the system one is situated in, which, in the case of Debord, reinforces the described effect of spectacle as an authoritarian, omnipresent, mediated reality on individuality and society.

In conducting this research, I have utilized various theories of identity and related psychological issues that affect identity development, tailored to the specific focus of each publication and the overall thesis, to create a comprehensive understanding of the K-Pop industry's impact. Among the key concepts that required clarification were national identity and national branding. In a similar way that Hall shifted the emphasis of the perennial questions regarding identity from "who we are" and "where we came from", to "what we might become" and "how we have been represented" or "how we might represent ourselves" (2011 [1996]: 4), Rogers Brubaker adopts a similar approach on national identity. In his

work *Nationalism Reframed*, Brubaker reframes the question of “what is a nation” to “how is nationhood as a political and cultural form institutionalized within and among states” (2009 [1996]: 16). John Keane argues that the term national identity is a “modern European invention” (2016 [1993]: 39) that cultivates a sense of belongingness and the feeling of ‘home’ among individuals. The author highlights that the sense of homeness, together with its associated familiarity, is fostered by and identified in the shared codes among the nation’s citizens, allowing them to recognize the distinctive character of their collective identity. Still, this does not transform the nation into a homophonous entity that eliminates all elements feared to threaten cohesion. The established sense of belonging is precisely what enables individuals to comfortably share and accept different viewpoints, allowing a degree of openness that allows even debates regarding the boundaries of nationhood (Keane 2016 [1993]: 39–40). Finally, Anthony Smith, in his work *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (1999), employs an “ethno-symbolic approach” to examine the topic. The author provides a definition of nation, which, by extension, can aid in comprehending national identity, according to which, a nation is: “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (1999: 11). Among the themes and notions related to ethnicity, nationhood, and identity, Smith is referring to reappropriation, which illustrates the effort to link historical heritage with modern national identity, aiming to recapture a possibly lost authenticity and reestablishing connections to ancestral origins. Another essential component, according to the author, is the role of myth and myth-making in establishing national identity, and cultivating cohesion and collectivism. Myths reveal and promote a shared vision on ideology, values, codes, meanings, and the very idea of nationhood. However, Smith notes, supported by his case studies, that myths can also fragment communities and commence internal conflict. The author further emphasizes that the modern era of myth-making is driven by nationalism and is marked by a revolutionary character, aiming to challenge the already established, while often serving the quest for national or territorial recognition (1999: 60–61).

The different methods that cultivate a sense of belonging and a collective notion of nationhood, and hence the processes of nation-building, frequently aim at economic growth or marketing promotion of the nation, leading to what is termed national branding (Polese and Sheranova 2023). National branding, according to Bolin and Ståhlberg, is “the phenomenon by which governments engage in self-conscious activities aimed at producing a certain image of the nation-state” (2010:82). The authors continue by arguing that national branding could be thought of as part of public diplomacy, however the key difference lay in the fact that the former has a targeted orientation “towards the global *market* rather than political actors” (Bolin and Ståhlberg 2010: 82). National branding is not unlike a common set of marketing tactics for a commodity, if we consider the analogous advantages for a country investing in the creation of a new image, that is economic growth, increased tourism, or even enhancement of the political

dominance (Alexandru Pop et al. 2020). Furthermore, as indicated by Alexandru Pop and his co-authors, national branding potentially aims at concealing negative historical and political elements associated with a nation, hence ‘re-branding’. However, the authors raise the issue of authenticity, as in many instances the newly created image of a nation does not reflect its true identity and fails to maintain continuity with its heritage and traditions (Alexandru Pop et al. 2020: 1007). However, having considered the term national branding, it is also reasonable to clarify the associated term of soft power. Joseph Nye, who coined the term, states that soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (2004: x), hence, “shape the preference of others” (2004: 5) by building an image and exporting a culture to be admired and followed.

An equally significant distinction is between national identity and collective identity. National identity can be viewed as a massive type of collective identity (Goldstein and Rayner 1994), with smaller types including cliques, gangs, fandoms, and broader categories such as gender, religious groups, and ethnic groups (Snow and Corrigan-Brown 2015: 175). Another associated term that is sometimes used interchangeably is social identity. Social identity differs from both personal and collective identity, as it is granted onto the individual through social interactions within a social context, and labeled as a social role (Snow and Corrigan-Brown 2015: 174). Social identity relates to the differentiation between “I” and “me”, as articulated by George Mead (1972 [1934]), a theory that has also been employed in my research³. The social role that is bestowed upon the individual, serving some purpose and bearing responsibilities and advantages, is related to the social “me”, “the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes” (Mead 1972 [1934]: 175). In other words, social identity constitutes a self-concept emerging from an individual’s position within a given group, indicating a particular socially constructed role, whereas collective identity shifts the focus from the individual to the encompassing we, the shared values and experiences of the entire group. An alternative perspective on social identity, which correlates and analyzes it with identity theories and identity formation, is found in the work of Stets and Burke (2000). The authors argue that integrating the two, that is, personal identity and social identity, and treating them as distinct aspects instead of different types, underscores the importance and impact stemming from their interconnection, which can lead the discussion to topics such as identity salience and other identity-related psychological phenomena.

Evidently, national identity is founded on a range of ethno-cultural elements; hence, cultural identity is nested within this broader sphere. However, the question is whether it is possible to have a univocal cultural identity that accurately represents all members of a nation. From the perspectives of semiotics, sociology,

³ While my published work (Alexandru 2024) utilized George Mead’s theory, in connection to Hermans’ ‘dialogical self’ and Lotman’s autocommunicative process, I would like to refine the application, aligning it more accurately with Mead’s notions. Memory and knowledge are characteristics of the social “me”, rather than the “I” who acts as the spontaneous subject.

cultural studies, and so on, we can talk about different spheres, such as dominant culture, subcultures, counter- or contra-cultures, and even non-culture. These cultures, which establish diverse sets of identities, have to coexist and interact with one another. This understanding evokes Keane's observation of the significance of flexibility and the nurtured security in identifying and recognizing I/We from the Other, even amidst divergent perspectives and the lack of complete alignment of viewpoints. Additionally, it reminds Hall's quote that "[i]dentities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (2011 [1996]: 6). Consequently, individuals assert their positions and either maintain or abolish their belongingness, exactly through the negotiation and challenging of this described flexibility, within discourse. Simultaneously, as Peeter Torop (2017) underscores, a fundamental characteristic of culture is the ability for self-description, which entails the dialogue between one's own culture and other cultural spheres. The author argues that polyphony and diversity benefit and enhance a culture, resulting in a stronger, clearer self-image. This sentiment concords with Goldstein and Rayner's argument that:

[C]ollective identity in late modern society might often be strengthened through a process of continuous interaction with other collectivities – a process that requires each community to see itself from the perspective of others, and incorporate those perspectives through the prism of its own consciousness in a continuous reflexive process. Collective identity would be recognized as selectively *chosen* (within certain parameters) rather than merely *given*. The measure of coherent identity would be the conditions under which a community could *reappropriate* (rather than preserve intact) its norms and practices. (Goldstein and Rayner 1994: 381–382)

Thus, it is possible to envision different cultural identities within a larger culture, or a single national identity, alongside the potential for the formation of diverse co-existing collective identities, and the capacity of an individual with a unique personal identity to simultaneously belong to all these different communities.

A final contribution that I would like to acknowledge, as it significantly influenced my research, is Zygmunt Bauman's "From pilgrim to tourist" (2011 [1996]: 18–36). In this work, Bauman treats identity as an obstacle for the (post-)modern individual, constraining and halting the freedom and liberation that come with embracing a fluid identity. An established and fixed, or even crystallized identity, is deemed to be the rescuing plan from the anxiety of doubt, ambiguity, and indecision. Bauman is creatively assigning personas to different approaches to identity, illustrating the characteristics and behavior patterns of each. Hence, **pilgrims** carry themselves and treat meaning and identity as projects in the making (2011 [1996]: 22). This attitude mirrors that of religious followers, evaluating every moment and action as worthy only insofar as it narrows the distance to the final spiritual destination. Nevertheless, it is noted that postmodern reality is a foreign land for pilgrims, as identity is no longer considered a settled objective. Another persona conjured by Bauman is that of the **stroller** (influenced by Baudelaire's concept of *flâneur*), who, in contrast to the pilgrim's devotion

and loyalty, treats identity and life lightly and carelessly. Stroller-like individuals are driven by pleasure, giving in to the spur of the moment and being seduced by leisure (2011 [1996]: 27). The author mentions that this type of mindset and lifestyle that would once be seen as marginal, has become the new norm, and that in the post-modern era, even reality is treated as something trivial (2011 [1996]: 27). **Vagabonds** are also opposed to the persona of the pilgrim, and are characterized as untamed, unbowed, and rebellious individuals. They are described as people who do not feel a sense of belonging, which prevents them from becoming permanent members of a community (2011 [1996]: 28–29). Nevertheless, according to Bauman, in the post-modern world, individuals might indeed result in a similar lifestyle, of not settling or belonging somewhere, not out of choice and based on ideology, but due to the fact that there is now a “scarcity of settled places” (2011 [1996]: 29). The persona of the **tourist** is compared to the one of vagabond in terms of not belonging to one place or community, with the difference laying in their reason and intentionality, along with the fact that the tourist has many places to call ‘home’. Like the stroller, the tourist is moving from one place to another; however, the individual here is driven by aesthetic criteria and a conscious, serious desire to gain new experiences (2011 [1996]: 29–30). Finally, there is the persona of the **player** (2011 [1996]: 31), which I associate with Bourdieu’s parallelism between social life and a game, and with his notions of field, habitus, and capital. The player is described by Bauman as an individual indifferent to moral or ethical dilemmas, who neither relies on luck nor crumbles under adversity. It is the one who exemplifies a true goal-oriented mindset. Nonetheless, the author does not depict the player as a villain, but as an individual who engages deeply with the game of life, approaches every set earnestly, aspires to victory, yet refrains from inflicting lasting consequences through his/her actions. As I will elaborate in the following chapter on discussion and results, Bauman’s theory is particularly useful for understanding the formation of fandoms and their behavioral patterns. Overall, the thorough review of identity theories across several disciplines, along with the associated psychological implications for identity and its development, was essential to my research on K-Pop’s impact on identity and to addressing my research questions.

2.4 Space and place

Spatial dimension and the notions of space and place are crucial terms for the present thesis. I have already addressed the spatial dimensions of the spectacular realm in the preceding subchapter; however, I will briefly summarize that, according to Debord, spectacle is mapped as an identical reflection of the world it depicts, that is, the “real” world, and it is described as a “motionless monotony” (Debord 2014 [1967]: 90). Moreover, it is possible to envision a multilayered structure of the spectacle, taking into consideration the three degrees articulated by Debord (2005) and elaborated by Bunyard (2018). The three degrees of this scaffold, namely, include the “technico-ideological appearances” layer, “the reality

of the social organization”, and “the historical reality”. These degrees should be considered as operational domains of the same entity, each with distinct emphasis and focus, as well as analytical significance.

From a semiotic standpoint, the theoretical framework I employed for my research also indicates a prominent spatial nature. In addition to the Lotmanian semiosphere, two of the most significant theories utilized in my work are the M-Space (Shpinitskaya 2008) and the intersemiotic space (Torop 2004; 2020). Julia Shpinitskaya, drawing on Lotman’s concepts of semiosphere and text, as well as Kristeva’s intertextuality, to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of cross-cultural communication in art (2008: 642–649). The author introduced the notion of M-Space, a macro-system of intercultural communication among cultures and subcultures. M-Space is perceived as a network of interconnected cultural spheres, where dynamic relationships, interactive behaviors, and the exchange of information between cultural contexts result in the formation of M-Texts. The texts produced in the activated zones of M-Space are viewed as original creations that generate new meaning, as “cultural paradigms are inserted into new structures and new syntagmatic relationships” (2008: 645). M-Texts can either emerge organically from historical circumstances of cultural coexistence or through deliberate, systematic collaboration among agents of different cultural origins. Ultimately, Shpinitskaya examines the significance of identity, individuality, and authorship in this theoretical framework, concluding that the author of M-Texts serves as a cultural mediator.

A similar cultural network is articulated through Peeter Torop’s framework and his notion of intersemiotic space (2004; 2020). Inspired by the Lotmanian semiosphere, and influenced by the Jakobsonian theory of intersemiotic translation, Torop described the intersemiotic space as the environment of textual transformation and translation. In the semiosphere the focus lies on the structural organization of units, whereas the intersemiotic space emphasizes the transformational processes of texts and the dissolution of their boundaries. Torop argues that “[i]n culture, text becomes a diffused mental whole” (2004: 63) through the process of translation and the creation of metatexts. The intersemiotic space facilitates the conceptualization of texts that simultaneously exist across several sign systems, possess multiple concurrent meanings, and perpetually generate secondary texts. The acknowledgment of these aspects allows the observation and comprehension of code shifts and the navigation of the intertextual tapestry. It is important to note that the selection of these related theoretical frameworks for my work was determined by the specific analytical requirements of each individual research. Shpinitskaya’s approach offers a concise and functional model for investigating a network in which cultural exchange produces new texts and meanings, with a strong emphasis on multiculturalism and authorship. On the other hand, Torop’s intersemiotic space provided the necessary theoretical depth to highlight the coexistence of interpretations, the inclusion of a single text-unit in diverse sign systems, the transformation, and, importantly, the blurring of boundaries, thereby connecting the intersemiotic space with trans-

mediality and transmedial productions. To quote Peeter Torop, "...intersemiotic space is also a space of transmedial translation" (2020: 269).

Before moving from the notion of text within semiotic theory, I would like to draw attention to the work of Anti Randviir, "Space and place as substrates of culture" (2002), whose articulation effectively conveys the significance of space in semiotics. The author highlights the interconnectedness of space and human awareness of the physical environment, as well as the alignment of human existence with semiotic systems, employing space metaphorically to conceptualize them (2002: 140). The capacity for spatial thinking and the ability to construct analogous models have enabled scholars to conceptualize notions such as the biosphere and noosphere, or *Umwelt*, "that are connected with and help to explain aspects pertaining to the topic of construction of the semiotic reality." (2002: 142). Thus, semiotics, especially the Tartu-Moscow school, demonstrates a prominent spatial character, a notion that is further supported by the author's juxtaposition of the structural and identifiable features of space and text (2002: 143). Finally, Randviir, utilizing the Greimassian 'space' and 'expanse', follows a parallel premise to formulate the sequence of *expanse* > *space* > *area* > *region* > *territory* > *place* (2002: 145). Ultimately, the author argues that space should be understood in relation to broader cultural dimensions and developments, while place should be viewed as associated with specific phenomena and events (2002: 145).

This perspective aligns with theories from other disciplines that aim to provide a clearer, more concrete distinction between the colloquially interchangeable terms, space and place. Setha Low defines space as "any defined piece of territory" and emphasizes that place holds "personal significance" (1992: 142). Furthermore, in a similar vein, Yi-Fu Tan underscores that space lacks personal significance, and it is the "humanized space" that becomes place (1977: 54). Examining the definitions of the terms was crucial for understanding and implementing another valuable contribution to my work on the spatial dimension: Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, presented in the publication "Of other spaces" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986). Within Foucault's framework, there is no precise definition of the notions; however, it can be inferred from context that space is the broader structural domain (and an epistemic realm⁴) in which emplacement occurs. Conversely, place is regarded as an integral component of space and is considered to possess a socially constructed significance. Foucault presents two interconnected concepts related to the described spatial dimension: utopia and heterotopia. Although the author argues that utopias are not actual or concrete locations but rather idealistic representations of our society, heterotopias are depicted as tangible places in our world. Heterotopias are described as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites [...] are simultaneously repre-

⁴ In his work *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, Foucault explicitly makes the connection between space, episteme, and discourse, stating "knowledge is also the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse" (Foucault 1972 [1969]: 182)

sented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986: 24). Heterotopias are places that challenge and subvert established norms and the status quo; they both invert and represent the space they are embedded in. Foucault employs the mirror as a metaphor to elucidate the nature of, and the connection between, utopia and heterotopia. Utopia is regarded as a mirror’s reflection, depicting the individual and their surroundings in a virtual realm devoid of spatial dimensions. However, the mirror “is also a heterotopia in so far as [it] does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction of the position that I occupy” (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986: 24). The realization and subsequent awareness of absence, and the self-reflection (here, metaphorically), “forces us to return to ourselves, to reconstruct ourselves where we are” (Laanemets 2002: 305–306). Foucault proceeds to a methodical, systematic description of the six principles of heterotopias, establishing a solid framework for implementation and analysis. According to the author, heterotopias are intrinsic components of all cultures throughout history, while across different epochs, they highlight historical and socio-cultural shifts. Foucault describes heterotopias as places that integrate diverse elements into cohesive wholes and elucidates their temporal dimensions. Finally, he examines them as open and closed systems and emphasizes their potential to provoke critical reflection or distract, enveloping individuals in a realm of illusion. Hence, heterotopia serves as an additional theoretical framework for exploring space and place in relation to meaning-making, socio-cultural transformations, impact, and affect.

I would also like to note two additional notions that have been important to my understanding of space and beneficial to my research, although I ultimately did not incorporate them into my published works so far: atmosphere and psycho-geography. Hermann Schmitz was a German philosopher and the founder of the Society for New Phenomenology in 1992. His body of work was influenced by Goethe’s philosophy, marked by the notions of interconnectivity and intuition (Kazig 2016: §2). Schmitz concentrated on the notion of emotions, strongly opposing the ancient Greek paradigm that dichotomized body and soul, thereby reducing emotions to mere reactions void of spatiality and localization (Schmitz 2014). For that reason, Schmitz conceived and examined the surface-less areas where emotions reside. He differentiated between the ontological model of the material body, characterized by definite borders and margins, which employs the five senses as input and output mechanisms, and the phenomenological model of the felt body. The felt body, according to Schmitz, has no borders and exists in unity with the environment. The author consequently integrates the notion of atmosphere, defined as “a total or partial, but in any case, comprehensive occupation of a surface-less space in the area of what is experienced as present” (Schmitz 2014: 19)⁵. The author also makes a distinction between the atmospheres of the felt body and those of emotions, which the individual can either

⁵ The quotation in the original language (German): “Eine Atmosphäre ist eine totale oder partielle, in jedem Fall aber umfassende Besetzung eines flächenlosen Raumes im Bereich dessen, was als anwesend erlebt wird”

surrender to or oppose. In my research, I juxtaposed and discovered interesting similarities between atmospheres and the Debordian spectacle, which could, in extension, be applied to the study of K-Pop. For instance, the cultivated atmosphere of emotions, through meticulously orchestrated synesthetic characteristics saturated with emotion (Schmitz 2014: 29), could be a technique attributed to celebrities, enticing the audience through gestures, nuances, or even the color of their voice. Additionally, Schmitz refers to the element of stillness, which can be solemn or oppressive, triggering corresponding feelings, and to the enclosed spaces that foster dwelling and accumulate emotions, both of which are comparable to the descriptions of the spectacle: its motionless monotony and pseudo-cyclical time.

Psychogeography is the interdisciplinary study of geographical environments concerning human emotions, perceptions, and desires. While the concept is commonly attributed to Guy Debord, Denis Wood (2010) accurately notes that an almost concurrent development of a similar idea occurred among scholars at Clark University, influenced by Lynch's work⁶, unaware of Debord's notion. Simply put, if a conventional city map illustrates the layout of the urban environment, including street names and historical landmarks, the psychogeographical map represents subjectively selected locations imbued with emotion, and highlights areas of affect that attract individuals towards them. Hence, psychogeography regards affective spatial patterns and the production of emotional responses within a geographical environment.

My work explores both conceptual and intangible spaces, such as M-Space and the intersemiotic space, while also focusing on concrete, localized places shaped and/or impacted by the K-Pop industry. Particularly, I have elaborated on the relationship between the two realms in my publication "The intersemiotic space of K-Pop" (forthcoming). In this article, I argue that transmedial world-building should be recognized as an embodiment of the intersemiotic space (here) of K-Pop, thereby forming heterotopias within Seoul's urban landscape. Theories not directly employed in my works, such as the concepts of atmosphere and psychogeography, have nonetheless been significant in shaping my understanding of surface-less areas and affective places. Therefore, it was crucial to conduct a thorough review of the relevant concepts and terminology to effectively address my inquiries, identify connections among theories (and their limitations), and integrate them. This is why I found it necessary to briefly present these concepts here and to acknowledge the significant and influential works that have informed and guided my research, even though some of them are absent from my publications.

⁶ Particularly influenced by Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City* (1960).

3. METHODOLOGY

When applying for the MA program in Semiotics, and having a very vague idea about the field, I remember writing that “semiotics could be the key that enables one to unlock a whole new dimension in experiencing reality, thus offering the needed tools to look at things from a different perspective.” After seven years as a student of semiotics, I look at these words with appreciation, since, in the naïve eyes of an applicant, there seems to have been some intuitive insight. Semiotics reveals how meaning takes shape within specific contexts, as well as the possibility of coexisting different interpretations. Tracing the evolution of meaning-making processes from the conception of a message in an internal dialogue, or autocommunicative process, to its codification for the purpose of communication, and later on the reception and interpretation, or misinterpretation of it by the addressee, the focus lies in all the moments of choice and opportunity for meaning to rise and form. Another favorite description of mine comes from Anti Randviir, who explains that, in the well-known scheme of ‘input–black box–output’, semiotics’s focus lies exactly on the content of the black box.

This is the point of departure for semiotics and the original systems theory: for semiotics, the sphere of the actual research target lies inside the interpreting system (be it the Mind, interpreter, person, individual, etc.) (Randviir 2019: 16)

Perhaps one of the most important principles of semiotics is relationality, and the understanding that nothing exists in a vacuum. The dynamic relationship between units and texts revealed to me the operative system of culture, society, and even life itself. The necessary and beneficial binarisms of translatability and untranslatability, or symmetry and asymmetry (to name a few), along with the required, seemingly destructive explosion that paves the way for novelty and creativity, became the prism through which I began to look at everything around me. Hence, semiotics has not been simply a tool or a method for the present research, but the lens through which I interpreted and examined my materials and drew my conclusions. To phrase it differently, this dissertation would not have been the same as a product of meticulous research under a different adjacent field, and regardless of the transdisciplinary nature of my work, this is a thesis grounded in semiotics.

Specifically, the current research and my entire academic trajectory have been shaped by the Tartu-Moscow school of thought. I am influenced by the Lotmanian tradition and by all the scholars who have preserved and expanded on it (many of whom I was fortunate to study under). In addition to the well-known concept of the semiosphere, which represents the expansive, continually reforming, and evolving immaterial environment of signs and texts, other notably impactful works include the *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (1990), particularly the emphasis on text and the notion of autocommunication. Alongside, I was inspired by the book *Culture and Explosion*, which begins with the critical question “how can a system develop and yet remain true to itself?” (2009 [1992]: 1). This work introduces the concept of explosion, as opposed to gradual progress, and clarifies them as essential conditions that facilitate growth

and transformation. The explosion is no longer a destructive force to be feared, but a catalyst for innovation and a moment of infinite possibilities. Moreover, I was impacted by Lotman's (and Uspenski's) understanding of culture, as articulated in "The semiotic mechanism of culture" (1978), the interdependence of culture and language, the characterization of culture as a social phenomenon, and the conceptualization of culture as memory. Finally, the introduction of the five types of communication of text in "The semiotics of culture and the concept of a text" (1988 [1981]) further enhanced my comprehension of self-description and self-recording, as well as the evolution, transformation, or repositioning of texts within the semiosphere.

In the foreword of *Culture and Explosion* (2009 [1992]: xxvii) Peeter Torop emphasizes the significance of time and space in Lotman's view of text within cultural processes. I believe that Lotman's focus on text, and his systematic approach throughout his body of work and the various phases of his epistemic journey, along with his inclination to conceptualize the spatial arrangement of elements within larger wholes, networks, and spheres, have significantly enhanced my understanding and fostered my curiosity in exploring these dimension of the phenomena surrounding me, like in this present work.

I would also like to note some theoretical tensions in my work. For example, Debord expressed skepticism and concern about semiology; therefore, I am convinced he would regard semiotics similarly. Halls perceived phenomenological approaches to identity as risky, as they would shift the focus towards a unified, universal, and transcendental understanding of human experience. Conversely, Schmitz a prominent figure of phenomenology, notably dismissed the idea that feelings should be examined via a strict, traditional psychological framework that would equate them to logical processes taking place within the mind. Despite their diverse and seemingly contradictory perspectives, I argue that it is precisely through these tensions and varying viewpoints that a comprehensive understanding of the topic can be achieved. By recognizing the strengths and limitations of each theory, along with their potential and capacity for flexibility and abstraction, it becomes possible to effectively integrate them without distorting them. By "not distortion", I mean that I have devoted sufficient time to familiarize myself with the theoretical framework, understanding its constraints as well as discovering the points of convergence and divergence. I have systematically integrated them, understanding potential contradictions, yet emphasizing the advantages of the coexistence of the diverse theoretical perspectives. The different theoretical viewpoints hold significance at different analytical levels of the work⁷, but when combined, they enhance one another, providing a comprehensive and spherical understanding of the topic under investigation. In other words, it is

⁷ Debord's framework facilitates a discourse on structural organization, arrangement of the mediated reality, internal mechanisms that sustain the system, and the overall logic of the spectacular domain. Schmitz's theory on the other hand becomes crucial for the understanding of constructed affective environments, and the cultivated affective intimacy. Psychogeography connects the spectacle to the localized environment, and affective places, whilst heterotopias hold significance for understanding the reconfiguration of space. Theories of identity are vital for delineating the various strata or domains of impact, as well as the specific zones of crises that emerge from the established structure and its operation.

feasible to creatively apply those theories to generate new knowledge and, expectantly, achieve epistemological clarity. As for semiotics, as the overarching framework, I believe it serves as the bridge, interconnecting the different perspectives and facilitating meaningful connections within this conceptual structure.

Hence, semiotics has been used simultaneously as a viewpoint, a theoretical approach, and as a toolbox, providing the necessary metalanguage and concepts for conducting the present research. Additionally, the study could be characterized as a theory-driven semiotic analysis of multimodal cultural material. Theory is essential to research, since it facilitates the establishment of systematic knowledge and a thorough comprehension of the object under study. The multiplicity of theories and abstraction allows for an in-depth evaluation of the topic, which consists of a broader conceptual framework, as described in the works of Marshall and Rossman (2011) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017). The conceptual framework encompasses all components of research, including scope and objectives, research questions, literature review, theory selection, argumentation, data collection, and analytical methods. Mills (1993) argues that adopting a theoretical framework in qualitative research is essential to moving beyond mere description of the phenomenon under investigation and provides the fundamental basis for articulating the research problem and questions. The significance of theory in qualitative research has also been thoroughly delineated in Anfara Jr. and Martz's book *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research* (2015). Furthermore, Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, and Karlsson, in their work *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences* (2002 [1997]), note that in the social sciences it is common to treat theory and methodology separately. Nevertheless, according to them, methods regard the application and development of theories essentially. Theories are responsible not only for providing the necessary terminology and metalanguage for conducting an analysis, but also for theoretically defining the topic of investigation. Alecia Y. Jackson's "Thinking without method" (2017) is another interesting take on the relationship between theory and methodology; the author, heavily influenced by Deleuze and Foucault, argues that rigid methods impose constraints and are often used to confer validity and legitimacy to research. Subsequently, Jackson elaborates on the advantages, productivity, and creativity of thinking without method but with theory, letting concepts guide the process of discovery, analysis, and interpretation, paradoxically creating a form of methodology itself. Thereby, I connect my research with this approach of theory as methodology. This underlines my characterization of the dissertation as a theory-driven semiotic analysis, as the various concepts and theories, comprising the theoretical and broader conceptual framework, guided the selection of materials, shaped the analytical focus, informed the methods of analysis and interpretation, and ultimately led to the discovery of answers to the presented research questions.

4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

As stated in the introduction, I opted to organize the discussion and results section according to my original idea of a triptych model of impact, divided into macro, meso, and micro levels⁸. The macro level pertains to the K-Pop industry's impact on Korean culture and national identity. This part will focus on K-Pop as a representation and continuity of Korean culture, the strategic intertextual incorporation of national elements in songs and music videos, the constructed myth of K-Pop, and the contrasting perspective that challenges the authenticity of the phenomenon's Korean-ness. The meso level concerns the industry's influence on contemporary society, therefore, the social and collective identity. I will examine the challenges citizens encounter related to K-Pop due to the phenomenon's dominance that overshadows social reality, and the formation and behavioral patterns of the K-Pop fandom. At the micro level, regarding the impact of K-Pop on personal identity, I will examine how the industry shapes the identity development of idols and fans, highlighting extreme cases of parasocial contact and immersion. Finally, I shall revisit and address the research questions posed by the present thesis.

4.1 Macro

The subchapter of identity indicates that national identity cultivates a sense of belonging and familiarity, fostering the perception of being part of a group with a shared history, values, morals, behavioral patterns, culture, and mythology. Representation is an interlinked component in this context, as national symbols, artifacts, myths, products, and so on are assessed against historical and traditional criteria, in sync with the nation's current social reality, to be recognized as accurately reflecting the community. Any element that contradicts key principles of the national identity would be considered a misrepresentation of the whole. Here also lies the previously mentioned aspect of flexibility and the permitted elasticity inside the nation of diverse approaches and worldviews, without jeopardizing the cohesive and unified community.

My first article, titled "K-Pop as (mis)representation of Korean culture" (Alexandri 2022), precisely addresses this subject. The study examines the intrinsic hybridity of the K-Pop music industry and whether it functions as a reflection of Korean culture and national identity. Furthermore, it examines the

⁸ I was surprised to find during my research that Bronfenbrenner's ecological system model (1977) is constructed similarly to my idea. Bronfenbrenner's model demonstrates how individuality is formed and shaped by several interrelated contexts, or, in his terminology, environments. The model presents these environments as nested spheres, with the outermost representing the broader temporal context (chronosystem) and the innermost representing the individual. I view Bronfenbrenner's model as validation of the structure and rationale of my own conceptualization.

industry's role in enhancing Korea's national branding, therefore advancing Korean culture. I analyzed both perspectives, evaluating the criteria under which K-Pop may accurately represent Korean identity, while also addressing counter-arguments to that assertion. Applying the aforementioned theory of M-Space (Shpinitzskaya 2008), I identified K-Pop productions as M-Texts and considered Korea a domain of M-Space. This conceptualization does not intend to disregard the uniqueness, authenticity, and heritage of Korea, but rather to focus on the active zones of M-Space, cultivated throughout Korean history. The brief summary of invasions and occupations in the preceding subchapter on K-Pop exemplifies the country's extensive exposure to intercultural exchanges. Korea's history demonstrates an enduring spirit of acceptance and an ability to adapt, integrating external influences with traditional national elements. This statement is supported by various examples in my publication; however, the paper lacks the Korean Matrix concept introduced by Professor So-Jeon Park. In her online course "Introduction to Korean Philosophy and Culture" (2021), Park stated that the Korean Matrix is a distinct mechanism of Korean culture and language that has developed throughout time by processing foreign influences to generate novel inventions. The professor emphasizes that the Korean Matrix is not a static system that appropriates these external elements; rather, it processes, filters, and alters them to generate entirely new forms, which, according to Park, justifies identifying the resultant products as Korean⁹. In this view, K-Pop exemplifies a continuity of the Korean philosophy and practice, serving as another manifestation of the Korean Matrix.

Conversely, there are those who argue that K-Pop does not accurately represent national identity and question the Korean-ness of the phenomenon. To illustrate that perspective, I referenced the works of John Lie, specifically, "What is the K in K-Pop" (2012) and *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (2015), in which the author critiques K-Pop as a soft power strategy that is largely disconnected from Korean culture, instead rising from a desire for national pride and global acknowledgment. Lie explicitly states that K-Pop lacks any Korean-ness, which might account for its success. The author diminishes K-Pop to mere commercialism, an instrument to promote overconsumption, fundamentally contradicting Confucian traditions. Kyung Hyun Kim (2021), in a milder tone, characterizes K-Pop as a mimicry of neo-American aesthetics, suggesting that this has rendered Korean culture obscure in exchange for commercial success. Subchapter 3.1, which analyzed K-Pop as a spectacle via the Debordian theory, is absent from my published work. Following an intense debate with the journal's editor, it was determined that the specific section would be omitted. This removal did not detract from the fundamental

⁹ I initially excluded this concept from my paper because, after a brief correspondence with Professor Park, she indicated that she was preparing a publication on the topic. Consequently, I anticipated being able to cite the expanded version of her theory when writing my thesis. Sadly, to my knowledge, this work remains incomplete and unpublished. Yet, I wished to seize the opportunity to acknowledge this contribution.

aspects of my argument, since the remaining chapter illustrated the contrasting perspectives on the Korean-ness of K-Pop. However, I would like to take this chance to address the missing part here. The focus was on Debord's perspective regarding the distortion of culture. Spectacles can undermine culture in pursuit of popularity and acceptance. "As culture becomes completely commodified it tends to become the star commodity of spectacular society" (Debord 2014 [1967]: 104). I was hence examining the intentional alteration of culture within the realm of spectacles, which may result in cultural hegemony over others.

In analyzing this fusion of external influences and traditional elements, I applied Heinrich Plett's theoretical framework to K-Pop, identifying three distinct forms of intertextuality. The first type pertains to international influences as intertextual components traced in K-Pop's audiovisual productions, particularly during the early phases of the genre's globalization. The purpose of this intertextuality was to establish a communication channel with an international audience, creating points of relatability and association, rendering K-Pop both novel and familiar, even nostalgic, hence, facilitating its acceptance. The second type of intertextuality refers to the integration of traditional elements into audiovisual productions. With the ascendance of K-Pop as a global phenomenon, it emerged as a vehicle for national branding and promotion of Korean culture. Traditional instruments began to be included in orchestrations, choreographies emulated traditional court dances, and national attire appeared in music videos and live performances. This illustrates a meticulous balance between universality and particularity, shaping and presenting K-Pop as a contemporary music genre and cultural phenomenon, a competing force in the international music scene, yet uniquely Korean¹⁰. The third type of intertextuality demonstrates the widespread popularity and acceptance of K-Pop in the worldwide market, as it is now K-Pop referenced in international productions. American films depict characters as K-Pop enthusiasts, K-Pop songs are featured in the original soundtracks of blockbuster movies, and leading video games such as *League of Legends* honor K-Pop, not only through purchasable in-game items but also by forming an original virtual K-Pop girl group featuring alternative versions of the game's characters as idols.

The paper illustrates that K-Pop significantly influences the formation and perception of Korean national identity among both locals and outsiders. Numerous overseas fans learn about Korea and its culture through K-Pop and *Hallyu*, thereby shaping their perceptions of the nation based on the conveyed representations. Conversely, locals possess the necessary knowledge and familiarity with their culture and national identity to evaluate the effectiveness of the

¹⁰ A similar analysis of the incorporation of national elements in K-Pop and the skepticism regarding the genre's ability to accurately represent Korean culture was published in the same year by Hee-Sun Kim, titled "Appropriating *Gugak* and negotiating K-Heritage" (2022), whose background is specifically in Korean traditional music. Although our theoretical frameworks diverge, we utilized the same examples and arrived at complementary conclusions. Unaware of one another's research, we were both pleased to discover each other's work.

representation. K-Pop partially aligns with Korean traditions and exemplifies the culture of adaptability and innovation as articulated in the Korean Matrix; however, it also conflicts with specific Korean customs and incorporates various foreign elements. I argue that the focus should shift beyond evaluating the accuracy of representation to clarifying our understanding of culture and the degree of flexibility permitted in its definitions. Furthermore, the focus should also turn to the issue of authorship and the authenticity of M-Texts and byproducts of intertextuality and cultural exchange. The Korean Matrix and certain intertextual components may go unnoticed by uninformed audiences; yet, the reappropriation of traditional elements creates continuity with Korean culture and tradition, and K-Pop enables a reconfiguration of national branding while constructing a new myth.

The concept of myth also shows notable academic interest, especially in the context of the present thesis. As Smith (1999) notes, mythmaking in the contemporary era frequently results in internal conflicts among communities, as seen with the developed myth of K-Pop. I have initiated a concentrated analysis on the topic, and although it remains incomplete, I would like to present some preliminary observations and findings. The contemporary and colloquial understanding of myth has broadened enough to entail mass media products, commodities, and individuals with global recognition, often promoting, affirming, or reinforcing particular ideals and worldviews. From a semiotic standpoint, we can consider myths through Barthes' theory and his tri-dimensional model of signification, influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure. Hence, myth is a system "constructed from a semiological chain which existed before: it is a *second-order semiological system*" (1993 [1957]: 114). Additionally, Phillip Wheelwright articulated his threefold concept of myth in his work "The semantic approach to myth" (1955). The author presented: the primary myth, which pertains to elements linked to pre-linguistic inclinations; the romantic myth, which emphasizes the intentional development of narrative and a defined structure; and the consummatory myth, which emerges from post-romantic cultural evolution and seeks to recover a sense of lost innocence. This theory can be expanded and creatively applied to examine the myth and evolution of boy bands, tracing their trajectory from choirs (primary) to the 19th century barbershop quarters (romantic), and then to the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of the first boy groups in the contemporary music industry, such as the Jackson 5 and the Beatles (consummatory). Furthermore, Stanley Hyman, in his work "The ritual view of the myth and the mythic" (1955), delineates three primary features of myth: origins, structure, and function. Navickaitė-Martinelli's (2008) work on the ritualization of performing arts, rooted in the Romantic tradition, offers a theoretical framework for understanding how artists achieve a "sacred" status and how performances acquire a religious dimension. The structure of the K-Pop myth may be analyzed through the lens of spectacle and its inherent mechanisms, while its function may be perceived as enhancing national branding. Thus, the K-Pop industry maintains the legacy of the primary, romantic, and consummatory myth while preserving

its origins, operating within a structure, and addressing contemporary demands through its functionality.

Having considered myth, it is also important to discuss authenticity and authorship. Authenticity may appear to contradict the process of reappropriation, reconstruction, and the integration of foreign influences. Nonetheless, both M-Space (Shpinitskaya 2008), and the intersemiotic space (Torop 2004; 2020) provide the means to tackle this issue. Shpinitskaya's theory distinguishes between M-Texts deliberately created through systematic collaboration among authors and those that evolve organically within a multicultural context. In addition to the intentional intertextual elements identified in my aforementioned publication (Alexandri 2022), the exposure to foreign influences from years of cultural co-existence and exchange on the Korean peninsula also contributes to the genre's development, being so intrinsically interlinked that it becomes hard to detect and trace. Moreover, Torop's theory of intersemiotic space (2004; 2020) elucidates the interaction, translation, and transformation of texts, leading to the ongoing generation of metatexts as the boundaries of the units begin to blur.

Seo Taiji and Boys, Lee Soo-man, and the 1997 Asian financial crisis may be the main catalysts for the rise of K-Pop and Hallyu, as referenced in numerous sources; nonetheless, there are multiple additional components that contributed to the formation and rise of K-Pop, and its evolution into the phenomenon witnessed today. Korea has a rich history of performing arts, including court dances and royal processional music, traced back as early as the Three Kingdoms period, and influenced by Chinese culture (Clair 2023: 33; Lee 1981). Trot music, of Korean origins, evolved in the 20th century during Japanese rule, and was influenced by Japanese *enka* music, which was itself inspired by the Western foxtrot (Clair 2023: 34; Korean Culture and Information Service 2011: 49; Lie 2015: 37). As noted in the K-Pop section of the present thesis, Korea was subjected to American music, especially during the presence of the U.S. troops. After their departure, and despite the dictatorship's censorship, foreign influences persisted in shaping audience preferences and inspiring artists, such as the young Lee Soo-man, to form hybrid groups, mirroring the intercultural background to which they had been exposed to. During the late 1950s, the need for entertainment at military bases was met by Korean agencies that auditioned and trained Korean artists (Kim 2021: 15; Maliangkay 2018). Kyung Hyun Kim argues that "these performers would soon come to constitute the critical labor base for the entire Korean popular music industry in the years to come" (2021: 15). Finally, Oh claims that even "[t]he formation of the idol system and culture in Korea was strongly influenced by the Japanese model" (2018: 106). Consequently, over the ages, several aspects of Korean tradition, culture, intercultural exchange, and history have laid a foundation and prepared the ground for the emergence of a phenomenon and an industry such as K-Pop.

The various components creating this sequence result in K-Pop, which is now difficult to trace, organize, and assess in terms of significance per contribution, along with other overlooked factors, can be summed up in what Osip Mandelstam articulated as a blueprint, in his work *Conversations About Dante* (1967 [1933]).

The Russian poet, in his essay, offers reflections on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, praising his uniqueness as an author and analyzing his artistic philosophy. In the fifth chapter of Mandelstam's essay (1967 [1933]: 27–34), the author discusses the notion of blueprints (or drafts, depending on the translation), in art, referring to the various preliminary iterations of a project that are never destroyed, and encapsulate the energy and essence of the work developed through the sequential stages of realization. Nevertheless, the artistic process is challenging to trace, as it has a fluid, dynamic nature that makes it impossible to retrieve. An artist might be thought of as a sailor maneuvering and navigating through the winds, making spontaneous and unconscious decisions that influence the work, but their effects, or rather the causality of their effect, may not be clearly apparent. Therefore, even if we, as the audience, had access to all the various iterations of the work, we would still be unable to fully comprehend the entire process and all the steps that culminated in the final text. The final text has absorbed all the blueprints. Another equally interesting and pertinent point drawn from Mandelstam's work is the discussion of Dante's simile, metaphors, and poetic expressions, in the third chapter of the essay (1967 [1933]: 19–21). Mandelstam argues that metaphors are not part of Dante's body of work out of necessity; in fact, they are not needed. Yet they function as an impeccable reflection of the author's identity, and a homage to his sociocultural background. By extension, intertextual elements of K-Pop are not embellishments ornamenting audiovisual productions based on vague aestheticism for a shallow connection to Korean culture, but rather they inherently derive from it.

It is important, however, not to assume that K-Pop is perceived by all audiences as a cultural creative process comprising drafts, blueprints, and intertextual influences. Certainly, these elements may be uncovered by individuals who engage in a deeper exploration of the broader culture. I believe that the transmedial nature of industry facilitates a dual mode of engagement, allowing a choice between spreadability and drillability (Jenkins 2009a), both within the spectacular realm. Having said that, drillability and the investigation for deeper textual layers and intertextual connections are not assured. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the possibility of a partial, limited, or misinterpreted representation of national identity and Korean culture, which can influence perceptions among a global audience. This evokes Hall's questions concerning identity: "how we've been represented" and "how we might represent ourselves" (2011 [1996]: 4). Hee-sun Kim, drawing on the research of Lee Gyu-tag, asserts that all pop music variants of contemporary music landscape, which emerge from different nations, are hybrid; they balance between global and local influences. Thus, the incorporation of local elements into K-Pop serves as a distinguishing characteristic that renders the genre authentically Korean (Lee in Kim 2022: 30). While the statement holds merit, I argue that the debates surrounding K-Pop arise from its promotion as a national brand of South Korea, where idols have evolved into cultural ambassadors. This expansion transcends the confines of a music genre, making K-Pop incomparable to other forms of pop music in this regard. Georgetown University's series *Ask a Professor*, hosted a discussion with the

Korean literary scholar Jinaeng Choi, regarding the rise of *Hallyu*, Korean culture, and the topic of representation, in light of the recent Academy Award win of K-Pop *Demon Hunters*, and its tremendous success on the Netflix streaming platform. Choi, among other things, noted that Hallyu creators are well aware of their responsibility and role as cultural representatives and mediators, which can be quite stressful and overwhelming, given the expectations of a nation to encompass the totality of Korea's culture and history within a single textual entity (Georgetown University 2026). However, here, the Debordian quote "even the deceivers are deceived" (Debord 2014 [1967]: 2) is relevant. The inspiration and intentions driving the creative process may not originate from the motivations that propel the industry; nonetheless, once in the production phase, the content is instrumentalized and altered to serve the industry's objectives. The terms 'deceive' and 'deceiver' may appear severe and accusing; however, they fundamentally characterize the subjective position of agents within the system, the compromises and choices they have to make, or the exploitation they might experience.

From the above analysis, it becomes evident that the issue of national identity extends into a matter of collective and social identity, as it incites internal conflict, cultural identity crises, and distress stemming from the constructed views and expectations of the Others.

4.2 Meso

As already mentioned, national identity can be viewed as a major type of collective identity (Goldstein and Rayner 1994). Conversely, social identity is distinct from personal and collective identity, since it is obtained through social interactions within a social context, characterized by a social role (Snow and Corrigall-Brown 2015: 174). Relevant here is also the study by Sanchez-Mazas and Klein (2003), which analyzes citizenship through the lens of social identity theory. The authors argue that citizenship should not be viewed merely as a complex of duties and rights, nor should it conform to a dominant, fixed, and imposed national model to be followed uncritically. Citizenship as social identity is formed through social interaction, negotiation, and the absence of unanimous consent (2003: 3). Consequently, diversity and polyphony serve as tools of democracy, an idea that aligns with the autocommunicative process and Keane's notion of flexibility (2016 [1993]). Through this lens and in continuation of the previous subchapter's discussion, it becomes clear and expected that matters of representation and Korean-ness drive debates and shape attitudes within the community. The spectrum of stances may range from locals who proudly identify South Korea as the birthplace of K-Pop to others cautioning against the overshadowing of Korean culture and history, emphasizing that Korea is much more than K-Pop, or even asserting that there is nothing Korean about it. In addition to the internal struggle, there are associated phenomena arising from the foreign audience's cultivated perceptions, along with practical and social challenges

encountered by residents concerning K-Pop, governmental policies and funding, and the transformation of the urban landscape.

My fourth publication, “The intersemiotic space of K-Pop” (Alexandri, forthcoming), partially addresses these issues. Beginning with an analysis of the seven principles of transmediality as articulated by Henry Jenkins (2009a; 2009b), I reconceptualized the principles of immersion, extraction, and worldbuilding, ultimately concluding that worldbuilding should be regarded as an embodiment of the expanding intersemiotic space (Torop 2004; 2020). Subsequently, I concentrated on the formation of K-Places in Seoul’s urban landscape, classifying them as either officially produced by the industry, byproducts of grassroots initiatives, or reconfigured and re-coded existing sites. Finally, I examined these locations as heterotopias (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986), to gain insight into the tensions between established norms and novel spatial trends, the evolving interpretations of place, the transformations within the socio-cultural context, and the resulting implications for the living environment.

The K-Pop industry plays a crucial role in South Korea’s soft power strategies and the evolution of its national branding, as demonstrated by many practices; nevertheless, the changes in Seoul’s urban landscape are particularly revealing. In my work, I presented examples of various themed, immersive, and commercial spaces, installations, and pop-up stores situated in Seoul. I also elaborated on K-Road, a 1.08km road in Apgujeong-dong dedicated to K-Pop artists, which redirects tourists to adjacent establishments through city guides that narrate the affiliations of idols to these locales. I also discussed the Gangnam Tourism Information Center, which has adopted a K-Pop-centric approach, allocating an entire floor to K-Pop exhibitions and offering travelers immersive experiences on-site. Additionally, I refer to Goyang City, an entire complex located in the Seoul Metropolitan region, also known as *Hallyu Wood* or *Hallyu World*, which comprises a hybrid, natural, and artificial environment, featuring filming locations, performance venues, and various retail establishments linked to K-Pop and the broader Korean Wave. Moreover, additional instances illustrate governmental and administrative strategies that employ K-Pop and *Hallyu* as major attractions for their touristic campaigns, featuring idols as national ambassadors, and curate itineraries focusing on key locations for K-Pop enthusiasts. Furthermore, in my publication, I examined the production of place stemming from fan initiatives, which I will touch upon in the subsequent part, as well as the reconfigured and recoded existing sites in Seoul. The latter classification of K-Places pertains to the previously addressed issue of representation and the dominant visibility of K-Pop and *Hallyu*, which obscures other cultural elements. The existing sites and monuments are no longer perceived in relation to their historical and cultural context, but rather through the mediated image of Korea. Hence, they are experienced through the lens of K-Pop.

4.2.1 Korean society

In addition to the spatial reconfiguration and the shifting emphasis from traditional, historical, and cultural landmarks integral to Korean identity, from a theoretical standpoint, citizens have raised concerns and discontent regarding practical aspects of social life. The issue of representation still is an increasing worry among them, as the distorted mediated image of the country and the modern Korean reality, seems to diminish the community (Oh 2018: 97). However, tensions have arisen also about governmental activities and the allocation of public resources for financing Korean Wave-related productions and establishments (Oh 2018: 25) neglecting other sectors of social and urban life requiring support, attention, and enhancement. Finally, an escalating debate regarding the potential ecological harm to space (Oh 2018: 92).

To bring a recent example that illustrates all the issues discussed so far, BTS held a comeback live concert on March 21, 2026, reconnecting with local and global fans after an approximate four-year hiatus from group activities. The live concert was accompanied by the release of the band's new album, entitled *Arirang*. *Arirang* is the "indisputable national song of South (and North) Korea" (Lie 2015: 18), protected by UNESCO as intangible cultural property. This culturally significant folk song encompasses numerous variations and adaptations that have evolved throughout Korean history, serving as a symbol of creativity and expression. "Everyone can create new lyrics, adding to the song's regional, historical, and genre variations, and cultural diversity" (UNESCO 2012). The choice of *Arirang* as the album title may be interpreted as an advocate of Korea's intangible heritage, aiming to popularize the folk song among a wider audience. Additionally, considering the song's associations to freedom, innovation, and inclusivity, symbolically it positions BTS, and by extension K-Pop, as a continuation of Korean culture. Furthermore, it may signify the artists' reconnection to their roots, and their pursuit of redefining their artistic identities.

The live concert took place in Seoul, at Gwanghwamun Square, adjacent to the southern gate of Gyeongbokgung Palace, the most recognizable landmark of Seoul and the first royal palace of the Joseon dynasty, thereby reinforcing the connection between the event (and in extension K-Pop) with Korean history and tradition. On a different note, the event holds an additional importance for the wider cultural and media scene, as it became the first live concert streamed in real time via the Netflix platform. The financial agreement between HYBE, the representative label of BTS and a major South Korean conglomerate, and Netflix is estimated to surpass 10 billion won (Choi 2026). According to Netflix reports, the broadcast reached the top of the rankings in 24 countries and garnered 18.4 million global viewers (Wang 2026).

The event was particularly important to government officials, city administration, and stakeholders. Korean Finance Minister Koo-Yun Cheol emphasized online the anticipated profit from inbound tourism resulting from the event, projected at 1 trillion won (Ray 2026), with an estimated live audience attendance of 260,000 individuals (Shahana 2026). Although outlets like *Rolling Stone*

reported 250,000 attendees (Kreps 2026), other reports emerged to contest these figures, with the Seoul Metropolitan Government estimating around 40,000 individuals and HYBE's official report stating attendance of 104,000 people (Bang 2026). Considering the event's significance and anticipated profits, the city overprepared for the concert, leading local businesses to overstock and resulting in a surplus (Bang 2026; Im et al. 2026), while public opinion criticized the tax waste associated with safety measures (Lee 2026). Significant criticism was directed at the allocation of national resources for the concert, which occurred just one day after the devastating fire in Daejeon that resulted in 14 fatalities and 25 injuries (Chae 2026). Additionally, this situation sparked discussion about the appropriateness of proceeding with the concert in light of the tragedy, rather than postponing it in respect for the deceased and their families (Chae 2026). The intense discussions prompted the National Fire Agency to issue a public statement regarding the incident (Osen 2026), while HYBE apologized for causing inconvenience to locals and offered condolences for the fatal fire (Shin 2026).

This case illustrates not only the issue of representation but also the challenges and consequences in the living environment arising from treating K-Pop as an industry inherently linked to the national image and domestic economy. Increased criticism keeps surfacing on social media about the appropriateness of using Gwanghwamun Square for the event, the disruptions to city life caused by the temporary public transportation shutdowns, and the projection of red light onto significant landmarks for event promotion, questioning whether it entailed political connotations. Although preliminary statements are circulated on the Internet, and there are allegations for potential legal actions to follow, the story remains unresolved at the time of writing this thesis.

Nonetheless, the urban environment, its evolving aesthetic identity, the reconfiguration of space, and the everyday lives of citizens are not the only aspects being impacted that warrant discussion in this section. Min Joo Lee conducted research on the foreign gaze, fan consumption of *Hallyu* productions, and the nurtured desire for romance and intimacy in relation to fan-induced tourism (2020), a study that was subsequently popularized as 'the Netflix effect' (Kwon 2022). Lee contends that the framework of 'orientalism' and notions like 'cultural proximity' are not effective for analyzing this contemporary phenomenon. Female fans are travelling to Korea in anticipation of recreating romantic experiences akin to those depicted in K-Dramas and encountering Korean men who resemble the appearance of K-Pop idols. Lee argues that Korean inbound tourism has increasingly been based on the cultivated emotions and romance facilitated by the Korean Wave, with certain travelers driven by desire and intimacy. While K-Dramas have a greater capacity to shape perceptions of Korean norms, behavioral patterns, etiquette, and traditions through their narratives, K-Pop has also influenced this image. The contribution of K-Pop comes from documentaries, variety shows, and live streams that allow idols to interact with fans and showcase their off-stage lives. Numerous K-Pop fans highlight the courteous and respectful demeanor of idols, particularly noting male performers' approach

toward female counterparts, characterized by a respectful distance and the avoidance of physical contact. On the other hand, both male and female idols have been sexualized and objectified by fans (and the industry itself), a phenomenon extensively examined through the lens of gender studies. Viral narratives, such as that of the American woman who traveled to Korea in search of a K-Drama partner, only to upload a derogatory TikTok video expressing her disappointment with Korean men's appearance, may represent extreme cases but reflect a broader industry-related issue that affects identity. The K-Pop industry, rooted in strict Korean beauty standards that predate its fame, has achieved global success and acceptance, reinforcing expectations around body image and appearance. This influence affects both local and international fans; however, in combination with instances of racial fetishization, there is an emergent distress regarding identity at both personal and collective levels within Korean society.

4.2.2 Fandom

Fandoms are also organized collectives of individuals that establish a shared identity. K-Pop fandoms have garnered significant academic attention over the years; however, my research contributes to understanding these groups by analyzing their behavioral patterns and identity formation as influenced by the spectacular industry. My latest work (Alexandri, forthcoming) explores the production of place through fandom initiatives, while my publication "The illusory world of K-Pop" (Alexandri 2024), analyzes the industry's impact on the identity development of idols and fans. Nevertheless, in this section, I aim to elaborate on these findings, expand my research, and address the pertinent question regarding the feasibility of fandoms' existence within a spectacular realm characterized by isolation and pseudo-participation.

As Debord notes, "[s]pectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other" but the spectacle "reunites them only in their separateness" (2014 [1967]: 10). Even in a conventional interpretation and application of this quote, it is evident that isolation is not intended in a literal sense, like individuals entrapped in solitary confinement. It is rather that seclusion serves as detachment from social life, the genuine, unmediated reality that can truly be experienced. Consequently, in a spectacular domain, individuals may gather and engage; nevertheless, these interactions are conducted in the language of the spectacle, influenced and shaped by it, transpire inside commodified time, and neglect to challenge the spectacle's authority. The economy of attention is an important and relevant notion, facilitating a fuller understanding of engagement within the pseudo-cyclical and commodified time. Debord's work elucidates how the postmodern world and capitalism have converted time into monetary value, an idea that aligns with the concept of attention as an economy, introduced by the Nobel-winning economist Herbert A. Simon in the early 1970s. In the printed dialogue, "Designing organizations for an information-rich world", Simon discusses with Karl Deutsch and Emilio Daddario, explaining how the overload of information, combined with the scarce

availability of attention, has evolved into an economic problem. Simon argues that in an information-saturated society¹¹, the addressers of a message must not only evaluate the expenses associated with its production and communication but also consider the cost burdening the addressee (Simon et al. 1971: 41). Consequently, this leads to the logical deduction that there must be an impetus and incentive for the recipient to pay that cost, since attention as a resource is limited and has no capacity for being accumulated and stored, hence valuable by its nature. The concept of attention economy has gained increasing significance in the age of the Internet, social media, and transmedial productions. In competitive markets like the entertainment industry, companies and conglomerates aim to capture and retain audience attention through various strategies, ensuring that the scarce attention is not diverted to rival products. Hence, I argue that the K-Pop industry aims to convert the ‘tourists’ of the media-driven world into ‘pilgrims’ (Bauman 2011 [1996]), who are devoted and loyal to its offerings. As a matter of fact, numerous publications characterize Seoul as the pilgrimage of K-Pop and depict fans as pilgrims (for instance, Clair 2023; Fedorenko 2021; Oh 2018).

Instances of fan-induced tourism, fan gatherings, the creation of K-Places by grassroots initiatives, fan-generated content, and the collective endeavors of community members to support and promote their beloved idols are not devoid of meaning, semiosis, communication, and interaction, or impact. Nevertheless, they are structured, directed, and ritualized within the spectacular realm and contribute significantly to the system’s flourishing success. The conversion of tourists into pilgrims, and the ritualization of engagement can be further understood by Navickaitė-Martinelli’s analysis of performers as mediators and the “sacred” status they attain (2008). The author notes that, during live performances, despite the maintained distance of space and status, a cultivated sense of unity emerges, like a quasi-religious experience. Navickaitė-Martinelli’s claims could be further enhanced by Schmitz’s analysis of atmospheres of emotion, elucidating how an individual is influenced by an atmosphere while simultaneously contributing to its creation and expansion. Furthermore, Navickaitė-Martinelli draws on Eero Tarasti’s work in existential semiotics to emphasize how religiosity in this context of musical practices correlates with isolation and detachment from the external world (Navickaitė-Martinelli 2008: 161). It is the inaccessibility and reluctance towards publicity and exposure that facilitate the artists’ elevation to a sacred status (Navickaitė-Martinelli 2008: 161). I argue that, from the audience’s perspective, the element of seclusion enhances a sense of uniqueness or accomplishment among fans, as fandom’s rituals foster an esotericism limited to members of an exclusive group. Finally, Navickaitė-

¹¹ To complement Simon’s observation, I would like to provide some numbers from the work of Eli Pariser: “We are overwhelmed by a torrent of information: 900,000 blog posts, 50 million tweets, more than 60 million Facebook status updates and 210 billion e-mails are sent off into the electronic ether every day. Eric Schmidt likes to point out that if you recorded all human communication from the dawn of time to 2003, it’d take up about 5 billion gigabytes of storage space. Now we’re creating that much data every two days.” (2021: 10–11)

Martinelli articulates that in the age of the Internet, social media, and globalization, the competitive market and the heightened expectations and needs of fans have necessitated a new approach; hence “the “secular” has intruded into the “sacral”” (Navickaitė-Martinelli 2008: 163). Consequently, artists must create an illusion of approachability and accessibility, enhance the visibility of their personal, off-stage life, and navigate these tensions to preserve their fame and sacred status.

The ritualistic and quasi-religious nature of K-Pop performances can also be traced in industry-curated fan practices, such as fan chants and light sticks. Fan chants are synchronized vocalizations that fans shout at the beginning of a concert, during instrumental interludes, or in between songs; although they may be originated by fans and gradually evolve into canon fan chants for the fandom, they are usually introduced by the artists via video tutorials. Conversely, light sticks (*paenbong*) are portable devices, with the latest models using Bluetooth technology to enable connectivity and synchronization with the concert venue. These fan-held devices change the color of the emitted light, its tempo, and its flashing patterns to produce a visual effect that transcends the stage. Each group possesses a unique *paenbong*, customized by their agencies to reflect their artistic and aesthetic identity. Numerous bands have multiple sticks, each symbolizing a distinct era, some created through exclusive collaborations with international artists and retailing for hundreds of dollars. Thus, the ritualistic practices of live performances and the sacred status of the artists align with fans’ transformation into pilgrims, fostering a spiritual perspective towards the artists and the industry, or, metaphorically, towards the deities and the pilgrimage.

In addition to live performance practices, there are instances of fan-generated content disseminated in both digital and physical spaces, alongside the production of place, through cup sleeve events, flash mobs, and fan-financed billboard purchases for idol promotion, among other activities. Consequently, fans invest money and time, which is also considered a valuable resource, promoting and supporting their favorite artists. The rationale for this unpaid labor can be elucidated through the concept of “prosumer”, as proposed by Alvin Toffler (1980), an idea reflected also in Patrick Galbraith’s term “labor of love” (2016). The industry’s fostering of desire for intimacy and familiarity with performers establishes an emotional bond, which incentivizes consumers to participate in production, transforming leisure into labor. “[P]op idols and drama characters are human agents used to build an affective intimacy with audiences” (Oh 2018: 15). Nonetheless, my argument persists that while I do not endorse a completely passive participation with the industry, the generation of metatexts, the production of place, and the accumulation of fan initiatives are predominantly guided, even instructed by the industry, and never manage to challenge or alter the spectacular structure. All shifts and adaptations within the industry are informed by audience preferences; however, they are implemented for the attention economy and financial profit. Thereby, the industry maintains the distance from fans, who are deprived of influence over the system’s structure and operation. For instance, despite fans’ concerns and protests over the excessively harsh training

of idols, the exhausting diets that result in eating disorders and on-stage fainting episodes, and the maltreatment or exploitation of idols by their agencies, nothing is changing. Hence, pseudo-participation promotes the spectacular industry, which persists as a self-centered, self-absorbed system that captures attention within a realm of pseudo-cyclical time.

Lastly, I would like to reiterate the notion of psychogeographies in the context of fans' behavior. From the perspective of the Situationists, *dérive*, was a "psychogeographic method" (Wood 2010: 186), and as mentioned in the subsection of the spectacle, it can be regarded as an ideological, rebellious technique and a way to counteract the spectacle, by "discovering unities of ambiance" and "reconstructing the city as a terrain of passion" (Wood 2010: 187). However, detaching the concept from the method, it is possible to utilize it to focus purely on the cultivation of emotions within the city and on the behavioral patterns of individuals, such as fans; the discovery of symbolically loaded places of interest, and the generation of new meanings. Interestingly, this approach could return to the concept of spectacle, and it would be possible to examine the affective places produced by spectacle, such as K-Places. This would reveal that, despite the Situationists' intentions to use psychogeography through the *dérive* to escape the spectacular realm, its omnipresence, at least in our postmodern world, shapes and influences the emotional landscape. I find that the case study of idol ads in Seoul metro stations by Olga Fedorenko (2021), accurately reflects the idea of psychogeography, as a fan initiative, within the framework of the spectacular industry. The reclaiming of space, as Fedorenko phrases it, through the fandom's financed ads in various metro stations of Seoul, but most importantly, the fan-made maps of the underground commute, indicating only the stations of K-Pop relevance, provide a tangible artifact of the fan practices, the spectacular psychogeography, and the labor of love.

4.2.3 Translocal and virtual

K-Pop fandoms are transnational and translocal communities, with the Internet serving as the overarching environment that facilitates their engagement with content and communication with one another. Fan activities in the digital space encompass fan-generated edits, the composition of fan fiction, the investigation and theorization of hidden meanings within music videos, and the exploration of interconnected nodes in the transmedia productions. Korean fans actively engage in the community, serving as additional cultural mediators by translating Korean lyrics, subtitling idol performances on live streams or variety shows, and explaining the Korean cultural context to facilitate understanding of the integrated traditional elements. Furthermore, in relation to the previously described elements of pilgrimage, ritualization, and the quasi-religious character of the industry, fans orchestrate collective streaming sessions of songs, entire albums, or music videos to offer their beloved artists' new record milestones. The Internet has undoubtedly contributed to the globalization and popularity of K-Pop and *Hallyu*, enabling the almost effortless distribution and consumption of content,

while Korean decision-makers are credited with orchestrating and strategically utilizing the platforms and digital tools available in this new era (Kim 2021; United Nations 2024). In this context, Kyung Hyun Kim (2021) examines BTS as an indicative example of the impact of social media and fans' activity on the band's success. The author critically dismisses comparisons between BTS and the Beatles, a juxtaposition often cited by academicians and media critics based on sales data, chart records, and cultural impact. Kim writes: "[D]espite the popularity of [BTS], Korean popular music has yet to produce one single progression of chords that has created a ripple effect of global critical response without the super aid of maniacal campaigns by their fans." (2021: 61).

In keeping with the subchapter's emphasis on the industry's influence on collective identity, I would like to shift the focus from the role of the Internet in K-Pop's success and acknowledge a few pertinent works that offer insight into this impact in the digital context. Daria Arkhipova's doctoral dissertation on AI-supported recommendation systems and their effect on decision-making (2024) presents a substantial contribution. Arkhipova conducted semiotic research to elucidate the influence of recommendation systems on cognition, emotional experiences, and social life, as well as how exposure to algorithmically curated designs shapes social and cultural practices. The author highlighted the troubling facets of tailored and personalized Internet navigation, as it creates "filter bubbles" and cultivates an echo chamber environment. I consider Eli Pariser's work on the notion of the filter bubble highly relevant, given the author's definitions and descriptions closely resemble the spectacular world illustrated by Debord in 1967. Pariser argues that a filter bubble comprises an individual in isolation; despite a topic of interest being widely shared across the community, each bubble is customized for every user (Pariser 2021: 9). "In an age when shared information is the bedrock of shared experience, the filter bubble is a centrifugal force, pulling us apart" (Pariser 2021: 9-10). Moreover, the author asserts that filter bubbles are notoriously unnoticeable and untraceable (Pariser 2021: 10). Algorithmic recommendations are not directly chosen or filtered by the user in the same way that one deliberately selects a specific outlet as their primary source of information. Rather, they are curated and pushed to individuals based on data profiling, with the intent of enhancing engagement for profit maximization. Although users may be aware of these practices and the concerns they raise, comprehending the existence of a filter bubble and detecting its bias remain exceedingly challenging.

Consequently, through the consumption of content on social media and the constant recommendation of related videos and products, users amplify their engagement in pseudo-cyclical time. This remark is connected to a deeper concern about misinformation and distortion, and it is directly related to the previously discussed issue of representation, as the customized filter bubble would emphasize and prioritize previously used terms, consistently curating results associated with these keywords. The results and recommended content on platforms such as Google, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (among others) will be tailored to users' analyzed personal preferences. This data-collection-based method

for a personalized digital experience mitigates information overload; however, it is driven by the attention economy, ensuring the user's prolonged exposure to relatable content. The objective is to increase interactions with advertisements and grow platforms' metrics, sacrificing a balanced, heterogeneous presentation of different sources and a variety of content. This leads to confirmation bias, polarization, echo chambers, and false consensus.

Returning to K-Pop, for a fan, the offered content may thus be predominantly focused on K-Pop, hence diminishing the visibility of content unrelated to the music genre or idols. This would create a misleading impression of the eminent position, the cultural and representational significance of K-Pop in South Korea, overshadowing other cultural elements and the reality of modern Korean society. Furthermore, the false consensus would lead to fandom's confirmation biases on the achievements and widespread appeal of their beloved artists, bombarding users with data on successive record-breaking milestones and articles covering the success, proliferation, and cultural impact of K-Pop. Deeper engagement, critical analysis, cross-referencing, and comparative study would be needed to fully comprehend the proportions of the said success and the relevance of record-breaking figures in the broader pop cultural sphere and international music scene. Nevertheless, out-of-proportion narratives become a canon within fandom, shaping fans' collective identity (as shared history and culture of the fandom) and guiding their behavioral tendencies. Ultimately, in close relation to Debord, the filter bubbles, algorithmic curation, and AI recommendation systems, encapsulate the essence of a mediated world that is observable yet not wholly experienced, and a system that grows progressively more self-centered, self-absorbed, and self-referential, isolating individuals from social life and constructing a distorted perception of reality. The cultivated perception of reality is combined with a false impression of knowledge of and trust in the depicted world, which, due to its exposure, appears open and trustworthy. Nevertheless, spectacles, and in this case, the K-Pop industry, are closed systems that do not reveal the entirety of their architecture and mechanisms, but only the necessary parts for the success and preservation of their existence.

The sentiments expressed in the preceding paragraphs lead to the recognition that the K-pop industry is embedded in a broader network of spectacles. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that the industry, and more specifically the various agencies, companies, or conglomerates, has no direct means of controlling or regulating the formation of filter bubbles and personalized recommendation systems. Nonetheless, Korean decision-makers are commended for their strategic use of digital tools, as they effectively influence the system indirectly through a reverse-engineering approach. Indeed, many content creators and influencers might have mastered the same technique by including the most searched keywords in their titles and tags, thereby increasing their visibility. However, the K-Pop industry holds the resources to generate an overflow of content. Different versions of songs' music videos, dance rehearsals, behind-the-scenes footage, live streams of idols across different platforms, multiple 'reels' and 'shorts' are uploaded consistently, alongside documentaries in exclusive partnership with

streaming services. Simultaneously, fans are bombarded with this content through their personalized filter bubbles, while, as pilgrims and prosumers, they actively engage with it through reposting, commenting, sharing, and liking. Furthermore, the transmedial nature of the productions ensures that even if some content exists in one particular medium, its circulation will extend beyond that and spread across multiple platforms. This creates a positive feedback loop that reinforces the algorithm and increases the possibility of the content reaching new audiences.

4.3 Micro

Personal identity constitutes the innermost part of my triptych model regarding the impact of the K-Pop industry at the individual level. All influences on national and social, or collective identity are interconnected with this level. Personal identity emerges from social interactions and simultaneously informs our choices and social behavior. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that personal identity, like any other form of identity, is not a fixed, crystallized manual instructing and directing the individual, but rather an evolving process.

My third publication, “The illusionary world of K-Pop” (Alexandri 2024), examines this topic. Beginning with the research question of which features of the K-Pop industry would suffice for its characterization as a spectacle, I subsequently examined the subjective positions emerging within this system, concentrating on idols and fans. Ultimately, I analyzed their subjective perspectives, juxtaposing them with identity development and reality perception theories to reveal the extent of deviation from the norms established in the literature. Based on my research, I argue that idols are being transformed into and treated as empty signifiers, as the industry strips them of their individuality and imposes particular roles and personas on them. The K-Pop industry is described as “a paternalistic system that disciplines its stars” (Hong 2014: 129), while in addition, “the training is an education of the whole person” (Hong 2014: 129). The gravity of this invasive influence on the identity development of idols becomes clearer when examining the age at which artists begin their training. For that reason, I employed Erik Erikson’s epigenetic theory of psychological development (1968; 1977 [1950]), and James Marcia’s framework for the development and validation of ego identity (1966) to elucidate the risks associated with industry practices that adversely impact the smooth development of identity in adolescent trainees. Following that, I analyzed the same topic through the lens of semiotics, exploring identity foreclosure and diffusion through the Lotmanian tradition. Additionally, I examined the development of salient identities (McCall and Simmons 1978 [1966]), as the idols grow in an environment where they learn to seek the necessary approval for their identification from industry members who assume the roles of family figures, as well as from the audience that validates the idols and their artistic endeavors.

On the other hand, fans are equally impacted on an individual level by the industry’s strategies. In my research, I employed the concept of ‘modern

autonomous imaginative hedonism' (Campbell 2018 [1987]), which elucidates the phenomenon wherein an individual deliberately immerses into an illusionary realm, substituting conventional consumption with the indulgence of fantasies. The individual is delving into an imaginary experience to fulfill needs and desires, compensating for what is missing in social, everyday life. Additionally, I utilized the concept of 'parasocial interaction' as introduced by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956), which delineates the audience's developed sense of intimacy and familiarity with performers and celebrities. The authors caution that if this one-sided interaction and the accumulation of emotions persist and transform into a fantasy that dominates the individual's social life, it may be classified as "pathological" (Horton and Wohl 1956: 223). My research and analysis of cases from the K-Pop industry indicate that companies are aware of the dysfunctions that arise among fans and exploit their vulnerabilities. Simultaneously, a plethora of fan-generated content and products exist online that nurture and sustain these dysfunctions, with one of my primary examples being the alarming application Mydol. The app, engineered to simulate interactions between users and K-Pop idols, prompted users to engage extensively with the chatbots while also providing the opportunity to assume the role of a celebrity in role-playing scenarios with others. As of the writing of this thesis, the application has been withdrawn by the majority of providers due to its classification as potentially risky and hazardous.

Nonetheless, numerous media (official or fan-generated) continue to promote practices that encourage or sustain extreme immersion and extended engagement, thereby contributing to the potential development of the aforementioned dysfunctional tendencies and behaviors. Campbell notes, regarding his notion of imaginative hedonism: "The individual is both actor and audience in his own drama, 'his own' in the sense that he constructed it, stars in it, and constitutes the sum total of the audience." (Campbell, 2018 [1987], p. 132). It cannot be overlooked that Lotmanina theory posits that communication with texts (hence not interpersonal) still constitutes a legitimate form of interaction, fostering dialogue, negotiation, reflection, juxtaposition, and so on. However, Campbell's observation emphasizes the root of the problem: in the analyzed practices, fans are amassing the entirety of potential roles, resulting in a harmful, absorbing monologue. In this context, I finally applied Hermann Schmitz's theory of primitive present (Schmitz et al. 2011), to explore the disjunction and detachment from reality experienced during the intense immersion over an extended period of engagement. The notion refers to the essential ongoing awareness and engagement with one's spatiotemporal environment, which fosters self-consciousness and ultimately leads to the formation of absolute identity in the present. I concluded that since the five elements of primitive present (here, now, being, this, I) fail to merge within a singular spatiotemporal dimension, as a result of the individual's coexistence in both realms of reality and fiction, there is a subsequent disruption in the cognition of reality, linked with the perception of identity.

A concept missing from my publication that could reinforce my arguments about the inherent risks of succumbing to intense immersion for an extended

period in isolation from social life is playfulness, as described by Juri Lotman (2011). In his work “The place of art among other modelling systems”, Lotman discusses the significance of play for the human psyche, and even the development of instincts to skills of non-human animals. The author emphasizes that play, as a process, does not negate cognition; rather, it depends on consciousness and the capacity to differentiate reality from the fictitious and unreal. Playing necessitates the transposition of some real elements into the realm of the game, an imaginary situation established as the arena of playfulness. These elements are rendered in the game’s language and adhere to its rules (Lotman 2011: 253). Furthermore, it is crucial for the act of play that the individual simultaneously recognizes the imaginary as nonexistent and distinct from reality, while deliberately, and temporarily, overlooking that reality to achieve participation, involvement, and immersion. “The ability to play means mastering such twofold behaviour.” (Lotman 2011: 254). Lotman then illustrates two approaches to playing that violate its principles: the first type is to perceive play as frivolous and meaningless, thereby rejecting the opportunity to explore an imaginary scenario and engage in a playful act (Lotman 2011: 254–255). The second type of violation occurs when the game is taken too seriously, resulting in a conflation of imagination and reality (Lotman 2011: 254). Consequently, the second form of violating the principles of play, that is, the immersion to the extent that reality and imagination converge, reinforces the arguments of my publication from an alternative theoretical perspective, and underscores the potential dangers of intense and sustained immersion that supersedes an individual’s social life.

Another aspect addressed in my third article seeks to investigate the ramifications of this stated complete and prolonged immersion. “Identity, reality, and the semiotic process may be viewed as a trinity that forms the basis of human cognition; the components are so intimately intertwined that disrupting one will immediately impact the others.” (Alexandri 2024: 294). Consequently, the disruption of this equilibrium could result in a distorted perception of reality and a transformation of semiosis as we know it. Randviir’s 2019 work “From systematic semiotic modelling to pseudointentional reference” suggests a parallel trajectory, indicating that indexicality may be influenced by unintentional or conditioned referentiality, which could result in a collapse of realities. The author asserts that our environment is shaped and even “manipulated by the creation and arrangement of diverse types of texts and culture topics” (2019: 62), whilst the model of objective reality depends on “the conditioning of semiotic reflexes and crystallization of (semiotic) institutions” (2019: 62). These remarks not only substantiate the hypothesis that an isolated monologue, which detaches the individual from the essential social interaction, can result in the conflation or dissolution of different realities, but also reinforces the notion that the realm of spectacles, along with its established language, and the monopoly of appearances, can readily influence and promote the supersession of mediated reality over the collectively accepted objective reality model.

Lastly, I would like to reference a study that employs Schmitz’s phenomenological approach in a manner that contrasts with my implementation. Lindemann

and Schünemann conducted a study on the embodied experience of presence within digital environments, indicating that conventional perceptions of authentic social contact marginalize or pathologize technologically mediated communication (2020). The authors assert that the existing literature neglects the spatial aspects of digital interactions and the element of presence in these engagements. I would argue that even communication with another person in the digital sphere is debatable as equivalent to the experience of face-to-face social interaction. While I acknowledge that digital communication possesses spatiotemporal dimensions, even considering the temporal aspect of reception and reaction fundamentally alters the nature of engagement, without accounting for the shared or not local spatiality. Moreover, I contend that this approach, which draws parallels with the ethnocentric perspective that facilitates comprehension of interactions with immaterial and non-spatially present entities, such as ghosts, along with the abstraction that all corporeal beings are inherently artificial (derived from Plessner's work), paves the way for a hazardous interpretation of social interaction, presence, and experience. In the current landscape of AI technology, chatbots and language models that are capable of human-like dialogue, and the lurking danger of echo-chambers and AI psychosis, there is a pressing need for a thorough examination and clarification of what constitutes interaction, presence, and embodied experience. It is essential to discern when the various aspects of these phenomena may become detrimental to the individual, impacting their perception of reality and identity, which aligns with my stance and claims from my research and with the application of Schmitz's phenomenology. Nonetheless, the work of Lindemann and Schünemann's (2020) may initiate a discourse not only regarding that burning issue, but also to enhance the comprehension of embodied experience within a mediated digital sphere, such as the mediated reality of spectacles, with a focus on indexicality, conditioned referentiality, and their influence on the perception of reality.

4.4 Revisiting the research questions

Following the presentation of my findings, it is now necessary to revisit and address the research questions of the present thesis. My research intended to investigate the research question: **How does K-Pop produce, organize, and mediate culture, and how are identities formed, negotiated, constrained, and experienced within the K-Pop place?** This broader inquiry led to further specific questions that were examined through the body of my work, including my publications and original material I presented in this introductory chapter:

- How are parasocial interactions organized by the industry, and how do these interactions affect the different agents and their identities?
- How does the expansion of K-Pop affect the social aesthetics and identity of Korea, as well as its national identity?

- How does the spectacular industry become a soft power instrument, and how does it simultaneously eclipse and promote culture?
- What is the topology of K-Pop and its different analytical models?

The preceding analysis indicates that parasocial interactions are based on concepts such as the ‘modern autonomous imaginative hedonism’ (Campbell 2018 [1987]), and it has been noted that the industry not only recognizes these dysfunctions but also promotes their growth to achieve its objectives. Artists’ identities are affected when their individuality is overshadowed by the industry, which imposes different personas on them to cater to a broad audience, obstructing their identity development, especially during the early stages of adolescence. Fans, on the other hand, may engage in escapism to fulfill unmet needs and desires in their daily lives; nevertheless, this can potentially lead to an immersion that overtakes social life and might even blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy. This fostered bidirectional relationship between fans and artists, based on which the idols function as empty signifiers to meet the expectations of a wide audience, which in turn feeds and shapes the desires and expectations of fans, creating a feedback loop, serving the purposes of the industry seeking to excel in a fiercely competitive market and obtain the economy of attention. The stakes are elevated, as the goal here encompasses not only profit maximization but also the establishment of an industry capable of asserting itself in the global market, the exportation of a national cultural product that rebrands national identity, and its integration into the nation’s soft power strategies. Through the strategic and systematic cultivation of this bidirectional relationship, fans become committed pilgrims who not only consume available content but also contribute free labor and undertake initiatives that sustain and bolster the spectacular industry. The omnipresence of mediated reality, coupled with filter bubbles and algorithmic recommendations, maintains the industry’s domination and perpetuates the pseudo-cyclical consumption pattern.

Examining the second and third questions of social and national identity, together with the simultaneous promotion and overshadowing of the Korean culture, proved to be an intricate matter, yet the investigation yielded a compelling conclusion. Based on my research, an analytical distinction appears between K-Pop as: a) a creative process, and a cultural phenomenon situated in a defined historical and socio-cultural context, and b) the K-Pop industry. However, it is impossible to separate the two, as the industry shapes the conditions of the phenomenon’s existence and operation, making the two sides co-constitutive aspects of the same unit. The K-Pop industry is structured and operates as a spectacle, albeit not in an exact analogy to the concept described by Guy Debord. The industry organizes the visibility and circulation of culture, filtering and projecting the elements necessary for the product’s success, increased attention, and, of course, profit. Thus, culture is being mediated and instrumentalized, becoming the “star commodity” of the spectacle (Debord 2014 [1967]: 104). This entails the potential for distortion or misrepresentation, since the simplified, at times

reduced, cultural representation appears distant from the actual heritage and becomes ahistorical. Hence, a K-culture is being produced within industry; however, I argue that the Korean history and tradition, and the continuity with culture, are not exhausted within the system. These elements might become opaque, but they are inherent to the phenomenon and foundations of its evolution; they are the ‘blueprints’ of K-Pop.¹²

Spectacle curates and constrains a much larger cultural and (inter)semiotic field, which, even if limited, is still not void of meaning, meaning-making processes, and the possibility of co-existing multiple interpretations. Even the process of curation, reappropriation, translation, and transformation of texts within the spectacular realm indicates semiosis and the generation of new meanings and metatexts. I believe that these productions and the dialogue across cultures establish K-pop as part of contemporary Korean culture and, consequently, reaffirm its continuation of the broader cultural lineage.

Considering Debord’s (2005) degrees of spectacle, it is possible to imagine how the media-driven mediation of the selected and curated aspects of Korean culture falls within the level of “technico-ideological appearances”. However, I claim that at the second level of the “reality of social organization” lies the constructed myth of K-Pop, driven by national branding and the operation of soft power. The impetus is not only the profitability of industry and, in extension, the nation, but also the desire for visibility and international recognition. The historical amnesia and seeming distance from culture, as I mentioned, are byproducts of simplified mediation. However, the K-Pop industry should serve as a vehicle for introducing Korean history and culture to a global audience. This is achieved through its transmedial nature, which enables different modes of engagement, hence reorienting the audience to a deeper exploration of the broader culture. Nonetheless, it should also be considered how the dominance of the spectacle and its omnipresence result in the eclipse (not erasure) of other cultural and historical aspects. Since in spectacle “what appears is good” and “what is good appears” (Debord 2014 [1967]: 3), not mediated elements are likely to be ignored, or even deemed unimportant, as the spectacular model being more attractive and alluring supersedes the socio-cultural reality. Finally, other significant aspects are the issues of uniformity and monotony, which I don’t see as a lack of heterogeneity on all levels, or absence of layers and diverse modes of engagement, but rather as a hazard grounded in the practice of reading every text in relation to, and through, the lens of the spectacle.

¹² I believe that this analytical distinction, the structure and organization of the industry, but also the cultural continuity, are conclusions similar to the recently published column of the Korean sociologist Han Sang-jin (2026), who asserted that the polarity of factory production and authentic creation/artistry is too rigid and simplified. He proposed that, although the undeniable structure of the K-Pop system is evident, the phenomenon is renovating and transforming culture by creating and platforming new knowledge and meanings. For the scholar, inquiries into K-Pop should shift from whether a system and an organization exist to what we understand of it and what it represents.

In conclusion, I will present what I term the topology of K-Pop and the various analytical models identified in my research. I propose that there are at least three interconnected layers of spatiality concerning K-Pop, conceptualized through various analytical approaches and levels of investigation. At the outset, the spatial dimension of the K-Pop industry was examined in my work through the lens of spectacle, manifesting as a mediated reality modeled identically to the actual world, positioned at a distance that forbids any interference with the represented realm. The degrees of spectacle also acquire a spatial dimension, reflecting the scaffolding and architecture of the spectacular system. Nonetheless, I assert that the industry can be examined from different analytical perspectives and viewpoints, adopting a less critical tone than the Debordian theory, and aiming at the indication of diverse aspects, while conceptualizing its spatial dimension. For instance, the K-Pop industry could be viewed as an ecosystem, a concept explored by Jeon et al. (2023) with the implementation of the “semiotic square of consumption values” and a focus on fans’ participation. Similarly, the K-pop ‘ecosystem’, and more particularly the emerging adjacent industries, have been recently investigated by CedarBough T. Saeji (2024). Nonetheless, another daring yet innovative and creative approach would involve applying Timo Maran’s “Deep ecosemiotics: forest as a semiotic model” (2022) as the primary theoretical framework. The author elucidates that:

For an ecological view, a characteristic of the forest is the presence of several interconnected structural layers. These can be mapped spatially, temporally, or structurally, as different layers of the vertical structure in vegetation, different stages of succession, or different levels of the ecological pyramid. (Maran 2022: 292)

Another analytical model of K-Pop concerns the tangible, localized expansions of K-Pop in the physical environment. My research has focused on officially produced spaces, grassroots initiatives, and the reconfiguration/recoding of existing sites within Seoul’s urban landscape. Nonetheless, instances of physical expansion are not exclusive to the capital, nor are they limited to South Korea. Future research may encompass localized K-Places in various Korean cities, including examples that derive not only from K-Pop but also from K-dramas and Korean cinema, and proceed with a comparative analysis of the K-Places inspired by the different domains. The research can also focus on investigating K-Places in countries beyond South Korea, analyzing the challenges and negotiations with established socio-cultural environments, and comparing the affective spaces of these nations, highlighting similarities and differences of K-Places on a global scale. Moreover, the concepts of psychogeography and Schmitz’s atmosphere could be more fully employed, with a more prominent role in the conceptual framework, linking physical places with human behavioral patterns, desires, and experiences.

The last analytical model identified in my work is the spatial dimension of K-Pop, which pertains to the immaterial space the phenomenon occupies. This

approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the K-Pop semiosphere, encompassing the dualities and semiotic tensions of global versus local, traditional versus international, authentic versus reproductive, marginalized and alternative versus hegemonic, advocative and representative versus distorting, and real versus illusionary. This intangible spatial dimension facilitates the examination of the expansion of the K-Pop sphere, its self-recording, the delineation of its own territory within broader spheres of Korean culture, pop culture, or culture at large, and the dynamic relationships among them. Furthermore, it is in this immaterial realm where the intersemiotic space and M-Space of K-Pop reside. An unexamined aspect of the immaterial spatial dimension of K-Pop in my research is the chronotopic study of K-Pop as a text situated within the intersemiotic space. Thus, within the intersemiotic, or alternatively defined, space of transmedial translation (Torop 2020: 269), one can analyze the macrotime, microtime, and achrony of K-Pop's text, establishing a different scaffolding and conceptualizing a distinct spatio-temporal configuration. Macrotime pertains to the chronological sequence of creation, from inception to the realization of its individual components, while microtime refers to the production of the distinct parts and the order in which each unit ultimately attains its final form and position, resulting in a complete and comprehensive whole (Torop 2004: 62).

In addition to the macro- and microtime of the manuscript there is also reason to distinguish the achrony of the manuscript, which means the understanding of the manuscript as an archive document in which the minimal unit is formed by the whole manuscript or its holistic part as a fascicle, notebook or the like. (Torop 2004: 62)

This structure facilitates the organization of the diachronic history of K-Pop as the macrotime of the K-Pop text, commencing with court dances and the initial influences that contributed to the emergence of the K-Pop phenomenon. Alternatively, the beginning of the diachronic line could begin with the early 1950s when Korean agencies auditioned and trained artists for the entertainment of American troops (Kim 2021: 15; Maliangkay 2018); or the late 1990s, which is frequently recognized as the inception of K-Pop. Torop asserts that when the analysis is unlikely to trace the precise diachronic sequence of a text's formation, one can reconstruct the macrotime by referring to distinct periods of the creative process (2004: 62), something that aligns with the previously discussed blueprint of K-Pop, a concept derived from the work of Osip Mandelstam (1967 [1933]). The microtime can examine the different generations of K-Pop bands and solo artists, which, depending on different scholars, K-Pop experts, and critics, can be categorized as five or more; while the achrony may denote the period when K-Pop finally emerged as a unique and distinct musical genre, marking its own place within the music sphere.

5. CONCLUSION

This dissertation is a theory-driven, exploratory, transdisciplinary study aimed at analyzing the global phenomenon of K-Pop through the lens of semiotics. The initial motivation stemmed from the observed dualities, contradictions, and semiotic tensions within the K-Pop industry, alongside its substantial role in South Korea's contemporary soft power strategies and national rebranding. The primary research question for this work was: How does K-Pop produce, organize, and mediate culture, and how are identities formed, negotiated, constrained, and experienced within the K-Pop place? I believe that the prior subchapters adequately addressed this question, as well as the succeeding, more focused inquiries posed in this introductory chapter. What distinguishes my work is the analysis of K-Pop as a semiotic object, as well as the semiotic synthesis of various, established but fragmented perspectives on K-Pop from other fields. Furthermore, the transdisciplinary aspect of my research offers a spherical approach and constructs a conceptual framework of theories and concepts from several disciplines, recognizing their strengths and limitations and utilizing them strategically. Additionally, the originality of the work lies in its spatial orientation and the analytical models presented, specifically the triptych model of impact and the topology of K-Pop. This study contributes to filling the highlighted gap in K-Pop research, formulating theories inspired and tailored for the object of investigation, and laying the foundations for future research.

My application of Debordian theory allows for an understanding of the spectacular industry as a soft power instrument, as well as for the exploration of its impact on culture and identities, and for the investigation of the layering and organization of meanings. Although the implementation of the theory did not fully embrace every aspect of Debord's description of the spectacular realm, I argue that the author, through his work, implicitly anticipated that his conception of the society of the spectacle is pertinent to his temporal and socio-cultural context, albeit still relevant today. Theory must be "sent into battle at the right time", and "die in the war of time" (Debord 2003 [1978]: 150); thus, contemporary, revised, and adapted iterations of the theory are essential for examining the omnipresence and impact of the mediated environment of our times.

Another issue that I would like to underscore is that, similar to my view of Debord's work as a message of caution rather than an endeavor to intimidate or belittle the reader, I hold the same perspective regarding fans. My work should not be generalized to represent the totality of the K-Pop fandom, nor should it assert an unequivocal absence of agency, capacity of interpretation and meaning-making, or critical analysis. In this introductory chapter, I have emphasized that critically evaluating the consumed content is the most appropriate strategy to safely navigate the contemporary media-saturated environment. Having said that, it is essential, I believe, to open up a discussion regarding the implications and risks posed by (in this case) the K-Pop industry, and in extension the broader

spectacular systems that engulf individuals into a passive mode of consumption, who rashly and uncritically accept what is shown, thereby fulfilling the industry's objectives, and unwillingly become part of the spectacle.

My work is not concerned with finding a solution or an escape from the spectacle. Apart from being outside the scope of the research, this is also partially due to my perception that the K-Pop industry is part of a larger society of spectacles, while perhaps not as bleak as Debord's depiction, it is still prevalent and highly influential. I concur with the quote that in the spectacle "even the deceivers are deceived" (Debord 2014 [1967]: 2), as I believe that there is the potential of agents within the spectacular realm being completely unaware of their role or contribution in its prevalence. Even texts not originally designed to be part of the spectacle may nonetheless be instrumentalized. Having said that, I do not endorse a viewpoint that vilifies the entertainment industry or pop culture, and my academic and personal stance diverges significantly from the 'cultural industry' of Adorno and Horkheimer. On the contrary, I strongly believe and argue that the fear of demonization, on the one hand, and the aphoristic or reductive approaches to pop culture, on the other, deprive us of the ability to closely examine the intricate relationships among cultural units, emergent phenomena, and their influence on the contemporary sociocultural landscape. My position aligns closely with Douglas Kellner's diagnostic critique. Recognizing and analyzing potential risks associated with immersion in the world of spectacles is essential, as such studies can reveal social pathogenies and provide an accurate picture of socio-cultural reality. Furthermore, they can equip individuals with the tools to cultivate critical thinking and media literacy, thereby enabling them to harness the benefits of the postmodern, media-driven world while avoiding its risks.

Finally, the recent increase in scholarly articles on K-Pop signifies a positive shift, indicating that topics related to pop culture are now considered worthy of thorough academic investigation, marking a point of destigmatization. I anticipate that as the phenomenon of K-Pop continues to grow and expand, academic attention will persist, leading to the emergence of new relevant research questions. In addition to the previously proposed avenues for further research that I outlined during my presentation of K-Pop's topology, I would be interested in exploring further the effects of extreme immersion on identity and cognition of reality. I am particularly interested in conducting research involving interviews with the self-identified 'reality shifters' (for reference, Somer et al. 2023; Sunil et al. 2026), a phenomenon that has recently emerged online, wherein numerous community members participate in practices that allegedly allows the to mentally transition to alternative realities and fulfill their fantasies with their beloved K-Pop idols. I deem that the identification of trends and the observation of subcultural practices can reveal several overlooked facets of the community that possess significant academic value. Furthermore, another phenomenon that has recently gained great popularity and global acceptance is the rebirth of otome video games. 'Otome' refers to a specific category of narrative-driven games across multiple platforms, incorporating several genres, aimed primarily at a female audience, in which the player develops romantic relationships with various

male characters. The success of video games in recent years has fostered fandoms that exhibit behavioral patterns similar to those of K-Pop fans, while the industry closely resembles the structure and mechanics of the K-Pop industry. I firmly contend that a comparative analysis of these industries and fandoms may yield intriguing results.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

K-popi fenomen: reaalsuse ja fiktsiooni kohtumispaik

Antud doktoritöö on teooriakeskne ja transdistsiplinaarne uurimus, mille eesmärk on analüüsida K-popi üleilmset nähtust semiootika vaatenurgast. Uurimistöö lähtekohaks on K-popi tööstuses esinevad kahetisused, vastuolud ja semiootilised pinged, samuti selle oluline roll Lõuna-Korea praegustes pehme jõu strateegiates ja riigi kuvandi ümberkujundamises. Need ajendasid mind uurima K-popi nähtuse pragmaatilisi mõõtmeid. Töö kasvab välja minu strukturalismi suunitlusega magistritööst, milles uurisin BTS-i poeetilise universumi ülesehitust ning selle peamiste teemade ja motiivide ülekandumist K-popi poistebändi avarasse transmeedialisse maailma. Doktoritöös keskendun sellele, kuidas K-popi tööstus mõjutab identiteedi kujunemist ja arengut. Selleks töötasin välja mõju kolmeosalise mudeli, mille abil analüüsin K-popi tööstuse mõju rahvuslikule, sotsiaalsele, kollektiivsele ja isiklikule identiteedile, jagades need makro-, meso- ja mikrotasandiks. Uurimistöö tõi esile analüütilise eristuse K-popi kui kultuurilise nähtuse ja K-popi tööstuse vahel. Esimene säilitab järjepidevuse oma sotsiaalse ja kultuurilise kontekstiga, teine on aga korraldatud ning toimib vaatemängulise süsteemina.

Prantsuse filosoofi Guy Debord'i 1960. aastatel sõnastatud „spektaakli“ (ehk vaatemängu) mõiste mõjutas minu tööd oluliselt, sest see võimaldab uurida teemat samal ajal nii strukturalistlikust kui ka pragmaatilisest vaatenurgast. Esmapilgul ilmnis selge paralleel Debord'i teooria ja K-popi tööstuse vahel ning see äratas minus akadeemilist huvi. See teoreetiline raamistik võimaldas käsitleda näilist osalust ja agentsust, kogemuste vahendamist, kultuuri reguleeritud nähtavust ja instrumentaliseerimist, K-popi iidolikeskset süsteemi ning afektiivse läheduse kujundamist. Seega arenes algne tähelepanek vaatemängu ja K-popi vahelistest paralleelidest ning mustritest loomulikult selleni, et Debord'i teooriast sai minu kontseptuaalse raamistiku keskne osa ja oluline alus suurele osale uurimistööst.

Oluline on rõhutada, et kasutan spektaakli mõistet selle teema uurimisel loovalt. Samuti ei ole selle mõiste rakendamise eesmärk seletada K-popi tervikuna, sest nagu eespool märgitud, eristan selgelt K-popi kui kultuurilist nähtust ja tööstust. Samuti on tähtis märkida, et vaatemänguline tööstus ei kustuta ega hävita K-popi kultuurilist ja semiootilist välja ega katkesta selle sidet Korea kultuuri ja rahvusliku identiteediga. Sellest hoolimata on spektaakli mõiste keskne nende pingete uurimisel, millele eespool osutasin, eriti tööstuse toime-mehhanismide, võimusuhte, agentsuse probleemi ning eri identiteedivormidele avalduva mõju analüüsimisel. Spektaakli käsitlemine ja minu pakutud teoorialaiendus, täpsemalt spektaakli mõtestamine modelleeriva süsteemina, viisid omakorda K-popi topoloogilise vaatenurga kujunemiseni. See avardas uurimistöö ulatust ja tõi esile K-popi ruumiliste mõõtmete teema.

Sellest lähtudes esitab doktoritöö järgmise uurimisküsimuse: **kuidas K-pop loob, korrastab ja vahendab kultuuri ning kuidas identiteedid K-popi paigas kujunevad, läbi räägitakse, piiratakse ja kogetakse?** Sellest üldisest küsimusest kasvasid omakorda välja täpsemad uurimisküsimused:

- Kuidas korraldab tööstus parasotsiaalseid suhteid ning kuidas mõjutavad need suhted eri toimijaid ja nende identiteete?
- Kuidas mõjutab K-popi laienemine Korea sotsiaalset esteetikat ja identiteeti ning rahvuslikku identiteeti?
- Kuidas muutub vaatamänguline tööstus pehme jõu vahendiks ning kuidas see samal ajal kultuuri nii varjutab kui ka edendab?
- Milline on K-popi topoloogia ja millised on selle erinevad analüütilised mudelid?

Nendele küsimustele vastamiseks uurisin ja kasutasin lisaks identiteedi kujunemise, rahvusliku identiteedi, rahvusbrändingu, pehme jõu ning sotsiaalse ja kollektiivse identiteedi teooriaid. Sama oluline oli põhjalikult mõista ruumilist mõõdet ning leida selle käsitlemiseks sobiv metakeel ja terminoloogia, sest need moodustavad minu uurimistöö põhilised analüütilised mõisted. Ruum ja paik ei tähenda selles töös alati sõnasõnalist, materiaalselt ega kindlasse asukohta seotud nähtust. Minu käsitus liigub Lotmani semiosfäärist ja Toropi intersemiootilisest ruumist Foucault' heterotoopiate, transmeedialise maailmaloomise, emotsioonide atmosfääri ja psühhogeograafiateni ning jõuab lõpuks füüsiliste paikadeni Soulis, Lõuna-Koreas. Olen seisukohal, et kalduvus mõtestada K-popi topoloogiliselt ning huvi uurida K-popi kui nähtuse või selle vaatamängulise tööstuse ruumilisust tulenevad Tartu-Moskva semiootikakoolkonnast, Lotmani traditsioonist ja rõhuasetusest modelleerivate süsteemide tähtsusele. Seega ei ole semiootika selles töös üksnes mõistete ja teooriate tööriistakast, vaid terviklik vaatenurk ja teoreetiline lähenemine.

Arutelu ja tulemuste osa läheb kaugemale minu varem avaldatud artiklite ja peatükkide järeldustest. See sisaldab uut uurimust, täpsustab minu järeldusi, koondab mitme aasta jooksul kujunenud tähelepanekuid ning arvestab ka uusimat teavet K-popi kui pidevalt kasvava nähtuse kohta. Selle osa ülesehitus järgib eespool kirjeldatud mõju kolmeosalist mudelit: makrotasand käsitleb rahvuslikku identiteeti, mesotasand sotsiaalset ja kollektiivset identiteeti ning mikrotasand isikliku identiteedi küsimusi. Lisaks esitan K-popi topoloogia, mis hõlmab uurimistöö käigus eristatud analüütilisi mudeleid. K-pop paikneb kohaliku ja rahvusvahelise ristumiskohas: ühelt poolt on see olemuslikult seotud Lõuna-Korea rahvusliku ja kultuurilise identiteediga, teiselt poolt toimib see kultuurilise ekspordina.

Makrotasandil uurin erinevaid lähenemisi representatsiooni täpsusele, uue mütoloogia loomist, mis tekitab kogukonna sees sisemisi pingeid, järjepidevust või katkestust kultuurilise arengu liinis ning selliste mõistete nagu rahvuslus, kultuuriline representatsioon ja autentsus paindlikke määratlusi ja tõlgendusi.

Erinevalt teistest popžanritest ületab K-pop muusikatööstuse piirid ning muutub Lõuna-Korea nüüdisaegse brändikuvandi osaks. Selle artistidest saavad kultuuri-saadikud. Tööstus kasutab Korea ajaloo, kultuuri ja traditsiooni elemente, kuid püüab samal ajal kõnetada võimalikult laia publikut. Seetõttu kultuurilisi elemente korrastatakse, filtreeritakse, kohandatakse ja mõnikord ka moonutatakse, et vastata konkurentsitiheda turu nõudmistele ja püüda tähelepanumajanduses nähtavust.

Mesotasandil käsitlen samu küsimusi edasi, keskendudes nende mõjule sotsiaalsel ja kollektiivsel tasandil. Uurin K-popi tööstuse mõju kodanikele, selle tagajärgi ja probleeme linnakeskkonnas ning korealaste igapäevaelus. Siia kuulub Korea ja selle elanike ebatäpne, osaline või moonutatud kujutamine, samuti rahvusvahelise publiku ebarealistlike ootuste kujundamine. See publik ootab sageli „autentset“ Koread, mis vastaks selle vahendatud kuvandile. Nähtus hõlmab viimastel aastatel esile kerkinud rassilise fetišeerimise probleemi, kuid osutab ka sellele, kuidas tänapäeva Korea ühiskonna ajalooline, sotsiaalne, kultuuriline ja majanduslik kontekst võib jääda K-popi, *Hallyu* ehk „Korea laine“ ja vahendatud tegelikkuse varju. Kollektiivsel tasandil mõjutab tööstus ka fännide identiteeti. Selle lõppeesmärk on muuta inimene paindliku ja voolava tarbija-identiteediga subjektist pühendunud palveränduriks, kes mitte ainult ei jälgi ega tarbi tooteid ja sisu, vaid lõimib need oma elu olulise ja lahutamatu osana. Lõpuks käsitlen fännikogukondi virtuaalsest ja translokaalsest vaatenurgast. Toetun algoritmiliste soovitusüsteemide ja filtrimullide uurimustele, et näidata, kuidas kujuneb petlik konsensus, mis muutub K-popi kollektiivse ja subkultuurilise identiteedi jaoks keskseks.

Mikrotasandil uurin K-popi tööstuse mõju artistide ja fännide isiklikule identiteedile. Ambitsioonikad noored alustavad tööstuses treeninguid sageli varases teismeeas ning sisenevad paternalistlikku süsteemi, mis vormib nii nende iidolirooli kui ka kogu nende individuaalsust. Eraldatus perekeskkonnast, haridusteest ja tavapäraest teismee kogemustest ning laiale publikule sobivate isiksuste kehtestamine takistavad isikliku identiteedi tervet ja sujuvat arengut. Selle tulemusena võivad esile kerkida domineerivad identiteedid ning tekkida võimalus identiteedi enneaegseks sulgumiseks, hajumiseks või muudeks identiteedi-häireteks. Fännid, keda kannustab kujutluslik hedonism, on omakorda vastuvõtlikud tööstuse praktikatele, mis kasutavad neid kalduvusi ära ning soodustavad parasotsiaalsete suhete ja näilise läheduse tunde kujunemist iidolitega. Oma uurimistöös keskendusin eeskätt fännide äärmuslikele juhtumitele, kus pikaajaline ja intensiivne sukeldumine fiktsionaalsetesse maailmadesse hakkab domineerima nende sotsiaalsete suhete üle. Sellest tähelepanekust kasvas välja hüpotees, et sedavõrd tugev süüvimine võib kahjustada identiteedi ja tegelikkuse tajumist.

Minu uurimistöö näitas, et tööstus tugineb artistide ja fännide teadlikult kujundatud kahesuunalisele suhtele. See loob tagasisideahela, milles ringlevad näilised vajadused, ihad, afektiivne lähedus ja nõudlus ning see mõjutab nii fännide isiklikku ja kollektiivset identiteeti kui ka artistide individuaalsust. Nagu juba mainitud, on minu uurimistöö üks keskseid avastusi analüütiline eristus K-popi kui

kultuurilise nähtuse ja K-popi kui vaatamängulise tööstuse vahel. See eristus aitab mõista näilist vastuolu: K-pop võib ühtaegu edendada ja esindada Korea kultuuri ning samal ajal seda varjutada.

Kuigi K-popi tööstus toimib vaatamänguna, ei järgi see täpselt Debord'i kirjeldatud „spektaakli“ mõistet. Minu käsitles kureerib ja piirab K-popi tööstus palju laiemat kultuurilist ja intersemiootilist välja, kuid see väli ei ole tähendustest, tähendusloomest ega koos eksisteerivate tõlgenduste võimalikkusest tühi. Sotsiaalset ja rahvuslikku identiteeti mõjutab Korea kultuuri ja ühiskonna vahendatud, osaline ning kohati moonutatud representatsioon. See tekitab sisemisi konflikte, aga ka praktilisi probleeme, mis puudutavad tööstust toetavaid haldusotsuseid ja poliitikaid, mis ei näi alati lähtuvat kodanike huvidest. Teiselt poolt aitavad K-popi toodete transmeedialine olemus ja tööstuse strateegiad kaasa Lõuna-Korea rahvuslikule ümberbrändimisele ja pehme jõu taktikatele. Need võimaldavad publikul suhestuda K-popiga erinevatel viisidel ning võivad suunata inimesi uurima Korea kultuuri laiemalt, väljaspool K-popi piire. Samal ajal on vaatamängu domineeriv ja kõikjal olev mõju piisavalt tugev, et varjutada laiemat konteksti, sest vahendamata või vähem vahendatud kultuurilised elemendid võivad jääda publiku tähelepanust kõrvale.

Minu pakutud K-popi topoloogia ja uurimistöös eristatud ruumilise mõõtme analüütilised viisid hõlmavad kolme peamist suunda. Esiteks võimaldab see uurida K-popi tööstuse ruumilisust ka teiste teoreetiliste raamistike kaudu, mitte ainult vaatamängu mõiste abil. Teiseks võimaldab see analüüsida K-popi tegelikke, materiaalseid ja asukohapõhiseid laienemisi füüsilises keskkonnas. Kolmandaks hõlmab see K-popi mittemateriaalset ruumi, sealhulgas K-popi semiosfääri, intersemiootilist ruumi ja M-ruumi.

K-pop on viimasel ajal kujunenud akadeemiliselt põhjendatud ja köitvaks uurimisobjektiks. See on julgustav märk popkultuuri stigmatiseerimise vähenemisest ning selle tunnustamisest nähtusena, mis väärib põhjalikku ja üksikasjalikku uurimist. Kuigi akadeemiline huvi K-popi vastu on viimase kahe aastakümne jooksul kasvanud, on Korea teadlased ja analüütikud märkinud, et mitmed aspektid on endiselt vähe uuritud. Samuti on vaja tugevamat kirjandust, mille teoreetiline raamistik oleks loodud just selle üleilmse nähtuse analüüsimiseks.

Minu töö uudsus seisneb K-popi käsitlemises semiootilise objektina ning erinevatest distsipliinidest ja mõttetraditsioonidest pärinevate, kuid juba väljakujunenud uurimisküsimuste semiootilises sünteesis. Lisaks pakub töö transdistsiplinaarne laad terviklikku vaatenurka, mis ühendab eri valdkondade teooriad ja mõisted üksteist täiendavaks raamistikuks, arvestades nende tugevusi ja piiranguid ning kasutades neid sihipäraselt. Usun, et see doktoritöö aitab käsitleda senises K-popi uurimises esile toodud lünka, arendab teooriaid, mis lähtuvad uuritavast nähtusest endast, ning loob aluse edasisteks uurimusteks.

PUBLICATIONS

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Publications:

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Alexandri, Eleni 2022. K-Pop as (mis)representation of Korean culture. *International Journal of Marketing Semiotics and Discourse Studies*. 10(1): 1–20.

Alexandri, Eleni 2023. A spectacular world of modeled reality. In: Kõvamees, Erik; Miyamoto, Oscar; Randviir, Anti (eds.). *Concepts for Semiotics II*. (198–225). Tartu, Estonia: University of Tartu Press. 197–224.

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Alexandri, Eleni 2024. Õpilasest õpetajaks [From student to teacher] *Acta Semiotica Estica*. 21(1): 147–150.

Alexandri, Eleni (forthcoming). The intersemiotic space of K-Pop. *Semiotica*

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Research awards and recognitions:

2023 Eleni Alexandri, Student Act of the Year – Awarding of the academic journal *Hortus Semioticus* [Student editors are: Andrew Mark Creighton, Eleni Alexandri, Hongjin Song, Siiri Tarkikas, Andrea Barone Renolfi, Rahul Murdeshwar, Ingrid Udeküll, Tshinar-Kristi Shahmardan, and Sebastián Nabón.]

- 2022 Eleni Alexandri, Asian Center Scholarship Recipients – The purpose of the scholarship is to support students at the University of Tartu whose research focuses on interdisciplinary studies of the regions of Asia and/or the Middle East or their fields. (for the master’s thesis *Semiotic Analysis of K-Pop: The Making of BTS Universe*)
- 2021 Eleni Alexandri, Best Qualitative Research Award of the Center for Digital Humanities and Information Society dissertation competition (for the master’s thesis *Semiotic Analysis of K-Pop: The Making of BTS Universe*)

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Shu, Qin 2024. *The Functions of Intertextuality in LGBTQ+ Representation: Exemplified by Word of Honor*. Master’s degree thesis for the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu. [First supervisor: Alexandra Milyakina. Second supervisor: Eleni Alexandri]

Grintšak, Kiira 2025. *Romanticisation of Violence in Film and Musical Heathers*. Master’s degree thesis for the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu. [First supervisor: Katre Pärn. Second supervisor: Eleni Alexandri]

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Alexandri, Eleni 2021. *Semiotic Analysis of K-Pop: The Making of BTS Universe*. Master's degree thesis for the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu.

Alexandri, Eleni 2022. K-Pop as (mis)representation of Korean culture. *International Journal of Marketing Semiotics and Discourse Studies*. 10(1): 1–20.

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Teadustöö auhinnad ja tunnustused:

2023 Eleni Alexandri, Aasta üliõpilane – akadeemilise ajakirja „Hortus Semioticus“ auhind [Üliõpilastoimetajad on: Andrew Mark Creighton, Eleni Alexandri, Hongjin Song, Siiri Tarkikas, Andrea Barone Renolfi, Rahul Murdeshwar, Ingrid Udeküll, Tshinar-Kristi Shahmardan, and Sebastián Nabón.]

- 2022 Eleni Alexandri, Aasia Keskuse stipendiumi saajad – Stipendiumi eesmärk on toetada Tartu Ülikooli üliõpilasi, kelle uurimistöö keskendub Aasia ja/või Lähis-Ida piirkondade või nende valdkondade interdistsiplinaarsetele uuringutele. (magistritöö jaoks: *Semiotic Analysis of K-Pop: The Making of BTS Universe*)
- 2021 Eleni Alexandri, Digitaalhumanitaarika ja infouhiskonna keskuse magistritööde konkursi parima kvalitatiivse uurimistöö auhind (magistritööde kategoorias: *Semiotic Analysis of K-Pop: The Making of BTS Universe*)

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Kaasjuhendaja:

Shu, Qin 2024. *The Functions of Intertextuality in LGBTQ+ Representation: Exemplified by Word of Honor*. Master's degree thesis for the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu. [Juhendaja: Alexandra Milyakina. Kaasjuhendaja: Eleni Alexandri]

Grintšak, Kiira 2025. *Romanticisation of Violence in Film and Musical Heathers*. Master's degree thesis for the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu. [Juhendaja: Katre Pärn. Kaasjuhendaja: Eleni Alexandri]

Muud akadeemilised tegevused:

2020–praegu Akadeemilise ajakirja toimetuse liige *Hortus Semioticus*

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