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Grief and Democracy: Mourning, Mobilisation, and Public Distrust after Recent Tragedies in South Korea

Riassunto

Negli ultimi dodici anni, la Corea del Sud ha vissuto due tragedie di grande impatto: il naufragio del Sewol (2014) e la calca di Itaewon (2022). Entrambi gli eventi hanno provocato perdite di vite umane e hanno messo in luce carenze nella gestione delle emergenze e un tentativo di deresponsabilizzazione da parte del governo. In entrambi i casi, il dolore privato si è trasformato in rivendicazioni politiche collettive, generando indignazione civica, attivismo digitale e una prima significativa frattura tra governanti e cittadini. I social media hanno documentato gli eventi, facilitato il lutto collettivo e promosso la memoria tramite hashtag e iniziative online, mentre le pratiche commemorative, dai nastri gialli alle veglie, hanno reso visibile il lutto privato, trasformandolo in un impegno pubblico e dando voce al dolore collettivo. In questo contesto, il modo in cui la società ricorda le vittime non dipende solo dalla gravità del disastro, ma anche dalle gerarchie sociali e dalle narrative pubbliche che determinano quali eventi restano vivi nella memoria collettiva. Così, queste tragedie mostrano come emozione, attivismo civico e responsabilità si intrecciano con la democrazia nella Corea del Sud contemporanea.

Abstract

Over the past twelve years, South Korea has faced two profound tragedies, the Sewol ferry disaster (2014) and the Itaewon crowd crush (2022). Both claimed many lives and exposed weaknesses in emergency management, alongside attempts to evade responsibility by the government. In each case, private grief became a collective political demand, fuelling

civic outrage, digital activism, and a growing divide between citizens and those in power. Social media documented the events, supported collective mourning, and preserved memory through hashtags and online initiatives, while commemorative practices such as yellow ribbons and vigils made private sorrow visible and transformed it into public engagement. How society remembers these victims depends not only on the scale of the disaster but also on social hierarchies and public narratives that shape which events endure in collective memory. These tragedies reveal how emotion, civic activism, and responsibility are woven into the fabric of contemporary South Korean democracy.

Parole chiave: Partecipazione Civica, Democrazia, Tragedia del Sewol, Itaewon, Responsabilità

Keywords: Civic Engagement, Democracy, Sewol Tragedy, Itaewon, Accountability

Introduction

As the Republic of Korea (hereinafter South Korea or Korea) approaches four decades of democratic governance, it stands as one of the most remarkable success stories of the third wave of democratisation. Transitioning from authoritarian rule to a vibrant democracy, the country has achieved political stability, economic growth, and global cultural influence in a surprisingly short period of time. Nevertheless, even consolidated and resilient democracies remain vulnerable to tragedy and disaster, moments that test not only institutional capacity but also the depth of democratic accountability and long-term trust in the government.

Two such moments in contemporary South Korea were the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster and the 2022 Itaewon crowd crush. Although separated by eight years and differing in context, the two events revealed strikingly similar patterns in the South Korean state's management of mass-casualty events. In fact, the 2014 MV Sewol disaster, the sinking of a ferry that was en route from Incheon to Jeju Island with many young students onboard, and the Itaewon crowd crush of 2022, a stampede that occurred during Halloween festivities in a popular neighbourhood of Seoul, were not only moments of profound human loss. They became national traumas that revealed structural failures,

challenging assumptions about state capacity, accountability, and public safety in a consolidated democracy. They exposed institutional weaknesses and foreshadowed a decline in public approval that, years later, culminated in impeachment proceedings against the presidents then in office (Park Geun-hye and Yoon Suk Yeol). In both cases, which could have been opportunities for institutional self-correction, official narratives emphasised unforeseeability and individual error, while structural failures in regulation, emergency preparedness, and institutional responsibility remained largely unaddressed. In both disasters, public grief transformed into civic indignation, exposing the human cost of institutional failure and the so-called «blame avoidance»¹ strategies within a democratic framework.

The concept of disaster has been defined in various ways within the literature, and it extends beyond natural hazards. As McFarlane and Norris (2006) observe, the term derives etymologically from the Latin *dis astro* (bad star, ill-starred event), reflecting the historical belief that calamities resulted from unfavourable celestial alignments. The *Cambridge Dictionary* reports that a disaster is «(an event that results in) great harm, damage, or death, or serious difficulty»². Contemporary scholarship ultimately adopts a broader understanding of unfavourable situations, including technological failures, human actions³, and crucially, human inaction. The concept can be further expanded to encompass events arising not only from deliberate misconduct or technological failure, but also from omissions, regulatory negligence, or public authorities' failure to anticipate, mitigate, or manage risk effectively. From

¹ Weaver 1986, p. 390: In his work *The Politics of Blame Avoidance*, the author argues that politicians often focus more on avoiding blame for unpopular actions than on claiming credit for successful ones. They employ various strategies to deflect responsibility, including the use of scapegoats. Moreover, the author emphasises that government officials have a strong incentive to avoid blame because citizens can hold them accountable through mechanisms such as elections, protests or demonstrations. In other words, failing to act responsibly, or being perceived as irresponsible, can threaten politicians' power and position.

² See definition on Cambridge Dictionary: <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/disaster>>.

³ McFarlane, Norris 2006, p. 3.

this perspective, as Chung *et al.* note, all disasters are, to varying degrees, inherently political⁴. This is especially evident when institutional shortcomings become visible and contested in the public sphere. These implications intensify under democratic governance. In democratic systems, governance depends not only on electoral legitimacy but also on the state's capacity to assume responsibility when public failures result in civilian harm, a principle closely linked to the phenomenon scholars call «politicisation of disasters»⁵.

In South Korea, the state's responses to the Sewol Ferry disaster and the Itaewon crowd crush reveal a persistent tension between democratic norms and administrative practice, particularly regarding accountability, transparency, and anti-corruption measures. Central to this politicisation process is the concept of emotion. The circulation of information and emotions on social media during times of tragedy has been widely recognised as a social phenomenon, with people turning to platforms to seek information, express affective responses, and coordinate⁶. Unlike television's one-way and passive information flow, social media shapes the social meaning of events by enabling users to network, mediate, and share information actively⁷. In this context, grief and mourning do not remain private emotions but become publicly articulated and collectively mediated. Drawing on Quarantelli's foundational work on the sociology of disasters, scholars such as Hong *et al.* note that disasters are not only defined by their physical damage but also by the social implications that unfold in response to them⁸. «Disaster resilience» functions at individual, community, and institutional levels, supported by a sense of shared responsibility and social solidarity, which enables members of a community to come together and facilitates endurance and recovery from traumatic events through actions such as memorial rituals

⁴ Chung *et al.* 2022, p. 1.

⁵ Ivi, p. 2.

⁶ Velasco Lim, Park 2025, p. 2.

⁷ Kim *et al.* 2022, p. 471.

⁸ Hong *et al.* 2018, p. 2.

and online engagement⁹. In this context, affect refers to the emotional dynamics that drive public discourse and shape political perception. Affective solidarity, a sense of togetherness and compassion among individuals who feel powerless yet are linked by shared emotion, can transform personal loss into collective mobilisation. In times of crisis or profound tragedy, these common feelings help to explain collective action and can powerfully drive demands for social justice and accountability¹⁰. In the Sewol and Itaewon tragedies, the circulation of shared mourning contributed to the formation of affective publics, through which emotional expressions became intertwined with collective demands for governmental accountability and the subsequent joint action and political mobilisation. Grief did not remain a private experience but became publicly articulated and mediated, enabling individuals to recognise their loss as part of a broader social and political failure. Through this process, affective expression structured public engagement, extended collective scrutiny, and legitimised calls for responsibility and justice. In this context, social media use fostered a sense of engagement, connecting people and encouraging closeness in some relationships (among citizens), while simultaneously slowly creating distance in others (between society and government)¹¹.

Despite extensive research on the psychological and health-related consequences of these traumatic events in Korea, comparatively little attention has been paid to how such tragedies reshape civil society's perception of political institutions and democratic governance from a comparative perspective. Examining these two cases together allows for the identification of recurring patterns in institutional responses while also highlighting differences, including governmental involvement in memorial practices and information sharing through traditional and non-traditional media. This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study approach to analyse the Sewol ferry disaster and the Itaewon crowd crush.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Lünenborg 2019, p. 320.

¹¹ Papacharissi 2014.

By examining two distinct disasters occurring under different administrations (both conservative), this study explores how the active participation of victims' families and other citizens, both in physical public spaces and on globally accessible online platforms, shaped criticism of institutional responses and contributed to a decline in trust in the administration. Drawing on existing scholarship, newspaper reports, and digitally shared posts and initiatives, the analysis incorporates an interpretative examination of online discourse and commemorative practices, with particular attention to textual content and hashtag usage. Through this comparison, the study demonstrates how affective publics transform mourning into claims for political accountability directed at the state, exposing the structural limits of governmental responsibility in contemporary South Korea while underscoring the remarkable resilience of Korean citizens, who were recently recommended for the Nobel Peace Prize for their defence of democracy against martial law¹², and who persistently convert injustice into organised democratic action.

1. Reconfiguring Democratic Accountability and the Meaning of Yellow Ribbons: Civic Responses to the Sewol Ferry Disaster

The sinking of the Sewol ferry on April 16, 2014, remains one of the most devastating tragedies in South Korea's contemporary history. The ferry, carrying 476 passengers en route to Jeju Island, capsized and sank, resulting in 304 deaths. Among the victims were 250 high school students from Ansan on a school trip¹³. The incident rapidly escalated into a national disaster, leaving South Korean society in deep collective mourning and lingering sorrow. Beyond the scale of human loss, the disaster exposed profound structural failures, sparking massive public outrage and becoming a politicised matter beyond the tragedy. The incident drew broader attention to the structural negligence

¹² Yoon 2026.

¹³ Hayden 2025.

and regulatory shortcomings that contributed to the substantial loss of life, underscoring the necessity of systemic change¹⁴. Corruption and regulatory oversight failure contributed directly to the severity of the disaster. In fact, investigations revealed safety shortcomings, including the illegal modification of the vessel to carry additional cargo and inadequate safety inspections conducted by the responsible government-appointed body¹⁵. Moreover, the captain and crew abandoned the passengers and, although there was a critical window of approximately one hour between the first call and the submersion of the last exit, rescue operations proved fatally ineffective¹⁶. What emerged was not merely a maritime accident, but a systemic failure of governance on multiple levels.

The Sewol ferry disaster, broadcast live, transformed citizens into direct witnesses of the tragedy, making them immediately aware of the scale of the unfolding catastrophe and of the authorities' inadequate response. From the immediate aftermath of the disaster, social media rapidly emerged as a pivotal arena for information circulation, affective expression, and collective mobilisation¹⁷. At times, these platforms operated in direct tension with a largely pro-government traditional press, enabling citizens to contest official narratives and articulate alternative interpretations of responsibility. As people took the streets to express dissent, conservative outlets, instead of acting as independent truth-seekers, often disseminated disinformation and misleading information, framing bereaved families as greedy and politically motivated, and portraying supporters of the victims and opposition as anti-government groups¹⁸. In contrast, social media allowed citizens to voice anger that the government tried to silence, share grief, and demand accountability, creating a counter-politicisation from below. This dual dynamic

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ BBC News 2014.

¹⁶ Lee 2025, p. 91.

¹⁷ Kim *et al.* 2020: The authors show that, in the context of the Sewol ferry disaster, social media was a crucial driver of civic engagement, with users far more likely to take disaster-related civic action than those relying on traditional media.

¹⁸ Lee 2025, p. 101.

highlights how collective sentiment during the Sewol disaster was shaped by both citizen-driven discourse and by authorities' attempts to manipulate the narrative for damage control. Digital platforms amplified grief and facilitated public scrutiny of institutional responses. Online, grief, accountability claims, and commemorative practices could be articulated beyond the constraints of traditional media.

As Woo *et al.* note, online discourse can be used to assess and trace shifts in public sentiment during and after a disaster¹⁹. As evidenced by Hong *et al.*, initially, posts reflected emotional hope and solidarity, with keywords such as «hope» and «miracle» present in discussions²⁰. However, as expectations of survival and rescue began to fade and public awareness of governmental negligence intensified, anger increasingly replaced sorrow. Online expressions began to focus more on political responsibility, truth-seeking, and legal reform²¹, signalling a strong shift from pure mourning to accountability claims and revealing the raw intensity of collective emotion²². This shift strongly illustrates the emergence of affective publics. In this context, emotional responses were not confined to private grief; rather, alongside broad-based offline political rallies, they were collectively articulated through hashtags, images, and shared narratives. Hashtags and keywords such as #Remember0416 and 세월호 *Sewolho* (Sewol Ferry) trended globally, reflecting the remembrance and commemoration of the tragedy. In particular, #Remember0416, which directly references the tragedy's date, has been consistently used on Twitter (now X) over the years to honour the memory of those who lost their lives, share stories, and raise awareness of calls for accountability and the need for safety reforms. Anniversary-specific hashtags and emotionally resonant phrases reinforced long-term commemorative practices, functioning as architectures of remembrance that enabled personalised participation in collective memory while maintaining networks of engagement over time.

¹⁹ Woo *et al.* 2015.

²⁰ Hong *et al.* 2018.

²¹ *Ibidem.*

²² Woo *et al.* 2015, p. 10974.

The internet can be considered as a culturally embedded space structured by meaningful human interaction, where hashtag memory activism constitutes a form of digitally mediated connective action grounded in personalised, self-expressive participation²³. In this framework, digital media technologies reshape the dynamics of remembering and forgetting, with hashtags assuming an increasingly central role in online commemoration²⁴. In addition to the globally circulated hashtag #Remember0416, users have consistently engaged with emotionally resonant phrases such as #꽃이_진다고_그대를_잊은_적_없다 *kkochi_jindago_geudaereul_ijeun_jok_optta* («I have never forgotten you, even as the flowers fall»), transforming poetic expressions into a sustained practice of remembrance. Anniversary-specific hashtags have further reinforced the continuity of collective memory. For instance, #세월호_11주기 *sewolho_sibiljugi* («11th anniversary of the Sewol ferry disaster») was widely used in April 2025 to mark eleven years since the tragedy. Together, these digital practices illustrate the long-term power of SNS (Social Networking Services) in sustaining public remembrance and reinforcing the symbolic presence of the disaster in contemporary discourse. Posts containing these hashtags have typically been accompanied by visual and textual elements that enhance their symbolic meaning. Photographs of the victims are framed with yellow ribbons and flowers; poems and handwritten messages, often rendered in yellow, circulate alongside digitally designed memorial images. Symbolic drawings, particularly whales, recur across posts. As Kim Yena explained, whales in such remembrance drawings are used as symbols of miracles, often depicted as guardian figures that the lost students follow on their journey home to their families²⁵. Collectively, these aesthetic choices contributed to a recognisable visual repertoire of remembrance that preserves the emotional and symbolic resonance of the disaster in online spaces. Through the repetition of hashtags, imagery, and symbolic motifs, social

²³ Bennett, Segerberg 2012.

²⁴ Fridman 2023.

²⁵ Kim Y. 2020.

media platforms function not merely as sites of expression but as enduring infrastructures that sustain the emotional and political echo of the disaster in contemporary public discourse.

The most recognisable commemorative symbol that also reinforced collective claims was the yellow ribbon. Yellow ribbons have been a powerful and enduring symbol in the country. Initially, the small yellow bows symbolised the Korean public's collective prayers for the safe rescue and return of the victims. Over time, the meaning of the yellow ribbons expanded to reflect a broader desire for truth and accountability about the tragedy, as well as an unwavering commitment to remembrance²⁶. As noted by Sarfati and Chung, public dissemination of symbolic objects tied to collective memory can function as a powerful mechanism for generating and sustaining political dissent²⁷. In this case, it is fundamental to highlight that, when the events unfolded, the yellow ribbon was already an important symbol in South Korea and was intrinsically linked to politicised matters, particularly during pro-democracy activism in the 1980s. Drawing inspiration from the way yellow ribbons represented civilian activists for democratisation and opposition to the dictatorship in the Philippines, South Korea adopted the symbol and distributed ribbons among those who signed the petition for direct elections, as a sign that visually marked protest spaces and signified individual identity of political resistance and support to the democratisation in the country²⁸. More broadly, colour has historically played an important role in South Korean politics (e.g., blue traditionally represents liberals and red represents conservatives), with vibrant yellow strongly associated with progressive and reformist groups. The hue has functioned as a sign of hope and peace, an association that was notably revitalised during Kim Dae-jung's (in office 1998-2003) campaigns and later Roh Moo-hyun's (2003-2008) as a colour symbolising reforms and grassroots movements, and which, following Roh's passing, became linked to mourning

²⁶ Lee J. 2024.

²⁷ Sarfati, Chung 2018, p. 582.

²⁸ Kim 2017.

and solidarity²⁹. Following the April 2014 events, the yellow ribbon, together with the slogan «May one small movement bring a great miracle», became a fundamental, accessible, and powerful symbol amid sadness and gave rise to the social media movement often referred to as the «Yellow Ribbon Campaign»³⁰. A few days after the tragedy, a coalition of university clubs proposed using yellow ribbons to symbolise hope for a safe return. The yellow ribbon movement circulated widely across South Korea and internationally on platforms like Facebook, enabling individuals to express their sadness and remembrance and to develop a sense of community³¹. According to reports, the first ribbons were handmade with cloth bought at Dongdaemun Market and distributed to people in the streets. With the passage of time, the emblem became associated with the idea of state failure and was readily seen by institutions as an anti-government, anti-authority symbol. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, played a key role in this symbolic transformation. While they provided a forum for collective mourning, they also became channels for public criticism of governmental shortcomings, thereby linking the yellow ribbon to broader civic activism challenging state authority. Gradually, public displays of the ribbon came to be interpreted by some as implicit political protests, rather than solely as expressions of grief. According to *The Hankyoreh*, the meanings and motivations for wearing yellow ribbons have diversified over time, reflecting a range of sensitivities and personal interpretations. Even younger kids with no first-hand memory of the tragedy express a sense of responsibility to remember it to prevent similar events in the future³². They visit memorial sites and write letters of remembrance. For others, continuing to wear yellow ribbons is a form of healing, helping them overcome the fear created by the tragedy, even if they have not experienced it directly, or as a moral commitment reflecting the kind of person

²⁹ Moon 2025.

³⁰ Kim S. 2014.

³¹ Heo 2015.

³² Lee J. 2024.

they aspire to become³³. The symbolic practices contributed to a broader social movement characterised by sustained civic engagement. Candlelight rallies and nationwide demonstrations reflected collective grief transformed into political mobilisation. Citizens, many of whom had watched the tragedy unfold live on television, experienced a sense of shared witnessing that intensified demands for accountability.

To assess how far criticism translates into public distrust, it is essential to examine government actions and their effects. The level of civic engagement and symbolic mobilisation shapes how the public scrutinises presidential decisions. In particular, analysing the actions of President Park Geun-hye is key to understanding the political and social impact of the Sewol Ferry disaster. Notably, the first official presidential apology came more than a month after the sinking. Thirty-four days after the tragedy, Park issued a nationally broadcast statement, acknowledging that the government had failed both to prevent the disaster and to manage its emergency response effectively. However, public distrust began to take hold while the tragedy was still unfolding. Her absence during the vital first seven hours, known as 세월호 7시간, the Sewol ferry seven hours, often branded as the «seven-hour mystery»³⁴, had already escalated popular anger. This unexplained absence sparked widespread speculation about her activities, including suspicions of shamanic consultations and reports that hairdressers visited the presidential residence during the crisis. Park's conduct during these hours was later cited in the motion for her impeachment. The episode exemplifies a profound rupture in public trust, and it is difficult to overstate the lasting trauma that the Sewol disaster has inflicted upon South Korean society³⁵. Besides the missing hours issue, distrust in the President and her administration grew over time. On May 3, 2014, 154 rallies were held across the country. As reported by Lee Hyo-jeong, the claims were

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Ser 2018.

³⁵ Steger 2022.

threefold: uncovering the truth, punishing those in charge, and establishing a safe society³⁶.

Following the disaster, the approval rating of Park's administration fell by 6.8 points, to an average of 57.9%. As reported by Chung, on April 18, 2014, there was a sharp surge in approval, surpassing 70%, but it was driven by public expectations of a swift rescue for the disaster's victims. These expectations, however, were not met, and approval fell to 54% and 56.6% on April 24 and 25, respectively³⁷. As time passed, these events and their management cast a long shadow over governmental actions, highlighting the President's perceived disregard for society's interests. As Lee (2019) reports, the Candlelight Rallies (2016-2017) opposing President Park, who was later impeached, were heavily influenced by the collective memory of the ferry disaster, which drove demonstrators to oppose what they perceived as a corrupt and detached administration³⁸. The preventable nature of the disaster and the subsequent presidential carelessness fuelled a civic consciousness unwilling to remain silent in the face of wrongdoing. In this context, grassroots initiatives and commemorative activities surrounding the Sewol ferry disaster persisted over the weeks, reflecting ongoing public engagement with the tragic events. As these acts of remembrance continued, public faith in the government steadily weakened, underscoring the need for accountability. The yellow ribbon remained a key symbol of grief but also came to embody broader ideas, including a call for transparency and justice, a critique of corruption, and a shared desire for a better, more responsible future. In this sense, the ribbon functioned simultaneously as a visual expression of mourning and a powerful emblem of civic optimism and moral determination.

Although President Park Geun-hye's eventual impeachment in 2016-2017 was formally triggered by the corruption scandal involving her friend and adviser Choi Soon-sil, many scholars

³⁶ Lee 2025, p. 93.

³⁷ Chung 2014.

³⁸ Lee S. 2019.

regard the Sewol ferry disaster as a critical prelude to the events that unfolded a few years later. While not the direct cause of her removal from office, the tragedy significantly weakened her moral authority and public credibility, creating a political environment more receptive to impeachment³⁹. In this sense, the Sewol ferry disaster was not only a national tragedy but also a critical turning point, fundamentally reshaping the relationship between citizens and the state and redefining expectations of democratic accountability in contemporary South Korea.

2. Ethical Accountability and Collective Action: Reflections on the Itaewon Crowd Crush

On the night of October 29, 2022, a disastrous crowd crush happened during Halloween celebrations in Itaewon, one of Seoul's major nightlife areas, popular among Koreans and international visitors. The tragedy resulted in almost 160 deaths and more than 190 injuries. It was the deadliest tragedy in South Korea since the sinking of the MV Sewol, the largest mass casualty event since the 1995 Sampoong Department Store collapse, which killed over 500 people⁴⁰, and the most severe crowd crush in the nation's history. The event occurred in an area known for its exceptionally narrow alleys, which are structurally unsuitable for supporting big crowds. Furthermore, at the time of the event, ongoing unauthorised street construction works further limited available space. In addition, roads in the area are not level, a factor that significantly contributed to the crush's dynamics. As crowd pressure intensified, individuals were pushed downhill, causing many to fall and triggering a domino effect in which people collapsed on one another. In this regard, it is crucial to note that the Halloween celebration was the first major event of its kind after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, and it attracted a considerable number of young people following the removal of social distancing and mask mandates. Precisely because it was the first occasion to celebrate

³⁹ Seo 2021.

⁴⁰ Jung 2023.

without constraints, the presence of a larger-than-usual crowd was totally foreseeable⁴¹. The first emergency calls came in around 10:15 p.m., when fire officials were flooded with dozens of reports from residents and other people in the area who were having trouble breathing. The streets were so heavily packed with pedestrians and slow-moving vehicles that emergency personnel and ambulances found it nearly impossible to reach the scene quickly.

Preventive measures were insufficient. Because no single organiser coordinated the Halloween celebrations, the government did not require bars, clubs, and restaurants, many of which are or were located along Itaewon's tiny lanes, to submit safety plans. Although expecting a crowd of 100,000, only 137 police officers were employed, a very small number compared to the considerably higher number dispatched to a much smaller anti-government rally elsewhere in Seoul⁴². This stark disparity underscores the government's failure to protect the public during the celebrations. This situation led people to consider the administration directly responsible for the tragedy, which was deemed an avoidable «manmade disaster»⁴³ because preventive measures, such as closing the main road to cars or stationing police and government workers at strategic points to monitor potential bottlenecks, could have helped prevent it.

In the aftermath of the disaster, traditional media played a significant role in shaping public understanding. Liberal outlets clearly focused on the government's responsibility and systemic failures, highlighting inadequate crowd management and insufficient preventive measures. Conservative media, by contrast, adopted a politically ambivalent stance, dispersed attribution of responsibility⁴⁴, and widely covered topics related to political parties' responses rather than directly holding the administration accountable⁴⁵. This cautious approach, different from what was seen in the Sewol case, may have been a strategic

⁴¹ Wehde *et al.* 2025.

⁴² RaiNews 2022.

⁴³ Marsh 2023.

⁴⁴ Lee, Kim 2023.

⁴⁵ Kang 2023, p. 4.

attempt to mitigate the perception that government officials were directly to blame, rather than explicitly standing up for those in power. By often maintaining a balanced tone, such media avoided explicitly defending the administration while simultaneously refraining from direct or sharp criticism.

However, in this case, social media reporting played an even more important role. Social media, in fact, became a central platform for documenting and sharing the disaster, making the Itaewon crush one of the most extensively chronicled tragedies, broadcast online in real time through digital journalism. First-hand accounts shared on platforms such as Twitter (now X), Instagram, and TikTok, alongside live-streamed footage, provided immediate coverage and enabled both news outlets and international audiences to grasp the scale of the disaster in real time. In particular, the hashtag #Itaewon was widely used to share eyewitness testimonies and repost information. This rapid online diffusion of information once again produced a twofold effect. On the one hand, the availability of multiple sources from the scene facilitated the circulation of accurate, verifiable reports, helping counter disinformation and assisting families in reconnecting with missing individuals, marking a significant departure from the early media failures observed during the initial coverage of the Sewol ferry disaster through traditional outlets. On the other hand, this near-unfiltered sharing of videos and images prompted debate and criticism over what defines responsible reporting.

In the Itaewon case, online platforms, while initially serving real-time reporting functions, subsequently facilitated digital commemoration and the preservation of collective memory, albeit with a more limited global reach compared to the Sewol case. Following the tragedy, X (Twitter) hashtags were widely used to express grief and offer condolences, especially around the first anniversary. The hashtag #PrayForItaewon became popular, frequently accompanied by images of white chrysanthemums, a traditional symbol of mourning, and purple ribbons, which were also displayed at memorial rallies⁴⁶. Among other initiatives, a

⁴⁶ Ko 2024.

few X users shared links to an online project held on Naver, a widely used national social platform, titled «평안한 안식을 빌며 함께 추모합니다» («We pray for their peaceful rest and remember them together»), where people could virtually place chrysanthemums in memory of the victims of the crowd crush. By sharing these digital spaces for remembrance, users jointly honoured the victims and contributed to the preservation of public memory⁴⁷. On other globally used platforms like Reddit, initiatives such as a tribute wall for the victims of the crowd crush encouraged people to leave kind messages in memory of the victims and their loved ones, as well as the diffusion of recordings of the condolence speech given at the Itaewon Candlelight Vigil on November 5, 2022. Users also opened forums to debate how the accident might have been avoided and to criticise flaws in safety planning and management. These practices illustrate how digital platforms can transform individual gestures into shared rituals and collective debates, therefore keeping the event present in social consciousness over time.

Compared with the Sewol case, institutional and government support for remembrance after the Itaewon tragedy appeared weaker, with no official recurring day of mourning and the first official memorial in Seoul held only three years later⁴⁸. At the same time, a key difference in this context, compared with the Sewol case, lies in how responsibility was rhetorically distributed. In Sewol, families were sometimes framed as greedy, and their supporters as anti-government, yet the victims themselves and their innocence were not questioned. By contrast, in the aftermath of the Itaewon tragedy, efforts to deflect attention from institutional responsibility were accompanied by a tendency among some conservative commentators, politicians, and segments of netizen discourse to emphasise why people had gathered and how they behaved, thereby implicitly attributing at least part of the blame to the crowd. As Yu *et al.* note, those

⁴⁷ See the campaign at: <https://campaign.naver.com/memory_1030/?pcode=naver_moserp&campaign_id=2310-memory-001>.

⁴⁸ Kim B. K. 2025.

who lost their life, mostly young adults in their twenties and thirties, were often portrayed as having engaged in frivolous or pleasure-seeking behaviour by attending the Halloween gathering⁴⁹. Such versions marginalised the structural and institutional dimensions of the disaster, instead presenting it as the result of irresponsible partying or an unwise adoption of foreign cultural habits⁵⁰.

As mentioned before, public debate following the crowd crush was impacted by digital platforms, which facilitated real-time emotional expression, collective sense-making, calls for accountability, and in-person citizen-led commemorative events⁵¹. In this sense, offline commemorative practices mirrored the digital efforts, and vice versa. After the events, candlelight vigils and rallies were held in South Korea to remember those who lost their lives in the Halloween crowd crush, as public outrage grew over one of the country's deadliest peacetime disasters⁵². In the days that followed, many events took place to mourn the victims and protest against the government's mismanagement of the situation. The largest vigil, coordinated by Candlelight Action, brought tens of thousands of demonstrators to an area near City Hall, forcing the closure of two lanes of a major road⁵³. Many participants held signs distributed at organisers' tents, including white signs stating, «We pay tribute to the victims of the Itaewon disaster» and «Stepping down is an expression of condolence», directed at President Yoon Suk Yeol. A crowd of 200 protesters held a minute of silence and then marched through the streets, holding white chrysanthemums and signs calling for government accountability. Furthermore, at a subway exit near the alley where the Halloween crush happened in Itaewon, a sea of white flowers and tribute notes covered the area. According to reports, mourners also left offerings such as chocolates, beer, soju, and strawberry milk⁵⁴. Additionally,

⁴⁹ Yu *et al.* 2025.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁵¹ Lim, Park 2025.

⁵² Jabr 2022.

⁵³ Wong, Kim 2022.

⁵⁴ AFP 2022.

events were held in other areas of the country, for example, on Jeju Island, where around 100 people gathered for a candlelight vigil, laying flowers to honour the victims⁵⁵.

Following the tragedy, thousands of sticky notes were placed near Exit 1 of Itaewon Station as spontaneous memorial messages. As documented by *The Hankyoreh*, an analysis of the notes placed in the area in the first weeks indicated frequent use of terms such as «wrong» and «mistake», not to attribute blame to the young victims, but rather to reject narratives that sought to hold them responsible. References to the «state», «government», and «responsibility» also appeared repeatedly, reflecting broader public criticism and the need for institutional accountability⁵⁶. Many of the handwritten notes were also from the families of the victims, including parents expressing their sorrow. Moreover, volunteers actively protected the notes by covering them with plastic, demonstrating that the preservation of memory depended not on official institutions but on citizen initiative⁵⁷. This highlights that grassroots volunteering initiatives played a fundamental role in preserving memory, demonstrating that in the absence of sufficient institutional support, acts of civic engagement from below were essential for sustaining collective remembrance and commemorative practices. Volunteer activists have also led an online initiative titled *Archiving 10.29 Itaewon's Memory Project* to create a digital archive of messages left at memorial sites. Recognising that handwritten notes are vulnerable to damage and inevitable fading, the project digitises all sticky note messages left for the victims, including those written in Korean and those left by international visitors. The initiative allows users to transcribe the content of the scanned physical notes into digital text. In doing so, it seeks to create an archive of memory and preserve not only the words themselves but also the sentiments they convey. By safeguarding these messages, the initiative honours the memory of those who lost their lives and the expressions of love, grief,

⁵⁵ Muir, Rose 2022.

⁵⁶ Park J. 2022.

⁵⁷ Lee H. 2022.

and solidarity they inspired, ensuring that both remembrance and collective mourning endure beyond the fragility of paper⁵⁸.

The public response to the Itaewon crowd crush demonstrates the profound role of collective mourning and civic engagement in the aftermath of tragedy. Furthermore, as Choi and Shahin note, the affective and discursive unrest circulating within the Korean-language digital sphere after the events constituted not just an expression of collective grief and indignation, but also the beginning of long-term offline political mobilisation⁵⁹. Through vigils, protests, and spontaneous memorials, citizens expressed grief, solidarity, and demands for accountability. In this context, digital platforms and initiatives have helped preserve these expressions for later generations. Together, these acts of remembrance highlight how communities honour those who have died while also acknowledging institutional responsibility, resulting in an enduring record of collective memory and social conscience. Through these intertwined forms of commemoration, the Itaewon tragedy became a site for collective mourning and civic mobilisation. The interplay between social media, traditional reporting, and public memorials illustrates how modern tragedies in South Korea are mediated and remembered, highlighting both the failures of institutional oversight and the capacity of citizens to sustain collective memory, demand accountability, and cultivate civic consciousness.

In this context, while criminal accountability may be difficult to achieve, families argued that there exists a distinct and equally vital form of responsibility: ethical accountability. They emphasised that, even in the absence of legal consequences, the government's response remained indifferent, heartless, and profoundly lacking in moral and ethical obligation⁶⁰. Once again, the public was faced with the perception that the government was seeking to evade accountability. The victims' relatives felt that those in positions of authority were offering

⁵⁸ See the English campaign here: <<https://campaigns.do/campaigns/1703>>.

⁵⁹ Choi, Shahin 2025, p. 813.

⁶⁰ Marsh 2023.

apologies for their loss, for the actions of others, and for the tragedy itself, yet never for their own role, consequently never assuming direct responsibility⁶¹. In the climate following the events, public anger translated into declining trust in institutions and, as was the case with President Park, President Yoon's approval fell slightly, reflecting growing scepticism regarding the government's preparedness and response. A poll conducted in the week after the incident revealed a 1.5% drop in positive judgements of his performance and a 0.7% rise in disapproval. Although the decrease in approval was less pronounced than that seen after the Sewol tragedy, it was probably mitigated by concurrent events related to the Korean Peninsula, which would normally strengthen support for a conservative party. Nevertheless, the very fact that approval fell immediately after Itaewon indicates a loss of trust in institutions⁶². In a *Gallup Korea* poll, when asked whether the government's response to the tragedy was appropriate, 20% said yes, 70% said no, and 10% either did not know or refused to answer. When questioned about who was most responsible for the catastrophe, 20% pointed to the president and the government, followed by the police and command at 17%, the parties involved at 14%, and the Ministry of the Interior and Safety at 8%⁶³. Critics also pointed to the insufficient deployment of police officers and to complications arising from the relocation of the presidential office from the Blue House to the Ministry of National Defense, which complicated security coordination. This move required separate security operations for the presidential office and residence. President Yoon Suk Yeol and his cabinet faced numerous protests calling for his resignation, but he refused to step down⁶⁴.

Calls for accountability continued through formal channels. Later, in February 2023, South Korea's opposition-controlled Parliament voted to impeach Interior and Safety Minister Lee Sang-min, suspending him from his duties immediately. The National

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² Kim N. Y. 2022.

⁶³ Jo 2022.

⁶⁴ Salmon 2022.

Assembly held him accountable for the government's failures in disaster planning and response, which likely contributed to the October 2022 Itaewon tragedy⁶⁵. On July 25, 2023, the Korean Constitutional Court ruled against the impeachment. The court held that Lee had not violated constitutional or statutory duties to a degree warranting removal from office⁶⁶. While the court acknowledged that some of Lee's remarks were inappropriate, it concluded that public trust in disaster and safety management had not been sufficiently undermined, nor had relevant duties been compromised to an extent that would justify removal from office. In their concurring opinion, the judges noted that, while statutory breaches alone did not justify removal from office, some of Lee's statements about the golden time and other remarks constituted a breach of the duty to maintain dignity under the State Public Officials Act. Following the publication of the Constitutional Court's decision, numerous relatives of the victims and their supporters gathered outside the court, condemning the ruling for granting the Minister immunity. The parents of the young victims of the tragedy described the Constitutional Court's ruling as profoundly heartbreaking, emphasising their grief and frustration. They voiced serious concerns about the pervasive risks faced by children and young people in contemporary society, underlining what they perceived as systemic shortcomings in public safety and crisis management that left young lives unnecessarily vulnerable⁶⁷.

While the attempt to impeach Minister Lee highlighted accountability concerns, the actual impeachment of President Yoon was not directly related to the Itaewon tragedy. Nevertheless, the incident contributed to a broader erosion of public trust. President Yoon's eventual impeachment (and later sentence to life imprisonment)⁶⁸ was primarily triggered by his brief and controversial declaration of martial law in December 2024, an action widely condemned as unconstitutional and

⁶⁵ Kim T. 2023.

⁶⁶ Nam 2023.

⁶⁷ Park J. M. 2023.

⁶⁸ Rashid 2026.

pivotal in prompting nationwide demonstrations⁶⁹ to support the country's democracy. Within this broader context, the Itaewon tragedy stands as a key moment in public discourse on governmental accountability, ethical responsibility, and citizen mobilisation, illustrating how civic grief and outrage can persist long after a disaster, influencing political trajectories and public expectations of state duty.

3. Tragedy, Responsibility, and Social Hierarchy: Contrasts and Connections in the Sewol and Itaewon Cases

The Sewol Ferry disaster and the Itaewon crowd crush reveal similar dynamics in the political mediation of public grief and the circulation of information, alongside key differences in the recognition of suffering and in counter-blame framing. In both cases, traditional and social media coexisted as channels for conveying information, expressing emotion, and fostering public scrutiny, but also creating long-lasting trauma. During the Sewol case, initial reporting relied heavily on conventional media outlets, which shaped early narratives and influenced public perceptions of responsibility. Social media, however, allowed citizens to share eyewitness accounts, express grief, and demand accountability, often amplifying perspectives underrepresented in mainstream coverage. In the Itaewon tragedy, the rise of real-time digital journalism enabled social media platforms to document the event, providing widespread access to first-hand accounts and immediate information. These platforms facilitated collective witnessing and calls for accountability, even as the circulation of graphic footage, whether broadcast on television or shared online, posed psychological challenges for the broader public in both cases.

A further similarity between the two cases lies in their political context. Both incidents occurred under conservative governments that displayed comparable patterns in their utilisation of traditional media, particularly during the initial

⁶⁹ Kim B. R. 2024.

phases of information dissemination. However, in the Itaewon case, the coverage appeared somewhat less overtly pro-government and carried a more neutral tone.

Nevertheless, unlike the way remembrance has played a pivotal role in keeping the Sewol disaster memory alive, as Yu *et al.* (2025) report, State-sponsored mourning rituals after Itaewon were minimal. Moreover, unlike hashtags related to the Sewol ferry tragedy, hashtags about the Itaewon crowd crush, such as #RememberItaewon, have gained momentum right away but subsequently declined in use⁷⁰. The different ways in which these two cases have unfolded show what the authors define as «selective memorialisation»⁷¹ and can be linked to the concept of «grievability»⁷², referring to which lives are regarded as worthy of mourning and which are not, based on state discourse, media framing, and societal values. As Yu and the other authors point out, from this perspective, the Itaewon tragedy revealed that public grief is unevenly recognised and shaped by prevailing power relations. As they observe, «Mourning is not just an emotional experience. It is political»⁷³. The extent to which suffering is acknowledged, validated, or amplified is conditioned by political, social, and generational hierarchies. Grief, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a private emotional response; it is socially mediated, institutionally filtered, and interpreted within broader frameworks of authority. Mourning thus emerges as a political practice, shaped by struggles over visibility, responsibility attribution, and the construction of collective memory. In other words, despite citizens' efforts, not all grief and tragedy are equally recognised by institutions, and not all innocent victims are automatically perceived as such, as public recognition of innocence and blame often depends on their social or cultural background. From this perspective, a key distinction, as seen in the previous section, lies in the moral framing of the victims. In the Sewol case, many of the victims were innocent schoolchildren far from their families, which

⁷⁰ Yu *et al.* 2025.

⁷¹ *Ibidem.*

⁷² For a more detailed analysis of this concept see Butler 2009; Panaggio 2024.

⁷³ Yu *et al.* 2025.

naturally evoked widespread empathy and compassion. In the Itaewon incident, many victims were young adults engaged in leisure activities; despite their age or the reasons for being present, they were no less victims, as the tragedies in both cases resulted from external circumstances and the negligence of others. In other words, despite facing the same structural vulnerabilities, they were more exposed to narratives emphasising personal responsibility, enabling a minority of social media users, beyond the broadly sympathetic responses, to scrutinise their choices. Netizens and trolls frequently criticised the victims for partying during a holiday not even traditionally observed in Korea⁷⁴. In the comment sections of some articles covering the events, comments emerged from individuals who opposed the use of public funds for funeral expenses, asserting that victims should only be commemorated by their families and that those families should feel shame for raising their children improperly⁷⁵. These narratives attempted to shift blame onto the victims, seeking to undermine the moral force of collective grief by reframing inherently innocent individuals as partially responsible for their own deaths. In doing so, they transformed the tragedies into a mechanism of moral scapegoating, normalising public scrutiny of the victims' behaviour and diverting attention from the structural failures and negligence that were the real causes of the events.

Despite these differences, in both cases, families and citizens expanded public attention through protests, digital and analogue storytelling (e.g., sticky notes and symbolic flowers), and hashtags. This combination of online and offline actions enabled people to make their voices heard while balancing awareness and information accuracy. While the widespread use of social media helped address the lack of information, the circulation of content often escaped effective oversight, but the dissemination of unverified facts was actively and consistently discouraged. Furthermore, in the Itaewon case, consumption

⁷⁴ Kasulis Cho 2022.

⁷⁵ This content was collected from comments posted in response to the Itaewon tragedy across a range of social media platforms, including Korean-specific networks.

of graphic material depicting the tragedy produced effects comparable to those observed in the Sewol ferry disaster. In the case of the Itaewon crowd crush, the indiscriminate circulation of photographs and videos showing the scene and on-site rescue efforts had a significant impact on public mental health. The unfiltered dissemination of such graphic content has been identified as a potential source of trauma not only for victims and their families, but also for the wider public. By exposing intimate moments of suffering, this practice violated the privacy of victims and survivors, intensified the distress of those directly affected, and risked triggering secondary psychological trauma among viewers⁷⁶.

Conclusions

The Sewol ferry disaster and the Itaewon crowd crush demonstrate how deeply personal experiences of grief, loss, and trauma can assume a distinctly political significance. The private emotions of victims' families, survivors, and ordinary citizens – fear, anger, guilt, and helplessness – were rapidly transformed into public demands for accountability and justice. Through participation in vigils, the writing of commemorative and heartfelt messages, and symbolic gestures such as attaching a yellow ribbon to a backpack, individual grief became visible and transformed into collective action, challenging state institutions and societal expectations.

Digital platforms amplified this process, enabling private mourning to circulate as shared memory, emotional testimony, and a tool for civic mobilisation. Social media facilitated storytelling, commemoration, and the organisation of collective rituals, translating intimate experiences of loss into communal expressions of solidarity and criticism. Everyday life itself became politicised, as citizens asserted that safety, dignity, and the right to mourn are matters of public governance rather than

⁷⁶ Lee Y. W. 2022.

personal responsibility. In this sense, emotion functioned as a mode of political participation.

Families and citizens expanded the circle of grievability through collective action, both online and offline. Digital memorials, sticky notes, and vigils transformed private grief into visible public acts, asserting ethical and civic accountability even in the absence of full institutional recognition. Memorial spaces and symbolic practices became arenas of contestation, where acts of remembrance challenged attempts to depoliticise mourning. These gestures – flowers, photographs, ribbons – became collective claims for responsibility and social justice.

Mobilisation did not arise solely from ideological opposition but from identification with the victims as parents, students, workers, or users of public spaces. This identification blurred the boundary between private life and public politics, reinforcing a form of civic activism in which personal vulnerability became the foundation for collective resistance and democratic accountability.

Overall, the two cases yield two key insights into the politicisation of tragedy. First, they underscore the extent to which the personal is political: individual experiences of loss and grief can catalyse collective mobilisation and political action, transforming private mourning into public claim-making. Second, they highlight the structural politics of grief: moral framing, social hierarchies, and cultural values determine which tragedies gain visibility and which may be marginalised. Not all suffering is always and generally equally recognised, and the uneven acknowledgment of grief reflects broader patterns of power, authority, and societal priorities. In both instances, the political significance of mourning demonstrates that grief is not only an emotional experience but also a mechanism through which citizens assert ethical, social, and democratic claims.

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