

“You Can’t Help But Love Them”: BTS, Transcultural Fandom, and Affective Identities

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“You Can’t Help But Love Them”: *BTS, Transcultural Fandom, and Affective Identities*

Courtney McLAREN and Dal Yong JIN

Abstract

The global popularity of the Korean K-pop group BTS, backed by its devoted fanbase ARMY, continues to raise questions surrounding transnational and transcultural flows of hybridized popular cultures in an era of new media technologies. Drawing on theories of transcultural fandom, this article examines BTS within, and as a product of, these hybridized transcultural flows of content and identity. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the popularity of BTS is explored in the context of fans’ social media use and in their identification with BTS through the group’s online content, music, and image of authenticity. The use of social media is significant not only in terms of access to BTS content but to fannish practices of consuming such content. Flows of meaning and affect between BTS and fans are also mediated through social media, suggesting that hybridized popular culture is circulated not only through transnational flows of content but also transcultural constructions of affective investment and identity.

Keywords: BTS, K-pop, ARMY, transculturalism, transcultural fandom, social media

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Introduction

Forever ever ever we are young – BTS, "EPILOGUE: Young Forever" (2016)

On June 2, 2019, Wembley Stadium echoed with 90,000 voices as fans sang to global idol group BTS. The second of a two-day performance at Wembley and the eighth stop on their 20-stop world tour, the night was one of the many historic moments the septet had experienced since their unprecedented rise to worldwide fame. Four Billboard Music Awards (BBMAs), a best recording package Grammy nod for their album *Love Yourself: Tear* (2018), and record breaking sales numbers barely scratch the surface of the group's recent successes, and comparisons to the Beatles speaks to the profound impact BTS has had on music and pop culture in a relatively brief period of time.

BTS' prominence, backed by its equally global fanbase, continues to raise questions surrounding transnational and transcultural flows of hybridized popular cultures in an era increasingly mediated by digital platform and mobile technologies. Hybridity—and the larger theory of globalization in which it resides—was a response to the limits of cultural imperialist perspectives and considers the interaction and mixing of various cultures into new *hybrid* cultural forms (Pieterse 2001; Kraidy 2005; Sayegh 2008). Rather than a top-down model of imperialism dominated by Western cultural products, there is instead an interrogation of the spaces where various cultures converge as well as the practices and performances that emerge from those spaces (Shim 2006; Jin 2016). In his description of hybridity as the "fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities," Kraidy (2005, 5) notes the importance of cross-cultural contact that occurs across both national borders and cultural boundaries, while Bhabha (1994) identifies the blurring of cultural boundaries as a space where goods are appropriated and inscribed with locals' everyday experiences and meanings.

While hybridity has been critiqued for its loose definition and various applications across a number of disciplines, it remains a useful framework to interrogate the process of cross-cultural interactions and the historical,

economic, and sociopolitical contexts in which they occur. In his attempt to position hybridization as a tool for theorizing and investigating international communications, Kraidy (2005) emphasized the importance of broader contexts, particularly the economic and sociopolitical, in order to more fully understand how complex interactions of power play out in the process of hybridization. Jin echoes this argument in his discussion of hybridization in the context of the Korean Wave:

[H]ybridity should not simply be a form and style, reflecting a new and widespread trend within global popular culture. The hybridization of transnational popular culture should be understood as the ways in which local cultural players, including governments and cultural producers, negotiate with global culture, utilizing them as resources through which local actors create their unique spaces. (Jin 2016, 15)

Instead of being taken for granted as emerging new trends within global popular culture, hybridized cultures can be considered an outcome of the negotiation between global and local forces, which requires the contemplation of power relations between these two forces during the hybridization process. As a product of globalized popular culture, BTS and their music are a relevant and contemporary example of cultural hybridization.

While we acknowledge the significance of hybridity in the examination of BTS and K-pop more broadly, in this article we focus instead on the increasing role of global fandoms in the circulation and consumption of such hybridized popular cultures. Drawing on theories of transcultural fandom, this article examines BTS within and as a product of these hybridized transcultural flows of content, affect, and identity. It explores the popularity of BTS in the context of fans' social media use and in their identification with BTS through the band's online content, music, and authentic image. We then discuss how BTS' global appeal lies not only in the global circulation of content and products across borders but also the transcultural flows of affective affinity and identity constructed by BTS and their global ARMY worldwide.

Transculturalism, K-pop Fandom, and Social Media

In examining cross-border fandoms such as BTS' ARMY, two aspects of existing literature are relevant: First, the development of fan studies as a field, to include considerations of transcultural identities and affective investment and the affordances of digital technologies in increasing access to and circulation of fannish pop cultural objects. Over the past two decades study of media fans has expanded into a vibrant interdisciplinary field, and early work attempted to situate fan audiences as legitimate objects of inquiry (Bacon-Smith 1992; Fiske 1992; Jenkins 1992; Jenson 1992; Cavicchi 1998). Fan studies as a field has moved through a number of phases since those early attempts at reevaluating fans' value within popular culture and society; Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2017) effectively outline the move from early *fandom is beautiful* incorporation/resistance paradigms, to one of cultural hierarchies and power relations embedded in cultural and social contexts, to third-wave intrapersonal fan studies that allowed for interrogation of the relations between individuals, audiences, and the media they consume beyond the boundaries of popular culture. Essential in these various forms of inquiry into fan audiences are the uses and affordances of new media, the evolution of web 2.0 and convergence culture, and the entrenching of digital platforms and mobile technologies in everyday lives (Baym 2000; Jenkins 2006; Booth 2015; Stein 2015). Such affordances, now taken for granted in contemporary society, forced a reconsideration of the relationship between production, consumption, and circulation as fans were provided space to challenge dominant practices of creation and media use while being coopted and steered into new forms of old power imbalances and exploitation (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2017; Stanfill 2019).

As fan consumption practices are embedded in globalized media systems, recent criticisms of fan studies have pointed to the privileging of Western media and Western audiences, relegating studies of fans of non-Western media or non-Western fans to the periphery of the discipline (Chin and Morimoto 2013; De Kloet and van Zoonen 2007). English-language works on cross-border fandoms often overemphasize the nation while depoliticizing difference, particularly in the context of online fan spaces, which flatten such

differences and position Western media and fan practices as hegemonic (Chin and Morimoto 2013; Morimoto and Chin 2017). It is only recently that studies of cross-border fandom have attempted to address these gaps in fan studies inquiries, although many focus on the transnational flows of cultural products and individuals, positioning research as “x nationality interacting with y culture” (Pande 2016). In an early and somewhat exaggerated example, Hills (2002b) remarked that US-based fans of anime and manga were considered intriguing subjects of academic study due to their seemingly strange preference for non-American culture, positioning fans’ national identity as their primary identity through which their perceived un-American consumption of Japanese pop culture was viewed.

While transnational perspectives are important in examining how national identity and sociopolitical and cultural contexts may inform fannish practices and consumption of popular culture across borders, these perspectives have left gaps in the examination of other contexts—such as age, gender, sexuality, and popular and fannish culture—as well as the investigation of the flows of meaning and affect that stem from such contexts (Chin and Morimoto 2013; Annett 2014). Rather than focusing solely on the transnational, this article adopts a transcultural perspective, which acknowledges these flows of culturally specific meaning, affect, experiences, and contexts across borders (Morimoto and Chin 2017; Annett 2014). Transculturalism is described as a process in which:

...we may speak, for instance, of youth culture as a formation that is nationally inflected, but primarily determined by a non-national category: age. ...We may also speak of a fan culture in this light, as something that exists differently in different nations, but has similarities based on consumption of the same texts, overlapping forms of interpretation, and so on. (Annett 2014, 9)

Transcultural fandoms, according to Annett (2014) are spaces where groups of individuals from a variety of backgrounds (gender, cultural, ethnic, and individual) form communities and connection around shared interests, drawing on Tsing (2011)’s use of “interconnection across difference” (Tsing

2011, 4) to position not only the national but the cultural in negotiations of difference between members of the same community. Of particular interest to the theory of transcultural fandom is the notion of affective affinity (Hills 2002b; Chin and Morimoto 2013), where "fans become fans of border-crossing texts or objects not necessarily because of *where* they are produced but because they recognize a subjective moment of affinity regardless of origin" (Chin and Morimoto 2013, 9; emphasis in original). An inherently subjective category, affect acts, according to Grossberg, as a location of identity construction where a given cultural moment, text, or object is seen as "something to be invested in, something that *matters*" (Grossberg 1992, 57; emphasis added). Broadening categories of identity to include such affective investments provides an opportunity for deeper, more nuanced analysis of cross-border fan consumption.

The notion of such affective affinities has been explored in the context of Latino/a and Chicano/a fans of Morrissey in Los Angeles, where fans constructed a glocalised imagined community based on their identification with Morrissey and his music (Devereux and Hidalgo 2015), and has been discussed by Promkhuntong (2015) in her exploration of discourses of pleasure and practice by fans of film director Wong Kar-Wai. With the consumption of globalized and hybrid popular cultures among cross-border fandoms, interrogating not only the transnational but also the transcultural provides space for more nuanced forms of inquiry and deeper understandings of how fans consume, appropriate, and use fannish objects based not on a local/national identity but on identities mediated by various other cultural contexts as well as personal and community constructions of affective investment.

Research on K-pop fandom has primarily been undertaken from a transnational perspective, centering fans of x nationality as consumers of K-pop content and positioning this consumption and distribution as mediated through digital spaces (Pande 2016). Works that discuss K-pop fans from particular nationalities include Siriyuvasak and Shin (2007)'s exploration of Thai youth's consumption of K-pop and the construction of national and transnational identities based on contradictory imaginings of Korea, and Jung and Shim (2014)'s discussion of how Indonesian fans

consume K-pop content online due to its ease of accessibility, real-time updates, and affordability. Jin (2016)'s interviews with Canadian and American fans echo this sentiment, noting how social media platforms have granted international fans with convenient access to K-pop content. More recent studies on K-pop have considered a transcultural framework, with Benjamin Han (2017) discussing how K-pop's acceptance into mainstream Latin American popular culture is due in part to fans' reliance on digital mediation as a means of gaining recognition and legitimacy as a subculture. In her discussion of the K-pop celebrity idols, Elfving-Hwang (2018) considers the affective parasocial relationships fans construct with idols in a Korean context, which has also been applied in a cross-border fandom context by Proctor and Donabedian (2019).

Underpinning the literature on K-pop and its fandoms is the relevance of digital convergence, social media platforms, and the participatory affordances of web 2.0, which have been explored extensively by Hallyu scholars (Lee and Nornes 2015; Iwabuchi 2010; Leung 2012; Jin 2016; J. Kim 2012; Ono and Kwon 2013; E. Jung 2009). Notably, the expansion of K-pop beyond Korea and East Asia can be seen as due in part to the strategic adoption of digital platforms such as YouTube, allowing K-pop producers and distributors to bypass conventional channels of distribution and the global music oligopoly of Sony, Universal, and Time-Warner, targeting niche markets while taking advantage of the United States' and Japan's avoidance of YouTube's (at the time) low-profit margins (Oh and Park 2012; Yecies and Shim 2014). Label companies, led by SM Entertainment in 2006, began partnering with YouTube (Yecies and Shim 2014), marking a shift in the industry's use of social media as a promotional platform.

It is clear that the K-pop phenomenon takes place online, especially for fans outside of Korea and East Asia; entertainment and broadcasting companies have promotional YouTube, Facebook, and VLIVE accounts—and increasingly company apps that host forums for various idol groups housed by the label—while it is common for groups and individual members to have multiple accounts across social media, including Instagram and Twitter. While the K-pop industry is able to reach and target audiences via digital platforms, fans also utilize social media to circulate and

consume official and unofficial content, products, news, and translations as well as pleasures and meanings that are produced in such consumption and (re)distribution. While idols, fans, and industry producers have greater access to each other than ever before, it is important to note the asymmetries embedded in such access; while fans play key roles in maintaining and supporting such entertainment industries, their importance as a source of revenue and support signals the need for them to be managed in ways that benefit industries, which often results in fans' exploitation (Stanfill 2019). The affordances of social media and digital technologies provided to transcultural fandom and hybridized popular culture industries such as K-pop, where not only content but moments of affinity are circulated across national and cultural borders, is especially key when considering the unprecedented phenomenon that is BTS.

Methodologies

This article undertook a mixed-methods exploration of self-identified K-pop fans in Canada. Canada presents an interesting case to explore K-pop fandom, particularly when compared to the United States, which is considered a main market for K-pop outside of Asia due to the strong fanbase in the States. Canada also presents an interesting case considering its large multiethnic population compared to the country's relatively western-focused mediascape, a contradiction that underlies the context of K-pop consumption by fans in Canada (Yoon 2019). There has also yet to be a large demographic survey of K-pop fans in Canada (Yoon 2018), which this article attempts to address.

The data in this article, collected by Courtney McLaren during the period of May-August 2019, draws from K-pop fans from across Canada invited to participate in a short survey and/or semi-structured interviews in order to discuss their experiences as a fan, their participation in K-pop fandom, and their understandings and experiences of cultural difference. Participants were recruited during May-August 2019 through snowball sampling online utilizing the first author's personal network, where

invitations to participate in either a survey or a 45-minute to one-hour semi-structured interview were posted in various Canada-based Facebook K-pop fan groups as well as on Twitter and Tumblr, and in person through flyers advertised at a popular K-pop store in Vancouver, Canada. A total of 416 survey responses were collected, and of those, 198 identified BTS as their favorite or one of their favorite groups. While this number of responses specifically relating to BTS may reflect the rapid increase in popularity the group has experienced in recent years, it may have also been influenced by the recruitment method, which included a number of BTS-specific Facebook fan groups. However, the quantity of responses was significant enough for a number of trends to emerge.

For the purposes of this article, these 198 responses were coded for themes reflecting fans' reasoning as to why they chose BTS as a favorite group. Fans in this dataset primarily identified as white (38%), heterosexual (67%), female (92%) between the ages of 14–25 (76%), with the majority located in either British Columbia (41%) or Ontario (37%). Respondents were also asked how long they had been K-pop fans, and the majority of the 198 respondents (45%) indicated they had been fans for five years or longer.

Recruitment for the semi-structured interviews took place concurrently with survey recruitment during summer 2019 through the same sampling methods outlined above. Interviewees were recruited primarily in Vancouver and Toronto due to the vibrant K-pop communities in these cities. Seventeen participants were interviewed, with 10 interviewees from British Columbia, four from Ontario, two from Alberta, and one from Newfoundland. Interviewees primarily identified as female ($n=16$), with one identifying as a cisgender male, and were between the ages of 18 and 73 years old. Of the 17 interviewees, seven identified as East Asian, four as Caucasian, three as Southeast Asian, two of African descent, and one as Caucasian and of Indigenous descent. While not all interviewees identified themselves specifically as BTS fans, many mentioned the group during their interviews. Interviewees were asked questions about how they became a K-pop fan, their experiences as fans and in fandom, their social media use, and were asked to reflect on the impact being a K-pop fan had on themselves as individuals and their interactions with other cultures.

"Welcome, First Time with BTS?"¹

BTS' debut in 2013 was typical for idol groups at the time. Hailing from BigHit Entertainment, BTS debuted as a hip-hop idol group, following emerging trends and styles of similar groups such as Big Bang, Block B, and B.A.P. Their first few years following their debut reflected some of the general trends of K-pop in the early 2010s, with a variety of songs that included typical love songs to commentary on the Korean school system and society's obsession with technology, echoing past themes of other groups such as B.A.P, which had debuted two years earlier. While not attracting much attention from Korean media or the mainstream public, and facing harsh criticism from the Korean hip-hop community for their status as idols, BTS quickly gained fans overseas, with their reception at the 2014 KCON USA in Los Angeles hinting even then at their future potential (Y. Kim 2019). The year 2014 also saw their first Billboard World Albums chart appearance, with their EP "Skool Luv Affair" (2014) peaking at number three, while their first Japanese release reached the top ten in Japan's Oricon charts. By 2015 the group began topping charts in Korea and the United States, where they quickly became the most anticipated K-pop group in the country, headlining KCON USA 2016 at the STAPLES Center and eventually undertaking two major world tours (Y. Kim 2019).

Easily and readily quantified by fans, BTS' successes and records are almost too numerous to count: since 2016 their albums have consistently debuted within the top five on the iTunes Worldwide Albums charts and they have regularly topped Billboard charts over the past three years. On YouTube, their music videos have broken a number of viewing records: "Blood Sweat and Tears" (피 땀 눈물, Pi ttam nunmul; 2016) reached six million views in just 24 hours, while "Boy With Luv" (작은 것들을 위한 시, Jageun geotdeul-eul wihan si; 2019) smashed their own record by gaining over 74 million views within the same timeframe. Four-time nominees and winners of the Top Social Artist award at the BBMAs, BTS were the first Korean artists to receive RIAA gold in 2018 and became the first Asian

1. BTS, "Dope" (쩔어, Jjeoleo).

artists with a non-English album to chart at number one on the Billboard 200 (J. Lee 2018).

Behind BTS' record-breaking success is their powerfully active and engaged fandom, aptly dubbed ARMY (Adorable Representative MC for Youth). Composed largely of digital natives, it is difficult to ignore the impact ARMY has had on BTS' success, clearly encapsulated by their engagement and mass voting power that resulted in BTS' 2017 BBMA award. From in-depth and community-driven analysis of BTS' music videos and lyrics, to crowdfunding campaigns for BTS' UNICEF campaign and billboard advertisements, to their effective mobilizing in support and defense of BTS against mischaracterizations or racism, ARMY provides a powerful foundation for BTS' worldwide popularity. While many of the activities ARMY has undertaken are characteristic of popular media fandom practices more generally, dismissing the power of their cross-border devotion to BTS would ignore the impact it has had both online and offline in fan's promotion of BTS and their message. As a cross-border global fandom, ARMY primarily interact with each other and BTS on social media, and it is in this context that it is interesting to note the vast amount of content, paid and unpaid, official and fan-made, available to fans online. Even from their pre-debut as an idol group, BTS members were releasing content, including unofficial songs and short vlogs capturing the members' excitement and concern leading up to their debut. Such pre-debut releases are not uncommon in K-pop but are often much more polished and closely managed in the case of other groups.² Current content available to ARMY include hours of video footage from music videos to casual vlogs to BTS' vacation and documentary series, the mobile game "BTS World" and official global fanclub app Weverse, to fan-created content, including fanfiction, fanvids, and translations, as well as the plethora of official and unofficial merchandise, such as the BT21 character line collaboration with LINE FRIENDS.

The sheer scale of content in an already saturated K-pop industry

2. See, for example, EXO's pre-debut promotional teasers or LOONA's individual-member solos, which acted as introductory material for the groups leading up to the debut.

provides fans numerous opportunities for ARMY to interact with BTS in direct and indirect ways. In addition to official content, the BTS members themselves are afforded rare freedom to use social media as they wish; BigHit's Bang Shi Hyuk commented that he had no intention of restricting the group's access to social media, and that the members had become "Twitter maniacs" who enjoyed connecting with fans (L. Kim 2017). That social media plays a central role in connecting BTS and their content to fans—and vice versa—is undeniable; however, such affordances of social media in distributing content transnationally does not fully explain BTS' broad appeal across the globe.

Social Critique, Hip-Hop Idols, and Narrative Authenticity

In January 2013, five months before debuting, RM, Suga, and Jin released a video for "School of Tears" (학교의 눈물, Hakgyo-ui nunmul), commenting on violence in Korea's school system and society's unwillingness to address it. Rather than a one-off unofficial song, social commentary is a key characteristic of BTS' discography, with other notable songs including "Silver Spoon" (뽕새, Baepsae; 2015), which discusses the economic hardships facing youth compared to their parents' generation, and "Am I Wrong" (2016), which comments on global inequalities and the lack of action to address them. BTS' social commentary has been discussed as a major factor in their popularity, particularly overseas, and analysis of their lyrics show that the majority of their songs discuss socially conscious topics (J. Lee 2018; Y. Kim 2019). Their social commentary stems in part from their unique role in the musical process, as it is well known that BTS writes and produces the majority of their music, under the guidance of BigHit's in-house team. Suga and RM have both spoken openly about how their personal experiences have influenced their music and lyrics, and the themes of their songs have captured the various struggles of youth growing up in an increasingly unequal and uncertain global society (Herman 2017).

In his review of BTS' career, Youngdae Kim (2019) discusses BTS' positioning as hip-hop idols, situating them within the contexts of Korean

hip-hop and idol culture and notes that unlike other hip-hop idol groups (notably BIG BANG) who borrow the aesthetic of hip-hop,³ BTS embraces hip-hop as an identity; the group was formed around rappers RM and Suga, and their discography highlights their identity as hip-hop artists through their songs (including ‘Hip Hop Lover’ [힙합성애자, Hiphapseong aejja], ‘Silver Spoon,’ and the ‘Cypher’ series) and in the technical skills of the rappers. BTS members’ hip-hop identity, candid genuineness, and participation in their musical production through the lens of their lived experience has contributed to their perceived narrative authenticity (Y. Kim 2019). This perceived authenticity, along with their universal messages and social critique, has been considered a defining factor in their global popularity. Themes of dreams, youth, overcoming challenges, and self-discovery have been embedded in their music from the outset; their *Most Beautiful Moments in Life* trilogy captured various themes of youth and self-growth, while their most recent *Love Yourself* series furthered the message of learning to love oneself through hardship.⁴ All of these themes reflect BTS’ lived experience, as their lyrical and musical evolution has candidly discussed their fears, anxieties, and criticism they’ve faced throughout their career. The importance not only of BTS’ mediation of content through digital technologies but the group’s construction of an authentic narrative, also mediated by digital technologies, is evident in BTS fans’ constructions of affective affinities with the group and their music.

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3. It is important to acknowledge the tensions surrounding the debate of appropriation vs. appreciation of the use of African American music and aesthetics in K-pop and K-hip hop; while it could be argued that the localized Korean contexts refute possibilities of appropriation or racism (C. Oh 2014), anti-Black racism remains common in Korea (G. Han 2015). Especially considering K-pop’s position as a global cultural product, idols are not exempt from criticisms of appropriation (for example, the recent discussions surrounding BTS’ J-Hope’s ‘Chicken Noodle Soup’).
 4. For BTS’ most recent thoughts on the recurring themes of dreams and self-love in their music, see Russell 2019.

ARMY, BTS, and Social Media

While it is commonly known that fans use social media to access K-pop content, as discussed above, questions surrounding fans’ use of social media in relation to K-pop has primarily centered around such access (Jin 2016; Jin and Yoon 2016; Jung and Shim 2014), and has seldom considered these uses of social media in a fannish context. Reflecting past findings, survey respondents primarily identified YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter as main sites for fannish consumption of K-pop, as Figure 1 shows.

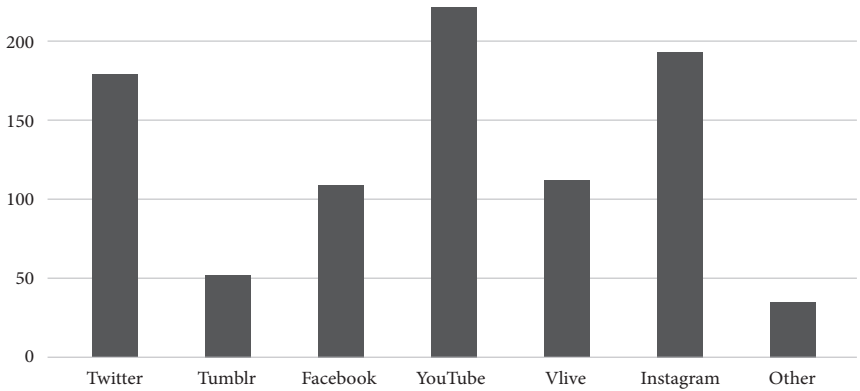


Figure 1. Social media platforms fans referenced as the primary sites for fan consumption and activity

Source: Author 1.

Note: multiple responses allowed.

YouTube’s popularity among fans evidently relates to its use by the industry as a promotion platform, as the consumption of music videos, variety shows, and weekly award shows by fans often occur on YouTube. Reflecting this, survey respondents identified primary online practices they participated in to be listening (n=156) or watching (n=184) songs or music videos. One female fan brought up YouTube specifically when discussing how she discovered new K-pop groups:

YouTube is a huge thing as well, just in terms of people who, uh...who go through and actually make the time to like, put together, like, funny compilation videos, which is actually how I started liking NCT... just cuz they were put into these videos that I started watching for um, BTS and Blackpink, and then NCT was also there and I'm like "oh these dudes are actually maybe kinda funny!" so then I started paying attention to their stuff a little bit more.⁵

An additional use of YouTube as well as other platforms such as Spotify was the practice of streaming (n=88). Streaming is a popular activity among K-pop fans, where replaying a specific song contributes to view and listening counts that are often considered during year-end awards in Korea. As one female interviewee mentioned, streaming is a fan practice that she regularly participated in:

I was on a streaming party when "Boy With Luv" came on, I had [my husband] on his phone and his... he hates the song now because like, it was on repeat for like, two days because I was like "we gotta get the streams babe c'mon let's do this!"⁶

The quantification of success factors such as year-end awards in Korea, and recently chart numbers in the United States, has become an increasing focus of K-pop fandom, with ARMY and other fandoms holding streaming parties when new songs are released in order to break music video or chart records. While it is difficult to state with certainty the impact fan streaming practices have on chart numbers, it is considered important enough among fans that instructions are circulated in various languages breaking down the rules and requirements for streaming on YouTube, Apple, Spotify, and Naver in order to maximize the number of plays without breaking the arbitrary rules of various platforms.

5. Fan A (female, Caucasian/Indigenous, age 27), interview with author 1, Newfoundland, Canada, June, 1, 2019.

6. Fan B (female, Caucasian, age 24), interview with author 1, Vancouver, Canada, May 24, 2019.

Fan use of Twitter differed from their use of YouTube in that it was mainly considered a space for connection to other fans and for instant updates. As one male interviewee explained,

Twitter. Yeah. And I guess why? Is because that's where the artists are. Um, I remember, before, like, the first couple of years, like in 2009, around then, most people were on Tumblr, um, at least in Western fandom? But like, now, in the past couple of years you know, it's like, pretty much all moved to Twitter, just because that's where the artists are, as well, they're kind of actively being on Twitter as well.⁷

K-pop idol use of social media platforms is a common industry practice, and the perceived reciprocal access between fans and idols is typical of contemporary media consumption. BTS in particular are known for their Twitter use, as their Top Social Artist awards were directly related to the amount of engagement their account experienced. The perceived closeness between idols and fans was referenced by survey participants who identified BTS as one of their favorite groups, as one of the main themes in fans' explanation of why they liked BTS was the connection it had with ARMY. It could be considered that the amount of content and access available to fans is an example of transnational consumption; however, that fans noted specifically the connection and interaction BTS has with ARMY both on and offline suggests the importance of such access in maintaining those connections, as fans are able extend their interactions with BTS through mobile apps, re-watching videos, and purchasing merchandise in addition to directly interacting with the group on Twitter and Weverse. While this engagement does not solely occur on Twitter, nor are BTS the only group that uses social media to foster such closeness, this engagement and interaction was considered a key aspect of fans' enjoyment of the group.

7. Fan C (male, Asian, age 24), interview with author 1, Vancouver, Canada, May 31, 2019.

ARMY, BTS, and Social Media

Underlying the research and inquiry surrounding Hallyu and K-pop's spread outside of Korea is the question of why; why Korea, why K-pop, and more recently why BTS, and these questions are not without elements of ethnocentric incredulousness. The implicit reasons for Hallyu and K-pop's enjoyment abroad have been discussed by a number of scholars; Choi and Maliangkay (2015)'s consideration of Western fans' consumption of the talented Asian Other; Hyunji Lee (2018)'s discussion on the appeal of K-drama's elements of fantasy and unique structural and cultural elements; and Yoon (2018)'s findings on fans' enjoyment of K-pop's hybrid characteristics as something similar yet different offer select examples; fans however are not often directly asked *why* they are fans. Such questions of why has potentially reductive implications, as relying on fan knowledge as objective or a priori legitimations of fan experience obscures the overwhelmingly subjective constructions of said knowledge, and can lead to justifications by fans that align with pre-existing structural or discursive legitimations of their own pleasure that uphold hegemonic constructions of *proper* forms of enjoyment (Hills 2002a). However, this question remains valuable in terms of exploring how fans talk about the objects they love and may serve to identify discursive structures within a fandom that are employed when fans are asked to explain why they are fans of a particular cultural object.

Survey and interview participants were asked what group or groups they liked the most and were given space to provide reasons why. Survey respondents who identified BTS among their favorite groups provided a number of reasons they made this choice. These reasons were coded into 14 general themes, and were then narrowed into six main themes, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Main Themes: Why Fans Like BTS

Theme	Number of References (198)
Enjoyment of music	38
BTS members’ personalities or attitudes	37
Message	31
Performance	17
Support through hardship	14
Connection with fans	9

The themes of enjoyment of music, performance (including choreography/dance and concert stages), and *BTS members’ personalities or attitudes* are common themes among survey respondents regardless of their preference for BTS or other groups, while *connection with fans* as discussed above referred to BTS’ investment in and engagement with fans on social media. The two themes *message* and *support through difficult times* were significant when considered within the context of BTS’ image as an authentic hip-hop idol group.

BTS’ perceived authenticity has been discussed among Korean and American fans and industry players with increasing regularity over recent years.⁸ In their analysis of constructions of authenticity within K-pop among professional and fan journalism, McLaren and Kim (2019) identified the role of participation in the creative or production process as a key marker of artistic authenticity, which was noted by one interviewee when she talked about why she liked BTS:

I don’t know, [BTS] seem the most...authentic? Like, they produce their own music, they—they wanna help out, like, this generation and not like, make music for the sake of making pop-y music.⁹

8. Western journalists that have discussed BTS’ authenticity include, Ming (2017); Dorof (2018); Cruz (2019); and Hollingsworth (2019).
9. Fan D (female, Southeast Asian, age 21), interview with author 1, Vancouver, Canada, May 21, 2019.

That BTS have some form of control over their music is a key characteristic that sets them apart within the K-pop industry. While other idols often contribute to their own or group's repertoire either lyrically, musically, or through choreography, that BTS are openly able to flex their creative skills in a variety of ways—such as by the rappers' mixtapes or Jungkook's lyrics, covers, and filmography—is an affordance rarely seen in the K-pop industry, and contributes greatly to their image of authenticity. Along with their creative control, some interviewees emphasized the struggle that BTS experienced early in their career as admirable, as one female fan emphasized:

Okay. Since I love them a lot I... will pick BTS. Why are they my favorite? Because they're different. They're not like any particular K-pop group, like, where they like, they stick to one genre, [BTS] always want to try something different, they always want to try something better, they're always pushing themselves to work hard. And that's why I stan them a lot.¹⁰

The theme of working hard to achieve a dream characterizes BTS' early work as they struggled for success, with "Skit: Circle Room Talk" and "Skit: Are You Happy Now" from their first and second releases, *2 Cool 4 Skool* (2013) and *O!RUL8,2?* (2013), respectively, represent two examples of their desire to become musicians and the uncertainties that come with having big dreams (Y. Kim 2019, 27, 36). The broader appeal of hard work and effort was reiterated by a male interviewee when discussing the draw of BTS and other K-pop groups:

There's a lot more emphasis on like, hard work and merit, and...um... um...yeah like, hard work and merit in the K-pop industry, that I think is highly respected amongst certain people that isn't found in Western bands, like I think that Western bands or Western artists...even if they did work hard, or even if they were somewhat manufactured in the same

10. Fan E (female, African American, age 29), interview with author 1, Ontario, Canada, August 7, 2019.

way, the...the spin or the marketing or the emphasis is on like, how they got lucky or how they got really talent—how they're really talented, they're born with that talent, and that's why they're famous? Whereas in K-pop it's like, very openly said like "yeah we worked hard" like "we trained for years...we're like a manufactured group but like, that's the reason for our success," it was, it was a merit thing rather than like, being born with talent thing.¹¹

The idea of individual hard work to overcome challenges and achieve fame or success is a key narrative in Western, particularly American ideology (Gladwell 2008) and is one of many characteristics of authenticity. The notion of the individual as authentic is also invoked in the concept of being *true to yourself* or *keeping it real* in hip-hop, which is positioned against conformity to mainstream popular, commercialized, and racialized cultures (McLeod 1999). BTS' struggle to achieve their dream in these contexts has the potential to appeal to a wider North American audience who are otherwise wary of musical acts that appear manufactured.

The appeal of BTS' authenticity was also linked to the *messages* that they have shared through their music. Interestingly, Youngdae Kim (2019) noted that fans he spoke with often said that there was something *different* about BTS songs, which was echoed by the interviewee above and in participant survey responses, as a number of fans indicated that there was something inexplicably different about the group's music (n=7). What had clearly resonated with fans were the themes and social critiques that BTS' lyrics and albums explored, where survey respondents indicated that the various messages about youth, dreams, struggle, and self-love were easy to relate to and identify with (n=31). One Toronto-based female fan referenced not only the group's hard work but their message when she discussed BTS' appeal:

BTS because...they're overall like, their story is really good like, their come up story. Their talent, how they, they're, they—how they work. Even their message throughout the last couple of years with their *Love Yourself*, um, albums...? Um, their, the fact that they went beyond that and um,

11. Fan C (male, Asian, age 24), interview with author 1, Vancouver, May 31, 2019.

had—have their campaign with UNICEF, that, I like their message. I’ve spent [CAD]\$150 on their UNICEF merch[andise].¹²

The *Love Yourself* series and related UNICEF campaign have been BTS’ most recent exploration of ideas of self-love, and during his address at the 2018 UN General Conference RM spoke about the number of fans who had written to the group about how their music had helped them overcome their own hardships. This was a theme among survey respondents (n=14), with references to how BTS inspired them to work hard, change for the better, and accept themselves, and was also discussed by a number of interviewees, as one female fan described:

...I think that’s part of the reason I was drawn to BTS, is because the words, I can feel them. Um, they actually helped me get out of a 28-year toxic relationship. I, I uh, give them credit, and...I am just now learning to love myself. So, um, if they were not allowed to sing what they believe in, what they want, what’s happening to them, even now the songs that we have, and they probably wouldn’t be as popular as they are...I think it’s, especially because I focus more on BTS than on the others I think might be part of the reason that I feel that way? It’s because of, um...cuz of their words and cuz their...their expression...but yeah they’re helping me learn to love myself.¹³

The emphasis on the love yourself message was reiterated again by two fans, who talked candidly about the struggles that BTS had helped them overcome. As one related:

I’m in K-pop for the happy positive good vibes, because like I said, after my mom died I was—I’m bipolar, so my low, went fucking...I crashed, and I was like “I’m never going to be happy again this is it,” like, I’m done. And then I found the love yourself and like, “you showed me I have

12. Fan F (female, Jamaican Canadian, age 25), interview with author 1, Ontario, Canada, August 7, 2019.

13. Fan G (female, Caucasian, age 53), interview with author 1, Vancouver, June 12, 2019.

reasons I should love myself' and all of these beautiful lyrics and like, and Love Myself: Answer, um, RM's verse, is like, if you look at the translation it's so fucking deep like I'm not su—"I don't want to die anymore" and like, all of these positive uplifting things that... Yeah, I don't know exactly what they're saying... their message is so deep and so like, just... you don't have to understand the lyrics. And like Joon [RM] said, like, you know, "you've shown the world that music has no language," that there is no language barrier when it comes to feeling these emotions with each other.¹⁴

"Answer: Love Myself" (2018) marked the closure of the *Love Myself* series, and the song's lyrics expressed the BTS members' relatable struggles and eventual acceptance in learning to love themselves. Another female fan again referenced the positivity and importance of the *Love Myself* message when discussing how being a fan had changed her perception of herself:

Their lyrics like, make you feel something? So, then...Just listening to like...like, I was uh, one day I was listening to like, "Five Seconds of Summer," cuz I'm in like, that fandom too, and their songs are kinda like, kind of dark and deep a bit, and then I just put on [BTS], and I'm like "okay I'm happy again," it's like, that vibe that they give off... Yeah, it's been love yourself, speak yourself you know, stand up for what you believe in. Which are really good messages to live by, I think.¹⁵

The candid expressions of happiness and the individual disclosures of hardship and mental illness provides some insight into the personal contexts that fans are bringing to their enjoyment of BTS, as the members and their fans share experiences as youth who have grown or are growing up during a period of increasing global inequalities, economic uncertainty, and climate disaster. As BTS members themselves have said about their popularity, "Anybody can relate to the message we are trying to deliver, as we try to talk about the feelings shared by our generation" (Russell 2019). The critically hopeful message that BTS' music carries, stemming from the members' lived

14. Fan B (Female, Caucasian, age 24), interview with author 1, Vancouver, Canada, May 24, 2019.

15. Fan H (female, Chinese, age 24), interview with author 1, Vancouver, Canada, May 29, 2019.

experience, serves to reinforce their authentic image and resonates not only with youth in Korea but across the globe, and through this BTS and their fans are able to communicate with each other, share the same struggles, and encourage each other to continue to love and hope for a better world.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how BTS fans based in Canada utilize social media in their access of BTS, reflecting past studies of transnational fans by B. Han (2017) and Jin (2018), and provides insight into a few of the many fannish practices that K-pop and BTS fans participate in online. Also discussed was the importance of BTS' image of authenticity and critically hopeful message of self-love in the face of hardship, which fans identified with and related to on deeply personal levels. While the fans in this study were located within Canada, national or ethnic identity were not emphasized with respect to their enjoyment of K-pop and BTS, and fans instead discussed the affective investments formed through their identification with the experiences and critical messages expressed by BTS through their music regardless of age or gender, speaking to the importance of transcultural fan identities and the construction of affective affinities in the distribution and consumption of K-pop.

Transcultural fandom allows for the interrogation of contexts and identities beyond categories of the nation, and acknowledges and embraces the subjective experiences and constructions of fans' affinity and affective investment with popular culture (Chin and Morimoto 2013). In investing in "something that matters" (Grossberg 1992, 57) fans have formed identities with and around BTS based on affinities of lived experiences of hardship, mental health, and political, economic, and social uncertainty. Within the context of hybridization, transcultural fandom allows for a more nuanced examination of the complexity involved in the (re)production, (re)distribution, appropriation, and consumption of hybridized popular cultures that take place in an era where such practices are mediated primarily through the digital mediascape of the 21st century, repositioning

the importance of subjective lived experiences and affinities of fans around the world.

The underlying factors behind BTS' global successes are multifaceted and varied, with the affordances of digitally mediated flows of content and affective investments only one aspect of their wide-ranging popularity. BTS' hybrid hip-hop idol identity is an example of the hybridization evident in both the K-pop industry and influences of hip-hop in Korean and global youth culture, speaking to "the mobilization of group identities" in the formation of mixed cultural products (Appadurai 1996, 13), while their critically hopeful message indicates the potential of politicized hybridity within such popular cultures. More importantly, the BTS phenomenon, which could continue, should be understood through the exploration of the formation of transcultural fan identities. That BTS and their ARMY have made such an impact on the global stage in such a short period of time indicates the continuation of cross-border cultural flows in a new media era, further complicating the negotiation of cultural exchange in a globalized world.

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