

**The Introduction of Surveillance as an Integral Modality in Social Media Activism**

**Research Through the Lens of K-pop**

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## **Introduction**

Surveillance and activism have always been inextricably linked, but the rise of social media requires a closer look as to how this relationship has evolved, and in many ways, become more complex. The nature of this relationship is too broad and abstract which is why this paper focuses on the specific use case of how the K-pop fanbase organized repeatedly within a short span of time—four times in June 2020—on Twitter to support the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. Through the lens of this case, we will analyze how four emerging forms of surveillance are influencing digital activism. By understanding how it impacts behaviors online, researchers can extract a more nuanced understanding of the other forms of multimodal communication. This paper recommends incorporating surveillance in multimodal research to comprehend the nature of digital activism and the interactions within.

## **Emergence of New Types of Surveillance in Digital Spaces**

With the rise and evolution of new technologies, the manner of surveillance has significantly shifted and opened up new dimensions that arguably becomes the underlying current of a majority of social media interactions in respect to activism. The affordances of social media has created new opportunities for individuals, but also comes paired with new forms of surveillance: interface or data surveillance (Orgun & Demirag, 2014), participatory surveillance (Orgun & Demirag, 2014), sousveillance (Orgun & Demirag, 2014), and news media surveillance. For the first dimension, users receive more personalized recommendations as companies, but it also simultaneously brings about a hyper surveillance through data collection. Secondly, social media connects dispersed people regardless of geography and pre-existing

social circles, but it also comes hand in hand with participatory surveillance in which individuals begin to observe the behavior of others. Additionally, the power dynamic of a few watching the masses, historically applied to marginalized groups, has been challenged by the affordances of social media with sousveillance. It has provided alternative ways for activists to challenge authorities and surveillance efforts (Hindmarsh & Calibeo, 2017). Lastly, the permanence of posted content has shaped the nature of news as journalists are able to gather insight and direct quotes from social media. News media surveillance has emerged, influencing both the type of news produced and the awareness of users. All of these technologically-constructed forms of surveillance are influencing digital activism, both consciously and subconsciously. Each of these dimensions and its relation to social media activism will be explored in greater depth through the lens of the K-pop activism efforts for BLM in June 2020.

### **Background on Use Cases: K-Pop Activism & BLM**

Three events unfolded in June of 2020 in which K-pop fans transformed Twitter's platform into a campaign ground to weaponize their mass network into a social movement tool for Black Lives Matter. The social media giant's horizontal-oriented social network aligns with the structure of grassroots activism (Buzzell, 2020). This practice of using collective movement to insert change is transferred to Twitter in the following events: iWatch Dallas, #WhiteLivesMatter, the Trump Tulsa rally, and #MatchaMillion campaign (Overview of event details on Table 1)

*Table 1: Overview of K-pop activism for BLM in June*

<b>Name of Event</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Description</b>
iWatch Dallas app	June 1, 2020	The Dallas police made a tweet asking citizens to

		upload videos of illegal activity from the BLM protests, and in response the K-pop fanbase responded in kind with fancams of their favorite K-pop star and groups. The app was flooded with spam as fans organized on Twitter—sharing where to download the app, how to create an anonymous number, and spreading the word. Several hours later the police announced the app was temporarily offline. (Olheiser, 2020)
#WhiteLivesMatter	June 3, 2020	#WhiteLivesMatter, repurposed by critics of BLM, began popping up on the Twitter newsfeed on June 2, 2020. By June 3, 2020, the hashtag was #1 trending due to the organized efforts of the K-pop fanbase. They drowned out the racist rhetoric with video loops of dancing popstars and slow motion zooms of their favorite K-pop stars. There were over 25,000 tweets linked to the hashtag with K-pop material on June 3, 2020 (CBC Kids News, 2020).
#MatchaMillion	June 6, 2020	Big Hit Entertainment, the music label for the famous K-pop group BTS, donates a million dollars to the Black Lives Matter organization on June 5, 2020, and a BTS fan, Daezy Agbakoba creates the hashtag #MatchaMillion. The campaign encourages fans to match BTS' donation which they succeed in doing so within 24 hours (Galantowicz, 2021).
Trump Tulsa Rally	June 20, 2020	In typical fashion, Trump controversially sets his rally on Juneteenth—the day all Black Americans were officially freed from slavery—in Tulsa, a historically significant site in Black history known for the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 (Galantowicz, 2021). The rally was moved back a day due to public outcry. Meanwhile, Twitter and TikTok K-pop fans began to coordinate with one another as they planned to purchase tickets without the intention of attending to falsely inflate the numbers. The rally could hold 19,000 attendees, but only 6,200 seats were filled. A great deal of media gave credit to K-pop fans.

These events will be referenced to in the following analysis of the relationship between surveillance and social media activism.

## **Researcher's Positionality on Methodologies for Surveillance Research**

In the process of trying to grapple with the relationship between surveillance and activists online, I also had to consider my positionality as a researcher and my relationship with surveillance. Online settings challenge researchers' role as participant observers. In offline settings, the presence of a researcher observing is delineated by their physicality, but online settings allow observers to remain invisible. There is an invisible audience of lurkers that cannot be incorporated into the analysis since there is no observable trace (Leander & Kim).

Additionally, the researchers' role transforms from observer to 'lurker', contrasting from typical ethnography (Leander & Kim). This shift draws awareness to my position as a researcher and my contribution to surveillance. For the purposes of this paper, I will draw inferences based on my observations of the online events, but I will refrain from pulling samples with any identifiers to maintain the anonymity and privacy of individuals. The analysis pulls from my personal observations and will utilize a couple of screenshots without the user's handle. Future studies should incorporate individuals using participatory ethnography in which participants co-create and reflect upon their behaviors and experiences.

## **Data Surveillance Awareness in Online Activism**

Data surveillance is often weaponized against activism, but in the K-pop events the social media users repurpose their knowledge that their data is being used to disrupt the #WhiteLivesMatter trend and Trump Tulsa rally. The K-pop fanbase's usual purpose is to organize for their favorite K-pop stars—ranging from increasing Youtube views, promoting votes for awards, requesting radio airplay, to organizing gifts (Lee & Kao, 2021). K-pop fans intentionally manipulate trending hashtags to assert their K-pop star's dominance over others (Olheiser, 2020). They even go so far as creating Youtube video tutorials that instruct fans how

to boost views for specific posts on social media (Daydreamer, 2018). This prior knowledge on organizing played a critical role in their ability to successfully mobilize.

In response to the growing trend of #WhiteLivesMatter, the K-pop fan base leveraged their understanding of hashtag trends on Twitter, their pre-existing organizing behaviors, and the number of fans to flood the hashtag and drown out the original, racist intentions. The approach, similar to previous research on online communication, made a political stance but used humor, playfulness, and irony (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2014). The juxtaposition of the verbiage #WhiteLivesMatter with the imagery of Asian pop stars charismatically dancing, singing, and smiling non-verbally effectively protested the racist messaging of white lives matter for a period of time. The success of this infiltration was celebrated by fellow Twitter users (Figure 1) and the news media. This approach demonstrates the way data surveillance can be used as an activist tactic for future movements.

Similarly, the data collection used in politics for marketing, can be upended by deceptive behaviors if organized in mass, as demonstrated by the Trump Tulsa rally. Data presentation has been tactically used to inflate numbers in the past (Dale & LeBlanc, 2022), giving the false perception of a politician's popularity or success. In this case, however, this tactic was reversed as K-pop fans reserved tickets to the rally with the intention of preventing others from attending. Ultimately, only 6,200 seats were filled in a space that could hold 19,000 attendees. Once more the understanding of how data surveillance is utilized was instrumental in creating meaningful change. This knowledge is being communicated, both inadvertently through messaging and explicitly, but either way it plays a critical role in digital activism. This underlying knowledge is a modality that needs to be considered in future research.

Seeing [#WhiteLivesMatters](#) trending, but kpop fans did their thing 🙏❤️.



I saw [#WhiteLivesMatter](#) trending this morning and was all 'what the fuck?'. Then I read about kpop and evidently they're tweeting insupport of [#BLM](#) by coopting the hashtag and fucking the racists.

Never thought I would tweet about kpop. [#awesome](#)

[#kpopstans](#) [#WhiteLivesMatters](#)

*Figure 1: Both images above show the celebratory responses*

### Participatory Surveillance and Activist Behavior Online

As social beings, our behavior is often influenced by our peers, but with technology our behaviors have more permanence and breadth which has inadvertently affected how we perceive peer-to-peer surveillance. The Literat & Brough (2019) study supports the claim that individuals consider the perception of others, of how they may view their content. In this same study, one of the individuals articulated a consciousness of how using social media was shaping how collective identities perceived themselves when given the opportunity to send a message, and the users are simultaneously impacting the platform by adding in different forms of new value to content (Literat & Brough, 2019). In the [#WhiteLivesMatter](#) hashtag trend, K-pop fans demonstrated the effect of peer surveillance as they infused new value to the platform by using different forms with the same hashtag. Examples of how peer surveillance influenced messaging could be seen in various examples. In some, users would caption their video or meme with a

reference to white people viewing their content (see Figure 2 for sample). In other cases, captions would be directed towards other invisible viewers that may consume their content (see Figure 3 for sample). These mannerisms indicate users are taking in account the surveillance of their peers online. This pattern aptly identifies how participatory surveillance is fundamentally altering communication online and how individuals relate to one another as they account for the perceptions of an invisible audience.

It is also shaping the ways that collective identities perceive themselves as K-pop used the platform to make a stance to work in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. In this case, some of the comments indicate a perception of themselves as social activists and a force to be reckoned with. The recurring organization in June 2020 began to shape fans' perception of what it meant to be a part of the K-pop fan base. For example, when the Dallas police requested videos with illegal activity, one of the Tweets responded 'you know the drill! SEND IN ALL OF YOUR FANCAMS...'. The phrase 'you know the drill' implies a certain understanding of how and what K-pop fans will respond. The mutual shaping between technology and collective identity is mediated by the awareness of peer surveillance.



White People When They Go To The [#WhiteLivesMatters](#) Tag And See All Kpop 🤔



Figure 2: Awareness of peers viewing content

y'all be hating on us kpop fans but then we spam the government with fancams and change the [#WhiteLivesMatters](#) algorithm to fall under kpop. we're a force to me reckoned with rethink who you stan



Figure 3: Speaking to invisible audience

## Sousveillance

The traditional concept of surveillance—a few monitoring the actions of many, particularly the marginalized, still persists with current technology, but it has now given the observed the tools to somewhat flip the script. The iWatch Dallas application was meant to reinforce and amplify the authorities' ability to surveil protestors. Twitter, however, gave people the opportunity to organize and disrupt surveillance. Ironically, in the network analysis conducted by Galantowicz (2021), the original tweets posted by the Dallas Police Department and Dallas Police chief, were repurposed the most to galvanize the K-pop fan base (Galantowicz, 2021). Additionally, the analysis also found that the tweet spanned globally and was not just limited to

the United States. The K-pop fan base was only able to leverage their international breadth by utilizing Twitter. As social media becomes an increasingly more integral part of activist movements, researchers will need to consider how mechanisms that have reinforced hierarchical surveillance can be repurposed and disrupted.

### **Role of News Media in Social Media**

The relationship between news organizations and online users naturally creates a new type of surveillance that gives uninhibited access to content posted publicly, dissolving the limitations of time and space that hinders the documentation of offline events. The news can retroactively bring attention to events that occur, like in #MatchaMillion campaign the articles gave coverage after they had successfully raised a million. On the other hand, articles can also contribute to mobilization as exhibited in the Tulsa rally movement. Word about the efforts to sabotage Trump's rally in Tulsa were spread by news sources and political commentators, the second most prominent source of the tweets related to the topic (Galantowicz, 2021). The consideration of whether online users consider the surveillance of journalists or other news outlets should be further analyzed in future research. The interaction between these entities likely feeds into the behavior of one another in online activist movements.

### **Conclusion**

This brief analysis of how surveillance is interacting with digital activism through the lens of these various K-pop-BLM events demonstrates the fundamental role it plays in online behaviors. Modality is not merely based on our five primary senses, but rather it can also be the sensation of being watched. Sometimes it's explicitly articulated in content or purposefully targeted, but in other circumstances surveillance is recognized through non-verbal, non-visual communication. The complexity of this is increased by the access to surveillance and our own

contributions as both researchers and users. Future research should explore more in depth the attitude and perception of surveillance in digital activism by working in cooperation with everyday activists to answer some of the following questions. How normalized is digital surveillance? How much does it contribute to their awareness and behavior online? In what ways do offline and online activism feed into each other?

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