

## 11 Transcultural Fandom

### *BTS and ARMY*

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It is almost impossible to mention the name of any Korean pop group or idol without acknowledging their fandoms: BTS has ARMY, TXT has MOA, TWICE has ONCE, and BLACKPINK has BLINK. Although these groups and their fandoms might be recognizable to many, stereotypes abound about the relationships between fandoms and artists, fandom activities, and the individuals who make up fandom communities. Fans and fandoms play a significant role in bringing success and attention to the artists and, arguably, the music industry. However, there is a delicate relationship between fandoms and artists. Some perspectives in popular media might lead one to believe that fans are mindless consumers who will do anything to promote their “faves.” These broad strokes miss (or completely ignore) that many fans are driven by the deep connection felt with the music and other fans. Additionally, if we fail to account for the role of fans, we risk continuing the tradition of “seeing fans as ‘other,’ non-intellectuals drawn to mindless entertainment.”<sup>1</sup> Understanding popular music must include the importance of fans and fandoms.<sup>2</sup>

Fandoms can wield a great deal of power and influence, but there can also be a great deal of mystery surrounding how they operate and their motives for particular actions. It can be challenging for those not part of fandoms or operating with their own biases to recognize them as complex networks made up of individuals who bring a host of interests, beliefs, and experiences and want to support a group of artists. For many fans of Korean popular music, the stereotypes and assumptions – often rooted in misogynistic and xenophobic ideologies – do not represent their lived fandom experiences. Further, because most accounts of Korean popular music focus on the collective fandom identity, it can be challenging to understand that fandoms and fan experiences are as personal and individual as they are public and collective expressions.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role fandom plays for Korean popular music through an exemplary example of BTS’s fandom, ARMY. This transcultural fandom has worked to support BTS, the fandom community, and communities not even related to the fandom. There are many fandoms, each with their unique histories, stories, and practices, but,

arguably, ARMY has risen to the top as one of the most visible for their online and offline presence.<sup>3</sup> Fans who identify as part of ARMY may differ in nationality and span a wide age demographic, along with other identity markers, but what connects them is their appreciation and enjoyment of BTS. For many BTS fans, being part of ARMY is more than purchasing music or merchandise; it is about supporting the band and the ARMY community. Furthermore, fandoms are continuously changing in response to historical and material conditions.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter begins with a brief history of fandom as understood within the context of fandom histories at large and Korean popular music. Certainly, it would be impossible to offer one history that encompasses all fandoms. This chapter shows fandoms' role for both artists and the industry by looking at practices that are most readily identifiable across Korean popular music fandoms: fan support for music, fandom philanthropy efforts, education, social justice, and community uplift. How fans carry out these practices varies widely given the social and material conditions of artists and fans. These practices remain some of the most recognizable (and possibly misunderstood) by those not familiar with Korean popular music. This chapter uses ARMY as an illustrative example of these characteristics.

To understand Korean popular music fandoms, we must put their history within the larger context of both fandom and K-pop history. While fandom communities vary widely, scholars have identified shared characteristics that often shape fandom spaces. Fandoms consist of people who are passionate about their object of fandom; there is a shared cohesion not only with the object of fandom but also among others in the community, and these spaces share their own cultures and traditions.<sup>5</sup> The same characteristics are reflected across K-pop fandom communities.<sup>6</sup> The history of the very term "fan" gives us some perspective into why this term and phenomenon often signals people to think negatively. Media studies and cultural studies scholar Mark Duffett traces the etymology of the word "fan" back to "fanatic," first used in the seventeenth century in England; it was associated with a person considered to be a "religious zealot."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Henry Jenkins describes how the term "fan" not only carried a religious connotation but also came to be used to describe those with "political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness."<sup>8</sup> The term continued to develop new associations regarding enthusiasm for sports teams and other cultural phenomena, but the negative connotations often remained. Early fan studies research sought to counter the negative stereotypes and offer a more robust understanding of how these communities function as active, engaged, and creative spaces where people develop their own culture in conversation with popular cultural objects.

While research in fan and fandom studies has moved away from continually defending fans, negative stereotypes associated with particular types of fandoms and fans, such as those with large numbers of women, girls, or members of BIPOC communities, continue. Concerning popular music in particular, there is a long history of reducing female fans to being obsessive, shallow, and hysterical. These stereotypes point to a long legacy of dismissing things that women enjoy.<sup>9</sup> K-pop fandoms especially have faced negative branding from popular media, where they are often described as being full of “hysterical teenagers” or women with “excessive obsessions.”<sup>10</sup> The significant demographic of women and BIPOC present in these fandoms, alongside the xenophobia around Korean idols and idol groups, have continued misconceptions and a lack of critical engagement about these communities’ practices and traditions.<sup>11</sup> The stereotypes and misconceptions fail to notice that K-pop fans and fandoms are often highly organized, multifaceted communities that not only act in response to their desire to support the artists but also show their frequent commitments to helping the fandom community in ways that are not readily connected back to the artists or K-pop at all. This is not to suggest that fandoms are without their own issues. Fans can bring their own biases into these spaces, and, unfortunately, negative expressions, like bullying, can be part of the fandom experience.

### **Where Are the Fans? The Globalization of K-Pop Fandom**

Research has demonstrated that K-pop fandoms are pretty diverse across demographics such as race, gender, location, and age (Anderson 2013; J. Lee 2019). K-pop fandom research continues to document the growth of these fandoms around the world, in Asia (Siriuyusak and Shin 2007; Jung and Shim 2014), Latin America (Han 2017; Min, Jin, and Han 2019), the Middle East (Otmazgin and Lyan 2014; E. Lee 2017), and North America (Yoon 2017; McLaren and Jin 2020). While much research points to diversity in terms of nationality and ethnicity, K-pop fandoms can also be understood as both transnational and transcultural spaces. Media and fan studies scholars Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto posit that using the term transcultural helps in examining “border-crossing fandoms” where “the nation is but one in a constellation of contexts that inflect and influence their rise and spread.”<sup>12</sup> Even among similar regions, the fandom community’s experiences and expectations may vary widely because of each fan’s social and cultural background.

In part, understanding K-pop fans must be done with attention to the general spread of Korean popular culture globally through the Korean

cultural wave, or *Hallyu*. The export of Korean popular culture is not relegated solely to music but also includes film, drama, food, clothing, beauty products, games, and other products. While there is often debate over exact dates, scholars most often demarcate the Korean Wave by phases or generations.<sup>13</sup> Seo Taeji and Boys are heralded as the group that marked the beginning of K-pop and K-pop fandom as we know it. Blending hip hop and choreography with traditional Korean music, they ushered in a new music sound and style in Korea in the early 1990s. Notably, concerning fandom, one of the marks of this group is that their fans stressed the importance of performance and visuals through music videos.<sup>14</sup> In the first phase of *Hallyu*, from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, K-pop was aimed at countries throughout Asia. During this time, first-generation idol groups like H.O.T., Shinhwa, and Baby V.O.X. saw popularity (and fandom growth) in China and Japan.<sup>15</sup> From the mid-2000s through the early 2010s, the second phase of *Hallyu* saw increased attention to Korean boy and girl groups, with stars such as BIGBANG and Girls' Generation popular with fans in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. With the rise of the internet, entertainment companies increasingly turned to digital technologies and social media to spread their music and messages and engage with global audiences. Third-generation groups continued to build upon these practices, utilizing Twitter, YouTube, and apps that allow for artist-fan communication and multimedia content. Like BTS, BLACKPINK and Seventeen have maintained global fandoms. While recognizing these artists' trajectories as managed by their entertainment companies and the technological forces that influenced the spread of Korean popular music is important, studying the music and messages of these artists is equally important for understanding their fandom.

## **K-Pop Fandom Structure and Design**

K-pop fandoms have existed since the industry's inception, and entertainment companies have long invested in developing and sustaining them.<sup>16</sup> In most instances, the concept for the fandom begins with the artists' label. Companies may name the fandom and give it a representative color and associated logos that appear on merchandise. Companies do extensive market research to inform the decisions made about creating experiences for fans to enjoy the music and artists, such as concerts and fan meets, and designing spaces for fans to interact with each other and the artists online. These platforms can shape the ways fans interact and experience the music, the artist, and being in a community with other fans. For example, V Live is a South Korean streaming service used explicitly by celebrities to

communicate with their fans. In addition to acting as a streaming service for videos, it provides celebrities with the ability to go “live” via video feed and allows fans to view and comment during these sessions. The entertainment companies certainly play a role in creating a fandom brand and experience; fans and idols have crucial roles in developing and sustaining the community.

The artists’ music is often the first point of entry or interest for fans. Whether recommended by a friend or an algorithm on a streaming service, listening to a song is how fans come to feel invited to learn more about a group. While the mainstream media have often claimed that K-pop produces manufactured music and performances, this is not a truth for all artists. In the case of BTS, fans often comment on the authenticity present in the music and messages.<sup>17</sup> This authenticity is connected to the observation that BTS writes many of their own songs, allowing them to address topics in their lyrics that reflect their own experiences. Opportunities to communicate with and see the artists offstage often shape the kind of connections fans think they can have with the artist, which influences the fandom community. This suggests that social media does not have the sole role in developing the relationship between a fan and artists and complicates claims that seem to fixate on social media as the sole reason for an artists’ popularity. Fans can learn more about the artists’ personalities through social media such as V Live, social media posts, interviews, and vlogs. These are ways for fans to learn more about the dynamics between members of the group and the artists’ personalities. The encounters may shape how fans then feel connected to the artists, but ultimately the music and content are what keep fans engaged. For those who may have experienced these groups only via YouTube or shared media recordings of performances, such encounters are often the only “live” experiences they will have to get to know who these idols are offstage.<sup>18</sup>

Entertainment companies often establish official fan clubs that carry annual membership fees and offer incentives such as raffles, unique concert ticket sale offerings, or access to the artists themselves through fan meets. For some fans, membership may be an important marker of belonging to the fandom community. However, one does not have to be part of an official club to participate in all fandom activities. Fandoms have coalesced online without the necessity of official membership because of the global popularity of K-pop. Access to official K-pop fandom communities was difficult for those who neither speak Korean nor reside in Korea. Fan cafés, digital clubs that allowed for artist-fan connection through message boards, forums, and other content, were most often all in Korean. The internet enabled fans to organize themselves and connect with others without fan clubs organized by entertainment companies,

which was especially useful for those outside Korea. These unofficial sites are often housed or run through Twitter, Facebook, or Tumblr. They are integral to providing resources, such as translation content into other languages, fan meetup opportunities, and other community-building activities.<sup>19</sup>

Many K-pop fandoms are diffuse in terms of structure and organization, without designated or official leaders. Still, most are highly organized, with the ability to share news, resources, and goals for supporting their respective pop artists through social media. Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook allow fandoms to quickly organize and share information.<sup>20</sup> Some scholars have noted that for Korean popular music fandoms outside Korea, this diffuse structure is different from Korean fandom experiences, which tend to be more hierarchical.

Fandoms often have regional bases for each country (and also regions within a country). Additionally, social media accounts often monitor music charting, track fan voting efforts for fan-driven awards and philanthropy efforts, monitor and share news about the artists, and provide translations across languages. While companies may create and initially provide fandom identity markers such as names, colors, and even online spaces for fans to connect, once fans start to interact with the artists, content, and other fans, how these fandoms take shape and evolve is unique to each.

### **Fandom Practices: Supporting One's Faves and One's Fandom**

A core value of many K-pop fandoms is the desire to support the performers and enjoy music and content with other fans. If there is a central shared characteristic, it is that most in these communities see their primary mission as supporting the work of the artists. How this manifests can look different for each fan. For some, participating in voting for fan-driven awards and streaming music for charting purposes takes precedence. For others, it may be participating in offline fan events such as meetups or celebrations in honor of a group's anniversary or artist's birthday. Still, for others, the work of doing online PR through actions such as trending hashtags, vlogging reaction videos to music or performances, writing reviews, or providing a translation of content from Korea to other languages is essential. All of this fan labor is a means to provide positive attention and support to the artists.

There are many ways that fans may show support and increase visibility for artists. Perhaps the most recognized and talked about is streaming and

purchasing music to help artists succeed on music charts and break records. While some awards, charts, and radio play might be region-specific in that they are limited to participation from fans from a specific area, fans work together to support one another through sharing resources about goals, metrics, and details on what the process looks like for specific charts. For example, music charts, such as the Billboard Hot 100, are ranked according to radio play, streaming across music platforms, and sales in the United States. Social network spaces provide ground for fans to organize efforts around charting, streaming, and voting to promote the music and artists. Although practices such as streaming may seem to suggest an uncritical engagement with the music, these actions often reflect fans' desire to be more engaged listeners who want not only to support the artist but also to exercise control over their music choices on these platforms. They may use streaming (and charting music) as a means to respond to what some fans perceive as bias toward music from groups like BTS.<sup>21</sup>

Fandoms can also create and sustain visibility and attention to a group or performer in other ways. Fans make and trend hashtags to bring attention to a new song or album, in some instances creating their own digital content to boost awareness of a group. On YouTube, fans upload reaction videos to reflect on a performance or music video, expressing that they are watching the content for the first time to capture an alive and honest response. These videos often show "excessive delight, a structure of feeling that might characterize fandom."<sup>22</sup> For example, a YouTube channel with over 210,000 subscribers, "WhatchaGot2Say," offers BTS reaction video content. Three creators watch BTS content and provide commentary and reviews. Their reaction videos, which range from reactions to BTS performances to music videos, often include laughter, joy, and commentary that expresses excitement. These videos, as Cho argues, also build community among fans and viewers online, drawing attention to the artists and offering a shared sense of community as fans can watch others experience the same thing they enjoy.<sup>23</sup> Many of this channel's reaction videos see over 200,000 views with comments that range from agreeing with what the creators make to fans sharing their own reflections on the video or content being reviewed. Another YouTube creator, xCeleste, with a channel that has over 313,000 subscribers, creates and posts videos with a range of BTS content, from introduction videos aimed at newcomers to the group and their fandom to reaction videos of performances. xCeleste's "This Is BTS: Introduction," posted on August 19, 2020, has just over 398,000 views as of this writing. The 15:37 video presents a montage of video clips that give a history of BTS's career trajectory, highlighting both their success and their hardships.<sup>24</sup> Videos such as these also serve as a way to document history for fans.

Fans are aware of the bias often present against K-pop in mainstream media and what had been a lack of coverage until 2018.<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps from this awareness and a desire to communicate within the community that fan-driven publications can be spaces for fandom news, band news, and other types of content. Sometimes these publications focus on more news-oriented content about the artist, such as reporting on milestones or achievements like awards and new music. In contrast, others provide creative writing, essays, fan art, and scholarly articles. Before the rise of social media, fandoms circulated information via fliers or within local community meetups through word of mouth.<sup>26</sup> Now, internet spaces allow fans to create blogs, vlogs, and even extended Twitter threads to circulate news and creative responses.

In addition to providing publicity for the artists, perhaps one of the most recognized and appreciated acts of labor by fans in K-pop fandom is translators' work. While there may be subtitles provided for some K-pop music videos and interviews, this is not always the case. Translation accounts abound on Twitter, where many fans post real-time translations when artists share tweets or livestreams in Korean. Most translators operate for a specific artist, and accounts can be managed by one person or an entire team.<sup>27</sup> It is often because of the work of fan translators that fans have access to K-pop song lyrics in other languages. Some translators also share news related to Korea and Korean entertainment that affects the focal artists.<sup>28</sup> K-pop's global spread means that there are often articles and interviews written about artists across languages. While translations from Korean to other languages are necessary, so is translation of content from other languages into Korean for Korean-speaking fans.<sup>29</sup> Translators act as a bridge for the community. HYBE Corporation (the Korean entertainment company that manages BTS) created an education division, HYBE EDU, in which part of the focus has been to develop Korean-language books and materials to help fans learn Korean.<sup>30</sup> Even with these resources and subtitles on official content, the role of translators remains integral for sharing information.

Activism and philanthropic efforts have long been part of K-pop fandom communities, from fan groups organizing to support specific charities or causes to speaking out about policies in the entertainment industry that affect artists and communities outside the artist-fandom relationship. At times activism has meant fans organizing and calling attention to mistreatment by the entertainment companies on behalf of the artists. In some instances, fans have managed to bring attention to perceived issues with idols or other unfair treatment contracts. In 2009, the members of the fandom for JYJ (a former K-pop group) organized to show support for the members who filed a lawsuit against an unfair contract



through petitions and boycotts of SM Entertainment, the management group.<sup>31</sup> Such actions have changed industry practices.<sup>32</sup> While there are positive aspects to this kind of fan involvement, it has been examined and critiqued for the problems it can cause when fans try to intervene on behalf of artists but lack understanding of the full context for the issue they are trying to address.<sup>33</sup>

Artists can sometimes spur or encourage fan activity around social and humanitarian causes. For example, a K-pop group or its members might use social media to promote a fundraising cause, spurring fandom to provide their support. BTS's anti-violence campaign, Love MYSELF, began in 2017 in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). This campaign has raised 4.5B KRW as of December 2021.<sup>34</sup> As will be discussed, it also served as the impetus for a group of ARMY to establish One in an ARMY (OIAA), a fan-driven philanthropic organization. K-pop artist IU donated to the Korean Foundation for Support of the Senior Citizen in both her name and the fandom's name, who provided gifts and inspirations to her philanthropy project.<sup>35</sup>

Other actions are more grassroots, coming directly from fans who organize initiatives and give to a charity of their own choice in the name of a group or an artist. One of the earliest mentions of fandom philanthropy is from Shinhwa fans who sent rice donations to a charity to mark Shin Hye-sung's first solo concert.<sup>36</sup> In 2012 fans of Seo Taiji and Boys helped celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the group's debut by raising enough money to create the "Seo Taiji Forest" in Brazil.<sup>37</sup> An artist's birthday or landmark group anniversary may be the occasion for such actions and result in donations to support the building of schools, scholarships, and a variety of charitable organizations. As will be discussed later in this chapter, some fandoms have dedicated charity fanbases that run campaigns.

The political and racial protests in the United States during the summer of 2020 saw a great deal of media attention given to K-pop fandom activism. From donations raised in support of the Black Lives Matter movement (#BLM) by ARMY that totaled \$1 million to spamming a police scanner app for Dallas, Texas, with fancams (a short video clip of an artist or group) to jam the app, media coverage began a narrative about K-pop fandoms that shifted from the stereotypes of "screaming teenagers" to question to what extent they could influence politics.<sup>38</sup> While it is true that activism has long been part of K-pop communities, for some fans, these actions stem not from their identity as fans of K-pop but rather from the commitments and beliefs they bring with them into these spaces. As one K-pop fan said in response to her online activism during the summer 2020 #BLM protests: "I'm Black before I'm a K-pop stan . . . the main point

of why we were fighting was for the Black Lives Matter cause, not to get recognized [as K-pop fans].”<sup>39</sup>

### **A Case Study in Fandom: The Presence and Growth of the BTS ARMY Fandom**

BTS is one of the most successful international K-pop groups of the twenty-first century, with one of the world’s largest fandoms. As of October 2021, BTS had 40.5 million followers on Twitter and just over 13 million subscribers on the Weverse app. Sales for touring also demonstrate their popularity and fandom size; BTS was the first Asian act to sell out Wembley Stadium in London twice and touted viewership of 775,000 during one of their pandemic online concerts, “Bang Bang Con: The Live.”<sup>40</sup> Since debuting with Big Hit Entertainment (now under HYBE) in June 2013, they have seen steady success across multiple fronts: breaking records on the music charts, earning music awards globally, selling out worldwide stadium tours, and serving as invited speakers for international organizations such as the United Nations General Assembly. While BTS has garnered steady attention for their artistry and ability to break records, their fandom has received attention for their creativity and innovation in supporting BTS. Scholars and music critics have cited many factors that have led to their success and massive global fanbase: their music, authenticity, history, and a wide variety of engaging content.<sup>41</sup>

The acronym ARMY stands for Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth. The fandom receives attention for their ability to sell out stadiums, help BTS chart their way to a Billboard #1 hit for both English and Korean songs, and consistently place BTS as winners for the Billboard Top Social Artist award (as of October 2021 they have won every year since 2017). While those achievements directly impact the group, the synergistic relationship between BTS and ARMY must be put into context with BTS’s history and music. Korean media did not give BTS as much attention as other groups because Big Hit was not a significant entertainment company when BTS debuted. Accordingly, Big Hit did not have the same resources as more established entertainment companies to garner access to media and invitations for idol groups to appear on variety shows or engage in circuits that would have helped build their reputation. Members of BTS used social media to connect with fans, telling their own stories to build relationships. Early vlogs described their struggles as trainees preparing for debut and scenes from their daily lives (cooking, practicing their music and dance, and simply spending time with one another). These more personal interactions would help fans feel more connected to the members.

Rather than feel as if they were getting to know BTS members onstage or through performances only, viewers came to know them in more personal and intimate settings.

Jeeheng Lee posits that BTS coming from a small company influenced the way their fandom formed: “Unlike idols from large agencies – who gain exposure and grow a fan base via TV appearances – BTS barely benefited from broadcasting opportunities and compensated by diligently uploading behind-the-scenes footage and their daily lives online.”<sup>42</sup> The disadvantages BTS encountered made the relationship between BTS and ARMY stronger. Members of the fandom saw themselves as BTS’s only allies, which motivated them to give them the support and recognition they believed the band deserved. BTS’s unique history among K-pop groups has relied on this strong relationship in particular ways. Most groups’ popularity and fandom grew in Korea before gaining attention abroad, but BTS’s initial stronghold with fans began in the United States. Music critic Youngdae Kim describes the reason behind this: “In the early 2010s, none of the Korean media paid attention to this group of unknown boys as the ‘next big thing’ in the middle of the cutthroat competition among idol groups. Instead, American fans and the media that harbored less prejudice against BTS recognized their potential first. They were not large in number, but their existence was nonetheless critical.”<sup>43</sup> It is important to acknowledge that even with these early challenges and steady rise of fandom outside Korea, BTS had a dedicated Korean fanbase that was supportive as well.

In addition to the initial conditions that laid the groundwork for BTS and Big Hit to develop their fanbase, the strategies that sustain a dedicated fanbase are also essential to understand. Big Hit has cultivated countless opportunities for fans to enjoy BTS’s music and content and become part of the group’s story. While BTS’s core way of connecting with fans has been through their music (much of which they write themselves), there are other avenues, such as V Lives, in which the members spend time with fans, sometimes after important events like concerts or awards shows. For example, after the 2021 Grammy Awards show (in which they were nominated for Best Pop Duo/Group Performance), BTS had a live event in which they reassured fans that while disappointed about their loss, they were grateful for the opportunity and would continue to work hard. It is also not uncommon for members to respond to viewer comments during these livestreams. They might wish a fan happy birthday, offer advice, or pass on kind words in general.

Scholars have talked at length about celebrity-fan relations through the framework of parasocial relationships.<sup>44</sup> The connections established between artists and fans often emerge from a collective experience, such

as BTS fans enjoying content together. This can take many forms, from celebrating countdowns on Twitter in anticipation of new music releases to fans creating games or other nonofficial content as a way to connect. Most fans do not have an illusive perception that they actually “know” the artists. Instead, fans may feel that they know the message and philosophy of the group well enough to recognize the parts of the personalities that artists do show. Social media also offer fans a way to feel connected. The BTS members’ joint Twitter feed and individual Instagram accounts provide fans with photos, music clips, recommendations, and other messages. Similarly, Weverse allows members to post messages and pictures to fans, and through these encounters, fans may come to feel that they do get to learn about a member’s personality. For example, RM (Kim Nam-joon) frequently posts pictures of his museum visits. An avid art collector, he has inspired many fans to visit the same galleries.<sup>45</sup> On Weverse, members will often respond to fan posts, further establishing the connection fans feel. In addition to these traditional K-pop ways of establishing a relationship between fans and artists, Big Hit has taken on more innovative means. In 2020, as part of BTS’s *Map of the Soul: 7* album, the company hosted an international global art show, *Connect, BTS*. Although hindered in some ways by the COVID-19 pandemic, this program spanned five cities and featured over twenty artists. It invited both fans and the general public to experience art exhibitions that resonated with BTS’s philosophy of making art and music accessible to all. Big Hit has also used transmedia storytelling across platforms that encourage fans to theorize and build connections across content. This began with BTS’s 2015 album, *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Part 1*. A narrative began to construct the Bangtan Universe – a complex conglomerate of fictional stories centering around the members’ characters and woven across albums, music videos, and a webtoon. Bangtan Universe does not reflect the members’ actual lives, but some ARMY followed the experience by theorizing the fictional narrative arc. Some fans also created YouTube videos that analyzed and mapped out theories for understanding the fictional stories. This content not only builds fan connections as they work together to understand and unpack the story but also offers another route for fans to enter and experience the range of content.

ARMY performs many of the fan practices mentioned in this chapter: organizing for streaming and charting, circulating news and content created by fans, and connecting with BTS over social media. But this fandom is also recognized for its social and humanitarian projects, inspired by BTS’s messages. These range from reflections on the love, fear, and angst around growing up and adulthood to critiques of social injustice and encouraging people to find their passion. These messages have universal

power because they appeal to many shared experiences regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity. While some start from a South Korean context or perspective, these issues are not limited by borders and languages.<sup>46</sup> BTS invites ARMY and other listeners to consider issues rather than setting out to advocate for one particular outcome or follow one particular directive. No outcome or response is privileged over another. The fan base's strength is its desire to reflect the joy and connection they have experienced due to BTS's music.

Although organizing around social issues is not unique to ARMY, what distinguishes ARMY's philanthropic work from the rest is the scale, effort, and diversity in the range of causes. Perhaps one of the most recognized BTS messages has come from their aforementioned *Love Yourself* album series and their work with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). In November 2017, BTS and Big Hit partnered with the Korean Committee for UNICEF to join the #ENDviolence campaign. The focus was on preventing violence against young people. The group's participation and support of this campaign, described as an extension of BTS's lyrics and music videos, attested to the importance of self-love. It was part of the overarching concept for the *Love Yourself* albums – to echo the importance of loving oneself as a first step toward fostering self-respect and awareness of one's place in the world.<sup>47</sup> One of the ARMY responses to this message created One in an ARMY (OIAA), a fan-driven organization that helps raise funds and awareness about various human rights and social issues, composed of ARMY volunteers worldwide. For each BTS member's birthday, they will run a campaign in their name and honor. These volunteers receive input from other ARMY members regarding which nonprofit organizations they will support, and they use Twitter to organize calls for microdonations. They have done campaigns for various nonprofits, from those that support literacy for incarcerated teens to support for the elderly to COVID-19 relief. Their reach and impact for the birthday projects are extensive, raising just over a total of \$49,000 in 2019 in honor of each of the seven BTS members' birthdays alone.<sup>48</sup> This amount didn't include additional projects, such as flash fundraisers and ongoing projects that celebrate acts of kindness that may not be attached to monetary donations. A September 2020 Weverse magazine article, "BTS & ARMY, We Walk Together," highlights the philanthropy of ARMY and notes that its donation history totaled \$2,018,020,000 won, roughly US\$1,713,802.<sup>49</sup>

ARMY's response to these efforts is impressive because of the money raised and the opportunities it provides for people to learn about issues they otherwise might be unaware of. OIAA stresses the importance of projects that reflect the messages found in BTS: "The vision behind OIAA

is driven by our belief that the comfort we get from BTS can be given back to the world in abundance. It also aligns with our objective, as individuals, to work in making this world a better place.”<sup>50</sup> This desire to reflect the gratitude for BTS through efforts to help communities who may not even be aware of the group or its fandom has been quite effective for the fundraising efforts. However, more crucial than the amount raised is that these activities provide opportunities to educate about social issues. For example, an October 2020 birthday campaign in honor of a BTS member, Jimin, raised money for Free the Girls, an organization that helps girls rescued from sex trafficking. Using Twitter threads to spur conversation throughout the month of the campaign, OIAA posted links for donations and a series of questions about the issue to encourage discussion and share knowledge about the subject. The questions encouraged readers to move between local and global contexts and see connections between issues often related to more significant structural inequalities: “FTG, through their programs have emerged as great entrepreneurs who are adapting to the needs of the time by trying to expand to an online model, like an online marketplace. How do you think online channels and the global reach of the internet help them in their endeavors?”<sup>51</sup> They also ask ARMY to think about how sex trafficking connects to other issues about the kinds of social support and infrastructure needed to help victims: “How do you think our structures and institutions contribute to creating the divide and what in your opinion can one do on their end to bridge the gap?”<sup>52</sup> These are opportunities for critical conversation and learning, which are just as crucial for social change as donations.

Similarly, an examination of how some ARMY members responded to the #BLM movement in 2020 sheds light on the fandom’s ability to mobilize with impressive donations and educate from within around issues of race, racism, and violence. In the wake of George Floyd’s killing and ensuing protests of racial violence against Black people, there were concerted efforts within the fandom to raise money and awareness for BLM. These efforts, many of which started before BTS announced in support of BLM and made public that they had donated \$1 million to support the movement, were driven by fans. The magnitude of ARMY’s response to BLM resulted in the #MatchAMillion campaign. Although fans started this outside OIAA, the organization helped track logistics for the campaign to match funds. Before the announcement that BTS had donated \$1 million, OIAA found that ARMY had raised approximately \$50,000. Again, the ability to organize and the amount raised are undoubtedly crucial, but the attempts to educate the public deserve attention. Before BTS’s announcement, fans tweeted resources that helped explain the history of anti-Black racism in both American and global contexts. In particular, there were

efforts to help Korean fans understand the importance of this movement and moment. The #BLM hashtag was circulating within the ARMY community before BTS tweeted their message of support on June 4, 2020; on June 1, 2020, another hashtag appeared in the ARMY community: #WeLoveBlackARMY. This was created by Dr. Jiyoung Lee, a Korean-ARMY academic who used the hashtag in conjunction with #BlackLivesMatter to show support and draw attention to the issue. Dr. Lee's tweet directed toward K-ARMY, first written in Korean and later translated into English, reads:

I'd like to ask you, K-ARMYs.

The current situation in the U.S. is so severe that I'm apprehensive about the pain felt by the Black ARMY. Wouldn't it provide a little bit of strength to them if you showed you're with them? Why don't you write a message of encouragement with the hashtags?

I'm worried about people who might be hurt beyond our expectations. Especially our overseas fans. We know so well about the protest site filled with fear and anger. I hope our support and backing can help them to turn their despair into hope.<sup>53</sup>

Under the hashtag, a range of conversations ensued from people asking to learn more about the incident to links to blog posts that articulated Korean-ARMY's own attempts to understand race and racism in this context. The hashtag functioned to call attention to the issue, offer support, and provide a space to exchange resources and educate one another about the problems. This moment also represented a potential opportunity for learning and activism that transcended BTS.

ARMY takes finding ways to support one another just as seriously as supporting BTS. In addition to organizing to help with philanthropic efforts, fans have developed several subgroups that provide communal support, such as Korean-language-learning opportunities, tutoring services for a variety of subjects, book clubs, mental health support, cooking lessons, and sharing of employment resources. The Bangtan Academy is an ARMY-sponsored free language-learning program operated through a Discord server that supports students who are learning Korean using several different curricula. Self-paced classes utilize YouTube Korean language channels supplemented with homework assignments designed by Bangtan Academy teachers; all this is augmented by support and encouragement from teachers and other students through chats. There are also language courses taught by volunteers who design their own curricula and provide materials for students. In addition, there are opportunities for learning and discussion around Korean history and culture.<sup>54</sup> ARMY Academics provide free tutoring across a host of subjects taught by

ARMY volunteers. Those seeking help complete a form and partner with a tutor. ARMY Academics also sponsors free programs to help students navigate the process of applying to college, choosing majors, and transitioning from high school to college (ARMY Academy).

Another example of this intracommunity support is the BTS ARMY Job Board, coordinated by ARMY volunteers who circulate job advertisements worldwide. They describe the impetus for their establishment as wanting to provide help for ARMY as inspiration from “the examples of kindness and compassion shown by BTS through their words and their actions” (ARMY Job Board “History”). On Twitter, they share a range of potential job opportunities. This group also supports other fans around issues of career-related concerns.

These fan-driven efforts are not directly related to BTS’s success but rather exemplify fans’ willingness and desire to support the community formed around this group. ARMY’s desire to support BTS has manifested into a desire to help one another in ways inspired by but not limited to music.

## Conclusion

Korean popular music fandoms are vibrant communities comprising unique individuals. While the records these fandoms help their artists to reach are impressive, equally impressive is how fandom communities are helping their local and global communities find meaningful ways to impact the world. Broadly, fandoms support artists through purchasing music and content, creating original content inspired by the artists, and taking up volunteer efforts promoting social good. The mechanics of this work change over time given social and material conditions, the artists, and the fans who make up these communities. Attention is often given to fandom for its ability to support its artists. Perhaps we can also learn how the joy and comfort expressed in the music inspire ripples of action throughout communities, some of whom may have never even listened to Korean popular music. The ARMY fandom, similar to BTS, demonstrates possibilities in uncharted territory.

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