

14 Following the Footsteps of BTS

The Global Rise of K-Pop Tourism

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The globalization of K-pop is not only about outward expansion with more export market penetration. The outward circulation of Korean entertainment has spawned inbound global flows by drawing in its audience as tourists and shoppers. As Korean popular culture functions as a window through which audiences come to know South Korea (hereafter Korea), specific places within the country have emerged as physical sites through which K-culture experiences can be extended.¹ This chapter explores K-pop tourism, which is reshaping the tourist landscape in the country. Despite the temporary decrease after the THAAD conflict with China in 2017, Korea's popularity as a tourist destination continually surged until 2019, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.² The global craze for K-pop and its associated lifestyles, such as K-beauty and K-food, are the primary contributors.³ According to the statistics released by the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO), the proportion of tourists in their twenties has continually increased since 2015 and was the highest demographic of international tourists in Korea in 2019.⁴ The same survey asked foreign tourists' reasons for selecting Korea as a travel destination; "K-pop/Korean Wave" accounted for 12.7 percent.⁵ Other major purposes, such as shopping, food, and elegant culture/fashion trends, are not entirely separate from the lifestyles that Korean popular culture exhibits. Given the obvious link between the global fever of K-pop and increasing inbound tourism, this chapter focuses on specific practices of K-pop tourism: what motivates fans to visit Korea, what specific destinations draw fans' desire, how they experience K-pop-related places, and what implications K-pop tourism has for both the K-pop and tourism industries. In order to illustrate the actual behaviors and lived experiences of K-pop tourism, discussions will revolve around its most thriving route: the "Bangtan Tour."

Bangtan Tour: Sentimental Pilgrimage

There is little dispute that BTS (Bangtan, or Bulletproof, Boys) is the most successful K-pop idol group, garnering worldwide recognition and

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popularity. BTS has a huge and devoted worldwide fan base, known as ARMY (an acronym for Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth). The international fandom includes talented translators and savvy promoters of BTS music through streaming and systemic purchase. ARMY generates extraordinary volumes of social media postings on Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, easily driving world trends. With its mighty numbers, ARMY immediately bought out all the tickets for the BTS World Tour in 2018 and 2019.⁶ The concert venues are always ringing with fan chants. Inspired by BTS and their music, international members of ARMY desire to learn the Korean language, know more about Korea, and, most importantly, visit Korea, where they can follow in the footsteps of BTS.

Global fans come to Seoul, the world's capital city of K-pop, not only to attend concerts and music shows but also to trace the paths of K-pop idols they admire. The stomping grounds of BTS have turned into destinations. The basic idea of the "Bangtan Tour" is visiting any BTS-related places, such as where the group filmed music videos and had album jacket photo shoots, or simply places BTS members frequented, and taking "proof photos" to verify that fans have been there as well. How is the Bangtan Tour lived, experienced, and told? What "images, feelings, desires, thoughts, and meanings" constitute this tour?⁷ To answer these questions, in July 2019 I embarked on the "Bangtan Tour" to several places associated with BTS. At first sight, all the places I visited turned out not to have any touristic qualities of sightseeing, heritage, leisure, or Instagrammable images. Then the question is, why and how do those places attract fan-tourists? What are the perceived values of these places to fans, and how do they appreciate the places? The following sections aim to answer in terms of authenticity, storytelling, and everydayness. In all three categories, the role of fan-tourists constitutes, rather than consumes, place values.

Authenticity

In *Pop City*, I discussed three types of pleasures in K-pop tourism: expectation, connection, and knowledge accumulation.⁸ The very anticipation of having a chance to meet their beloved idols in person provides fans with excitement. By attending live music events (concerts, music shows, fan meetings, etc.), fans enjoy being connected not only with stars but also with fellow fans they encounter. Over the course of K-pop tourism, fans collect information about stars and star-associated places, and such knowledge accumulation itself brings them joy. The pleasure derived from K-pop tourism culminates in the desire for connection. Celebrity tourism is

similar to pilgrimage in that it evokes “pilgrims’ personal experiences of connection with their faith.”⁹ What draws members of ARMY across the globe to Seoul is their aspiration to be more deeply connected with BTS and develop affective intimacy with them.

The old office of Big Hit Entertainment (the agency of BTS, now HYBE), located on a back street of Gangnam in Seoul, is the primary pilgrimage destination to anchor desires for emotional attachment. Although Big Hit has moved to other locations, the old agency building is the birthplace of BTS, a “sacred site” where BTS came into being. The landlord keeps the old Big Hit sign at the entrance, authenticating the place’s stature on the BTS tourist trail. In tourism studies, authenticity “is used to characterize a criterion of evaluation used by the modern tourist as observer.”¹⁰ In celebrity tourism, however, the concept of authenticity transcends the modern/premodern, Western/non-Western, and self/other binaries. Revolving around the celebrity’s existence, authenticity is what “legitimizes” fans’ personal relationship with idols.

What renders the old agency building even more authentic is BTS’s own coming-of-age narrative. Before achieving their current status as a global icon, BTS struggled in the early years. Given the monopolistic landscape of the K-pop industry dominated by three major agencies, a band produced by a small agency like Big Hit did not enjoy privileged treatment by broadcasters; sometimes their performances were cut from broadcasts, and the band was often forced to perform shorter versions of their songs, resulting in limited exposure to the public. BTS was also harshly criticized by underground rappers who did not see the group as legitimate hip-hop artists due to their idol status. Some members received insulting comments from “netizens” (anonymous internet users) for their appearances that did not fit the stereotypical mold of perfect-looking idols. When BTS initially won first place on a music chart show, netizens accused Big Hit Entertainment of *sajaegi* – a scheme to buy their own artists’ albums to achieve a top rank on the music charts, thus boosting further sales – because no one believed BTS could sell more than 100,000 album copies in 2015. BTS was also attacked for plagiarism of other groups’ concepts¹¹ and constantly scrutinized for any minute faults. Multiple BTS songs are reactions to such struggles and oppression, expressing pain and anger, as well as gratitude for fan support that became the source of comfort and resilience. What built and consolidated the strong fan base (ARMY) was BTS’s honest and sincere sharing of their transformative journey with their fans. The peculiar aura of the old agency building emanates from its authenticity as a place of humble beginnings.

The building’s façade presents an astonishing view. All walls, stairs, window frames, and even handrails are entirely covered with millions of

scribbles by fans. Fans' graffiti can be categorized into largely three types: thanks, love, and anticipation. "Thank you for your music." "Thank you for changing my life." "You're my Most Beautiful Moment of Life." ARMY fans thank the group for how they were touched by BTS and their songs, and how they were comforted by them. Expressions of infinite love and support for members are obvious: "Jasmine♥JK," "Jin♥SylIA," "I Love BTS." Fans also leave their names, their home countries, and inviting notes – "Singapore ARMY," "Italy ARMY," and "Come 2 Hawaii" – in anticipation of BTS someday revisiting the site and seeing the messages. Fans' graffitiing is a performative act to reinscribe the meaning of this place, sustaining and reproducing its authenticity. ARMY fans are informed about this building via diverse media and feel motivated to visit. One of the sources is BTS's own Twitter account (@bts_twt). On May 31, 2015, RM posted a selfie standing at the outdoor stairway of the agency building. But fans are not merely doing the ritual of "quotations" by repeating preframed and fixed photographic practices. By staging their stories, messages, and aspirations, ARMY fans rework the sacredness of this place. Visiting the old agency building is beyond merely consuming it. Rather, inscribing aspirations via imprinted messages into a physical space is an act of reconstructing the pilgrimage site.

The authentic status of the old agency building can be compared to the new HYBE locations where there are no visual marks left by fans. This could be due to the fact that the current landlord and HYBE do not allow graffiti. A more persuasive explanation, however, is that fans care more about BTS's "humble beginnings" than their current world-star status. Since ARMY has been built and expanded upon BTS's history of struggles, its members have strongly empathized with the narrative that casts the group as underdogs. The "blood, sweat, and tears" (a title of their song) BTS shed at a small building where Big Hit could afford to rent only two floors make the old agency building a "true" BTS place.

Just a few steps from the old Big Hit location is Yoojung Sikdang, under which BTS's old practice room was located. This Korean BBQ restaurant was frequented by BTS after hours of hard practice during their trainee period and in the early days after their debut. In BTS's reality show *Rookie King* (2013), the restaurant was featured with the members' complimentary comments on dishes and how the place is closely associated with their pre-debut era. RM said, "[Even] during vacation, we would eat two of our meals here." Suga added, "[The owner's] food was like my mom's homemade meals." In an interview on the show, the owner remarked, "I love them like they're my own children. They're all so polite, kind, and bright. I truly believe that they'll be successful."¹²

Humble Korean BBQ restaurants like Yoojung Sikdang usually serve workers from nearby offices and neighborhood regulars; they are places where middle-aged folks wine and dine for entertainment. By no standards does Yoojung Sikdang fit the taste of younger generations; it is neither fancy nor Instagrammable. However, the majority of current customers are ARMY fans from across the globe; inside the restaurant the four walls and even the ceiling are completely covered with BTS photos, banners, stickers, and posters. During my visit, the restaurant owner, who garnered fame and admiration from ARMY thanks to the interview, kindly welcomed each guest, asked about a favorite member, and handed out a photo card of the member. She seemed very accustomed to treating international guests and advised them on their menu selections by hinting about each member's favorite dishes. Like the old agency building, Yoojung Sikdang is an "authentic" place BTS inhabited, where they lived their everyday life and endeavored to achieve their dreams. The reward for fans visiting is having the same food that once brought comfort and satisfaction to BTS, allowing the tourists to imagine the group's modest early days. The possibility of sharing in BTS's memories by dining there is a spice to lure more fans to this place.

Storytelling

What distinguishes BTS from other K-pop idol groups is that they produce their own music and participate in the writing/composition of their songs. The conventional production of K-pop idols centers around cultivating desirable images, and idols perform music designed to highlight the images given to them by their agency.¹³ From their beginning, however, BTS was encouraged to write lyrics and melodies through which to reveal their true personalities and share their voices with the audience. Rather than grooming immaculate appearances, the journey of BTS involved finding their worldviews and communicating them to audiences. Their debut trilogy albums, *2 COOL 4 SKOOL* (2013), *O! RUL8, 2?* (2013), and *SKOOL LUV AFFAIR* (2014), dealt with teenage anxiety, dreams, happiness, and love. Although industry insiders comment that the school theme was banal and already overexploited, it was natural for the BTS members, aged fifteen to twenty at that time, to talk about school. The debut title song, "No More Dream," urges teenagers to "follow their own dreams rather than fall prey to society's expectations."¹⁴ The self-reflective lyrics, not scripted by industry experts but emanating from the band members' own voices, are blunt and crude, but resonate closely with fellow youngsters.

BTS's "confessional lyrics" proved real and developed further in the trilogy *HwaYangYeonHwa* (meaning "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life," hereafter HYYH), under which three albums were released: *HYYH: Pt.1* (2015), *HYYH: Pt.2* (2015), and *Young Forever* (2016). The HYYH trilogy is a coming-of-age story narrating "the struggles the boys face[d] while transitioning from childhood to adulthood, from being caterpillars to becoming butterflies."¹⁵ All the songs, music videos, concept films, and photos are organized around the theme of youth and the feelings that come with it: angst, grief, confusion, volatility, pain, laughter, and dreams. After releasing *HYYH: Pt.1*, Big Hit released *HYYH On Stage: Prologue*, a twelve-minute video, which is an overarching bridge connecting several videos for songs on the trilogy albums. The prologue is a story after the music video for "I NEED U" (the title song of Pt.1) was released in May 2015, and a preview of *HYYH: Pt.2* and *HYYH: Young Forever*. The film starts with a scene of V with bloodied hands and suffering from guilt.¹⁶ Then he is lying on a mattress at an abandoned outdoor pool with no water. In a few seconds, the other boys arrive at the pool and join V. Later, they realize that Jin is video-recording these scenes. Greeting Jin, the boys continue to have "the most beautiful time" together. Soon a quote appears onscreen: "You can smile as long as we are together."

The HYYH trilogy, including the *On Stage: Prologue* film, has attracted numerous interpretive communities in which fans actively decipher the hidden meanings of BTS storytelling narrated and represented in music videos and lyrics. According to some of these fan interpretations, the abandoned swimming pool implies Neverland, where boys (childhood friends) remain innocent, playful, and oblivious to the cruelty of the real world.¹⁷ These nostalgic scenes were filmed at an abandoned pool at Seoul National University. Tucked inside the forest far from the main campus, the pool and surrounding buildings appear dilapidated. The four walls of the pool are filled with multiple layers of graffiti, originally created for filming and now augmented by fans. The bottom of the pool is covered with coarse moss, littered with bizarre-looking props. This secluded, deserted, and creepy space, were it not for its association with BTS, does not possess any quality to attract visitors. However, it is one of the must-visit BTS places, thanks to the power of storytelling.

BTS fans visit this place not to consume it but to appreciate the stories visualized through it. The abandoned swimming pool is meaningful and worth visiting only to those who empathized with the HYYH narrative. Here ARMY fans reflect on their youth – the most beautiful moment in life. Here their pain and angst are consoled, and their joys and dreams uplifted. ARMY fans' manner of telling their tourism story verifies the point; post-tour blog postings show scenes from the film and photos fans

took at the same spots in an alternating manner, relating the HYYH stories to their own feelings at the site. Since the group has effectively constructed an “authentic narrative” based on their own lived experiences, the place is suffused with “true and sincere” stories to draw fans.¹⁸ Touring the abandoned swimming pool reaffirms fans’ affective affinities with BTS and their music. Fan-tourists, however, are not limited by sentimentalism alone. One fan noted after their visit, “Once my friend played ‘Butterfly,’ which was mainly the background song for their *On Stage: Prologue*, it still felt nostalgic.”¹⁹ Affective interpretation processes spill into the pool and redefine the material space.²⁰ The embedded storytelling is enriched through fans’ diverse sensorial activities and bodily performances.

Sensing emotional connections through the place leads to the materialization of emotions. ARMY fans have left personal messages of love and support for BTS as graffiti on the walls. Drawings of BT21 cartoon characters (based on the actual group members) make up parts of the graffiti. The affective place created through narrative construction is constantly reconfigured by fans’ performative activities added to the original site. By looking at the fan-generated graffiti, ARMY fans not only become connected to BTS but also feel camaraderie with fellow fans. A blog post comments about a message written on the wall, “Thanks for Teaching me How to Love Myself,” by reacting “The feeling is mutual” (*naduyo*).²¹

BTS’s socially conscious and interactive lyrics fully blossomed in their album *You Never Walk Alone* (2017). The title song, “Spring Day” (*Bomnal*), exudes feelings of longing for missing friends or loved ones who may not be with us anymore. Although there has been no confirmation from BTS themselves, many fans relate the story in “Spring Day” to the Sewol ferry tragedy (for an account on this incident, see Chapter 10). Starting with the phrase “I miss you, When I say this I miss you more,” the lyrics portray loss and grief. “It’s only winter here. Even in August, winter is here” denotes that their loneliness and despair persist during all seasons. Toward the end, the lyrics move to imply the willingness for reunion: “The morning will come again, Because no darkness, no season can last forever. When cherry blossoms are blooming, the winter is ending . . . If you wait a little more, if you stay up a few more nights, I will come see you, I will come pick you up.” Despite the nuanced symbolism, this song conveys condolences for victims and their families, as well as consolation for the “Sewol generation” – young South Koreans traumatized by witnessing the death of so many young people.

Jumunjin Beach (or Hyangho Beach) in Gangneung city (located on the east coast of the Korean Peninsula) is where BTS took the cover photo for their sensational album *You Never Walk Alone*. The photo displays an empty seaside bus stop, which was constructed for the shoot; inside the

album, “concept photos” depict BTS members sitting at the bus stop individually and together. “BTS ‘YOU NEVER WALK ALONE’ cover shooting sketch” on their YouTube channel shows behind-the-scenes episodes of the concept photo shoot.²² Other than the beach, the location features nothing spectacular. Yet this place is now flooded with tourists. KTO held a popularity poll to ask ARMY (more than 22,000 members in 137 countries) which place they most wished to visit of all BTS filming locations. Receiving more than 21 percent of the votes, this Jumunjin Beach bus stop ranked number one.²³ The Gangneung city government installed a replica of BTS’s bus stop at Jumunjin Beach, complete with the set’s signpost, stating, “This place is the shooting location of BTS’s YOU NEVER WALK ALONE album cover.” Inside the bus stop is a little bus station schedule map, on which all the stations are named after BTS songs. Why do so many (international) fans take extra time and energy to visit a small regional city outside the Seoul metropolitan region, only to see this “replica” bus stop? They are not consuming the location per se, but the stories associated with the place. Sitting at the same spot where BTS once sat, they contemplate the comforting and encouraging message the album delivers: “You never walk alone.” It is also a great place for fans to take memorable photos that confirm “ARMY is where BTS was,” thereby reaffirming their loyalty and commitment.

Everydayness

Worshipping idols is not limited to consuming music and celebrating the iconic aura of stars on stage. Fans want to “know” about each idol not only as a star but also as a person. Celebrity consumption, therefore, involves accumulating knowledge about them – birthday, favorite food, movie choices, how they behave in certain circumstances, personal fashion style, and so on. Even the most trivial information is precious to fans. As discussed elsewhere, reality-variety shows conventionally function as a channel through which K-pop idols reveal their offstage personalities.²⁴ Partly because they did not have opportunities to appear on reality shows given that the collaborative partnership between major agencies and leading broadcasters dominated television shows, BTS has proactively utilized social media platforms – YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Weibo, Weverse, and TikTok – to promote themselves. The members of BTS were some of the first K-pop idols on Twitter. The majority of their YouTube channel (BANGTANTV) content consists of Bangtan Bomb, short videos focusing on the members having fun behind the curtains of TV music shows, award ceremonies, promotional events,

and live stages; there is a “Log” section to share individual members’ daily lives and thoughts. The savvy reliance on social media played a role in effectively forming a global fan base.

BTS has tapped social media platforms for promotion of their music, but also for interaction and building intimacy with fans. Most other K-pop groups’ official social media accounts are managed by agencies solely for promotional purposes – release of a new album, new music video, or concert schedule – and individual members run their own accounts for more personal posts. BTS has one collective Twitter account that the seven members share to post about their daily lives: everyday selfies, funny photos of birthday celebrations, post-performance “thank you” videos for fans, or travel photos and other information about their whereabouts.²⁵ The shared BTS Twitter account made fans not only invest in it with concentrated energy and loyalty but also find immense pleasure in discovering BTS members as fellow human beings. Fans “study” such casual postings: what kinds of fashion items they don, how they spend free time, what they want to say to ARMY. Getting to know the group members’ everyday personae helps build affective intimacy for the audience. Fans are primarily captivated by idols’ stardom built upon their impeccable physical qualities, their stellar performances, and the ubiquity of their images. The highly iconic status, however, also creates a star-fan distance that should be bridged in order to make the latter truly attached to the former. Developing familiarity by revealing everyday personalities of idols is a critical step to transform an interested audience into devoted fans. Once strong affective intimacy is formed, it can in turn generate profits from selling products and places. Affective intimacy turns fans into motivated pilgrims, inspiring them to embark on the “Bangtan Tour.”

Places BTS members have visited during their free time have emerged as “pilgrimage” sites among fans. Daeo Bookstore (*Daeo seojeom*), the oldest bookstore in Seoul, is located in Seochon, a district known for preserving old ways of life in the city. After visiting there twice in 2016 and 2019, RM, the leader of BTS, posted selfies taken at this place on Twitter. The bookstore proudly exhibits one of the photos from 2016 at the same spot where RM took it. Adorned with tons of used books and antiques, exuding an exotic aura of the “recent past” of the city, the bookstore is an Instagrammable place soon to become a destination for BTS pilgrims. The very spot where RM took his selfie is popular, an affective place where fans can feel the “personal side” of their beloved idol. Now even the KTO posts information about this bookstore featuring BTS. The MIN’s café is a place BTS frequented during their early days. Owned by Lee Changmin from the K-pop idol group 2AM and Homme, it is run by Changmin’s parents, who provide little BTS anecdotes to fans. Inside

the café, visitors can find a wide array of BTS memorabilia, including pictures, autographs, albums, and handwritten letters from the members. BTS posted photos relaxing at their regular table at this café several times on Twitter. When I visited, I witnessed minor but fierce competition among customers, holding a favorite beverage of their *choeae* (bias, or favorite idol), to take BTS's regular table. By sharing the same place (albeit with time lags) and imitating stars' behaviors, ARMY's affective relationship to BTS is extended bodily, materially, and spatially.

The members of BTS have run their own online variety shows, *RUN BTS!* and *Bon Voyage*, exclusively released on Naver Corporation's V Live channel, a live video-streaming service. *RUN BTS!* usually includes games and "extraordinary experiences" in various settings such as cooking, camping, visiting a water park, and pottery making. In episode 45, BTS met a professional barista who taught them how to make a shot of espresso, taste and appreciate one, and make latte art.²⁶ After a brief tutorial, each member was asked to make signature drinks that would be evaluated by the barista. The episode was filmed at "&gather café," a humble location in a quiet Seoul neighborhood far from bustling commercial centers and typical tourist destinations. It is now attracting ARMY fans who must seriously study a map to get there. There is nothing special about the café's interior design except the popular purple neon sign displaying "Time, stay a while, you're so beautiful (*sungana meomchueora neo jeongmal areumdapguna*)," underneath which BTS members took a photo. However, ARMY fans do not visit here only to take a photo under the sign. The café is imbued with BTS's real-life personalities. Variety shows like *Run BTS!* inevitably display offstage aspects of the group: laughter, challenges, trials and errors, and chemistry among group members. What captivates fans is revelations about how the world-class celebrities are "imperfect" beyond their comfort zones. Being "flawed" is considered charming to fans, who feel BTS is relatable. &gather café is a place where fans can grasp the textures and ambiance of such intimacy. The café owner stated that the place was particularly crowded around BTS's fifth and sixth anniversaries and each member's birthday. A mundane space became a sacred place in which fans can sip beverages "created" by BTS.

Celebrity Merchandise Shops as Destinations

BT21 is a brand consisting of eight cartoon characters (Koya, RJ, Shooky, Mang, Chimmy, Tata, and Cooky, each representing one of the group members, and VAN, representing BTS's fandom ARMY) produced

through a collaborative project between BTS and Line Friends. BTS members participated in the entire process of creating the characters, from drawing sketches to design and elaboration. The eight characters are now copiously reproduced on all kinds of commodities – such as cushions, pens, T-shirts, cups, and bags – that are sold at Line Friends stores.

Elsewhere, I defined K-pop idols as a metacommodity “to sell other products, including music, celebrity merchandise, and K-pop places as pseudo-avatars of K-pop idols. Once images are cultivated, they can be endlessly reproduced in products, virtual shows, and experimental tours.”²⁷ Idol merchandise is a secondary product with symbolic value cultivated through the affective intimacy forged between idols and fans. Once affective relations are formed, fans try to deepen such connections by consuming tangible avatars. Yet BT21 is slightly different from conventional celebrity goods produced by professional designers, which conventionally feature images of idols. Cup featuring Mang (a character J-Hope produced), for example, is fundamentally different from a cup on which J-Hope’s face is simply wrapped, since the character was created by J-Hope, whose personality, characteristics, and inspirations were embedded in it. BTS also created stories in order to generate character traits that somewhat resemble the members’ own personalities. For instance, RJ (representing Jin) loves cooking and eating and has a compassionate soul that makes everyone feel right at home. Miniprunker Shooky (correlating to Suga) loves pulling pranks, especially on friends; one thing he hates is milk. Moreover, BT21 characters frequently appear on *RUN BTS!* episodes, partly because both Line Friends and the V Live channel are owned by the Naver Corporation. In episode 43, Suga appears on the show wearing the costume of RJ, as punishment for losing a quiz game in a previous episode.²⁸ Jin is wearing Cooky’s costume in episode 45.²⁹ Such intertextual appearances of BT21 characters make them more familiar to fans by adding more story lines. Through a repeated personification process, BT21 characters become affective avatars of BTS.

Among many stores in Seoul, the Itaewon Line Friends Flagship Store holds a more sacred aura because it was where BTS members held meetings to build concepts for their respective characters.³⁰ The store is equipped with multiple screens that repeatedly show scenes from BT21 Universe episodes featuring the character-building process.³¹ The second floor of the store is exclusively reserved as a BT21 Zone in which huge BT21 characters are placed and all kinds of BT21 merchandise are displayed. BT21 Zone also exhibits the artifacts of the character-building process, such as original sketches, concept pieces, dolls, and posters signed by BTS. The third floor is a café that offers a BT21-themed menu, such as “Chimmy drink” – a mango slush. During fieldwork I witnessed a crowd

filling the entire store, particularly in the BT21 zone. Fans were milling around the store window-shopping various products, busy taking selfies in the BT21 Zone with characters, or relaxing at the café. Here, I was able to have conversations with some overseas ARMY fans. They commented, “It is a tourist destination full of photo spots. It is so much fun to take pictures with life-size BT21 characters.” I wondered why they buy BT21 characters and what kinds of pleasure such merchandise generates. The question was answered with a very self-convinced statement, “Chimmy is Jimin. When I touch Chimmy, I can smell Jimin’s odor, I can listen to Jimin’s breathing.”³² The affective avatars are great souvenirs for fan-tourists who can feel BTS’s personal presence through the characters.

BTS and City Promotion

K-pop tourism is highly demand-driven; the fan-driven influx of tourists “often surprises the receiving destinations.”³³ Some municipalities belatedly recognize the explosive power of K-pop-induced mobilities and start to employ K-pop artists in tourism promotion. Given their exponentially increasing international impact, the members of BTS are among the most sought-after celebrities by Korean cities and provinces. The winner of the intermunicipal competition to court BTS was Seoul Metropolitan City, which employed BTS as an Honorary Tourism Ambassador for three consecutive years starting in 2017. Every year, the city government produced Seoul advertisement videos released on social media (Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram) and broadcast through television channels: “KBS World aired in 58 million households in 117 countries and on the tvN Asia Channel that is available to 9 million households in nine Southeast Asian countries.”³⁴ The 2017 video titled “BTS Life in Seoul” introduced major landmarks of Seoul, including Hangang Park and the newly constructed Seoulo 7017 overpass. In 2018, besides the advertisement music video “With Seoul,” an additional seven special playlists featuring thematic explorations of Seoul were promoted: Delicious Seoul, Relax Seoul, Extreme Seoul, Historic Seoul, K-Wave Seoul, Fashionable Seoul, and Exclusive Seoul. A transition in points of view occurred in the 2019 video from the previous introduction of the city by Seoulites to the viewpoints of foreign tourists, who are encouraged to create and share special experiences. Both individual versions created by each BTS member and integrated versions featuring all BTS members aim to elicit tourists’ desires to live and spend time in Seoul like BTS.³⁵

Both the tourism market and the city government have found that BTS’s endorsement power has been much greater than initially estimated.

According to the Hyundai Research Institute, out of the 10.41 million tourists, 7.6 percent of the visits in 2017 were influenced by the Korean pop group.³⁶ The same report also stated that one in every thirteen foreign tourists in 2017 visited South Korea solely due to BTS. “It is rare for any country to have a boost in the tourism industry contributed by a specific group of people rather than sights or events.”³⁷ The Seoul Metropolitan Government credited BTS for revitalizing the city’s tourism, which had stagnated since the THAAD ban.³⁸ The city government also thanked BTS for their fidelity and private promotion – such as uploading multiple Seoul-related postings on their social media accounts – in addition to the official promotion activities. City officials are confident about potential risks arising from the volatile nature of celebrity-centered promotion, stating, “Their attitudes are humble and full of gratitude, there are no signs of arrogance or boasting. Since all members are aware about it, I am confident that there will be no scandals.”³⁹ Based on trust and reliability, the city hopes to renew its contract with BTS.

BTS’s Fifth Muster (annual fan meeting), “Magic Shop,” in celebration of their sixth anniversary, took place in Busan Metropolitan City. The city government and the Busan Tourism Organization (BTO) took full advantage of the event, and their strategies merit a close analysis. The city adorned major Busan landmarks – Gwangan Bridge, Busan-Hang Daegyo Bridge, and the Busan Cinema Center – with purple lights, BTS’s signature color, to welcome both BTS and ARMY fans. The BTO came up with special tours that followed the traces of two BTS members (Jimin and Jungkook) born and raised in Busan. Each consisted of locations – such as popular coffee shops, restaurants, and heritage sites – where Jimin and Jungkook lived or spent time during their childhood. The manner in which BTO introduced the Jimin Tour and Jungkook Tour is also intriguing. Holding a hand fan in which Jimin’s face is printed, a BTO staff introduces locations in Geumjeong-dong as if Jimin is walking through the neighborhood. Similarly, watching the photos of Manduck-dong presented by BTO, the audience would feel that Jungkook is walking through his hometown.⁴⁰ Inspired by these promotions, fans amble along Jimin’s and Jungkook’s memory lanes. ARMY fans could also spot multiple banners hung by neighborhood residents: “BTS Jimin, son of Geumjeong, congratulation on your sixth anniversary concert. Jimin-ah, we love you!!” Humble residential neighborhoods are suddenly recast as “K-pop places” replete with BTS stories. ARMY fans’ practices of relaying their experience – how they feel about areas, how they come to know more about BTS and thus become more attached to them – constitute the affective qualities of place.

Ahead of a BTS fan meeting in Busan, V posted photos of himself walking in Busan Citizens Park, commenting, “Busan is nice” in the dialect

of Gyeongsang (the province where Busan is located). Only a few days later, the Busan Infrastructure Corporation (BISCO), which manages the park, set up a “footprints” signpost at the same spot where V stood. They also posted a map introducing “V’s photo spot” on their Facebook page with the comment: “ARMY! This is the trail. Please refer to the map. You can now walk the path V once walked.”⁴¹ Busan Citizens Park also contains layers of painful history: During Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), it was used as a horse racing track and later as a storage yard for military supplies serving the Imperial Japanese Army headquarters in Busan. After liberation in 1945, the US military occupied the site and operated Camp Hialeah until it was closed in 2006; only in 2010 was the site transferred to the city of Busan, and the park was opened in 2011. Despite the risk of obscuring this contentious history and being known only as a place associated with BTS, the park has become a popular destination among the ARMY, who love to take “been there” photos at the same spot.

Conclusion

K-pop tourism is illustrative of how the tourism landscape is changing. Any places, even though they do not possess traditional touristic qualities, associated with K-pop or with specific K-pop idols can emerge as the hottest tourism destinations. Places of K-pop idols’ birth, dreams, and career path have become “authentic places,” a pilgrimage route for K-pop fans. K-pop tourism entails a significant amount of multifaceted storytelling: Anecdotes of stars, messages of K-pop music, and narratives presented in music videos and photos construct the meanings of place. Reflecting upon such stories, fan-tourists make strong connections to both stars and places. K-pop tourism that follows the footsteps of stars collapses the barrier between celebrity and fans, helping to develop strong affective bonds between them. By traveling to star-related places, fans can share the idols’ offstage everyday life. The desire to do this enables ordinary spaces to be stripped of quotidian, mundane features and endows those spaces with affective qualities. In K-pop tourism, perceived values of expectation, enjoyment, and experiences matter more than physical, social, and cultural qualities of place. The role of fandom in K-pop tourism, however, is not limited to place consumption. Through various performances – photographic practices, graffiti, and post-visit social media circulation – fans reconfigure, enrich, and fortify the socially constructed meanings of those places. If stars are human magnets to draw fan-tourists to certain places, fans are agents to amplify and further publicize the value of their tourist trail.

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Notes

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- 2 Korea Tourism Organization, "Korea Tourism Statistics" (2020), www.index.go.kr/potal/stts/idxMain/selectPoSttsIdxMainPrint.do?idx_cd=1653&board_cd=INDX_001. In March 2017, the US government established the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system in South Korea. While both the US and the South Korean government insisted that it was a measure to prevent North Korea's provocation, it irritated China. In response, the Chinese government and citizens boycotted South Korean products and companies and banned group tourism to South Korea. Only in October 2017 did Seoul and Beijing agree to normalize relations again.
- 3 Korea Tourism Organization, "Increase in Foreigners' Recognition of and Preference for South Korea as a Tourist Destination" (press release, 2019), <https://kto.visitkorea.or.kr/kor/notice/news/press/board/view.kto?id=441344&isNotice=false&instanceId=42&rnum=1>.
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- 6 Although the exact number is not available, as of August 2020, BTS's Twitter account (@bts_twt) had 28.4 million followers and their YouTube channel (BANGTANTV) had 35.5 million subscribers.
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- 16 In the original version of the "I Need U" music video, the ending scenes suggest that V symbolically kills his abusive father in order to protect his sister. Because of the age-restricted content, this part is omitted in the official version.

- 17 The Bangtan Theory, “BTS ‘PROLOGUE’ TRAILER EXPLAINED // THE BUTTERFLY THEME” (2016), <https://thebangtantheory.wordpress.com/2016/07/26/bts-prologue-mv-explained/>.
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