

Senior Thesis Prospectus

Introduction

In my thesis, I will explore how K-Pop fans (both Korean and international) participate in the K-Pop industry in their own patterns of *prosumption*. In doing so, I will answer the following research questions: **How does the increasing presence of affective labor in the K-Pop industry generate economic purchases by fans? How can we understand larger changes in the Korean economy through K-Pop fandoms—specifically, BTS and their fans?** I believe that changes in the K-Pop industry and in K-Pop fandoms provides an entry point to explore South Korea's new "affective" capitalism based on intimacy and affective labor. Although Korea's cultural wave or *Hallyu* has witnessed success in the past, particularly in other parts of Asia, I believe that we can recognize broader changes in the industry during this new cultural wave, hereby referred to as *Hallyu 2.0* (Dal 2012). These changes are marked by new social media technologies, new marketing tactics, and new relationship patterns between celebrity and fan; moreover, these changes are taking place alongside South Korea's integration into the global economy.

Conceptual Framework

The concepts and theories that I will use to frame my research are as follows. First, I will also have to look at the concept of *neoliberalization* as it refers to specific transformations in the Korean economy since the 1997 financial crisis. From 1997 onward, Korea—pressured by international organizations like the IMF—transitioned from a developmental state to a neoliberal economy, entailing a massive restructuring of Korea's political economy that stressed flexibilization and open markets (Cummings 2005). Such changes demanded a necessary shift from an industrial, export-led economy to a service economy—a change that would inevitably bring about the affective labor practices found in late capitalism. I will apply Michael Hardt's theory of 'affective labor' in order to analyze the digitally intimate relationships between K-Pop fans and idols. In doing so, I seek to understand how the production of emotion or affect in K-Pop fans (by companies and their artists/idols) relates to capitalist consumption (Hardt 1999). The increase of affective labor practices in K-Pop indicates a larger trend in the South Korean economy toward *emotional capitalism*, termed by Eva Illouz in her book *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Contemporary capitalism, Illouz argues, which is marked by the increased presence of emotional relationships when consuming services and media (Illouz 2007).

Ultimately, my case study of BTS fans will involve theories from the field of fandom studies. I will observe the relationship between fandom theories and theories of neoliberalization, affective labor, and emotional capitalism. As I see it, newfound labor relations and consumption patterns—compounded by the rise of new digital technologies—entail new developments in the relationships between celebrities and their fans. Using Henry Jenkins' theories of 'convergence culture' and 'participatory fandom' from his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* I will take a look at how fans actively participate and produce meaning around their celebrity consumption—in other words, how they *prosume* (Jenkins 2007). Jenkins' theory of convergence culture refers to the spread of media across multiple platforms; for example, K-

Pop entails not only music videos, but also merchandise, live streams, video games, tours, and social media. This expansion is shaped not only by corporations' drive for profit, but also consumers' desires to interact with their favorite media—in the case of K-Pop, their favorite idols. Jenkins argues that this convergence phenomena extends to the interaction or participation of fans with their media, as fans are encouraged to consume across multiple platforms and draw connections between different media forms. I will show that these practices are prevalent in the K-Pop industry, and I will show that affective labor by Korean idols encourages an even deeper and more active participation in K-Pop fans, thereby driving K-Pop consumers toward material and media consumption.

Case Selection and Hypothesis

Largely mirroring economic policies enforced by larger capitalist societies like the U.S. and Japan, South Korea and its music industry represent a prime case for examining affective labor in emotional capitalist societies. The K-Pop industry, in addition to its global popularity in recent years, combines affective labor performances by idols, participation by fandoms, and convergence of media across multiple platforms. In my thesis, I will focus my research more specifically on a study of BTS (방탄소년단) fans (both Korean and international), also referred to as ARMY. Not only is BTS arguably the most successful K-Pop act to come from *Hallyu 2.0*, consistently topping both the Billboard and Melon (South Korea) charts and breaking numerous sales and streaming records. BTS represents a **typical case** of idol company practices in the industry, spreading out their idols' image and affect over multiple platforms including Twitter, apps, video games, music videos, live streams, Youtube, and more. Moreover, BTS's fanbase ARMY is extremely active across all platforms in their desire to support, interact with, and consume their favorite idols. In many ways, BTS and their corporation BigHit are representative of transformations in South Korea's music industry and economy at large. South Korea is an apt case to study the characteristics of late capitalism given its economy's rapid transformations. Largely mirroring economic policies enforced by larger capitalist societies like the U.S. and Japan, South Korea exhibits one of the best cases for examining affective labor in capitalist service economies. The K-Pop industry, in addition to its global popularity in recent years, combines affective labor performances by idols, participation by fandoms, and convergence of media across multiple platforms.

My **hypothesis** is that the acceleration of capitalism in the South Korean economy (as a result of neoliberalization policies since 1997) is reflected through transformations in South Korea's music industry, such as the rise of affective labor and the spread of products across platforms. I contend that this new form of *emotional capitalism* can be observed through the relationship between fan and celebrity, including the rise of participatory/convergence culture in fandom.

Data and Methodology

I will conduct a mixed-methods study combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Quantitative data will be drawn from a variety of sources, including annual reports from BTS's parent company BigHit Entertainment; social media analytics from Twitter, V-Live (app), Billboard (music streaming and social media presence), etc.; and economic data on South Korea from the OECD and Statista. For BigHit Entertainment's fiscal report, I will examine how revenue is accumulated across consumption platforms including tours, merchandising, apps and

games, and more. I will pull numbers from BTS’s various social media accounts, including views, comments/likes, and followers/subscriber counts; these sources, I believe, indicate the increased capacity not only for fans to consume, but also for celebrities and fans to interact. These will be complemented by examining South Korea’s economic data from the OECD, through which I will examine the rise of South Korea’s services and music industries. I will also look at the exportation of South Korea’s cultural contents abroad, and I will see how much content exports draw in economic revenue for the country (Statista).

My quantitative analysis will be supported by a qualitative content analysis of celebrity and fan activity. This will mainly be done by looking at BTS’s social media pages (i.e. Twitter and Youtube) and fans’ comments. I aim to focus my qualitative analysis by looking for and coding the increasingly affective, emotional, and/or interactive relationships between ARMY (fan) and BTS (celebrity). I will look for words and phrasing that indicate the perceived intimacy between fan/celebrity, drawing out instances of active participation and production. Fans’ productive activity might be represented by translations, fan art, fan theories, and more. These data sources will be analyzed using relevant theories of emotional capitalism, affective labor, convergence culture, and participatory fandom as discussed above.

Proposed Chapter Outline

Chapter Number/Description	Topics Covered
1. Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Introduction</i> • <i>Background information (Korea’s economic transformation)</i>
2. Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Affective labor and emotional capitalism</i> • <i>Convergence culture</i> • <i>Participatory fandom</i>
3. Background: Korea’s Economic Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Neoliberalization period</i> • <i>K-Pop’s relationship to the Korean government/economy</i> • <i>Hallyu and Hallyu 2.0</i>
4. Data and Methodology	-
5. Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>5.1: Affective labor and emotional capitalism in the K-Pop industry</i> • <i>5.2: Convergence culture: new technologies, new media, and new methods of consumption in K-Pop</i> • <i>5.3: Participation and prosumption in K-Pop fandom</i>
6. Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Conclusion</i>

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Limitations</i>• <i>Broader implications</i> |
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