

“ARMY, I’M HOME!”:
DIGITAL COMMUNITY AND MEDIATED INTIMACY IN K-POP FANDOM

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that we should turn our attention to the affective labor in the pop culture industry in South Korea. Using the House of BTS event as a case study of K-Pop fandom, I will address the affective labor practices and its impacts in K-Pop fandom. Idol group BTS (방탄소년단) and their company Big Hit Entertainment are a particularly apt study for this choice because they deliberately adopt *mediated intimacy* as a marketing tactic, creating content outside of music and across social networking platforms that cater to fans' desire to "know" and adore BTS members. In the House of BTS video series published on YouTube in 2019, this manifests itself as members—mediated through the lens of the corporate camera—invite fans to take part in a "shared" space that is simultaneously a "home" (providing comfort and love) and a "store" (where fans can, of course, spend their money). In line with Henry Jenkins' conceptualization of participatory fandom (2013), a study of fan-produced content in response to the House of BTS event reveals an active, participatory community encouraging fans to create their own works and allowing fans to find comfort not only in BTS but also in each other. Nonetheless, I found little evidence to suggest that this form of fandom has the potential to be completely liberated from capitalist intent. Though we cannot simplify BTS ARMY activity as blind consumption, the affective and communal investments themselves are inextricable from the logic of (affective) capital. Thus, my research supports Michael Hardt's stance on affective labor (1999); while affective communities like fandom may arise from affective labor's use, I maintain that affective labor practices such as mediated intimacy are primarily exploitative in nature, allowing corporations to generate profit through the utilization of fans' emotional, affective, and communal investments in K-Pop idols.

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I. Understanding (K-)Pop Culture: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Introduction

K-Pop's global popularity has taken the world by surprise. K-pop generally refers to South Korean pop music, but it is often used more narrowly to refer to the specific production style and culture surrounding South Korea's particular "idol-making" industry. One distinct feature of the K-pop industry is the practice of training, which refers to the "creation" of idols in which trainees are scouted (often at a young age) to train for years under large companies before "debuting" as artists, typically in a group (Grazian 2017). The term *Hallyu* (literally translating to "Korean Wave") was even coined to describe the spread of Korean pop culture—including movies, TV shows, as well as music—across the world since the 1990s. 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.

There are two broad frameworks or approaches to analyzing popular culture and pop culture phenomena: the critical theory approach and the audience interpretation approach (Grazian 2017). These analytical divisions also become apparent when examining the literature on K-Pop and K-Pop fandom. A critical approach focuses more on the political economy surrounding the K-Pop industry or on the industry's economic role. Using this approach, one would see the K-Pop industry as a political economic tool; the explicit and only goal of entertainment companies would be to create and

manufacture multi-talented idols known for their “squeaky clean” public image, but who are nonetheless devoid of any genuine vision or artistry. While these claims are true in part, those who take a more critical stance often fail to address the role and activity of fans, who play a critical role in the industry and culture surrounding K-Pop groups. An approach emphasizing audience interpretation would place fans and fandom in a central and active role, arguing that fans can freely interpret a given work and construct new meaning around it, regardless of the author or corporation’s intent. K-Pop fans are known to go beyond traditional consumer/producer relationships, engaging in notable participatory and creative practices that provide fans with a sense of community, belonging, and identity. In my thesis, I aim to challenge this conventional divide by situating K-Pop and K-Pop fandom in a particular economic and cultural context, one in which profound changes in labor and technology result in a shift in the relationship between fan and celebrity. 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. In doing so, I hope to answer the following questions: How do K-Pop fandoms (specifically, BTS and their fans) exhibit the South Korean economy’s trend toward emotional (Illouz 2007) or affective (Hardt 1999) capitalism? Does the presence of affective labor (in the form of mediated intimacy) in the K-Pop industry allow fans to create active, participatory communities with the potential to be turned against capitalist projects? Or is it simply another way to generate corporate profit?

Literature Review

The K-Pop industry developed in line with South Korea's economic and political goals during the economic restructuring of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and separating the K-Pop industry from this particular context would be impossible. Indeed, the South Korean government has actively positioned K-Pop as not only a profitable economic export, but also as a diplomatic tool for improving South Korea's "brand image" abroad (Elfving-Hwang 2013). More importantly, South Korea, like other advanced capitalist economies across the world, has undergone a major economic shift from a manufacturing-based economy to a services and information-based economy. 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). The shift to a post-Fordist or neoliberal capital system is a global phenomenon experienced by all advanced capitalist economies.

Transitioning away from the Fordist capital model necessarily involves a transformation of labor. Michael Hardt details this transformation of labor in his 1999 work, "Affective Labor." In tertiarized economies, most services involve the continuous exchange of information; consequently, *immaterial labor* takes on a central role. In the transition away from Fordist economies based largely in the manufacturing of tangible consumer goods, labor shifts increasingly from physically productive work to work that involves the production of intangible goods such as services, information, and knowledge. One form of this immaterial labor is affective labor, a form of labor that is centered around the production of *affects*—that is, labor that produces emotions like excitement, passion, ease, and happiness (Hardt 1999).

Hardt also emphasizes biopower as one product of affective labor; that is, he argues that affective labor has the potential to product “society itself.” In other words, affective labor, can produce social networks and forms of community. This is also present in the entertainment industry—for instance, fan communities form together around a common interest in a certain TV show, film, or celebrity. In their analysis of biopolitical production, Hardt emphasizes the liberating potential inherent in affective labor, arguing that the forms of community that emerge have the potential to be turned against capitalist projects (1999). He expands Foucault’s notion of biopower—which, in Foucault’s view, operates primarily from above—to include a “biopower from below,” in which the cooperation based on affective connections can create “autonomous circuits of valorizations” (1999:100). Applying Hardt’s perspective to fandom, we can argue that fans acting together within a community maintain the ability to harness the forms of collective solidarity brought about through affective labor—that is, the marketing and production of affect through entertainment. Fans can then utilize these affective networks to critique and challenge the media being marketed toward them.

In his work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins explores the lively, interactive nature of fan communities. Jenkins contrasts fans’ “participatory culture” with older notions of media spectatorship, which positions fans as passive audiences that uncritically consume whatever media corporations produce. In his explorations of *Star Trek*, *Disney*, and *Harry Potter* fandoms, Jenkins found that fans played a central role in the circulation of media; more importantly, fans actively constructed meaning and identity throughout everyday life practices. Media produces affect in its fans—that is, pop culture products become a source of happiness,

community, and even identity for those that consume it. Uniting around a common media (such as film, television, or music), fans create their own “mini-societies” containing a unique set of values and beliefs (Scholz 2012). For example, Anne Allison observes the role of affect in her analysis of Pokémon and Pokémon fans. Allison demonstrates that fans of Pokémon characters (and the plethora of products bearing their likeness that are sold each year) refer frequently to the affect that these products produce, including a sense of “healing” and community (Allison 2003). Thus, when observing fan culture, it quickly becomes apparent that fans do not consume their favorite media either passively or uncritically. Rather, as Jenkins observes, they actively construct and contest media’s meaning through lively (and at times heated) discussions, even at times going against the intentions or purposes of the original company or author. Media thus becomes a site of constant struggle, with fans negotiating their power as a consumer community vis-à-vis large profit-driven corporations.

Fans even engage in their own *productive* practices that can be understood as a form of labor in and of itself. Abigail De Kosnik argues that the contributions of fans to internet communities—in the form of video-making, art, writing, and so on—should be considered as labor as they increase the value of a given product. De Kosnik writes, “Fan activity, instead of being dismissed as insignificant and a waste of time at best and pathological at worst, should be valued as a new form of publicity and advertising, authored by volunteers, that corporations badly need in an era of market fragmentation. In other works, fan production is a category of work” (2012:127).

Throughout this paper, I seek to maintain Hardt’s skepticism when it comes to understanding the relationship between fandom and capital. Hardt argues that, though

there is potential for the subversion of capital by affective networks, the subjectivity and community brought about through affective labor is ultimately exploitable by capital. When analyzing free or “fan” labor practices as well, we should be weary of the ways in which fan activity contributes to capital accumulation. Of course, fans do not necessarily see their consumption as passive or mindless (but instead active and emotional), and they tend to carry a similar perspective in their attitude toward fan production. Fans see their work as primarily emotional, affective, and communal, and thus rarely seek compensation for their creative and productive efforts. Nonetheless, fan creations are often used as “advertising” by corporations, designed to increase a given product or celebrity’s market value. De Kosnik also maintains that we should be mindful of this particular relationship between fans and corporations as exploitative, remaining mindful of the uneven distribution of wealth between media companies and fans. The idea of “labor” itself presupposes the existence of capital; though fan labor/fan activity can be seen as voluntary, creative, and even communal, it is ultimately a practice that can be and is exploitable by capital.

Conceptual Framework: Mediated Intimacy

South Korea’s K-Pop industry is one illustrative example of the affective labor practices occurring in contemporary capitalist society, demonstrating not only how corporations harness and exploit the production of affects in fans, but also how fans build their own communities centered around affective bonds as well. The goal of this thesis is to build a nuanced picture of affective labor practices and affective communities in K-Pop fandoms. In pursuit of this goal, I want to examine the personal or “intimate” bonds between celebrities and fans and between members of fan communities. My analysis will

center around the notion of *mediated intimacy*. Mediated intimacy is a concept that has been explored throughout sociological and anthropological literature, and it is mainly used to refer to technology as a “medium through which intimate relations can be established between the subject and the other” (Attwood, Hakim, & Winch 2017). Examples include the maintenance of personal relationships across social media networks (Baym 2010) or even intimate interactions between YouTube content creators (arguably a new type of “celebrity” in the contemporary culture industry) and their fan following (Smith & Snider 2019). In analyzing fan-celebrity relationships, some scholars have also utilized the concept of *parasocial intimacy*, a form of interaction in which a fan or viewer perceives a celebrity as an intimate conversation partner, often with no acknowledgement or awareness on behalf of the celebrity (Dibble, Hartmann, Rosaen 2016). These parasocial interactions are mediated by the presence of technology and social media, bringing a sense of “liveness” to celebrity-fan interactions.

In my thesis, I will look at mediated intimacy within K-Pop fandom as one form of affective capitalism. I believe that the affective labor practices and affective production centers around one central relationship, that being the creation of “intimacy” between celebrity and fan. Here I want to clarify that I am using and expanding the concept of mediated intimacy to encompass two different forms of mediation. First, fan-celebrity intimacy is mediated by technological platforms and digital content such as YouTube videos, livestreams, etc. Second, fan-celebrity intimacy is mediated by the *corporation* itself, especially in the highly manufactured nature of the K-Pop idol industry. The intimacy created between K-Pop fans and celebrities—specifically, BTS and their fans—is mediated by the presence various corporate actors and social media

platforms. This mediation is one method in which corporate actors produce affect within fandom—for example, the marketing of a celebrity’s “personality” as relatable or charming, or the use of social media platforms to have celebrities interact with and communicate with fans. This mediation is what produces emotion and affect in fans, and thus it is also what gives rise to participatory fandom communities who actively interpret corporate content and creatively produce their own fan works. This can likewise be extended and applied to an observation of K-Pop and K-Pop fandom. Music has long been known to produce emotion or affect in listeners. The added structure of the K-Pop industry, with its process of scouting and training talented youth and polishing their public image to the point of perfection, is clearly designed to result in real people or “idols” who can produce feelings of passion, comfort, community, and intimacy in its fans. In her book *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance*, Kim Suk-Young conceptualizes K-Pop as a multimedia genre shaped by a unique “affective, technological, and ideological” mode of “liveness” (2019). According to Kim, the idea of “liveness” extends past the mere idea of the physical realm of the live concert. A fundamental element of K-Pop fandom is its global circulation through the Internet and social media. Kim attributes the circulation of visual content through YouTube to part of K-Pop’s unprecedented global rise. In doing so, Kim argues that K-Pop is specifically designed for this new digital culture, as K-Pop encompasses far more than catchy, upbeat music; rather, K-Pop is a multimedia form that heavily emphasizes visual elements, including choreography, variety/entertainment shows, and simply good looks (Kim 2019).

Of course, standard musical content such as music videos and promotional videos circulate through YouTube and other social media/video platforms worldwide, and these practices are common throughout most (if not all) music industries globally. More recently, however, entertainment companies have utilized YouTube and other social media platforms to mediate the intimate or “live” interactions between idols and fans. The K-Pop industry has gradually transitioned to embrace the more interactive forms of digital communication, including the creation of vlog¹ and reality style content that simulates direct interaction of idol and fan, which is the focus of my analysis. This simulated intimacy places fans in a unique position vis-a-vis K-Pop idols, contributing to the fantasy that one is “really” interacting with the pretty or handsome idol behind the camera. Hardt notes, “in the entertainment industry, for example, the human contact... is principally virtual, but not for that reason any less real” (Hardt 1999).

We cannot understand affective labor practices solely by examining “top-down” profit-driven practices, but at the same time it would be wrong to assume that these intimacy bonds can be understood as wholly “real” in the sense that it is a “genuine” interpersonal bond that is unrelated to capitalistic motives. Perhaps one result of this manufactured, mediated intimacy is the creation of an adoring fanbase willing to go to often extreme lengths to attract the attention of or show their devotion to their favorite star. K-Pop fans—like other fans from a variety of different genres and media forms—are often portrayed as pathological or delusional in their attraction and devotion to K-Pop idols or groups (Williams and Xiang 2016). The extremes that these fans go to are, of

¹ A vlog is a video blog recording one’s thoughts, opinions, and/or experiences. Often they are used to record one’s daily life (Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.).

course, often monetary. K-Pop fans are known to purchase not only physical or digital albums, but also merchandise such as clothes, stationary, etc.; concert and fan meeting tickets; or even private information regarding idols' flights, location, and more. As K-Pop witnesses even more global success in recent years, fans are even willing to travel across the world to attend concerts or to tour K-Pop sites around Korea, including a group's company headquarters, filming locations, or even idols' favorite restaurants. Indeed, the illusion of intimacy and the production of affect puts consumers in a unique position to be exploited by capital (Hardt 1999).

At the same time, intimate bonds between celebrity and fan give rise to voluntary fan activity, and thus fans' labor and creative inputs become useful sources of accumulation for corporations themselves. Such a one-dimensional portrayal of K-Pop fans as mindless consumers ignores the construction of meaning and negotiating of identity from the bottom up. Put simply, K-Pop and K-Pop fandom *means* a lot to those who take part in the community; the music, intimacy, friendship gained from taking part in K-Pop fandom provides a sense of comfort and "healing" to people otherwise burdened by loneliness, economic hardship, and other struggles. As such, fans are more than willing not only to spend money on their favorite media, but also to integrate K-Pop fandom beliefs and practices into their daily lives and interpersonal relationships. Many fans even willingly produce their own material for consumption by other fans, a practice that can be viewed as a form of labor in itself. Henry Jenkins writes about the productive work of fans in *Textual Poachers*, detailing the independent creation of fan art, fan fiction, and more. This phenomena is readily apparent in K-Pop fandom as well; K-Pop fans steadily create videos, memes, art, fiction, translations, and more in support of their

favorite artists and in solidarity with fellow fans. The distinction between producer and consumer thus becomes blurred, as fans provide (free) labor that in fact *increases* the market value of a given media, in this case K-Pop products—including concert tickets, albums, merchandise, etc. Thus, while fans primarily produce in pursuit of a sense of community and intimacy, they nonetheless (freely) contribute to the increased capital accumulation of media companies. As Kim Suk-Young notes in *K-Pop Live*, fans simultaneously pursue a sense of comfort and community while remaining complicit to the commodification in neoliberal markets (2019). Here, I agree with Kim's more nuanced approach towards fans' position in the culture industry. Using mediated intimacy as a tool for capital accumulation, these corporations simultaneously create an affective space in which fans can discover a sense of belonging, community, and identity.

II. Methodology and Chapter Outline

As there is virtually a limitless amount of content within K-Pop fandoms, I chose to focus my analysis on BTS (방탄소년단). BTS has received worldwide media attention, with many arguing that it was the first K-Pop group to successfully “break into the West” (Ming 2017). Media outlets both praise and criticize BTS’s fanbase (referred to hereafter as the BTS ARMY) for their devotion to the seven members. More importantly, however, I believe that we should focus on the ways that BTS’s company Big Hit Entertainment has taken deliberate and strategic steps to utilize social media (especially Youtube) to increase the group’s popularity by simulating intimate interactions between the group’s members and their fans. Utilizing BTS and Big Hit Entertainment as a case study for mediated intimacy in the K-Pop industry, I focused on the House of BTS Pop-Up event, a singular event in BTS’s lengthy timeline that I believed effectively demonstrated the complex relationships forming between celebrity, fan, social media, and profit.

This case study involves a qualitative analysis on both the rhetoric and practices of Big Hit Entertainment, BTS, and ARMY. In chapter three, I will observe exactly how BTS and BigHit Entertainment engage in affective labor practices by producing a sense of *mediated intimacy* through the creation of vlog-style content for the House of BTS event. I watched and analyzed ten Korean-language videos produced by BigHit Entertainment and uploaded to BTS’s YouTube channel BangtanTV. These videos followed the BTS members as they explored the pop up store in Gangnam, and were released shortly after the store’s opening date. My arguments in this chapter are also supported through official corporate statements regarding the company’s goals and

marketing tactics, which were gathered through two corporate briefing conferences uploaded to BigHit Entertainment's official YouTube channel in 2019 and 2020.

In chapter four, I will examine how BTS fans respond to and create meaning around these digital contents, as well as how fans actively produce their own content and disseminate information to other fans; in other words, I will explore how effective the marketing strategies detailed in chapter three are when it comes to their interpretation in fan communities, and how this feeling of community extends beyond the relationship between fan and celebrity and into the relationship between fans as well. I analyzed thirty two vlogs (9 Korean; 1 French; 1 Malay; and 21 English) produced by fans as they experienced and reviewed the House of BTS event. I examined fans' spending habits; their reception of the aforementioned BTS promotional videos; fans' rhetoric reflecting their emotional reaction to the store; and fans' transmission of information to and interaction with other fans. Videos were selected randomly as recommended through the Youtube algorithm. In the final chapter, I will discuss conclusions and applications of my research.

III. ARMY, I'm Home: Producing Affect through Mediated Intimacy

Introduction

BTS's somewhat unprecedented success has attracted a lot of media attention in recent years. In the oligopolistic structure of the Korean entertainment industry, which was practically dominated by three big companies—SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment—the success of a lesser known group from a small company was a shocking accomplishment. What are some of the factors that might explain this particular group's success, especially overseas beyond South Korea? How do Big Hit Entertainment's particular marketing strategies reflect a unique “affective” mode of capitalism in the entertainment industry? In this section, I will demonstrate how Big Hit Entertainment, at its outset a relatively small company compared to other K-Pop industry giants, embarked on specific and deliberate marketing strategies to promote BTS in an otherwise exclusive market space. In doing so, I will illustrate how the K-Pop industry—as embodied through BTS, the industry's its biggest contemporary success story—reflects a larger capitalist trend toward a mode of profit that places emotional and affective production at its core.

In 2019 alone with their release of their album *Map of the Soul: Persona*, BTS broke several world records revolving around digital streaming, album sales, YouTube views, and more. Such success stands in stark contrast to the group's “humble” beginnings as an industry *nugu* or “nobody” (*nugu* is a common slang term used by K-Pop fans to refer to relatively unknown groups). The chart below illustrates the dramatic rise in BTS's albums sales from their debut to their 2019 album release.

Table 1: BTS Album Sales Over Time (Physical)

Year	Title	Sales
2013	2 Cool 4 Skool	222,000
2013	O!RUL8,2?	240,000
2014	Skool Luv Affair	380,000
2014	Dark & Wild	345,000
2015	The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Pt. 1	540,000
2015	The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Pt. 2	630,000
2016	Wings	1,140,000
2017	Love Yourself: Her	2,215,000
2018	Love Yourself: Tear	2,290,000
2019	Map of the Soul: Persona	3,790,000

Source: ChartMasters

What could (at least in part) account for this unprecedented rise? The answer, in my opinion, lies in Big Hit Entertainment’s gradual adoption of a specific model that makes use of a particular affective mode of labor that involves the creation of “mediated (digital) intimacy” between artists and fans, and between fans themselves.

Scholar Kyu-tak Lee, in his article “BTS: New Generation, New Communication Methods, and Emotional Labor,” explores the role of emotional labor in the creation of a sort of “intimate” relationship between BTS and their fans (2018). In doing so, Lee pinpoints the specific use of new communication technologies that give rise to the impression (or perhaps illusion) of direct interaction between artist and fan by creating a unique set of digital contents aimed at sharing BTS’s personal lives, personalities, and friendships—not just their music—with fans through platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and V-Live. Although some fans might desire to maintain a certain degree of “distance” between themselves and their favorite artists, many (as is the particular case with K-Pop

fans) seek out an ever-increasing set of knowledge and information about their chosen media, as Dick Hebdige details in his analysis of so-called “affinity groups” or fandoms (Scholz 2012). Big Hit Entertainment’s marketing strategy on the whole reflects a desire to create and mediate these parasocial, intimate relationships. Taking note from their two recent corporate briefings in August 2019 and February 2020, I identified several key instances where the company displayed a desire to court this idea of “mediated intimacy,” a strategy that I believe they have been building upon for several years and that they will continue to build upon. The most prominent take away from this video, exhibited in the quote below, is their rhetorical emphasis on the “fan” (not profit, as we might expect) as the central goal of their business model.

*“I think now you’ll see what the Big Hit winning formula is... There is another indispensable element to this formula. Both at the core and the goal is the “fan.” Along with content, the fan is the core value of our business. In the music industry, the fans are our **valued customers** and **precious allies** who show infinite **love and passion** for Big Hit’s artists and music.”*

— Yoon Seok-Jun, Big Hit Entertainment Co-CEO

Thus, Big Hit Entertainment’s marketing formula is relatively explicit: build and improve fan experience by mediating the intimacy between fan and artists through the use of social media technology. Judging by the substantial rise in Big Hit’s profits in recent years, this formula has been successful in generating profit based on the production of affect; in recent years, economists have even turned their attention to the economic impact of BTS alone on the South Korean economy (Yoon 2019). Now, let’s take a look at how this mediation of intimacy works in action by focusing one single event in BTS’s recent timeline—the House of BTS pop up store in Seoul, South Korea. By analyzing this particular event, I believe that we can gather not only a clear picture of

how this strategic mediation of intimacy, by relying on fans' affective investments in the characters and personalities of BTS, translates into corporate profit.

Affect in Action: BTS's "Home Video"

House of BTS was officially announced in a short, colorfully animated trailer uploaded to YouTube on October 17. Inside the House of BTS, fans can purchase exclusive merchandise including albums, stickers, stationary, clothing, and more. To keep fans coming back for more during the store's 80-day stint—Big Hit Entertainment promised to update the shop with new merchandise, exhibits, menu items, and more each week. Big Hit entertainment officially described the store as "a large-scale multiplex space where one can enjoy BTS contents in a variety of forms" (Soompi News 2019). The three-story shop features a wide variety of attractions to keep fans entertained, including "forest" of ARMY bombs, life-size figurines, and interactive AR technology.



Fan Holding Up the House of BTS Map and Merchandise List (2019) [CR: Big Hit Entertainment]

In addition to the scale of the Seoul pop up event, House of BTS is notable particularly for the way it was marketed to fans across social media, namely YouTube. Beginning on November 8th, 2019, a series of YouTube videos were uploaded

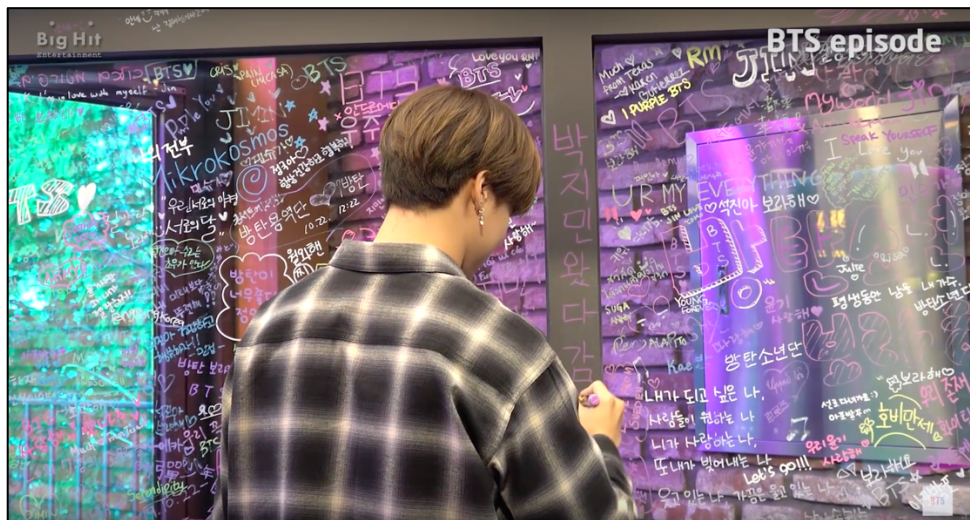
showcasing the store “through the eyes” of BTS members. These videos were created as an addition to BTS’s long running “Bangtan Bomb” YouTube series, a series of short 1 to 5 minute video clips that show members’ “behind the scenes” moments at practice, rehearsals, award shows, and so on. The Bangtan Bomb vlog series is largely understood by fans and the media as having a major influence on BTS’s overwhelming presence on YouTube compared to other idol groups, allowing fans “private”—or rather “intimate”—access into the daily behind-the-scenes activities of BTS members. As such, I felt that the House of BTS promotion period was a good opportunity to examine the intersection between affective labor practices, profit generation, and the creation of fan communities centered around this idea of “mediated intimacy.”

The official announcement trailer was accompanied the same day by another short, one minute “greeting message” from the members themselves. The seven members look directly into the camera, speaking one by one in a scripted fashion as they encourage fans (ARMY) to experience what the pop-up store has to offer. Immediately, the members’ phrasing explicitly evokes a sense of intimacy or “togetherness.” As one of the members explains the significance of the shop’s name and design, telling fans that the shop was prepared “comfortably like a home,” immediately drawing upon a collective sense of family and community. One member proclaims, “This is another space that we can experience *together*, so we [BTS] are so happy and excited!” The members urge fans not to miss this unique opportunity to experience the shop full of set pieces inspired by previous album and music video designs. The video ends with the following promise to fans: “House of BTS 에서 만나요”, *or* “See you at House of BTS!” From these first two announcements alone, we can already see how this particular form of marketing begins to

construct this idea of a “shared space,” where fans can gather together “with” BTS in a way that is both digital (through the vlog) and real (through the physical space of the store). The implication here is that—despite the temporal “lag” between when each is physically there—both fans and artists can share the space together, bestowing the store with a sense of intimacy that extends beyond the capitalist logic of mere buying and selling. This short greeting message was just the beginning of a longer video series depicting BTS exploring the store, kicking off the process by which Big Hit Entertainment created this store as a place to be “shared” between BTS and their fans.

Most of the other videos featured in the “House of BTS” vlog series were relatively short clips featuring various members exploring the shop and its merchandise and interacting with photo zones and AR attractions. One video follows the members as they play tunes on the giant piano on the main exhibit floor; another features members explaining the interactive AR exhibits. Such videos are informative in two senses. On the one hand, they literally explain to fans how to enjoy certain parts of the pop up store; in another sense, they are also informative about the members themselves, illustrating certain qualities of their personalities in addition to their interactions with and relationships with others. These videos build upon fans’ affective investments in the “world” of BTS, providing an intimate (albeit digitally and corporately mediated) “look” into their personal qualities, as if they were fans’ friends. This is aided by the members’ keen awareness of the camera—an awareness that is instilled through specific forms of training before K-Pop idols even debut—in which members not only look directly into the lens, but also speak to the camera as if it were ARMY themselves. Of course, here we have to emphasize the videos’ *mediated* quality once again. By taking a look into the

background of any given video, an observer can readily see the sheer production value behind these seemingly “intimate” moments. Each member is assigned a camera man to follow them around the store; professional photographers, audio engineers, lighting specialists, and even a director stand off to the side as the BTS members “play.” Mediation also comes into play with the vlogs’ “captioning style,” in which Big Hit editors comment (often fondly, as if writing in the perspective of a fan) on the members’ actions, appearance, and personalities. Such mediation points to the fact that this intimacy—however “real” fans may or may not perceive it to be—is being *created* with intent on behalf of the producers.



BTS Member Park Jimin, Writing to Fans on the Bus Stop Message Board (2019)
[CR: Big Hit Entertainment]

One of the video series’ more touching moments comes in BTS’s coverage of the bus stop. This bus stop, modeled after the bus stop featured on the cover of their album *You Never Walk Alone*, allows fans to write messages to BTS and to each other. BTS explores the messages written by fans during the opening week, giving fans a sense that they can be “heard” by BTS. Some members comment on how touched they are by fans’ loving messages, while others speculate on the meaning behind some of fans’ messages,

many of which are written in a type of fan-created “code,” the meaning of which would likely be lost to the average viewer. In the video series, cameramen document the members as they each take turns expressing their appreciation for fans by writing their own messages. Inspired by a fans’ message, one BTS member wrote “아.무.행.알” “No matter what, ARMYs should be happy.” This particular exhibit literally demonstrates to fans their ability to interact—albeit not physically—with the BTS members.

As a whole, the House of BTS video series transforms the pop up shop from a simple store into a “shared space” that BTS and fans can (at least symbolically) visit together. The fact that BTS has not only visited the shop, but also have left both physical (in the form of drawings and messages) and digital (vlogs) evidence of their visit in the form elevates the store’s status by drawing upon fans’ affective investment in the idols. Of course, the “intimacy” or “togetherness” that fans experience in this store is not genuine, one-on-one interaction with BTS members themselves; rather, it is tightly mediated by the camera and the corporation behind the creation of these videos. While the helps to create a sense of love and community in fans (which will be explored in the next chapter), it is important to keep in mind the corporate intent behind the creation of the pop up shop space, the vlog videos, and the music itself.

Sharing Space, Re-framing Profit

In addition to the store’s advertisement across social media, a look at the design of the store itself is particularly illuminating. Taking in mind Big Hit’s desire to “optimize fans’ experience,” the multiplex, almost museum-like design of the store illustrates a strategy that emphasizes fans’ affective investments in the “universe” of BTS

and Big Hit Entertainment. One way this is accomplished is the creation of exhibits modeled after spaces in BTS music videos. No area is without reference (both subtle and explicit) to moments in BTS’s career, with most exhibits centered around life-size music video recreations for fans to take pictures in and document on social media; as such, dedicated fans are sure to enjoy the references scattered throughout the pop-up shop. For example, the main display features several LED signs dangling over a giant piano, a reference to sets featured throughout the *Boy with Luv* music video which was, in itself, packed with references to songs and albums throughout BTS’s career. Other exhibits include a ribbon display from the *Idol* music video (2018); a bus stop featured on the album cover of *You Never Walk Alone* (2017); and a giant forest of BTS “cheering sticks,” which—in the BTS fandom—symbolizes the affective bonds created between fans at BTS concerts. As many observers have noted, this particular design rewards fans who have built an intimate knowledge of BTS over the years through continued consumption of BTS music, music videos, merchandise, and more.



Main Display, Recreated from BTS’s Boy with Luv MV (2019) [CR: Korea Herald]

Nonetheless, far from being a space that fans can experience wholesomely with BTS, the pop up store at its essence is exactly that—a store. The center of the House of BTS event is arguably merchandising. This is evidenced by the very design of the store itself. Upon opening the large pink doors at the store’s entrance, customers walk into the first floor which contains a colorful display of merchandise. A revolving carousel of goods (ranging from BTS-themed contact lenses to journals, pencils, and passport cases) marks the center of the room. At this stage, fans are encouraged to turn in a check list of the items they want to purchase; only after traveling up the multiplex’s four floors, then back down again to the pick-up zone on the second floor, can fans pick up these items. (Consequently, it is clear that the shop-turned-museum is not designed with the passive or “casual” fan in mind: it can take anywhere from three to six hours to “tour” the entire building, with much of that time spent waiting in line.) Even more merchandise displays are scattered throughout the exhibit-like photo zones on the upper floors. All the while, staff intermittently announces which items have sold out. Fans are encouraged to select the maximum number of ten items, as popular products are often sold out by midday.

Another illustrative example of this is the release of exclusive merchandise that can only be purchased at this particular location. On the shop’s opening day, Big Hit Entertainment uploaded yet another short concept trailer. This video announced the arrival of BTS’s new “cutest boy band in the world” figurine series, featuring miniature chibi-like versions of each member donning the “iconic” outfits from BTS’s recent *Idol* music video. The opening shot depicts what is clearly the desk of an ARMY, framed photos of the members scattered throughout the shelves, an army bomb (cheering stick) hanging from the photo board, and a calendar (featuring a BTS member, of course)

displaying the opening date of the pop-up store. Here, fandom becomes explicitly tied up in the logic of capital, as merchandise—calendars, figurines, photo cards—is framed as a key method of “belonging” to the BTS fandom (Stevens 2010). Finally, the video ends with the message, “Come see (or buy) us at BTS Pop-Up: House of BTS!” Regardless of whether or not such figurines were designed with profit as their primary purpose, fans appeared to be thrilled by this new announcement, with many expressing their love in the comments section for the “cute” characters and their “healing” quality. As Anne Allison notes in her discussion of *Pokemon* in Japan, this type of “character consumption” brings together both affective investments—the emotions produced by a “cute” object—and the generation of profit (Allison 2003).

The direct link between affective labor practices and capital accumulation is more discernible in the videos featuring BTS members. Likely encouraged by the videos’ producers (though this is never explicitly stated), the members continuously comment on the merchandise scattered throughout the space. Once each member has found something they like—and of course, each member chooses to wear a different piece—they wear the merchandise throughout the video. This can be viewed as a not-so-subtle advertisement enticing fans to “share” something with their favorite members through the act of purchasing. As if they were fans themselves, the members select the items that they want to “buy” from the merchandise guide; at the end of the video, the members show off what they decided to get within the confines of the ten item limit, commenting on the items’ good quality, practicality, and usefulness. Thus, what appears as an “intimate” interaction between BTS and their fans is both digitally and corporately *mediated*. The digital format of the video blog allows the members to create a sense of community and shared space

with fans across the world. Moreover, these “intimate” or affective interactions between celebrity and fan are mediated by the profit-driven motives of the corporation, as the members are not videoed purely for the purpose of entertaining the fan, but also for the purpose of advertising the space and the products in a way that harnesses the emotional bond between fan and celebrity.

IV. Becoming ARMY: Understanding Affect in Fandom

Introduction

In my literature review, I argued that a critical approach to pop culture that sees all media as a profit-driven enterprise is a one-dimensional approach that fails to accurately capture the complexity of fans' interpretation and interactions with pop culture media. This, of course, is especially true when attempting to understand K-Pop fandom, which is notable often for their active and participatory role when consuming K-Pop media. The previous chapter focused heavily on the way BTS and Big Hit Entertainment *produce* affect in their fans through digital content that mediates intimate "interactions" between fans and idols. In this chapter, I will capture the complex activities of BTS fans in their consumption and interpretation of the House of BTS pop of event. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that fans are not passive consumers of the products and affects that entertainment companies seek to produce; rather, they *construct* meaning around such events and *create* their own digital contents that allow them to build genuine, meaningful bonds through fandom communities.

BTS were not the only ones creating videos when the House of BTS event kicked off in October. One search on YouTube reveals a plethora of vlogs created by fans as they explored the pop-up store, sharing their experience, information, and opinions with other fans by utilizing YouTube as a community platform. I watched these fan vlogs in order to gain a sense of how fans constructed meaning not only around the pop-up store, but also the digital contents that BTS produced in celebration (or perhaps advertisement) of the event. In examining these videos, I sought the answer to the following questions. How do fans construct meaning around the House of BTS pop-up store, the BTS vlog

series, and the affective labor practices be? To what extent were fans influenced by the “mediated intimacy” effect created in the construction of the BTS vlog series? Do fans blindly consume the products and media being marketed to them, or do they actively build their own communities not only where they can create meaning for themselves, but also where they can be critical of the media being marketed toward them?

The simple act of creating these videos reveals a lot about the nature of K-Pop fandom. Indeed, as Jenkins and Thornton reveal in their analysis of participatory culture in fandom and fan labor, BTS fans also engage in their own *creative* or *productive* activities centered around their affective investments in both BTS and also each other. By nature, YouTube is a “democratic” platform that gives most people in advanced capitalist economies quick and easy access to means of production (at least in the case of video-making). In that sense, YouTube is quite an accessible platform for BTS fans to create their own content in a relatively cheap and easy way. Though of course “amateur” in nature, these fan videos reflect a serious effort on the part of the fans to edit clips together, compile information, and transmit this information to other fans. Indeed, fan-made videos documenting their concert experiences, introducing information to other (often new) fans, covering BTS songs/dances, and creating art, have become a relatively popular way of celebrating—arguably, a way of *consuming*—BTS within the fandom; the same is the case for other fandoms worldwide as well.

Becoming ARMY: Constructing Meaning in Fandom

It’s estimated that nearly 180,000 fans visited the pop up store in Seoul during its 80 day run; just by searching ‘House of BTS vlog’ on YouTube alone, one can find

hundreds of videos created by fans documenting their trip, purchases, and opinions of the event. In watching these videos, I looked for evidence that fans had consumed and were influenced by the videos made by BTS; I also explored the way that fans experienced and responded to the “shared space” provided by Big Hit Entertainment and BTS. The general response from ARMYs who traveled to the store in Gangnam is overwhelmingly positive. The elaborate interior design, complete with interactive exhibits, in fact immediately eliciting excited responses from fans as they passed through the large pink doors onto the first floor.



Fans Outside of House of BTS and Inside at the Merchandise Floor (2019)
[CR: Big Hit Entertainment]

Once again, it is clear that the store was constructed with the fan in mind given the references throughout the design that allow fans to bond with BTS and each other over various shared experiences, including BTS’s early career as well as the shared experience of the store itself. The videos demonstrated the success of this point, as fans actively recognized the intent and meaning behind each set design. I would also argue that fans did not simply *recognize* the re-created set pieces as something they had

consumed previously; rather, they were shared memories from a sort of “journey” that fans collectively experienced with BTS throughout the development of their career. These fan vlogs were full of affective language referencing the type of inspiration, excitement, and happiness that BTS (in the form of the pop up store) provides for them. In addition to typical expressions of excitement, fans referred to the store in almost reverential terms, claiming that the store was “fans’ paradise,” “instant healing,” “heaven on earth,” and a “privilege to attend.”

Thus, it is clear that fans do not simply experience BTS content passively as something to simply purchase or consume. Through the mediation of both the camera and the store itself, fans actively communicated and interacted with idols. This point in particular is demonstrated through the bus stop message exhibit, where fans documented their experience as they left messages for BTS. Notable examples include “방탄은 사랑입니다” (BTS is Love), “BTS 보라해”² (I love you BTS), and “Thank you for existing.” Through such messages, we can see how fans interpret the store as an interactive, comforting, and communal space to be shared with BTS and with other fans.

² “보라해” (lit. “I purple you”) is a phrase created by BTS member Taehyung. Combining the word purple (보라) and love (사랑해), V claims that it means that he will love ARMY to the end, as purple is the last color of a rainbow. Using fandom-specific jargon is one method of creating and consolidating communal belonging.



BTS Jimin Posed Next to Fans' Messages (2019) [CR: @BTS_twt]

Moreover, several fans explicitly acknowledged the BTS video series, demonstrating excitement at the idea that they could figuratively experience the space together with BTS—of course, all through the mediation of the camera lens. Fans sought out the various parts of the building where BTS left “evidence” of their visit, especially the written messages left at the bus stop exhibit and the life-size figurines as well. One fan explicitly mentioned how she was “so happy to go [to the store] after BTS” so that she could experience such shared moments. Indeed, we can get some sense of the relationship between affect and profit from these fan clips, as fans often referred to various clothing items in terms of which BTS members wore them in the video series. In that sense, the BTS series effectively produced emotion, meaning, and affect in fans who in turn perceived this store a meaningful space, thereby blurring the line between genuine intimacy/collective bonding on the one hand, and clever emotional or “affective marketing” on the other hand.

Affective ARMY: Fandom as Community

In the same sense that YouTube allows BTS and other celebrities to “connect” on a more personal basis with fans, it also allows fans to find each other and assemble their own communities—communities which often extend beyond YouTube and onto other social media websites such as Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and so on. The primary intent on YouTube seems to be for fans to share their experiences at the House of BTS and to provide a general overview of how and where the event takes place.

Many of these videos appeared to be made with informative intent, designed to help other fans plan their own trip or to allow other fans to live vicariously through those that are fortunate enough to make the journey to Seoul. Additionally, these videos are also often created keeping in mind that the BTS fandom is transnational; as such, many fans include subtitles and travel information for fans planning to travel overseas to experience the store (Yoon 2018). Such informative interactions extended into the comments section of the videos, where commenters asked fan creators questions about the store or where they simply thanked creators for uploading their experiences (or, in many cases, expressed jealousy at not being able to attend). As Jenkins demonstrated through his research, there are often vaguely constructed hierarchies within these communities, and this is the case with this particular YouTube community of ARMYs as well (2017). Many video makers had built up sizable audiences of their own, with nearly 70% of the videos analyzing surpassing one thousand views, and approximately 40% surpassing ten thousand views. Compared to the numbers that BTS videos tend to hit, this

appears minimal; within the fandom, however, these are relatively impressive numbers. By comparison, about 35% of videos analyzed had less than one thousand views. As such, BTS fans were able to position themselves in somewhat authoritative/informative roles where they could create their own content and transmit information to those who were unable to experience the event.

Beyond simply using these videos as a platform to transmit information, fans also utilized the House of BTS space and social media as a way to connect with other fans through a common affective investment in BTS. Only 15% of fan creators did not travel to the store accompanied by a friend or family member; of course, then, nearly 85% of fans were accompanied either by fellow fan friends, or in many cases by family members as well. Meanwhile, other fans documented their experience meeting and talking to other fans at the pop up store. For instance, one Korean video-maker noted how she met some new “I-Lovelies” (a slang term for international BTS fans) while waiting in line to buy her merchandise. Another fan, in her overall discussion of her experience at House of BTS, explicitly denounced the idea that the shop was just a store designed to generate profits. “It was more than just a pop up store,” she claimed, “It is a place where we [fans] can just have fun.” Thus, BTS and their store became more than just a thing to be consumed; rather, in fact, fans perceived this particular event as a very meaningful space where they could share information, meet new friends, and comment on BTS.

Fandom and Capital: Fans as Prosumers

Once again, however, it is important to keep in mind the intent behind the House of BTS—that is, it is important to remember that it is a store. Thus, the affect produced

by a shared sense of community (fandom) cannot be divorced from the logic of capital that inspires fandom’s creation. While the exhibits and community constructed around it may be meaningful for fans, as explored in earlier chapters these exhibits are still deliberately constructed with profit in mind; of course, most (but not all) fans are going to purchase merchandise at the House of BTS. Most videos observed featured a short clip documenting what each fan was planning to buy and what they actually bought at the store. Utilizing the merchandise maps, I approximated the average amount these fan-creators spent, visible in the chart below.

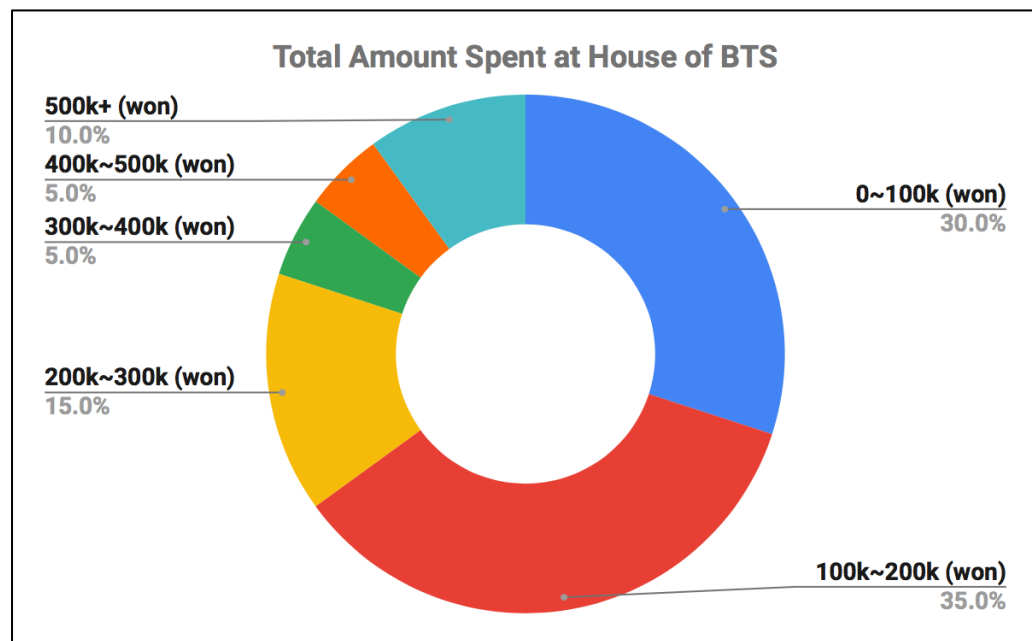


Figure 1.1: Total Amount Spent at House of BTS³

Fans even spent upwards of 700 to 800 dollars—this, of course, is barring fans who visited multiple times in order to acquire items that had sold out on their first visit. Indeed, BTS fans are not typically known for their frugality; Big Hit Entertainment, in

³ This data was gathered from 20 videos in which fans explicitly detailed what they bought and how much they spent. The remaining videos did not explicitly disclose any purchases.

their community briefing, estimated that one BTS concert in Seoul generates as much as 345.8 billion won (roughly 291,000 dollars) in local revenue in just three days as fans spend money in and around concert venues (Big Hit Corporate Briefing 2019).

In the same vein, fan produced content can also not be divorced from the idea of advertisement and profit. The contents that fans upload to the internet—in this case, review videos/vlogs from the House of BTS—do constitute free labor practices. Much like the vlogs featuring BTS exploring the store, these fan-created videos can be read as mini-advertisements designed to promote the event and encourage other fans, conferring new value and appeal to the object—the object being the store, its merchandise, and BTS as a whole (De Kosnik 2012). Of course, BTS fans are likely to perceive these creations in more personal and meaningful ways; that is, fans believe that the act of sharing their experiences through video format is a way of interacting with and participating in community (fan) life. To quote Thornton:

“We can discern that fans do not think of objects of fandom as commodities even though that is what they are, even though they spend a lot of money (in some cases, a great deal of money) acquiring those objects, and even though fandom is what gives those objects market value far greater than their initial sales price. Fans, therefore, do not regard their own activities as work that adds or creates exchange-value (rather, they think of their efforts as adding personal use value) and do not seek compensation for their activities” (2012: 139).

Thus, this chapter challenges the notion that the culture industry and the fan communities built around them are solely profit or consumption-driven enterprises; at the same time, my research also shows how K-Pop fans take an active, *prosuming* role in the K-Pop industry. Affective labor, mediated by the presence of social media technology and corporate actors, creates a sense of intimacy between idols and fans. While mediated intimacy in practice is a tool for capitalistic accumulation, it also allows fans to formulate meaningful communities centered around a common interest and a common message. We

can see how fans do not necessarily see their activity and their labor as corporate in nature, but rather they perceive fandom as a collective, emotional experience that unites fans globally and provides a sense of comfort, identity, and belonging. Undoubtedly, affective labor as it produces a sense of *mediated intimacy* unites fans by creating a common affective, emotional bond centered around an idol group. My research, however, does not indicate that these fan communities have major potential to be turned against capitalist projects; *mediated intimacy* continues to be a primary method for corporations to harness fans' emotions and affects in pursuit of profit. Fan community itself—shown in this study through digital, social media-based fan production—more often than not works in the interests of major companies, serving as “free” labor that advertises consumption and encourages other fans to consume as well. Thus, we should always keep in mind that affective labor practices are also one of the driving forces in advanced capitalist economies (Hardt 1999); therefore, we should continue to be wary of the exploitative practices that fail to acknowledge and/or compensate fans for their productive, participatory practices.

V. Conclusions

With the unprecedented rise of BTS and their fandom globally, media has displayed a tendency to pathologize K-Pop fans as mindless or even delusional consumers of idols. This tendency is prevalent throughout the study of pop culture and fandom, and it contributes to what I believe are dichotomous and oversimplified studies of the contemporary structure of global culture industries. In this thesis, I argue that we should turn our attention to the affective labor practices prevalent throughout the pop culture industry (and throughout contemporary capitalism as a whole). **How do K-Pop fandoms (specifically, BTS and their fans) exhibit the South Korea economy's trend toward emotional (Illouz 2007) or affective (Hardt 1999) capitalism?** Using the House of BTS event as a case study of K-Pop fandom, I demonstrated the [effects] of affective labor practices on K-Pop fandom. Big Hit Entertainment is a particularly apt study for this choice because they deliberately adopt *mediated intimacy* as a marketing tactic, creating content outside of music that caters to fans' desire to "know" and adore BTS members. However, we cannot simplify this practice by claiming that companies are prioritizing fan experience without capitalistic intent; rather, harnessing fans' affective investments and intimate bonds with their idols (BTS), Big Hit Entertainment adopts a particular marketing strategy explicitly designed for profit generation. In the House of BTS video series, this manifests itself as members—mediated through the lens of the corporate camera—invite fans to take part in a "shared" space that is simultaneously a "home" (providing comfort and love) and a "store" (where fans can, of course, spend their money).

Now, I will address the second question. **Does the presence of affective labor (in the form of mediated intimacy) in the K-Pop industry allow fans to create active, participatory communities with the potential to be turned against capitalist projects? Or is it simply another way to generate corporate profit?** In line with Henry Jenkins' conceptualization of participatory fandom (2017), a study of fan-produced content in response to the House of BTS event reveals an active, participatory community encouraging fans to create their own works and allowing fans to find comfort not only in BTS but also in each other. Nonetheless, I found little evidence to suggest that this form of fandom has the potential to be completely liberated from capitalist intent. Though we cannot simplify BTS ARMY activity as blind consumption, the affective and communal investments themselves are inextricable from the logic of (affective) capital. My research find that fans were excited and interested in spending their money as a way to "bond" with their idols and one another. Furthermore, I also demonstrated how fan production itself—for example, the creation of vlogs reviewing the space and the merchandise—should be understood as a labor practice that generates profit in the form of (free) advertisement. Thus, my research supports Michael Hardt's stance on affective labor; while affective communities like fandom may arise from affective labor's use, I maintain that affective labor practices such as mediated intimacy are primarily exploitative in nature, allowing corporations to generate profit through the utilization of fans' emotional, affective, and communal investments in K-Pop idols.

Applications

I believe that this study provides a nuanced approach to K-Pop and its fandom, taking into account affective labor practices—in particular, the use of *mediated intimacy* as practiced by K-Pop companies across social networking platforms. This study clarifies and expands the concept *mediated intimacy*, a particular form of affective labor that relies on the digital and corporate mediation of “intimate” relationships between idols and fans. In doing so, my research sets a precedent for future sociological and anthropological research on contemporary fandom practices as they arise in the context of affective labor/affective capitalism.

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