
K-pop, Affect, and Intimacy in Transnational Social Mediascapes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of BTS and Participatory Online Fandom

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The global phenomenon of Korean popular culture since the late 1990s has been referred to as Hallyu, or the Korean Wave. While early Hallyu focused on the export of television dramas, today's wave is best characterized by the popularity of Korean pop music (K-pop) and its passionate legion of fans. Previous research has explained the popularity of Hallyu through theories of cultural proximity, cultural hybridity, and the use of innovative digital technologies. However, these theories do not place enough importance on the affective and emotional nature of Korean cultural products, nor the use of social media as a public site of emotion and connection for fans. K-pop has been well known as having an international, digital participatory community that utilizes social mediascapes as places of belonging and connection. Social mediascapes serve as transnational interactive communication between fans and artists. Situated within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused social isolation and increased reliance on online technology for human interaction, this study focuses on the normalization of emotional interaction through digital spaces and innovative technology in K-pop. These strengths have allowed the industry to navigate the pandemic while attracting even more fans, despite the cancellation of face-to-face events. Using the globally iconic Korean musical group BTS as a case study, this study draws on secondary data to perform a quantitative analysis of their increasingly intimate online activities throughout the pandemic. Corresponding with this, their fandom growth over a year exemplifies social media as a site of affect and emotion, the

participatory power of online fandom, and the future of Hallyu through technological development. These findings can be used to draw broader implications on the growing digitalization of the world and contribute to understanding K-pop's ever-growing global popularity.

Keywords: Hallyu, K-pop, transnational fandom, fan-artist relationship, affect and emotion, parasocial relationships, connection and belonging, social isolation, digital spaces, online participatory community, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The popularity of Korean cultural and media products has been widely referred to as the Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, in both informal and academic circles. The Korean Wave, which includes music, dramas, films, fashion, food, comics, and online games, has enjoyed international popularity since the late 1990s, especially in neighboring East Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Taiwan. In these countries, Korean dramas are available in the daily programming of free-to-air and satellite television. This technology affordance has encouraged the consumption of Korean cultural products as part of the daily viewing habits of East Asian audiences.¹ According to this pattern of popularity, early *Hallyu* scholars have theorized several discourses to explain the regional and international success of cultural products from a seemingly small, North-East Asian state. These perspectives generally view the Korean Wave through a soft power or neoliberalist, economic lens and posit theories of cultural hybridity, cultural proximity, and transnational flows to explain the Korean Wave's globalizing success.² However, these theories fail to account for Korea's cultural products' affective and emotional nature and its growing internationalization through social media as a public site of emotion.

1 Sangjoon Lee, "Introduction: A decade of Hallyu scholarship: Toward a new direction in Hallyu 2.0," in *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Sangjoon Lee and Mark Nornes Abe (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 13.

2 Dooboo Shim, "Hybridity and the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia," *Media Culture & Society* no. 28(1), (2006): 25-44; Yong-jin Won, "Hallyu: Numerous discourses, one perspective," in *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*, ed. Tae-jin Yoon and Dal Yong Jin, (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017), 23-43.

English-speaking academic discourse on *Hallyu* had significantly weakened as scholars in Asian studies, communication studies, and cultural studies claimed that the Korean Wave had been thoroughly analyzed and researched.³ However, in the latter part of 2006, a second wave of Korean cultural products emerged, referred to by scholars as ‘*Hallyu 2.0*’; as *Hallyu 2.0* began to globalize as an unparalleled cultural phenomenon, the discourse was renewed.⁴ Differentiated from the first wave, *Hallyu 2.0* has focused on technological development, the use of social media, and the convergence of creative content – which has subsequently spawned peripheral ‘K’ industries such as K-gaming and K-beauty into the *Hallyu* brand. K-dramas were the primary cultural export in the first wave. In contrast, the growth of *Hallyu 2.0* has been led by Korean pop music (K-pop), whose accessibility through internet video platforms such as YouTube has immensely extended its international reach.⁵ Today, the South Korean music market ranks as the sixth largest globally with a 44.8 percent growth, positioning itself as the fastest-growing major market in 2020.⁶ In 2019, the K-pop industry’s exports (including tour products) contributed over US \$3 billion to the South Korean economy.⁷

Hallyu 2.0’s technological developments and reliance on social media as a distribution channel have allowed for the organization of imagined communities, online intimacy, transnational fandom activities, and the erasure of barriers between producer and consumer. The role of social media as a tool for experience and organizing communities has been highlighted as the world faces social isolation due to COVID-19. On March 11, 2020, the COVID-19 virus was officially declared a worldwide pandemic by the WHO, and governments urgently implemented border control and social distancing

3 Sangjoon Lee, “Introduction,” 14.

4 Dal Yong Jin, “New Perspectives on the Creative Industries in the *Hallyu 2.0* Era: Global-Local Dialectics in Intellectual Properties,” in *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Sangjoon Lee and Mark Normes Abe (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 56.

5 Ibid. 54.

6 International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, “Global Music Report 2021,” accessed November 20, 2021, https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GMR2021_STATE_OF_THE_INDUSTRY.pdf.

7 Yonhap News Agency, “Exports of Korean culture products soar 22.4 pct last year,” *Yonhap News Agency*, April 14, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200414009800315>.

policies to curb the spread of the virus.⁸ As a result, face-to-face social interaction, and physical contact as the norms of human interaction have been erased, and communication has been relegated to the cybersphere.

The global music industry, too, has not been exempt from the devastating impacts of the pandemic, with US\$ 30 billion lost in the concert industry alone in 2020.⁹ However, for the K-pop music industry, which has been at the forefront of technological innovation and online communication, this increased global shift to community communication via social media has further accelerated its popularity with music promotion, video performances, and digital interaction with fans becoming normalized throughout the pandemic.¹⁰ K-pop fandoms are recognized as a social, participatory culture and emotional space of intimacy for meeting like-minded people. This transnational community relies on social media for interaction, and the increased saturation of K-pop content, as well as the amount of time spent online during the pandemic, has allowed the global K-pop fandom to thrive, expanding its reach further than ever before.¹¹ Thus, rather than continuing to justify the success of the Korean Wave as one based on previous theories of cultural proximity and hybridity, this paper posits that the continued digitalization of the Korean Wave and its expanding global presence today should be viewed vis-à-vis an affective, emotional and experience-based economy.¹²

In examining the affective, emotional, digitalized nature of K-pop fandoms, first, a literature review on these concepts will be conducted. Then, situating within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper will discuss

8 M. Reza Azarpazhooh et. al, "COVID-19 Pandemic and Burden of Non-Communicable Disease: An Ecological Study on Data of 185 Countries," *Journal of Stroke and Cerebrovascular Diseases*, no. 29 (9) (2020): 2 & 3.

9 Jem Aswad, "Concert Industry Lost \$30 Billion in 2020," *Variety*, December 11, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/concert-industry-lost-30-billion-2020-1234851679/>.

10 Yonhap News Agency, "K-pop album market bullish despite pandemic," *Yonhap News Agency*, October 21, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211015005200315>.

11 Meicheng Sun, "K-pop fan labor and an alternative creative industry: A case study of GOT7 Chinese fans," *Global media and China*, no.5 (4) (2020): 390; Hyunji Lee, "A 'real' fantasy: hybridity, Korean drama, and pop cosmopolitans," *Media, Culture & Society*, no. 40 (3) (2018): 366.

12 Katrin Dovelung, Anu A. Harju, and Denise Sommer, "From Mediatized Emotion to Digital Affect Cultures: New Technologies and Global Flows of Emotion," *Social Media + Society*, (January-March 2018): 1-11.

how virtual connections and online intimacy have accelerated the growth of online, transnational K-pop communities by employing the Korean pop group BTS and their fandom, called ARMY, as a case study. The K-pop industry and its fandoms utilize online spaces as communities for emotional and affective interaction. However, an analysis of the behaviors of all K-pop fandoms is far beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, the author has decided to use only BTS as a case study because they are known for their close connection to fans on social media. As of 2021, BTS has five consecutive wins of Billboard Music Award's Top Social Artist Award, where award nominees are considered based on significant fan interaction, including global music streaming and social engagement.¹³ They have also been recognized internationally as Korea's most accomplished musical artists, becoming the first to debut a non-English song at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and the first Asian act to win Artist of the Year at the American Music Awards.¹⁴

This paper conducted a quantitative analysis to display the increase of online activities and BTS' fandom growth throughout the pandemic. Secondary data were collected from official company notices, social media channels, viewing statistics, and news and magazine articles between March 11, 2020 (the WHO's COVID-19 pandemic declaration date) to June 15, 2021 (the day after BTS' eight-year anniversary virtual fan meeting). BTS' activities and transition to online performances in lieu of face-to-face events, as well as their active social media presence, demonstrate how BTS have successfully transitioned to online technologies to recreate spaces of intimacy. Furthermore, these events and the corresponding development within the fandom community can be applied to *Hallyu* 2.0's international growth and contribute to our understanding of global society's increased dependence on social media and online connections as a place of belonging. Through this case study, this paper seeks to contribute to the understanding

13 Ananya Varma, "BTS wins top social artist at Billboard Music Awards for 5th time; debuts 'Butter' live," *Republic World*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.republicworld.com/entertainment-news/music/bts-wins-top-social-artist-at-billboard-music-awards-for-5th-time-debuts-butter-live.html>.; Sun-Ah Shim, "BTS becomes first Asian act to win top honor at AMAs," *Yonhap News Agency*, November 22, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211122004800315>.

14 Franchesca Judine Basbas, "BTS make history as 'Life Goes On' becomes the first non-English song to debut at number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts," *Bandwagon*, December 9, 2020. <https://www.bandwagon.asia/articles/bts-life-goes-on-debuts-at-no-1-on-3-billboard-global-charts-hot-100-global-200-global-excl-us-be-album-dynamite-big-hit-entertainment-korea-november-2020>.

of K-pop, affect and intimacy in transnational social mediascapes, the power of participatory online fandom in *Hallyu 2.0*'s success, and the future of K-pop fan-artist communities through technological development.

Literature Review

Concepts

In the context of cultural studies, affect is considered to be the performativity of emotion; an emotion that is socially produced, regulated, and shared; and how emotion flows and creates responses. Affect exists outside of a person and is an entity that is relational to the natural world that we engage with; it is something that we *do* rather than have.¹⁵ Emotion, meanwhile, is built into a person as a psychological construct and becomes active in social sharing situations. Emotion is situational and contextual, performed with discursively constructed cultural practices. For emotions to travel and affect, they must be produced into a text. How one is affected by emotions depends on their spatial dimension; that is, how close or far they are to the text.¹⁶ New media technologies both enable the exchange of information and foster globally mediatized emotional exchange. This is referred to as digital affect cultures, as the digital realm constructs a space where participation and orientation are guided by emotional communication. Social media are emotional media, and their core characteristics are based on emotional identification with others and belonging in a collective imagined community.¹⁷ Mediatization plays a crucial role in constructing public opinion, and by acknowledging this, the role of the media in processes of socio-cultural change can be understood. Humans gather around cultural artifacts and organize themselves through their understanding and opinions concerning the artifact, and this organization unites individuals into communities validated through shared and mediatized interaction.¹⁸ In digital affect cultures, these mediatized communications are no longer bound by time and instead allow users to conduct multiple simultaneous interactions unconstrained by distance.¹⁹

15 Katrin Dovelung et.al, "From Mediatized Emotion," 1.

16 Ibid, 2.

17 Ibid, 3 & 4.

18 Ignas Kalpokas, "Enabling Post-truth: Mediatization and Affect," in *A Political Theory of Post-Truth* (Pivot, Cham: Palgrave, 2019), 57.

19 Ibid, 59.

The self, too, is increasingly becoming mediatized. As the dominant method of interaction transitions to digital encounters rather than face-to-face interaction, the self becomes more existent as a digital representation rather than projected through our physical bodies.²⁰ This digitalized projection of self is driven especially in social mediascapes, controlled by user interactions. In the context of the K-pop industry, social media drives the interplay between entertainment companies and global fandoms, and reliance on social media is inevitable for interaction between the host (artists) and viewers (fans).²¹ Technologies such as the chatbox function on live streaming and video platforms allow for real-time virtual connection that users lack in their actual lives. Not only does the chat function as a direct interaction between host and viewer, but it also connects fellow viewers as they exchange their thoughts and emotions. These arenas provide a safe space that fosters transnational connections and intimacy between the host and viewer, building a strong sense of community, empathy, and affiliation amidst the absence of physical togetherness.²²

Indeed, one of the promises of the Internet is to “bring together isolated, but like-minded people,” making it inseparable from the concept of transnational fandoms today.²³ Fandoms can be defined as a “vibrant, socially rewarding space where groups of people come together to share interests, ideas, and occasionally work to change the world.”²⁴ It is a social space strengthened by community participation and unity. As Anna Lee Swan writes, “physically dispersed, but affectively connected, K-pop fans around the world have formed a dynamic community that imagines itself as transcending national boundaries.”²⁵ Perhaps no better example of this can be seen than through the role of social media in *Hallyu 2.0*, as it rapidly promotes the

20 Ibid.

21 Dal Yong Jin and Yoon Kyong, “The social mediascape of transnational Korean pop culture: Hallyu 2.0 as spreadable media practice,” *New Media and Society*, no.18 (7) (2016): 1280.

22 Hyesu Park, “Chapter 3: Korean mukbang wave: Making sense of eating and broadcasting and its techno-mediated narrative environment,” *Understanding Hallyu: The Korean Wave Through Literature, Webtoon, and Mukbang* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 3; Anna Lee Swan, “Transnational Identities and Feeling in Fandom: Place and Embodiment in K-pop Fan Reaction Videos,” *Communication Culture & Critique*, no. 11 (2018): 549.

23 Hyesu Park, “Korean mukbang,” 10.

24 Ibid.

25 Anna Lee Swan, “Transnational Identities and Feeling in Fandom,” 549.

visibility and accessibility of Korean popular culture to the Western world.²⁶

In Pandemic Times

COVID-19 has significantly impacted the South Korean music, concert, and tourism industry. A little over a month after the declaration of the pandemic, South Korea recorded its first case of COVID-19, and by February 29, 2020, it became the second most infected country.²⁷ This situation caused the immediate mass cancellation of live entertainment events amidst social distancing policies.²⁸ Globally, numerous countries implemented nationwide lockdowns and curfews, effectively halting face-to-face interaction for several consecutive months.²⁹ The extended length of the pandemic and these policies have caused threats to mental health worldwide as communities remain socially isolated.³⁰ Now, more than ever, are social media functioning as spaces for emotional connection during a time of physical separation.³¹

Scope and Methodology

Why BTS?

BTS, as K-pop idols, are known to be early adopters of social media. As one of the first K-pop groups to operate a ‘personal’ social media account independent of their company’s official account, BTS have consistently displayed their vulnerable and candid appearances through ‘personalized’ fan interaction. Pre-debut, the group opened their Twitter account and uploaded

26 Hyunji Lee, “A ‘real’ fantasy: hybridity,” 366.

27 Victor Cha and Dana Kim, “A Timeline of South Korea’s Response to COVID-19,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, last modified March 27, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/timeline-south-koreas-response-covid-19>.

28 “Performances, concerts cancelled over coronavirus,” *Yonhap News Agency*, February 25, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200225004000315>.

29 M. R. Azarpazhooh et al., “Covid-19 Pandemic,” 7.

30 Rodolfo Sarracci, “Prevention in COVID-19 time: from failure to future,” *Epidemiol Community Health*, no.74 (2020): 690.

31 *Ibid.* 550.

their first Tweet on December 18, 2012.³² Just over a month later, the first video-log (vlog) of leader RM sitting in their recording studio and chatting to the camera was uploaded onto their 'BANGTANTV' YouTube channel.³³ Mirroring their Twitter account, the 'BANGTANTV' YouTube channel is separate from their company's official music video distribution channel and presents 'behind the scenes' footage of the members' daily, casual, and intimate interactions. At the time of this paper's writing, BTS have Tweeted 12,762 times and have uploaded 1,633 videos on BANGTANTV.³⁴ Of course, the production and curation of each post and video are not wholly independent from company control. However, in line with *Hallyu* 2.0, BTS have utilized social media to show 'publicly private' moments, and in doing so, have built a global fandom based on intimacy and emotional connection. This connection has been recognized internationally through their wins of the Billboard Music Award's Top Social Artist Award, beating out US-industry competitors such as Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande, Taylor Swift, Shawn Mendes, and Billie Eilish.³⁵

A world tour beginning in Seoul on April 11, 2020 and extending throughout the summer of 2020 was planned to promote BTS' fourth studio album, marking an important seventh year of group activities.³⁶ However, due

32 BTS (@BTS_twt), "What's up! It's BTS. Finally, BTS' official Twitter has opened~ Clap clap clap! Before our debut, more weird and fun things that you could have only imagined will be uploaded," December 18, 2012, 2:43 a.m., https://twitter.com/BTS_twt/status/280729943476953090.

33 "130107, RAP MONSTER" January 7, 2013, BANGTANTV, video, 1:44, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srk5_rQVmmA&ab_channel=BANGTANTV.

34 "BANGTANTV," Social Blade, accessed November 20, 2021, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/bangtantv>; "@BTS_twt," Social Blade, accessed November 20, 2021, https://socialblade.com/twitter/user/bts_twt.

35 Billboard Music Awards (@BBMAs), "top social artist winners for the FIFTH YEAR IN A ROW !! congrats, @BTS_twt !! #BBMAs," May 24, 2021, 4:30 a.m., <https://twitter.com/BBMAs/status/1396549134258081792>.; Billboard Staff, "Billboard Music Awards 2018 Nominations: See the Full List," Billboard, last modified April 17, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/bbma/8343598/billboard-music-awards-2018-nominations-list>.; Denise Warner, "Cardi B Leads 2019 Billboard Music Awards Nominations With 21," Billboard, last modified April 4, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/bbma/8505581/billboard-music-awards-2019-nominations>.; "2020 Nominees," Billboard, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.billboardmusicawards.com/2020-nominees/>.

36 "BTS 4th Full-length Album Map of the Soul: 7," ibighit, accessed June 16, 2021, https://ibighit.com/bts/eng/discography/detail/map_of_the_soul-7.php.

to the exacerbating COVID-19 situation, the 37-date stadium world tour was canceled.³⁷ Despite these extenuating circumstances, BTS and their company, HYBE, introduced new technologies and varied modes of social media interaction to expand their business models and foster intimacy with fans.

The following section will detail data collected from secondary data sources between March 11, 2020 (the date the pandemic was declared) and June 15, 2021 (the date after their two-day eight-year anniversary concert). It will display how they have facilitated the growth of BTS' digital affect community during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data was collected through official company notices, official and fan social media channels, official press releases, viewing statistics, news articles, and magazine interviews between March 11, 2020 to June 15, 2021. This timeframe has been chosen as the start of the pandemic brought a halt to international travel, and a series of social distancing and lockdowns policies globally, affecting BTS' world tour plans. In addition, BTS' eight-year anniversary virtual fan meeting (an important event to celebrate the connection between artist and fan) is their most recent online live performance with publicly accessible data, as per the time of writing and publishing of this paper.

Data Analysis

Recreating Live Events Through Alternative Online Technologies

On February 27, 2020, two days before Korea ranked as the second most infected COVID-19 country, HYBE announced the cancellation of BTS' Seoul concerts scheduled for April 11, 12, 18 and 19 of 2020.³⁸ A month later, on March 26, the postponement of the North American leg of their tour (April 25 to June 6, 2020) was announced, and the ultimate decision to completely

37 Ana Monroy Yglesais, "BTS Cancel 2020 Map of the Soul World Tour Dates Due to COVID-19 Restrictions," Recording Academy Grammy Awards News, last modified April 28, 2020, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/bts-cancel-2020-map-soul-world-tour-dates-due-covid-19-restrictions>.

38 Althea Legaspi, "BTS Cancel 'Map of the Soul' Korea Shows Due to Coronavirus Concerns," *Rolling Stone*, last modified February 27, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bts-cancel-map-of-the-soul-korea-shows-coronavirus-959472/>.

reschedule all dates of the world tour was made on April 28, 2020.³⁹ Despite canceling their 37-date tour, measures to bring performances directly to fans were quickly executed.⁴⁰ On April 18 and 19, 2020, BTS held their first at-home concert series, 'Bang Bang Con,' streaming previous concert DVDs for free on their official YouTube channel. The two-day event replaced the cancellation of their in-person Seoul concerts, streaming for nearly 24 hours across the weekend; it attracted a total of 50.5 million viewers and a peak of 2.24 million concurrent viewers at one time across 162 regions.⁴¹ On June 14, 2020, 'Bang Bang Con: The Live' was held to replace their annual in-person fan meeting events. The event was streamed in live from Seoul and was the first collaboration between HYBE and the cloud-based live streaming platform Kiswe, whose mission statement includes "modernizing the fan experience," "audience-driven viewing," and "social-first experience."⁴² The platform includes cheer and chat functions that allow audiences to interact live with the artist. For this concert, a six-camera angle multi-view was offered as well as real-time Bluetooth connection technology to BTS' fan light-sticks. This technology allowed for the simultaneous syncing of fan cheering devices, replicating the same technology provided at physical concerts and allowing for a participatory aspect regardless of time, space, and distance.⁴³ 'Bang Bang Con: The Live' recorded 756,000 concurrent viewers in 107 countries, setting the Guinness Book of World Records for the biggest audience at a paid virtual concert,

39 Althea Legaspi, "BTS Postpone North American 'Map of the Soul' Tour Amid Coronavirus Pandemic," *Rolling Stone*, last modified March 26, 2020. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bts-postpone-north-american-map-of-the-soul-tour-coronavirus-973975/>; Ana Monroy Yglesais, "BTS Cancel 2020 Map of the Soul World Tour Dates Due to COVID-19 Restrictions," *Recording Academy Grammy Awards News*, last modified April 28, 2020, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/bts-cancel-2020-map-soul-world-tour-dates-due-covid-19-restrictions>.

40 BIGHIT MUSIC (@BIGHIT_MUSIC), "BTS MAP OF THE SOUL TOUR Schedule Information #BTS #BangtanSeoyeonDan #MapOfTheSoulTour, January 22, 2020, 9.00 a.m., https://twitter.com/bighit_music/status/1219771684904792064.

41 Sarah Deen, "BTS' mammoth online concert series BANG BANG CON fetches over 50 million viewers worldwide," *Metro UK*, last modified April 20, 2020, <https://metro.co.uk/2020/04/20/kpop-bts-bang-bang-con-gets-50m-viewers-12581409/>.

42 "Home," Kiswe, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.kiswe.com/>.

43 "Big Hit Entertainment and Kiswe Forge Strategic Alliance," *Kiswe News*, last modified June 8, 2020, <https://www.kiswe.com/news/big-hit-entertainment-and-kiswe-mobile-forge-strategic-alliance>.

and added an estimated 10,000 new members to the official BTS fan club.⁴⁴

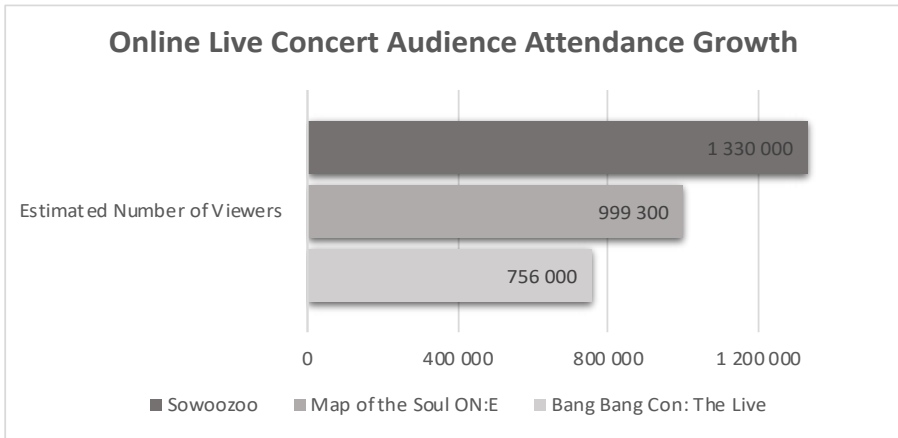
Four months later, on October 10 and 11, 2020, BTS broke their own Guinness Book World Record with their first full-length online concert, 'Map of the Soul ON:E.' Hosted using the same Kiswe technology, the concert introduced the 'ARMY on Air' function, where chosen fans' video and audio were streamed in real-time from their rooms to LED screens on-stage at the Seoul venue. It was the world's first streaming concert to apply both multi-view and 4K/HD technology, attracting 993,000 paid viewers from 191 countries and territories; a 237,000 viewership increase from 'Bang Bang Con: The Live.'⁴⁵ On April 17, 2021, one year from the first of the home concert series, 'Bang Bang Con 2021' streamed over eight hours of concert DVDs on YouTube, attracting 2.7 million concurrent viewers; an increase of nearly half a million viewers from the previous year.⁴⁶ Finally, on June 13 and June 14, 2021, BTS held their biggest paid online concert yet, attracting 1.33 million paid viewers from 195 countries and regions for their eighth-anniversary commemoration concert titled 'Sowozoo.' Held live at the Seoul Olympic Park Stadium, the sets and venue scale of the concert were the largest to date, with an upgraded version of 'ARMY on Air' that displayed fans individually across hundreds of LED screens in the formation of would-have-been physical concert seats.⁴⁷

44 Dominic Punt, "K-Pop Sensations BTS Set Concert Live Stream Record With Bang Bang Con: The Live," Guinness World Records, last modified July 22, 2020, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2020/7/k-pop-sensations-bts-set-concert-live-stream-record-with-bang-bang-con-the-live-624548>.; Patrick Frater, "BTS 'Bang Bang Con: The Live' Claims Record Viewership for Online Concert," Variety, last modified June 14, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/digital/asia/bts-big-bang-con-the-live-record-online-concert-1234635003/>.

45 "Kiswe Powers BTS' Innovative Virtual Concert 'Map of the Soul ON:E,'" Kiswe News, last modified October 14, 2020, <https://www.kiswe.com/news/kiswe-powers-bts-virtual-concert-map-of-the-soul-on-e>.

46 "Number of Peak Concurrent Viewers on BTS Online Event Surpasses 2.7 mln: Agency," *Yonhap News Agency*, April 18, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210418001100315>.

47 Hye-Min Hong, "1.33 million fans gather for BTS' 8th anniversary fan meeting," *Hankook Ilbo*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2021061509220003032?did=NA>.



Graph 1: An increase of 574,000 paid viewers in attendance between the 2020 and 2021 online fan meeting

Intimacy, Community, and Online Interactions

Although seven months elapsed between BTS' latest live online concerts, they participated in numerous pre-recorded online performances for several talk shows and music award shows, including the Billboard Music Awards, the American Music Awards, and the Grammy Award Show.⁴⁸ Moreover, the seven members (individually or in groups) regularly live-streamed daily activities such as cooking, playing video games, making arts and crafts, practicing instruments, or simply chatting. The first of these candid activities were live streamed on March 26, 2020, via the Korean video platform VLIVE. From then until April 5, 2021, 22 casual live streams were conducted on the platform.⁴⁹ For greater global reach, 24 live streams were conducted on YouTube between April 17, 2020, and November 13, 2020, and were labeled with the hashtags #StayConnected and #CarryOn.

48 "BTS (BangtanSeonyeonDan) 'Butter' @ Billboard Music Awards," May 24, 2021, BANGTANTV, video, 3:27, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7lhGz6Bfik&ab_channel=BANGTANTV.; Noah Yoo, "Watch BTS Perform 'Life Goes On' and 'Dynamite' at AMAs 2020, last modified November 22, 2020, <https://pitchfork.com/news/watch-bts-perform-life-goes-on-and-dynamite-at-amas-2020.>; "BTS (BangtanSeonyeonDan) 'Dynamite' @ 63rd GRAMMY Awards Show," April 21, 2021, BANGTANTV, video, 3:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWRMXiHhDjc>.

49 "BTS," VLIVE, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.vlive.tv/channel/FE619>.

While the live streams on YouTube started as daily vlogs, they later functioned as candid footage for the making process of the BE album released on November 20, 2020.⁵⁰ During these live streams, the chatbox function of each platform was used to respond to and react to fans’ questions in real-time. Further, BTS uploaded 285 image posts between January 1, 2020, and June 15, 2021, on Weverse, a social media platform created by HYBE exclusively for direct artist-fan interaction. Additionally, they regularly appear on the platform to chat and respond to fans’ posts.⁵¹ On Twitter, BTS made 526 Tweets between January 1, 2020, and June 15, 2021.⁵²

Platform	Amount of content uploaded
VLIVE	22 live streams
YouTube	24 live streams
Weverse	285 images
Twitter	526 Tweets

Table 1: Summary of activity across BTS’ social media platforms March 2020-June 2021

These daily activities and live interactions with the members have allowed fans to feel a sense of participation and ownership of BTS’ regular lives, privy to their ‘private’ moments. To add to this perception, the concept of the BE album focused on themes of isolation, loneliness, and ways to overcome the pandemic. Part of the title track ‘Life Goes On’ was filmed at BTS’ dorm and featured casual home clothing rather than the flashy high-end fashion that K-pop usually utilizes.⁵³ BTS also replaced their annual travel-reality show with a ‘staycation’ reality series featuring the members in a summer house doing activities that are “somewhere between everyday life and leisure.”⁵⁴ Footage included fishing, hiking, cooking, and sleeping

50 “BANGTANTV,” YouTube, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/user/BANGTANTV>.

51 “BTS,” Weverse, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.weverse.io/bts/feed>.

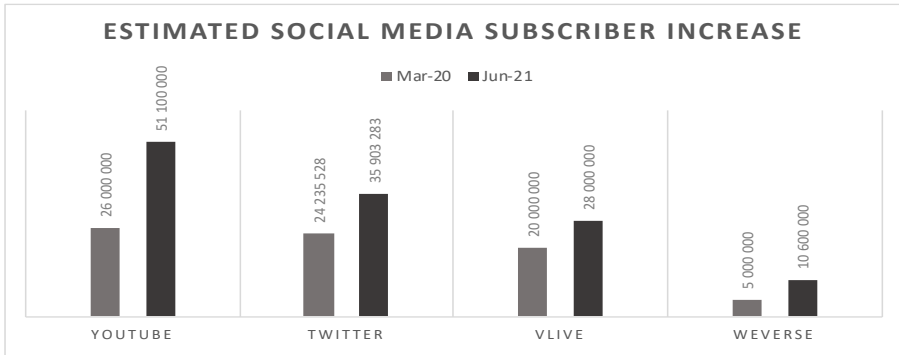
52 “BangtanSeonyeonDan,” Twitter, accessed June 17, 2021, https://twitter.com/bts_twt.

53 “BTS (BangtanSeonyeonDan) ‘Life Goes On’ Official MV,” November 20, 2020, HYBE LABELS, video, 3:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5q5mZbe3V8>.

54 “In the Soop,” Weverse, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://weverse.io/bts/media/category/73>.

and was aired on the Korean cable TV channel JTBC. Extended versions of the free-to-air episodes were uploaded as paid content on Weverse.

Of the 461 days within the research timeframe, BTS-related content was released across 355 days. This content includes their social media posts, reality show airing, online concerts, vlogs, music videos, interviews, magazine spreads, behind-the-scenes videos, DVDs, and advertisements. Notably, new content was released every day between February 21, 2021, and June 15, 2021.⁵⁵ As a result of BTS' and HYBE's strategies to produce and promote affective online content, the following estimates have been made of their followership across all social media platforms between March 2020 and June 2021.⁵⁶



Graph 2: Overall, BTS' YouTube subscribers have increased by 49.1%, Twitter followers by 32.5%, VLIVE subscribers by 28.5%, and Weverse members by 52.8%.

Discussion

BTS have a long history of utilizing their social media channels as affective,

55 "BTS," Google Calendar by choarosa@gmail.com, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://t.co/N6Oqu1suYP?amp=1>.

56 "BANGTANTV," Social Blade, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/bangtantv/monthly>.; "@BTS_twt," Social Blade, accessed June 17, 2021, https://socialblade.com/twitter/user/bts_twt/monthly.; V LIVE (@Vliveofficial), "BTS's VLIVE channel reached over 20 million subscribers VLIVE thanks ARMY from all over the world that showed love for BTS~ If you still haven't followed BTS's VLIVE channel, follow us now [#BTS #BangtanSeonyeonDan #VLIVE](https://channels.vlive.tv/FE619)," June 5, 2020, 12.38 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Vliveofficial/status/1268748890884333568>.; "BTS," VLIVE, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://channels.vlive.tv/FE619>.

culturally discursive spaces for community belonging and fandom practices. Nevertheless, the display of increasingly candid activities across their social media platforms during COVID-19 has resonated with audiences and contributed to a mass increase in fandom growth. Throughout the pandemic, with online platforms as the only way of communicating with fans, BTS have increased the sharing of their ‘publicly private’ personas, feelings, and innermost thoughts on a globally publicly accessible forum by providing footage into their personal living spaces, workspaces, and through live streams of their everyday activities. Although BTS have featured their work studios and living spaces before the pandemic, the addition of ‘everyday’ activities and conversations shared with fans within these spaces has enhanced the parasocial fan-artist relationship. It removes their unreachable superstar status and plays a performative role of friendship between the stars and fans. These interactions have further curated a sense of intimacy between artist and fandom. Adopting this communication model in place of face-to-face interaction has created a synergistic environment for attracting new audiences who view these images as BTS’ ‘authentic’ selves. These actions highlight visual intimacy, public vulnerability, and belief in BTS as affective personal leaders. Although most fans cannot directly interact with BTS, they can feel connected through textual viewing, breaching the barrier between public and private spaces, time, and distance.⁵⁷ As their influence expands, so too does BTS’ political leadership in these mediatized public spheres, and their ‘selves’ become a commodity to be consumed. Especially in today’s ‘Experience Age,’ exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, online users not only seek to maximize the pleasure of their consumption experience but to believe that they have a stake (or can participate directly) in the process of collective consumption.⁵⁸

The ‘ARMY on Air’ technology used during the ‘Map of the Soul ON:E’ and ‘Sowozoo’ live concerts allowed BTS to view fans in real-time through screens at the concert hall, while fans simultaneously watched BTS (and themselves) through their screens at home. These virtual community meetings present implications for the further deterritorialization and digitalization of K-pop. K-pop as a genre has relied on its global export to its transnational fans for the increase and longevity of its popularity. Pre-COVID-19, a significant portion of K-pop groups’ revenue was based on their performances at live events and corresponding ticket sales

57 Anna Lee Swan, “Transnational Identities and Feeling in Fandom,” 557.

58 Ignas Kalpokas, “Enabling Post-truth: Mediatization and Affect,” 62.

and merchandise sales. However, the transition to online concerts may decrease tour costs in favor of larger revenues through online ticket sales while also reaching masses of international fans who otherwise may never have had the opportunity to experience their favorite stars up-close. As displayed through the case study of BTS, the frequency and accessibility to increasingly intimate K-pop content allows for transnational fandom growth, who rely on social mediascapes as a site of community, affect, and emotion.

Dangers of Fandom as Emotionally Charged Spaces

Even before their official debut, BTS' candid nature and freedom over their 'personal' social media channels allowed them to share more of their lives than the average K-pop idol, consequently attracting a loyal fan community who feel a strong and close emotional connection to the group. However, while the sharing of BTS' 'everyday' and 'natural' lives throughout the pandemic has lent emotional and mental support to the fan-artist relationship, fandom and social media are emotionally charged spaces, and not all interactions within these digital affect communities are positive. With the growth of the group's fandom and investment in the increasingly emotional connection to the artist, leading to the consequent belief that fans have influence or ability to affect their real lives, the digital fandom space has the potential to be a place of negativity and unsavory behavior. The enormous size of the fandom and BTS' continued relevance on social media platforms have more than once led to the spread of rash and incorrect information; ARMY's keen protectiveness towards their stars has been interpreted as online cyberbullying and feeding into the digital 'cancel culture.'⁵⁹ Both Western and Korean industry celebrities alike have not been spared from this toxic behavior, and musical collaborations between BTS and other artists have been canceled as a consequence.⁶⁰

While on the one hand, online technologies, and their digital spaces as a site for social gathering and emotional interaction, has served as an important arena to allow global audiences to navigate and overcome feelings of social isolation throughout the pandemic, these spaces and their normalized behaviors also bring with it dangerous implications. Fans'

59 Michele Amabile Angermiller, "Charlie Puth implores BTS fans to end 'toxic internet screaming match,'" *Variety*, July 5, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/charlie-puth-bts-fans-1234698628/>.

60 SBS PopAsia HQ, "BTS fans attack Wale on Twitter," *SBS PopAsia*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.sbs.com.au/popasia/blog/2017/06/27/bts-fans-attack-wale-twitter>.

investment into their parasocial relationships can lead to the overstepping of socially constructed personal boundaries, and an unhealthy reliance on digital affect communities as a place of lived 'reality' in place of real, human society.

Study Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on the use of a single K-pop group as a case study. The behavior and nature of the relationship between BTS and ARMY is not representative of the way all K-pop idol groups and their fandoms utilize digital affect spaces. The study is also constrained by its' reliance on English language data sources and Korean to English language translations which may subconsciously reflect a Western bias perspective or factual inaccuracies. Furthermore, due to the quantitative nature of this study, the participation of fandom and interaction between fan and artist has only been displayed through numerical data. It has not been able to show how fan-artist interact on the micro-level, nor the actual thoughts, feelings, words, ideas, and behaviors of these communities.

Regardless of these limitations, this study, and its exploration on the reliance of digital affect communities for emotional connection, especially in times of mass social isolation, presents that the increased normalization of these behaviors could further benefit and attract audiences to *Hallyu 2.0* and subsequent Korean waves. Future research should offer a qualitative perspective on how K-pop fandoms participate in social media as an intimate space of affect. Additionally, further research can observe how and if future technological innovations such as virtual reality and augmented reality can be applied to deterritorializing online communities, live K-pop performances, its effect on fan-artist interactions, and fandoms' emotions and behaviors.

Conclusion

Indeed, new media has allowed viewers to transgress linguistic barriers and spatial dimensions with ease through fan-driven live translation blogs, real-time simultaneous subtitling, or official pre-captioned videos. Thus, previous applications of K-pop and cultural proximity may no longer be justified within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the entirety of the world seeks intimacy, emotional belonging, and affect. Technological mediation through BTS' innovative online concerts have deconstructed the boundaries between 'us' and the 'other,' closing the distance between the character onscreen and fans' own lived experiences. Suddenly, attendance

at the events of the world's biggest boy band is no longer dictated by geographical boundaries or language barriers. These technological developments have increased viewers' desires for transnational intimacy and provoked appetites for international media as a part of their daily routines.

Through this research, this paper has sought to display global viewers' increasing dependency on social media as a form of social and emotional connection. While research on *Hallyu 2.0* and the integral role of social media as a mediator between entertainment companies, artists, and fans has been conducted, the innovations learned from BTS' activities and portrayals of the 'authentic,' yet mediatized, and commodified self can be further applied as the K-pop industry continues to digitalize. The case of BTS has shown how social media and digital affect cultures reinforce fan identities and shared experiences between the artist and the community. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper has highlighted the increasing importance of social mediascapes as a place of affect and belonging and shown how *Hallyu* industries can innovate within an environment of increasing self-mediatization, as the boundaries between real and virtual continue to blur.