

# “This Is How We Support K-pop Stars” : From Unilateral Support to Mutually Inspired Partnership\*

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Over twenty-five years have elapsed since Korean popular music (K-pop) has become popular outside South Korea. As it has become a global cultural

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phenomenon, the way K-pop fans support K-pop has also changed. K-pop fans unilaterally supported their music in the 1990s. However, K-pop fandom today forms a mutually inspired and admiring partnership with their favorite stars. This paper examines the evolution of K-pop fandom from the 1990s to the present by focusing on how it transforms from an example of a para-social interaction as proposed by Horton and Wohl to an example of Partha Chatterjee's civil society. Furthermore, the author suggests that K-pop fandom today can be understood as an example of what Michael Warner refers to as a public.

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Key words: K-Pop, fandom, fan practices, ARMY, BTS

## 1. Introduction

When BTS, the prominent K-pop<sup>1)</sup> boy group, held a concert at Citi Field in New York for the first time on October 6, 2018, media outlets focused on BTS fans camping out near the venue days before the concert (Herman). During interviews with news media, fans often showed off items associated with BTS, such as support banners, T-shirts, light sticks, cushion dolls, etc. However,

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1) Though K-pop stands for Korean popular music, K-pop does not necessarily always mean Korean popular music. I clarify that K-pop is often used to indicate a specific style of Korean popular music, which can be a certain production style, performance style, and/or way of consuming by fans. In his book *K-pop in Conflict*, Gyu Tag Lee describes several reasons why K-pop is not a synonym of Korean popular music. See Lee, *K-pop in Conflict*, 11-3.

this was not all they did to celebrate the concert. Some brought food and blankets to donate to local homeless shelters. They also wrote thank-you notes to give the staff members at Citi Field and organized clean-up efforts around the venue. In sum, these efforts were part of a larger philanthropic initiative to support BTS, especially their historic concert in New York. In this respect, BTS's concert in New York was not just a musical performance or a milestone signaling the global success of K-pop, but also an occasion when members of an imagined community gathered and practiced a distinct fan culture by sharing the same values. Through their subculture of civic responsibility, K-pop fans collectively shaped an affirmative image of K-pop.

With the ascendancy of K-pop as a global pop culture phenomenon, fan practices have shifted in terms of their appreciation for the genre and support for idol stars. For example, as I will explore, whereas K-pop fans back in the 1990s simply unilaterally supported their favorite idols, K-pop fans today not only support idols but also interact with them through participatory dialogue. Whereas K-pop fans used to send luxurious items to idols, they now donate money to support victims of natural disasters across the world, to build a school for children in need, and to plant trees in the Amazon area in Brazil in honor of their favorite idols. In addition, BTS fans, for example, gathered more than \$1 million USD in June 2020, to support the Black Lives Matter movement, inspired by BTS and its management, Big Hit Entertainment, which also donated \$1 million to the movement (Iasimone). Though charitable work in K-pop is

one example of such pop culture philanthropy, it is quite distinct in the way that people, including K-pop fans and artists, are mutually inspiring, affecting, and interacting with each other in charitable events. In this essay, I examine shifts from unilateral support to more reciprocal relationships in K-pop fan practices. This change shows that K-pop fandom is now more like an example of civil society than the para-social interaction. Whereas the para-social interaction is “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by performer, and not susceptible of mutual development” (Horton and Wohl 215), civil society functions as “the institutional space of modern associational life…based on equality, autonomy, freedom of exit and entry, contract, deliberative procedures of decision making, recognized rights and duties of members, and other such principles” (Chatterjee 172).

Specifically, I am interested in how and why fan practices engage social issues beyond music consumption. By conducting charitable events and political advocacy, K-pop fans contribute to the social image of K-pop as they support their favorite stars. In this community, members are inspired by each other and engage in collective practices that are characteristic of fan culture (Harris 6; Duffett “Fan Words” 153). By looking at the transition of K-pop fandom, I emphasize that K-pop fandom is integral to the global success of K-pop, as well as to the construction of the image of K-pop. Further, the community of K-pop fandom is critical in illuminating the complex meaning of “K” in K-pop.

K-pop today is not merely Korean popular music. In her book, *K-pop Live*, Suk-Young Kim proposes several terms (all beginning

with “K–”) to clarify diverse characteristics of K–pop today. Kim describes K–pop as “kaleidoscopic” pop, embracing a wide range of multimedia performance, not just music; “keyboard or keypad” pop, which consumers can access digitally rather than through live performance; “Kleenex” pop, highly disposable in nature; “ketchup” pop, which is premade and has a predictable taste; “korporate” pop, a highly polished commercial product whose sole aim is to generate profit in global marketplaces; and “Korean” pop (S. Kim 9). For my discussion, I introduce an additional “k” concept, K–pop as imagined “community” pop, to denote a worldwide musical and cultural community of Korean origin. By imagined community, I mean that K–pop can be understood as an example of what Michael Warner states as a public. According to Warner, there are differences between the public and a public. For example, whereas “The public is a kind of social totality [...] It might be the people organized as the nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state, or some other community” (Warner 65), a public is more like self–organized. In addition, he states that “the notion of a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social [or community] entity” (Warner 11–2). By examining K–pop fan practices, I describe why K–pop fandom is an example of a public.

K–pop fandom has been debated by scholars focusing mainly on how K–pop is (re)produced, (re)circulated, and (re)interpreted depending on individuals in different sociocultural contexts (Otmažgin and Lyan; Sung; Oh). Scholars have also focused on the significant

role of fan practices in enhancing the cultural phenomenon of K-pop and building the cultural identity of K-pop fans (Jung; Auh and Walker; Han; J. Kim; Keith). For example, Han focuses on K-pop fan activism in Latin America to explore the transcultural dynamics of K-pop fandom. His work shows how K-pop fans negotiate social identities as they engage with the consumption and production of K-pop through digital fan activism, mediated practices which then become absorbed into mainstream culture in Latin America (Han 2265). Whereas these scholars explore how K-pop affects the formation of fans' sociocultural identity in particular regions, this essay examines changes to K-pop fandom as an important element of K-pop culture. I also explore how fan culture connects members of the K-pop community with one another beyond geographical barriers and what this connection might signify in the discourse of K-pop today. I contend that such a fan culture in K-pop is integral to building an imagined "Kommunity" whose identity reaches far beyond Korea.

## 2. Transition of Fan Practices

One of the characteristics of K-pop fandoms is that almost every K-pop idol group has an official fan club organized, in most cases, by its management company. In order to look at the transition of fan culture in K-pop from the 1990s to the present, it is important to examine the impact of Seo Taiji and Boys in the 1990s because he is often considered a principal cause of the changes in the music,

industry, and culture of K-pop. (Howard; Maliangkay; E. Jung). One of the legacies of Seo Taiji and Boys was the rise of teenage fandom as a dominant consumer group in the field of K-pop (S. Lee). After his retirement in 1996, teenage fans gravitated toward K-pop idol groups such as H.O.T. (High-Five of Teenagers). H.O.T. was, significantly, the first manufactured (thoroughly planned and produced) K-pop idol group in the modern history of K-pop. Teenage fandom was instrumental to the remarkable success of H.O.T. It is no coincidence that H.O.T. was supported by large numbers of teenage fans in 1996 when Seo Taiji and Boys retired.

Seo Taiji and Boys disbanded his official fan club at that time out of concerns about a potentially hierarchical relationship among fans that could result if a fan club became systemized. Also, he thought that the systemized fan club would likely be a group pursuing commercial purposes (Kim and Um). Unlike Seo Taiji and Boys, H.O.T.'s management company, SM Entertainment, established an official fan club named Club H.O.T. in order to have the fans promote H.O.T. and to increase the company's revenue. Inspired by H.O.T.'s tremendous success, it became the norm for all K-pop entertainment companies to establish an official fan club for each of its idol groups.

## 2.1. Fan club and *Jogong*

K-pop fans invented many ways to support their favored groups. For example, similar to fans of pop stars in the West, K-pop fans

would send gifts and supportive letters that has become a collective practice among K-pop fans (J. Kim “K-popping” 187). It was common to see teenage fans pool funds for a special day for their artist(s) and present them with extravagant gifts. K-pop fans have labelled this practice of collective gift-giving ‘jogong,’ which originally meant ‘tribute’ in Korean (J. Kim “K-popping” 188). To perform jogong, fans discuss and take on certain roles to make it successful. According to Jungwon Kim:

Using message boards in [online] fan sites, the fans discuss what kind of ‘tributes’ will be given to the stars as birthday presents—these tributes are also known as ‘birthday *jogong*’. Once the items for the birthday *jogong* are decided upon, the fan collect funds for the *jogong* items by wiring money to the fan site managers’ bank accounts. The manager announces the progress of the *jogong* to other fans, attaching pictures of the tributes. (J. Kim “K-popping” 188)

Official fan club members in the 1990s began to elect executive members, such as president, vice-president, treasurer, and local representatives, thus transforming fan clubs into hierarchical organizations. The president retained the authority to direct other members. Official fan club members followed their president’s directive as they supported their idols. For example, if the president were to leave a message in their shared-callbox, other fan club members would follow the directives. Min, a member of Sechs Kies’ official fan club, reminisces that “Since there was no cell phone and the Internet [back in the 1990s], I always checked callbox messages

from the president during breaks at school. Once we received the directive from the president, we followed the message to gather at a certain time and a certain place to support Sechs Kies. It was a sort of gang culture” (Jeon). With large membership rolls in fan clubs, Club H.O.T. numbering over one hundred thousand for instance (H. Lee), presidents could have substantial influence. Although fans came up with many ideas and elected executive members by themselves, their relationship with the artist (or performer) was one-sided and controlled by the performer. This relationship fits Horton and Wohl’s model of para-social interactions (Horton and Wohl 215).

By joining an official fan club, fans not only gain opportunities to provide meaningful support to their favorite artist, but they also feel solidarity with the star and other club members under the name of the fan club. In fact, each official fan club has its name representing the characteristics of an idol group. For example, BTS’s official fan club is called ARMY, which is an acronym for “Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth.” It is also associated with the original meaning of BTS(*Bangtan Sonyeondan*, “Bulletproof Boy Scouts” in English).<sup>2)</sup> TWICE, a female K-pop group, has an official fan club, named ONCE. Along with the fan club name, designated colors are one of the ways fans express supports for their star but also unity with each other. In the 1990s, it was common to see groups of people holding the same color of balloon or wearing the same color of raincoat in a broadcasting station,

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2) BTS rebranded their name as “Beyond The Scene” in 2017 (see Marshall).

festival, joint concert, or wherever stars were present. By waving a certain color of balloon representing a star, fans at that time not only supported their star, but also bolstered their solidarity. Light sticks have replaced balloons as this practice evolved, but many K-pop fans today still utilize a group's unique color to support idols.<sup>3)</sup> This distinct fan culture has become more diverse and influential. By using light sticks, K-pop fans today coordinate waves, as well as “produce massive banners of support” (Besley 13). Also, this fan culture affects iconic landscapes as it changes the color of the location. For example, several iconic landscapes in the world, such as Wembley Stadium, N Seoul Tower, the Empire State Building, and downtown Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, were colored purple, which represents BTS, to announce BTS concerts or fan meetings (*AllKpop*; *Yonhap News* “Landmark in Seoul”; Arcadio; *Arab News*).

## 2.2. Fans' contribution to visual and sonic environments of K-pop performance

Fans are also very important in producing a distinct ‘soundscape’ of K-pop. There is a distinct fan practice, called fan chant (either

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3) Back in the 1990s, a certain color was designated to represent a star. For example, White-H.O.T., Yellow-SechsKies, Sky Blue-g.o.d, and Orange-Shinwha. Since then, this fan culture has existed as a crucial fan activism. There is no one who does not know that purple represents BTS among K-pop fans. According to Nam, fan clubs take an important role to decide color. K-pop managements often consult fans as they make a decision. See Ji-eun Nam, “Idol, War of Colors,” *Hankyoreh*, 22 December 2016.

*ttechang* 떼창 or “organized fan chant”, or *eung wonbeob* 응원법 or “how to cheer the artist”).<sup>4)</sup> One can easily hear fan chants whenever and wherever s/he sees a K-pop performance. It is important to note that fan chants are not just shouting out loud or singalongs by fans. It has very specific directions and fans are expected to sing at a certain part of the song. What is musically important about this fan practice is that fan chant never interrupts main melody lines.

Here is an example of fan chant for “Pop!” by Nayeon of TWICE  
(See Figure 1).

The musical transcription shows the verse part of "Pop!" by Nayeon of TWICE. The tempo is indicated as  $\text{♩} = 194$  and the time signature is common time (C). The duration of the section is 0:05 ~ 0:25. The main melody and fan chant are shown on two staves. The main melody staff starts with a D major chord. The lyrics are: "What's wrong? 훌 릴 듯 이 난 너 를 자 극 해". The fan chant staff starts with an E major chord. The lyrics are: "pop pop pop". This pattern repeats. The section then transitions to a D minor chord (Dm) with lyrics: "내 땀 대로 play it". The section then transitions to an F major chord (F) with lyrics: "거 침 없 이 shake it". The section then transitions back to a D major chord (D) with lyrics: "play it". The section then transitions back to a D major chord (D) with lyrics: "You know? 넌 내 게 달 려 있 단 것 만 알아 뒤". The section then transitions back to a D major chord (D) with lyrics: "You know?". The lyrics are written in Korean and English, with some parts in Romanized Korean. The fan chant consists of three notes followed by a rest, repeated throughout the section.

Figure 1. verse part of “Pop!” by Nayeon of TWICE  
(transcription by the author).

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- 4) In almost all cases, artist's management company determines how to do fan chant and release a tutorial video on YouTube, titled “Cheering Guide,” before they release a new song.

Again, it was not distracting because the fan chant was well organized to support the main melody. In this example of fan chant, one can observe that the fan chant not only responds to main melody but also emphasizes a certain phrase. Fan chant is crucial to making distinct soundscape of K-pop.

Whereas these fan practices were mainly used by fans in the 1990s to boast their fandom against rival groups, light sticks and fan chants today function not only to produce a distinct visual and sonic environment of K-pop, but also to build solidarity between fans and artists, and among fans.

### 2.3. Fans' autonomous voice

Whereas fans autonomously elected executive members to run official fan clubs in the 1990s, today, fan club managers are generally hired by the management company. Fans today communicate with the fan manager as they ask, complain about, or insist on something. Though the management structure of fan clubs has changed, the fandom is still often used as a tool that a company can easily appropriate to increase its revenue. The nominal purpose of the official fan club established by a company is not only to support the artist in more effective ways but also to give fan club members a preferential right to access events, such as a concert or fan meeting. In this way, fans could be manipulated to spend more money to purchase a higher membership tier, concert/event tickets, or exclusive items. In her book, Suk-young Kim describes how

G-Dragon fans were exploited to increase revenues. By pointing out how fans were mobilized to make his music video "Who You," Kim states:

But not everyone was invited to this intimate forum, and the selection process reflected the cold-hearted marketing and promotion strategy of a profit-driven corporation. Invitations to join the video shooting went first to loyal VIP members of the official fan club, whose status is defined by quantifiable contributions to their stars' career, usually in financial terms, such as purchasing the stars' albums or merchandise...In short, every single guest who participated in the video shooting had to purchase G-Dragon's album in order to be there. (S. Kim 125–6)

In addition, K-pop fans today are incentivized to purchase more than one album. When an album is released, there are often random photos of a member of the group, or an application form for the autograph session to celebrate the new album release. Some constantly purchase the album until they finally get a photo of their favorite member, or the application form. Specifically, the autograph session is the most attractive event where fans feel what Duffett has called a "personal connection" to the star and heightened emotion "that are manifestations of effervescence" (Duffett "From Secret" 190). It is also the most competitive event because only a limited number of participants, usually a hundred of people per an event, are allowed to join. Enthusiastic fans of prominent boy groups such as BTS, Wanna One, or EXO usually buy more than an

album in order to raise the possibility to apply to the autograph session. Among K-pop fans, there is a rare, yet famous story of a Wanna One fan who purchased 213 albums but failed to attend the autograph session (Hong).

However, it does not always mean that fandom is a group of people who are merely manipulated by promotion strategies. Though official fan clubs were established by agencies, fans are neither controlled by the performer nor reluctant to voice their opinions. For example, fans of Mamamoo boycotted a concert out of concern for the artists' hectic schedule and called on the company to let the members take a break, which would, they believed, lead to a better concert. Fans of GFriend boycotted their artist goods, arguing that they were too commercially sexualized. Both companies eventually cancelled the plans for a concert and goods because of fans' demands (Son). As such, fans have become influential as they can affect a company's project and even get plans cancelled unless they are deemed acceptable. Indeed, “fans are both commodity-completists and they express anti-commercial beliefs or ideologies” (Hills 44).

#### 2.4. *Yeokjogong* (reverse-tribute)

Furthermore, fans may be praised by their beloved artist, which is called *yeokjogong* (reverse-tribute in English). To express gratitude for fan loyalty and support, K-pop stars frequently provide their devoted fans with presents. For example, IU not only provided cushions for her fans who had to sit a long time during her

concert, but also presented anniversary rings to fans attending a fan meeting for the tenth anniversary of her debut. Furthermore, she donated 100 million won (about \$86,000 USD), in her name and that of her fan club, Uaena, to children who are being raised by their grandparents. This impressed a number of IU's fans and inspired them to make further donations (Ahn). When Hyun-A had a comeback performance during the winter, she gave down jackets to her fans waiting in front of a broadcasting station. Besides IU and Hyun-A fans, other K-pop fans, such as the fans of BTS, Wonder Girls, BLACKPINK, and Suzy, were also touched by their stars' *yeokjogong* (J. Kim "Idol Stars"). Figure 2 is BTS's recent *yeokjogong* that was given to their fans attending their comeback show on June 13, 2022. This package consists of a rose, lip balm, hand cream, cookies, canned coffee, and photo. Only pre-selected 4,000 fans were able to attend the comeback stage.







Figure 2. BTS's yeokjogong package (courtesy by Kang Sin-Ae).

Among K-pop artists, it has become a tradition of treating fans who attend the TV program, *Idol Star Athletics Championships*, with meals during the show's filming, which usually takes a whole day. TWICE, for example, provided fans with meals along with hand-written thank you messages for spending the whole day to support them (Ji). As these examples show, several K-pop stars spend time and money on yeokjogong because they believe it is one of the best ways to interact with their fans, which leads to a companionship between fans and stars. Indeed, fandom in the new era is personal, collective, and mutual.

## 2.5. Charitable events

As I mentioned above, fan practices today are not confined to the relationship between fans and artists. Since the middle of the 2000s, K-pop fans willingly contribute to a socially affirmative and charitable image of K-pop by donating money or food in the name of their favorite stars to people in need. Since then, specifically, rice donations have become pervasive, especially when celebrating a concert. For example, TVXQ leader U-Know (Yunho)'s fans across the world donated 9.5 tons of rice to low-income groups in Gwangju, his hometown (The Korea Times). These donation pledges can be incorporated into the performance aesthetic: when an artist holds a concert, the performance site is often decorated with wreaths featuring the star's photo, name, and cheering messages. Since each wreath means that a certain amount of rice will be donated after the concert in the name of the star, the number of wreaths determines how many charitable works will be completed. For this reason, standing wreaths are often considered a barometer indicating the size, power, and influence of a particular fandom. Furthermore, the standing wreaths around the concert hall have become a distinct cultural venue for K-pop fans. According to Jungwon Kim, "as the wreaths function as part of the landscape of K-pop concerts, many fans at the concert venue enjoy taking selfies in front of the standing wreaths" (J. Kim "K-popping" 190).

As fan activism has become more diverse, its impact has become more pervasive. While fan activism in the 1990s used to center on

significant locations, such as a concert hall, broadcasting station, or the vicinity of star's home, fan activities are now more decentralized and form their own locations of cultural production. For example, K-pop fans will transform subway billboards into fan space. Figure 3 illustrates how a billboard in a South Korean subway station becomes a cultural site in which community members can gather. An interesting fact about this billboard is that the boys featured on it were aspiring musicians and participants in a K-pop audition program, *Produce X 101*, who had not yet debuted.<sup>5)</sup>



*Figure 3. A billboard of K-pop fans' support for a participant in the K-pop audition program, Produce X 101 Season 4, in Samseong Station in Seoul. Photograph by the author.*

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5) *Produce 101*, aired by Mnet, is an audition program, which fans' votes are crucial to determine the winner. For that reason, intensive fan activisms were seen during the season.

### 3. One In An ARMY: Big Fandom and Big Difference

As fan activism has expanded its domain, types of *jogong* also have become diverse. BTS fans' One In An ARMY (hereafter OIAA) is a case in point of how such supportive activities have become pervasive, diverse, boundless and highly organized. OIAA originated from BTS's two-year partnership beginning in 2017 with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in support of the global LOVE MYSELF anti-violence campaign for youth. Not only did they promote the #ENDviolence campaign on social media, but they also raised money for the dedicated fund. Among other fundraising for the campaign,<sup>6)</sup> three types of donations stand out: donations of 3% of the income from the sales of physical albums of the Love Yourself series, donations of 100% of the income from the sales of official goods for the LOVE MYSELF campaign, and donations of emoji stickers in LINE and KakaoTalk, which are popular mobile instant messaging applications among K-pop fans. These efforts signal that fans' activities are more accurately described as active engagement rather than passive consumption.

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6) Donations for Love Myself campaign consist of 1) donations worth KRW 500 million from Big Hit Entertainment and the seven BTS members, 2) donations of 3% of the income from the sales of physical albums of the Love Yourself series, 3) donations of 100% of the income from the sales of official goods for the LOVE MYSELF campaign, 4) donations at the donation desks installed by UNICEF, 5) LINE donations sticker, 6) Kakao Give-ticon, 7) Together with Kakao, and 8) Happybean. (see the official website of LOVE MYSELF campaign).

The partnership with UNICEF led BTS to deliver a speech at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 2018. During the speech, the leader of BTS, RM (Rap Monster, Kim Namjoon), tells his and BTS's story to emphasize how important loving yourself is, no matter what other people say. He states:

Yesterday's me is still me. Today I am who I am with all of my faults and my mistakes. Tomorrow I might be a tiny bit wiser and that would be me too. These faults and mistakes are what I am, making up the brightest stars in the constellation of my life. I have come to love myself for who I am, for who I was, and for who I hope to become. (UNICEF)

At the end of the speech, he urges young people across the world to take the next step of the LOVE MYSELF campaign. RM says:

After releasing the *Love Yourself* albums and launching the "Love Myself" campaign, we started to hear remarkable stories from our fans all over the world, how our message helped them overcome their hardships in life and start loving themselves. These stories constantly remind us of our responsibility. So, let's all take one more step. We have learned to love ourselves, so now I urge you to speak yourself [...] Tell me your story. I want to hear your voice, and I want to hear your conviction. No matter who you are, where you're from, your skin color, gender identity. Speak yourself. Find your name, find your voice by speaking yourself. (Ibid)

The speech was an inspirational call to action for BTS fans across

the world. OIAA is one effect of the speech. Since 2018, BTS fans have established this non-profit organization under the motto “I am One in an ARMY: Big Fandom. Big Difference.” After one of the BTS fans, known as rwapmon on Twitter, posted a tweet that went viral, asking if any fans of BTS were interested in working on a project for #ENDViolence, #BTSLoveMyself, or a Syrian relief project, a number of BTS fans all over the world organized a response. In this way, BTS fans created the OIAA project to “start making this idea a reality” (One In An ARMY). On their official website, they clarify that they are not endorsed by or affiliated with BTS or their management Big Hit Entertainment, but are a voluntary organization of BTS fans. In this project, they have launched monthly campaigns in the conviction that “many people giving small amounts can create a substantial impact when we work together” (One In An ARMY). In other words, they firmly believe in the positive impacts of their efforts in the name of BTS.

According to the Archive in One In An ARMY website, thirty-eight monthly campaigns have been fulfilled since April 2018.<sup>7)</sup> For the first charity campaign, they supported Medical Teams International (MTI) to help the medical crisis in Syria. For this campaign, ARMYs raised not only needed funds but also the social media presence of MTI. According to OIAA, awareness on social media for MTI during the month of April increased 747% compared to the previous month.<sup>8)</sup> They celebrated their accomplishment by

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7) See “Archive: Past Campaigns,” One In An ARMY, <https://www.oneinanarmy.org/archive>.

posting the results of the campaign including a letter of appreciation and certificate of donation on social media and the website (see Figure 4).



5/7/2018

Dear Members of BTS,  
Medical Teams International is thrilled to commend One in an Army, a loyal part of your fanbase, for their fundraising efforts to assist Syrian refugees. We have awarded this group with a certificate of our sincere appreciation, and a copy is enclosed for your reference.

For more information about Medical Teams International or One in an Army, please visit the following websites: [www.medicalteams.org](http://www.medicalteams.org) and <https://oneinanarmy.wixsite.com/home>

We praise your group's influence on young people to give philanthropically.

Joyfully,  
A handwritten signature in black ink.  
Tracy Holland  
Philanthropy Advisory  
tholland@medicalteams.org

Figure 4. A Letter of Appreciation from MTI:  
Courtesy of One In An ARMY

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- 8) One In An ARMY, "April 2018 Campaign Summary-Medical Teams Internationals." Regarding supportive activities on social media, they not only hook up the social media link of charity organizations on the Internet, but also create a certain hashtag for each campaign, such as #ThirstRealief\_July, #HealwithTaehyng, #DreamWithJungKook, and so forth.

Since August 2018, OIAA has started to incorporate the birthdays of BTS's seven members into their charity campaigns. For the first birthday campaign, they chose a non-profit corporation, called 'Korean Kids and Orphanage Outreach Mission (KKOOM)', to support Korean orphanages in honor of Jungkook's birthday. According to OIAA, \$3,839.98 were gathered in only 31 days from 278 donors in 40 countries, including 22 states in the U.S.<sup>9)</sup> Furthermore, as a part of this campaign project, ARMYs sent over 200 supportive letters and postcards to kids involved in KKOON. Kids received encouraging letters from ARMYs all over the world. In this way, children and ARMYs became a member of the BTS community beyond geographical barriers.

Besides monthly campaigns, OIAA has embarked on side projects in response to the enthusiasm for their charity work. For these bonus missions, OIAA urges people to join hashtag sharing campaigns, such as #RoarForChange, #LoveLoud, #BeTheGood, #KickChildhood Cancer, etc. #AnpanARMY<sup>10)</sup> is a typical side project of OIAA and has become a monthly tradition among BTS fans. #AnpanARMY is a kind of ritual to celebrate any work that organization members have done to make the world a better place. On the 17th of every

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9) See One In An ARMY, "August 2018 Campaign Summary-Korean Kids and Orphanage Outreach Mission (KKOOM)."

10) It is a combination word of Anpanman and ARMY. Anpanman is a fictional Japanese superhero character, which is very popular among young children. It is also a title of song in BTS's Love Yourself album, which is inspired by Anpanman character.

month in Korea Standard Time Zone, BTS fans all over the world share information about a good deed they have done by using the hashtag. For example, “saying something kind to someone, feeding a stray animal, volunteering somewhere, helping someone perform a task, etc.”<sup>11)</sup> In fact, what ARMYs did at Citi Field to celebrate BTS’s first concert in New York was a part of the #AnpanARMY project. After charity works around Citi Field, ARMYs shared their charity works on social media with the hashtag #AnpanARMY, inspiring others to continue a virtuous cycle. In this regard, philanthropic works of K-pop fans have become direct, diverse, and pervasive.

Mark Duffett’s concept of the “Knowing field” helps to explain contemporary K-pop fandom. According to Duffett, “Knowing field is an inner space of intense emotional conviction that fans collectively enter into when they notice engrossing aspects of a performance or persuasive elements in its context” (“Fan Words” 153). For my discussion, I rename his concept feeling field to emphasize emotion or affect, which is not something one knows, but feels.<sup>12)</sup> By feeling the companionship with other fans and their favorite stars, fans perform philanthropic works. Specifically, fans’ philanthropic works are mainly derived from emotional conviction. The social

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11) See One In An ARMY, “ANPANARMY.”

12) By feeling and emotion, I rely on Jerome Kagan’s definition. Kagan uses “feeling” for “a consciously detected change in feeling that has sensory qualities”; and “emotion” for “the preparedness second phenomenon and “emotion” for “the cognitive processes that interpret and/or label the feeling with words” (23).

advocacy of BTS fandom is perpetuated by BTS fans taking inspiration from their peers' actions and in turn entering the field. To further clarify terminology, while Duffett defines "performance" as a type of musical practice, I argue that performance should not be confined to a musical activity. As K-pop fandom illustrates, all kinds of fan activities can be performative, including fans documenting their achievements through video uploads, raising funds for donation, and tweeting on social media. The impact of such fan activities inspires each other and is just as influential as a strictly "musical" performance.

ARMYs form emotional conviction in their philanthropic campaigns not only because they are convinced of their moral value, but also because they are intuitively aware of its connection to the so-called (voluntary) performance. Consider the #ApanARMY project for BTS's concert in Citi Field, New York. By following a certain directive, BTS fans engaged in performative acts that aimed to enhance the moral value of the Kommuunity and established voluntary affiliations among fans. Their philanthropic campaigns are also a response to BTS's announcement that they will not receive birthday presents from fans. In this context, fans chose philanthropic works to express their love and appreciation in lieu of sending extravagant gifts (Cho). Duffett's concept of "Pull / Proximity / and Propinquity" is helpful to explain the OIAA phenomenon. According to him, "Pull / Proximity / Propinquity is the way in which getting closer to an icon intensifies feelings of pleasure." ("Fan Words" 155). Inspired by BTS's music, partnership with UNICEF, and their speech in the

UN General Assembly, ARMYs all around the world have started to seek intimacy with their star by launching and sustaining charity campaigns. To ARMYs, Community advocacy is a way of getting closer to BTS and to one another. This phenomenon can be explained by what Warner describes as a public. Regarding a formation of a public, he focuses on a relation among strangers. According to Warner,

A public is a relation among strangers [...] In modern society, a stranger is not as marvelously exotic as the wandering outsider would have been to an ancient, medieval, or early-modern town. In that earlier social order, or in contemporary analogues, a stranger is mysterious, a disturbing presence require resolution. In the context of a public, however, strangers can be treated as already belonging to our world [...] They are no longer merely people whom one does not yet know, rather, an environment of strangerhood is the necessary premise of some of our most prized ways of being [...] in modern forms strangerhood is the necessary medium of commonality (74–5).

In many cases, ARMYs across the world are strangers to each other. Nevertheless, they, as a public, feel a sense of belonging and solidarity in BTS.

OIAA's activism goes beyond philanthropic works and includes social movement activities to address education inequality, refugee crises, child rights, LGBTQ rights, health care disparities, global warming, and other causes. For example, after George Floyd's death on May

25th, 2020, BTS and Big Hit Entertainment announced their support for the Black Lives Matter movement by denouncing racial discrimination and violence (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. BTS tweet for the Black Lives Matter.

This supportive message went viral among K-pop fans and inspired them to speak out against racism. In fact, OIAA started a donation campaign first in response to ARMY's request. While gathering around \$50,000 within three days, ARMYs across the world saw that BTS and Big Hit Entertainment donated \$1 million USD to support the Black Lives Matter movement (KBS News).

Inspired by their donation, OIAA launched a hashtag campaign #MatchAMillion to raise funds in support of the movement. Donations eventually surpassed \$1 million (Iasimone). It is important note that BTS and Big Hit Entertainment's supportive message to the Black Lives Matter movement was also in response to fans' (mostly Black ARMYs') requests to be involved (Park). Fans complained to K-pop artists and management companies about their relative silence on the Black Lives Matter movement, even though their music and performances are highly inspired by Black culture. K-pop fans' involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement is important because it can respond to questions, such as "who, what, and where the media audience is, and how members of popular music fandom construct and express their own voices in the context of globalization" (Lee and Kao 80).

K-pop fandom has been recently highlighted in the U.S. media because of its influence on American politics. The American press has paid particular attention to how the K-pop fan community in the U.S. manipulates hashtags on Twitter and consequently affects actual political events. For example, NPR focused on how K-pop fans sabotaged the anti-Black Lives Matter movement by tweeting #WhiteLivesMatter and #KeepAmericaGreat hashtags that are linked to irrelevant fancams (fan-recorded video) of their favorite stars. Further, some attribute the lackluster turnout for US President Trump's campaign event in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in part to sabotage activities by K-pop fans and TikTok users.<sup>13)</sup> Although it is not clear whether Trump's rally fell through due to K-pop fans'

obstruction, they have demonstrably established a presence in U.S. politics.

#### 4. Conclusion

The global influence of K-pop has been increasing from the late 1990s through the present. With each K-pop hit record in global markets outside of Korea, such as H.O.T's first concert in China, BoA's successful debut in Japan, or the global appeal of Psy's "Gangnam Style," there have been skeptical people who expect K-pop to dissipate as another transient cultural phenomenon. However, the enduring success of several K-pop groups including BTS, BLACKPINK, NCT, TWICE, Seventeen, and Enhypen, suggests that K-pop may persist as an ongoing global cultural phenomenon. The success of BTS in 2020 and 2021 is especially remarkable. Six BTS songs were ranked No.1 on the Billboard Hot 100 list from September 2020 to October 2021, and they received nominations for the Grammys three times in a row—a

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13) According to Lorenz et al (2020), "TikTok users and fans of Korean pop music groups claimed to have registered potentially hundreds of thousands of tickets for Mr. Trump's campaign rally as a prank. After the Trump campaign's official account @TeamTrump posted a tweet asking supporters to register for free tickets using their phones on June 11, K-pop fan accounts began sharing the information with followers, encouraging them to register for the rally—and then not show." see Lorenz et al. 2020. "TikTok Teens and K-Pop Stans Say They Sank Trump Rally," The New York Times, 21 June.

first for any K-pop artist. Though the longevity of K-pop on the world stage remains to be seen, K-pop is arguably the most prominent global musical and cultural phenomenon of last two decades.

In fact, K-pop is continuously adapting to its fan outreach and the accommodation of fan needs. Along with the transition of K-pop, fan culture also has changed over time from unilateral support to philanthropic activities, to political engagement. This essay examined how K-pop has become a cultural venue in which community members are mutually inspired, carry out philanthropic activities to support stars, and raise their voices to be heard. In this regard, K-pop is more than a popular music genre and the descriptor of imagined *Kommunity* pop illustrates the range of sociality and civic engagement enabled by the genre.

In a mutually inspired partnership among fans and artists, people have become connected, and eventually, create an autonomous community where they appreciate and influence each other. The philanthropic activities conducted in the name of K-pop artists, of course, are not exclusive to K-pop fandom. Nevertheless, philanthropic K-pop activities are distinctive for their mutual inspiration between fans and artists, and among fans. As demonstrated in many examples, K-pop fans are unabashedly vocal, even though many belong to an official fan club established by management companies. As a matter of fact, fan participation in public discourse is valued and instrumental to significant changes in the field of K-pop. Hence, such K-pop

fandoms are as important as other elements in the discourse of K-pop, not only because they constitute a large part of K-pop consumption, but because they are influential in producing the diverse images and, indeed, the very identity of K-pop as it is understood today.

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## Abstract

# 일방적 지지에서 상호 동반자 관계로의 변천

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(음악인류학 박사수료, 오하이오 주립대학교)

케이팝이 세계인의 이목을 끌기 시작한 지 25년이 넘었다. 케이팝이 세계적 문화 현상으로 변화하면서 이를 향유하는 팬들의 방식 또한 변모했다. 예컨대, 1990년대 아이들을 향한 팬들의 일방적인 지지가 일반적이었다면, 현재 케이팝 팬들은 자신의 좋아하는 스타들과 적극적인 소통과 상호 관계를 통해 파트너쉽을 구축하고 있다. 본 논문은 1990년대부터 현재까지 케이팝을 향유하는 팬들의 방식이 어떻게 변했는지 살펴보고, 오늘날 케이팝 팬덤이 왜 Horton과 Wohl이 개념화 한 para-social interaction이 아닌 Chatterjee가 기술한 civil society의 한 예로 이해할 수 있는지 알아볼 것이다. 나아가 오늘날 케이팝 팬덤이 Warner의 a public 개념에 어떻게 부합하는지도 살펴본다.

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