

Exploring the BTS Army Fandom: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

This comprehensive review explores the BTS ARMY fandom within the context of globalization and technological advancements. As societies increasingly interact across cultural boundaries, the emergence of South Korean culture, particularly represented by BTS, has become a significant phenomenon. Through a qualitative desk research approach, utilizing secondary data analysis of existing literature, this study delves into the nature of fandoms, specifically focusing on the ARMY community. The objectives encompass understanding the importance of the topic, reviewing the state of the art and previous research, and elucidating the dynamics of ARMY fandom within the context of globalization. By examining existing studies and theories, this research seeks to provide insights into the characteristics and behaviors of ARMY fandom members. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how technology and globalization shape contemporary fan cultures, with implications for broader social and cultural processes. This review underscores the significance of ARMY fandom as a global cultural phenomenon and highlights avenues for future research in fan studies.

Keywords: BTS, ARMY fandom, globalization, fan studies, social and cultural processes

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of technology has significantly enhanced the convenience of daily life, with globalization being one notable outcome of this progress. Dey (2007) defines globalization as a social and cultural process where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds interact more intensively than ever before. Today, people from different countries can easily connect, thanks to technological advancements and social media innovations. According to Carr and Hayes (2015), social media are “internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real time or asynchronously.” This technological interconnectedness exposes individuals to different ways of thinking, cultural values, and new forms of family life (Dey, 2007).

The Korean Wave exemplifies a phenomenon amplified by globalization. Ravina (2009) describes the Korean Wave as the global visibility of Korean culture, which began in East Asia in the 1990s and has since reached the United States, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Europe. Essentially, the Korean Wave involves South Korean culture being showcased through media such as television dramas (K-dramas) and pop music (K-pop). Numerous boy band

contribute to K-pop, with BTS being one of the most prominent groups. BTS has captivated millions of fans worldwide, who consume their music and related media.

In fandom studies, fans are defined as “a person with a relatively deep, positive emotional conviction about someone or something famous, usually expressed through recognition of style or creativity” (Fuschillo, 2020). Fans often gather in communities, or fandoms, sharing a common interest. The digital revolution has profoundly impacted fandoms (Pearson, 2010). According to Sihombing and Andini (2022), advanced internet technology allows K-pop fans to connect with others without barriers, facilitated by social media. This paper focuses specifically on the BTS fandom, known as BTS ARMY, a phenomenon within the Korean Wave that has penetrated numerous countries.

Several studies have examined the collective phenomena of BTS ARMY, focusing on identity roles and fanaticism. Cheriya and Hadi (2022) found that Indonesian BTS fans express enthusiasm for BTS despite stereotypes of K-pop fans. Another study by Kim and Hutt (2021) explores participatory fan culture, where fans' consumption and social movement participation demonstrate collective action. By examining the roles of fanaticism, transnational context, identity formation, and participatory fan culture, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how technology and globalization shape contemporary fandoms and their broader social and cultural processes.

In summary, this exploration of the BTS ARMY fandom offers valuable insights into the world of fan cultures in the digital age. By embracing diversity and fostering inclusivity, fan communities can harness their collective power to effect meaningful social change.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative desk research approach, often referred to as secondary research. According to Heaton (2008), secondary research involves deriving data from previous studies. Clarke & Cossette (2000) define secondary analysis as utilizing existing data sets to answer new questions. By employing a desk research approach, this study collects and analyzes sources in the form of journal articles obtained through Google Scholar. The key search terms for this research include: “BTS Army Fandoms”, “BTS Army Identity”, “Fan Culture”, “Effects of Fandoms”, and “K-Pop Fandoms”. The search is constrained to publications from the last ten years to ensure relevance and timeliness. The selected articles are critically reviewed to gather data on the characteristics, behaviors, and cultural implications of the BTS Army fandom. The process involves identifying relevant studies, extracting pertinent data, and synthesizing findings to address the research questions. The types of publications considered include peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and credible online sources that provide insights into fan culture and identity formation. The gathered data is then categorized and analyzed to understand the broader social and cultural processes influenced by globalization.

This approach aims to provide a comprehensive review of BTS Army fandoms, exploring their implications for social and cultural dynamics within the context of globalization and technological advancement. By examining existing studies and theories, this research seeks to elucidate the characteristics and behaviors of ARMY fandom members, contributing to a deeper understanding of contemporary fan cultures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Role of Identity and Participatory Fan Culture

The exploration of BTS ARMY fandom within the context of globalization and technological advancements unveils interesting insights into the role of identity and participatory fan culture. Participatory fan culture, characterized by active engagement with BTS's music and content, plays a pivotal role in shaping the identities of ARMY members (Kim & Hutt, 2021). This active involvement fosters a sense of ownership and belonging within the fandom community, as fans contribute to the creation of fan-generated content such as fanfiction, fan art, and fan videos.

Identity formation and exploration are central themes within the ARMY fandom. Particularly among the sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY) (McInroy & Craig, 2018). Online fandom spaces provide a platform for SGMY to explore and express their identities in a supportive and inclusive environment. As highlighted by McInroy and Craig, fandom serves as a space for self-reflexivity and identity-building, offering opportunities for SGMY to engage with like-minded communities and "queer" media narratives through fanwork activities. Moreover, the study by Kanozia and Ganghariya delves into the activism within the BTS fandom amid the COVID-19 outbreak (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021), showcasing how ARMY members go beyond being mere fans of K-pop to actively engaging in social issues. This activism demonstrates the agency of ARMY members in shaping not only their identities within the fandom but also in broader social and political spheres. Park et al. (2021) contributes valuable insights through their case study on activism within the BTS fandom during the COVID-19 outbreak. Their research illuminates how ARMY members transcend their roles as music fans to engage in social advocacy, showcasing the transformative potential of participatory fan culture in addressing pressing societal issues (Park et al., 2021). This finding underscores the agency and influence wielded by fan communities in effecting positive change beyond the realm of entertainment. The participatory nature of fan culture enables ARMY members to enact their identities through meaningful engagement with BTS's music and message, transcending traditional fan-celebrity dynamics. The positive psychosocial outcomes and fan identity formation highlighted by Haulenbeek further underscore the importance of participatory fan culture in the lives of ARMY members (Haulenbeek, 2022). Fan membership enhances individuals' sense of belonging and self-esteem, contributing to the development of a supportive and inclusive community. Through active participation in fan activities, ARMY members forge connections with peers who share their passion for BTS, fostering a sense of camaraderie and mutual support. But we will get back to that topic later. The BTS ARMY fandom serves as a fascinating case study that illuminates the intricate dynamics of identity formation and participatory fan culture in the digital age (Kim & Hutt, 2021). Within this global community of fans, individuals navigate complex processes of self-discovery, self-expression, and collective belonging, influenced by their interactions with BTS's music, content, and fellow fans (Cheriyah & Hadi, 2022). As outlined by Cheriyah and Hadi, the relationship between ARMY-BTS identity and demographic factors underscores the diverse backgrounds and motivations of fans, highlighting the inclusive and multicultural nature of the fandom (Cheriyah & Hadi, 2022). One aspect that emerges prominently within the ARMY fandom is the role of participatory fan culture in shaping individual and collective identities. Drawing on insights from Proctor's study on fan labor (Proctor, 2021), it becomes evident that fans play an active and instrumental role in supporting BTS's career and promoting South Korean soft power on the global stage. Through fan-led initiatives such as streaming parties, fan projects, and social media campaigns, ARMY members not only express their devotion to BTS but also contribute to the dissemination of BTS's music and message worldwide. Furthermore, the study by Kim and

Hutt sheds light on the social movement aspect of the BTS phenomenon (Kim & Hutt, 2021), emphasizing the collective activism and advocacy efforts mobilized by the ARMY fandom (Nanda & Tjahjani, 2024). Beyond their role as music fans, ARMY members actively participate in social causes and philanthropic endeavors, amplifying their voices to raise awareness about issues such as mental health, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial equality. This collective action reflects the transformative potential of participatory fan culture in addressing societal challenges and effecting positive change, demonstrating the agency and influence wielded by fan communities in contemporary society. Additionally, the research conducted by Haulenbeek underscores the role of the ARMY fandom as a supportive community that fosters mental health, community, and individual growth among its members (Haulenbeek, 2022). Through online interactions, fan meet-ups, and shared experiences, ARMY members find solace, companionship, and validation within the fandom space, contributing to their overall well-being and sense of belonging. This sense of community extends beyond geographical boundaries, transcending language, culture, and nationality to unite fans from diverse backgrounds under a common bond of love and appreciation for BTS. Lee and Kao (2021) offer valuable perspectives on the transformative influence of fan support on BTS's success in the United States. Through an in-depth case study, they illuminate the instrumental role of ARMY members in amplifying BTS's music and message on a global scale (Lee, W. & Kao, G., 2021). This finding underscores the active engagement of fans in shaping the trajectory of their idols' careers and the dissemination of their cultural impact. By synthesizing these diverse perspectives, we gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play within the BTS ARMY fandom.

In summary, BTS ARMY fandom represents a rich variety of identity formation and participatory fan culture that is characterized by diversity, inclusivity and collective agency. As fans engage with BTS's music and message, they navigate complex processes of self-discovery and community-building, forging deep connections with fellow fans and contributing to the global spread of BTS's influence. Moving forward, researchers and practitioners in fan studies should continue to explore the multifaceted dynamics of identity and participation within fan communities, with a focus on promoting inclusivity, diversity, and social justice.

Context of Transnational

Technology and globalization play a pivotal role in shaping K-pop as well as the fans' culture. The use of various social media platforms has improved the global visibility of BTS. Kusuma et al. (2020) mentioned that "fan culture is made by a new type of cultural community". The process of this new cultural community can be done easily with the help of social media. Rouse (2019) defined transnational as a process or arrangement that involves two or more countries and refers to the process that is formed by people or organizations rather than the government of countries. ARMY is one of the global fandoms in which the members are spread all over the world. As Jin (2021) stated that "BTS fandom indicates the growth of non-Western-based transnational fandom, which is situated in the discourse of cyber-nationalism". This fans' culture in the context of transnational fandom may be in the form of their participation in fandom activities. Another activity that is considered as transnational consumption is the amount of content and access available to the fans (McLaren & Jin, 2020).

ARMY is a fandom in which members are from various cultural backgrounds that get together in celebrating and supporting their idols, BTS. This accessibility can only work more easily against any barriers with the use of internet technology that allows these interactions to take

place among the fans. Nugent & Vincent (2008) in Nam et al. (2023) explained that the borderless virtual world has facilitated the transnational communities to spread their influence and their values globally. “ARMY as one of the largest and powerful fandoms actively participates in all levels of fandom activities” (Jin, 2021). These participation from ARMY can be seen in various activities, starting from social movement to fundraising activity as well as the utilization of social media platforms as a spot for fans to gather around.

Despite the background of the members of ARMY, the way they connect and participating in every fandom activities have shown that they have these attitudes for their idols. Though it is in a form of online participation through social media platforms or any other online platform, the dedication grows. As a result, this participation help increase the global visibility of BTS around the world.

Chang & Park (2018) in Park et al. (2021) stated that ARMY implicitly has this organizational awareness and appraise teamwork with no leader that is governing or managing them. However, the fandom managed everything to be successful in every fan activity. In addition to ARMY’s successful teamwork, Nam et al. (2023) point out how transnational fandoms are able to create a viable system and the results show that the ARMY network has maintained the characteristics of a successful and viable system. There are several key plates that contribute to the fandom community voluntarily resulting from idolizing activity. Another study from Utami & Winduwati (2020) that concluded the ARMY in Indonesia is aiming to improve the global visibility of BTS as well as gives a voluntary assistance for BTS to accomplish a higher achievement through several creative activities, for instance: donations, exhibitions, etc.

Fanaticism

The term fans as an abbreviation for fanatic may be defined in various ways and connotes in a negative way. Samra & Wos (2015) in Cheryiah & Hadi (2022) defined fans as “a temple servant or a devotee”. However, a fan may be described as a person who is enthusiastic about things that they like, including books, music groups, movies, etc. The emergence of various music groups and music artists today have left an important part of few peoples that lead the listeners to give appreciation to their idols. One of the famous korean music groups is BTS that resulted in a lot of people’s appreciation to BTS’ music by being a fan or participating in their fandoms group. The official fan club of BTS is widely recognized as ARMY which was formed in 2014 and remains in existence until now (Sihombing & Andini, 2022). As the ARMY fandom grew bigger and more solid, the emergence of social media played a crucial role in building a community of ARMY by connecting these fans from all over the world to gather in one simple platform. Yoon (2020) in Lee & Nguyen (2020) found out that ARMY fandom exhibits the use of various social media effectively for participatory activities. Adding to that, the engagement between BTS and its fans on social media is part of the BTS’s success where each member shares stories of their lives and work. The fans’ internalization and externalization processes become limitless in supporting as well as engaging with their idols with the advancement of technology nowadays. As a result, these fans’ behavior may be intricate as it can lead to a worse scenario.

Several studies of K-pop fans have indicated that K-pop fans with high loyalty go along with a negative behavior of their idols (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021; Cheryiah & Hadi, 2021; Sihombing & Andini, 2022). Online platforms not only help to access their favorite music though it gives them access to connect with other fans. Pan (2021) explains that “excessively receiving self-think fantasies from their idols, some of them believe that they established a unique connection

with their celebrities”. The accessibility of social media may open up new threats to the celebrities or cause chaos between fandoms due to the fanatic behaviors. These fans may intend to intrude on the idols’ privacy, hurting them in a verbal communication or even stalking them. A study conducted by Sihombing & Andini (2022) on ARMY behavior on Twitter has shown that the fans’ behavior is extremely aggressive toward other fandoms and idols. The way they express their support to their idols may be perceived as loyalty from the fans’ perspective that ends up in a negative behavior in a public space. Often, the loyalty conveyed by a fan is considered as a fanatic behavior (Kirana, 2021). In addition, globalization has influenced how this fandoms’ dedication to their idols is a more complex and broader concept. Ardhiyansyah et al., (2021) mentions a term of *sasaeng* fans that refers to the fans who perform certain behaviors unlike the usual fans. These *sasaeng* fans are willing to pursue their satisfaction in order to get the closest with their idol though it is under dangerous circumstances. One of the incidents that happened to BTS in Indonesia is that the BTS’ personal information was allegedly being sold on Telegram (Agarwal, 2023).

Previous study from Ardhiyansyah et al. (2021) shows that K-pop marketing strategies promote fanatical behaviors of these fans. The release of official merchandises of each idol is popular among K-pop fans. They are more than happy to collect these merchandises which then become a culture that shows their identity of being fans of a particular idol as well as to satisfy their desires. It has created some sort of competition between the fans in collecting these official merchandises as it influences their identity within the fandom. Another study from Cheryiah & Hadi (2021) used few behavioral variables to identify fanaticism level of fans. The result has shown that the fans’ behavior is closely related to the fans’ fanaticism scale. Yuniarti & Agustina (2023) state that the fans are trying to build interaction with their idols through a one-way communication since it gives them this sense of enjoyment. It can be understood that the fans’ culture is the voluntary participation that leads them to be considered as free labor (Wang, 2020) that, when it becomes obsessive, is considered as fanaticism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this comprehensive review has illuminated the multifaceted nature of the BTS ARMY fandom within the context of globalization and technological advancements. By examining the roles of participatory fan culture, identity formation, transnational context, and fanaticism, several key findings have emerged. Firstly, the active engagement of ARMY members in various fan activities fosters a profound sense of belonging and community, contributing to positive psychosocial outcomes such as increased self-esteem and social connectedness. Moreover, the global reach of BTS and the extensive use of social media platforms have revolutionized fan engagement, enabling ARMY members from diverse cultural backgrounds to connect and interact in unprecedented ways. While this interconnectedness has facilitated the dissemination of BTS's message and music on a global scale, it has also posed new challenges, including privacy concerns and online conflicts. Furthermore, identity formation emerges as a central theme within the ARMY fandom, particularly among sexual and gender minority youth. Online fan spaces serve as vital platforms for self-expression and exploration, providing a supportive environment for individuals to explore their identities and connect with like-minded peers. This emphasis on inclusivity and diversity within the fandom underscores the transformative potential of participatory fan culture in empowering marginalized communities. Looking ahead, future research in fan studies should continue to explore the intricate dynamics of ARMY fandom, focusing on promoting responsible fan practices and enhancing social cohesion within the

community. By addressing the complexities and challenges associated with fan culture while harnessing its transformative potential for positive social change, we can gain valuable insights into contemporary fan cultures and their broader implications for social and cultural processes.

In summary, the exploration of BTS ARMY fandom offers valuable insights into the evolving landscape of fan cultures in the digital age. By embracing diversity and fostering inclusivity, we can harness the collective power of fan communities to effect meaningful change in society.

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