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**THE POWER OF THE VIRTUAL PLATFORM: A LOOK INTO FANDOMS AND
THEIR INTERACTIONS VIA TWITTER (X)**

Samantha Hacker

AN HONORS THESIS

in

Communications

Presented to the Faculty of the
Department of Communications of Bellarmine University
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the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors

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This undergraduate thesis is dedicated to the late Dr. Maggie Rossman. Thank you for believing in and supporting me, even when I couldn't do so myself.

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Abstract

Using social media to communicate has become increasingly popular since the medium was created. Twitter has been a popular breeding ground for fan communities to form social spaces. Parasocial relationship theory, as well as face negotiation theory, tie heavily into the discussion of fandoms and the creation of safe spaces on the platform. How people present themselves online is entirely dependent on the user and their level of comfort on the app. One fandom in particular that utilizes this app the most is the fan base for the seven-member South Korean boy band, BTS, who in reference to the band, refer to themselves as the BTS ARMY. Using the “#LoveMyself” Twitter campaign promoted by BTS and BTS ARMY, I will use this case study to highlight the variety of engagement that comes from participating in the social space curated from the fan community.

Keywords: BTS, ARMY, music fan communities, fan community, social space, affordances, Twitter, hashtags, parasocial relationship theory, social media campaign

The Power of the Virtual Platform: A Look Into Fandom Interactions via Twitter

“Part of what makes them so rare and remarkable to me is how much they genuinely care about people as a whole - not just their fans. If the world had more people like @BTS_twt in it, I feel like it would be a much better place.” - Twitter user

The rise of BTS, the seven-member South Korean boy band, over the past decade is a prime example of the reach and influence that can come from utilizing a virtual platform. They post regularly, both as a group and individually, to the joint and personal social media accounts on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Weverse, a platform that hosts a variety of free and paid content, allowing direct artist-to-fans interaction and communities (Delgado, 2020). As they remain active on their social media accounts across various platforms, so too does their fanbase. BTS fans – commonly referred to as BTS ARMY (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth) -- have proven themselves as a force to be reckoned with (Park et al, 2021). From mobilizing on Twitter to get BTS related hashtags trending, matching donations to social causes, as well as winning awards for BTS, they’ve proven their devotion to the BTS’s message of spreading self-love and positivity (Kwak, 2020; Moon, 2020; Ye-eun, 2017). Their artistry, alongside BTS ARMY’s active support on and offline, led to them winning the top place on the Billboard charts twice (Chang & Park, 2019). The band always make sure to thank their fanbase for their support. They consistently acknowledge their sincere gratitude for their fandom’s devotion. Their level of success would look different had it not been for the dedicated fan group formed from a shared interest of liking and listening to their music, and what the band stands for. The humble nature of BTS is one of the many reasons why participants of this fan community continue to remain in the

community. This thesis intends to navigate the interactions within the fandom in response to content provided by BTS and how other BTS ARMY members interact with such content.

One of the ways this relationship has been reinforced is through a social media campaign launched through their official Twitter account: the #LoveMyself campaign. This campaign was launched in 2017, at a point where BTS were just beginning to break into the American music industry. They already had a large following on social media, but the purpose of this campaign was not to gain more followers or extend their reach online; it was to remind fans of BTS to love themselves and reinforce relationships amongst within members of the fan community. This inspired fans of the BTS to not only uplift themselves, but other fans as well.

This notion of fans interacting with a fan object is at the center of this thesis, which I explore through a case study of BTS ARMY. This social media campaign has been widely discussed in scholarship on BTS, but very little has been written about the fans' actual responses to such explicit support from the group. As such, this thesis explores the #LoveMyself campaign on Twitter, providing an observational analysis of the affordances offered by Twitter that enabled BTS ARMY to engage with one another as encouraged by the campaign. My intent is to use this case study to support existing studies highlighting the level of inter-fandom engagement seen through BTS ARMY and their presence on social media.

Connecting is essential to communication within a fan community. When social media was first introduced, the idea of connection and what it means to connect changed drastically. Before social media, people defined being "well-connected" with the quality or status of their friendships. This was complicated online with the awareness of one's follower count. In theory, if a user has a large following, they are well-connected because of their vast reach (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023). A user might post every day to their account and engage with their

followers, which would fall into the category of being “well-connected.” However, just because a user has a certain number of followers, does not necessarily mean they are actively engaging with their followers. Content may be posted, but fans could rarely be interacted despite the content being created. Communication on social media has paved the way for a new era in which quality has arguably been replaced by quantity.

In a literal sense, the job of social media is to connect the user to a platform. The goal of social media companies is to convince the user to stay on their platform and have the user rely on them to fulfill their communication needs and wants. A person’s level of connectivity can be determined by the number of “followers” one has (Dijck, 2013). How people engage with their followers is determined by the type of social media platform they are using. This ties into the different reasons why people engage with social media in general. Some common ways people use social media are for social interaction, information seeking, community utility, and relaxation (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Once people online bond over shared interests, people begin to plant their roots with other people who share that interest. When a community of shared interest is established, then begins the task of finding platforms to easily communicate and connect with a large number of people in specific ways. This is why it is normal for fan communities to go beyond one social media platform and instead gather on multiple sites that offer different affordances, or features, on the site. If we want to understand how fan communities are established and maintained, it is important to pay attention to how fans interact both with one another and the object of their community itself. Stories about a users’ personal experience of bullying or feeling isolated in the offline world are shared with others; stories normally reserved for those with whom one has a deep personal connection and history. Yet, when a foundation of solidarity and unwavering support is provided, these social “boundaries” of

what is and what is not supposed to be shared online seem to disappear. There is a perception that users in a fan community only discuss situations or events relevant to the shared object they love. If someone is vulnerable online, they may even face bullying themselves from the community they are in. However, social spaces created through fan communities can open conversations and provide support to those struggling in the offline world. When the #LoveMyself campaign was launched by BTS in 2017, it was meant to encourage engagement within the fandom as well as promote an end to violence being faced by younger generations (LOVEMYSELF, n. d.). While they dedicated revenue from merchandise to the Korean Committee with UNICEF, they simultaneously were creating a unique moment for fan community bonding. They used the affordances already offered through Twitter to create the conditions for sharing online within the fandom through this campaign. This thesis will be using BTS' #LoveMyself campaign as a case study into how the affordances offered through Twitter can enhance the community formed through fans, and that they are making a conscious effort to engage with the fandom. This thesis is written from the assumption that users replying to tweets made by the official campaign account (@bts_love_myself) are members and active participants of the BTS ARMY. Chapter 1 provides context on fan communities as well as fan culture to help differentiate between behaviors seen in fan communities in the offline world versus the online world. This is crucial because the different affordances offered help create a sense of what behavior is allowed and what is not. Chapter 2 gives context into how Twitter was created and the social spaces that have since formed on the platform. Chapter 3 contextualizes BTS' rise to fame through the "*Hallyu*" wave of the 00s and how they broke through to the U.S. music industry. Chapter 4 is an observational analysis of BTS ARMY interactions during the #LoveMyself campaign on Twitter.

Methodology

For this thesis, I conducted an observational analysis through Twitter. The purpose of this research was to answer the question of how the BTS ARMY creates a social space through the community formed from fandom on Twitter. The intent of this analysis is to review the reactions to the content created to identify potential patterns that arise based on how they respond to the initial tweet. I chose the account dedicated to the #LoveMyself campaign by the group and sourced the tweets from the account, “@bts_love_myself”. I chose this account rather than a different account because this campaign is targeted towards those familiar with the message of BTS and their fanbase. The total amount of tweets from the account, as of writing this thesis, is 209, with the most recent tweet being from November 9, 2022. This number includes both retweets, quote retweets, and original tweets from the account. The account launched in 2017, and while nothing has been tweeted since 2022, the account is still open for people to see. The tweets made from the account are expected to come from a third party rather than from the band directly, as opposed to the content created from the official account, “@BTS_twt”.

Upon reviewing the tweets, I reviewed those that were tweeted from the campaign account and disregarded those that came from a secondary account. Once this was completed, I sorted the tweets based on the level of engagement received. This was done by sorting the tweets with the most to least liked. Many of the features that are available through Twitter now, such as quote tweets and engagement analytics, were not available at the time most of the content was being put out for the campaign. To maintain consistency with what was available at the time, I based the engagement solely on “likes” alone. Given the small range of content posted from the account, I manually scrolled through twitter and organized the top five most “liked” tweets to

begin my analysis of the replies. Out of the five tweets picked, there were an average of 20,800K replies total. For each tweet I chose one hundred replies to sort through to include in this analysis. Twitter does not organize replies to tweets based on response time or engagement analytics; it is loaded at random. This made choosing the one hundred responses per tweet unbiased, as they would appear in a random order each time I loaded the tweet.

The result of the top five tweets were the following, the first having the most “likes” on the account: 1) The first tweet on the account, launching the campaign from 2017; 2) An update to the #LoveMyself campaign from 2021; 3) How to get involved with the campaign, tweeted just eight days after the launching of the #LoveMyself campaign; 4) Clips from an interview at UNICEF from member of BTS Kim Taehyung (V) explaining why he is supportive of the campaign; and 5) Encouragement from BTS to fans on how to stay strong whilst in isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. I sourced a total of 500 replies from these tweets, and looked at how the replies were formatted. This was done through an Excel spreadsheet, where I documented the username of the account, the date the reply was posted compared to when the original tweet was published, the content of the reply (i.e. including a hashtag), and whether it included additional content such as an image, gif, or video. The purpose of looking at these specific items is to determine how engaged members of the fandom are within the social space crafted from Twitter. A user is still considered active as long as they are replying to the initial tweet. Yet, there is a difference between a user replying with a single purple heart emoji and a user sharing their personal story as to why they are engaging with the campaign. It is these varying levels of engagement this analysis intends to review.

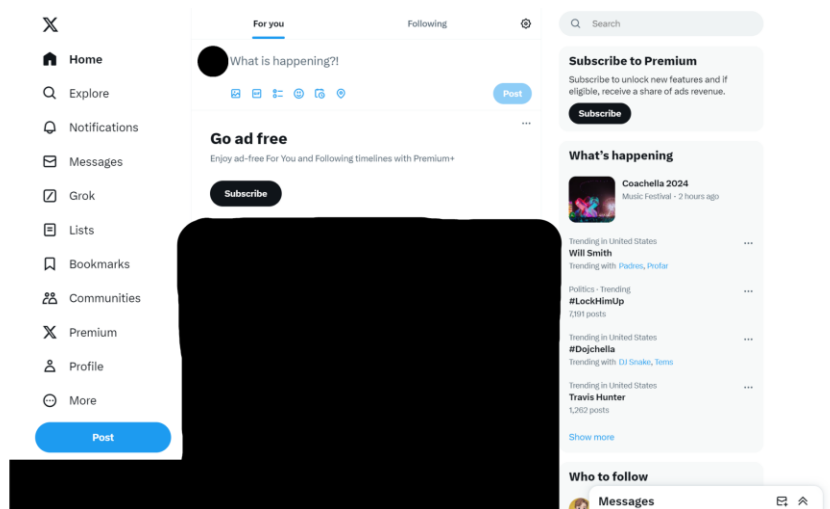


Figure 1: Screenshot of Twitter's current layout.

Twitter is one type of social media that remains popular despite debuting two decades ago. Twitter became a popular method for socializing through the unique usage of hashtags. Twitter was the first social media platform to use the ‘#’ symbol outside of online forums. This idea was proposed by Chris Messina in 2007 to apply the feature to Twitter, referring to them as “channels”; writer Steve Boyd suggested the name “hash tags” (van den Berg, 2014). While many other social media have adopted the usage of this feature, Twitter is known for having a live feed of hashtags that are trending either in the country one is ‘tweeting’ from, or on a global scale. They are constantly in the eye of the viewer when accessed via computer and visible when attempting to search for content from one’s mobile device. Hashtags are beneficial when there is hoped to reach a larger audience to bring attention to what a person is tweeting about. Another incentive to use hashtags is the possibility of discovering other users who are sharing similar information. When this occurs, there are opportunities for the users to bond over the shared interests and develop friendships online. Not only do users have the ability to update their status, but they can include pictures, gifs, or videos in their tweets with the hashtag. Since the development of the hashtag, this has become a popular method of communication in fandoms.

This paper, while touching on examples of virtual communities surrounding television shows, will focus on the communities and fandoms formed around musicians.

Literature Review

Twitter

What separates Twitter from other social media sites is its usage of the hashtag, as well as its ability to exist without required reciprocation on the platform. In a 2013 article, Richard Rogers from the University of Amsterdam discusses the origins of Twitter and how it transformed over the years since its launch in 2006. He addresses how the platform was first created to be used as a platform to follow friends. It would not be until 2009 that Twitter adjusted the questions asked to users when they entered their “Home” page so that expectations changed with how to interact with the platform. There even exists a debate on whether Twitter is a social network or a news site, as discussed by Haewoon Kwak, Changhyun Lee, Hosung Park, and Sue Moon in their 2010 article. They mention how Twitter does not require reciprocation as compared to other social networks, such as Facebook or MySpace. Connectivity, regardless of reciprocation, is crucial when it comes to fandom and fandom culture. Before delving into the discussion of fan communities and interactions via social media, it is important to provide context on the evolution of social media platforms. “Web 2.0” was the term used for what is now referred to as “social media”. Alice Marwick’s 2013 book *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, she contextualizes the arrival of Web 2.0 and how it became to be called social media. She focuses her analysis on the social hierarchy built into someone’s “status” on social media. She explains how the rise of status has brought “the attention economy” to the forefront of interactions on social media, and that it has popularized “attention-getting techniques like self-branding and livestreaming” (p. 10). According to

Marwick, it is through the Web 2.0 age where blogs and Twitter encouraged “citizen journalism” and the critique of mainstream media through social technology rather than through offline methods, such as protest or political participation as the solution (Marwick, 2013, p. 24).

One way social media status is determined is by the number of followers a user has on their account. If someone were to tweet out information from an account with less than ten followers, it would not have as big of an impact as if it came from a user with thousands of followers. A user’s follower count not only determines social media status, but level of connectivity. The larger following a creator has, the more reach they have into other users’ social media feeds. In his 2013 book, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, José van Dijck breaks down individual social media platforms and how they utilize connection as a resource. His book contains a section on connectivity concerning Twitter. Given the extent to which this thesis depends on this platform, Twitter’s functionality is discussed to a large extent. According to Dijck, the connectivity of Twitter is enhanced through its implementation of the “following” and Twitter trends chart on the platform (Dijck, 2013). An analysis observed for this thesis that emphasizes the power of connectivity on Twitter is through Tim Highfield, Stephen Harrington & Axel Bruns’ 2013 article on user interaction on Twitter in the context of the annual Eurovision Song Contest. They highlighted Twitter as a technology used to express shared fandom amongst users on the platform through hashtags relating to the event.

This is especially useful when mentioning Amanda Kerhberg, who in her 2016 article discusses the hierarchy within fandoms that predominantly use Twitter as a social space. She sourced tweets from Justin Bieber, Katy Perry, Barack Obama, Rihanna, and Taylor Swift to review hierarchy within fandoms that actively use Twitter. She found that hierarchy does structure discourse amongst fans and celebrities on Twitter. The mere name of the “follower”

feature on the site highlights the boundaries presented despite the perceived level of access a user has to a celebrity's platform. Ultimately, she concluded that Twitter users are aware of this hierarchy, especially when composing their messages, and suggest that "both accessibility and hierarchy may be dependent on the star being addressed, and not the medium of communication" (p. 96). Another important finding in her study is the pattern of fan users having usernames that "reflect the users' adoration for one celebrity in particular" (p. 94). This expands our understanding of fandom through the conscious decision to create a username that reflects a user's love for a shared object. It is on display for their followers to see and signals to other users they have a deep passion for something, wishing to engage with content similar to the interest reflected in their username. An additional analysis observed for this thesis is through Tim Highfield, Stephen Harrington & Axel Bruns' 2013 article on user interaction on Twitter in the context of the annual Eurovision Song Contest. They highlighted Twitter as a technology used to express shared fandom amongst users on the platform through hashtags relating to the event.

Media Fandoms

Media fandoms form from an intense engagement with movies, television shows, music, or celebrities. Fandom can be both a solitary and a group activity. Both may bring on different experiences within the fandom, but they are still valid ways to participate in fan activities. Fandoms extensively use social media as a social space. Yet, fandoms do not isolate themselves to a single platform; they participate in as many as they can. They migrate from platform to platform, and by using Casey Fiesler and Brianna Dym's definition of migration in the offline and online world from their 2020 article, this thesis utilizes their work to establish this pattern exhibited by fandoms. Communication theories play an integral role in this thesis. Ontological security, parasocial relationship theory, and face negotiation theory. The inclusion of ontological

security is included in a 2016 article by Dr. Rebecca Williams from the University of Wales. She includes the definition of ontological security used originally by Anthony Giddens to support her hypothesis of how television fandom can be a source of ontological security. Her case study involved the television show *Twin Peaks* and the dedicated fanbase surrounding it, even after it went off the air. She ties this long-sustaining fandom to Twitter and the affordances the site offers to members of the fandom. Music fandoms can provide another level of ontological security, but when the community is utilizing the social space of a social media platform, such as Twitter, the potential for security to be threatened can increase.

Fans of musicians will not hesitate to express their outward opinion of them because of the perceived level of intimacy and closeness. Engaging within a fandom can bring on a multitude of feelings. For some, they are encouraged by the celebrity directly to engage with the shared object, such as seen in Lucy Bennett and Bertha Chin's 2014 analysis of how producers and fans can interact through social media. Being a part of a fan group can enhance an individual's well-being (Reysen, Plante & Chadborn, 2017). Studies of the unique relationship between BTS and ARMY have been conducted in previous years. For example, one study refers to their relationship as an emerging digital fandom and analyzes the relationship through four dimensions: digital intimacy, non-social sociality, transnational locality, and organizing without organization (Chang & Park, 2019). It concludes with the observation that fandom is "a key to understanding modern life in our increasingly mediated and globalized world," and the more likely digital intimacy can be fostered through social media, the more likely there will be social consequences (Chang & Park, 2019, p. 279). In 2021, Brooke Auxier and Monica Anderson conducted a survey to determine which social media American adults were using the most. While Twitter was ranked on the lower end of usage compared to other social media platforms,

they provide context for how many adults on average use a social media platform. They argue how normalized social media usage has become in recent decades.

Media Fandoms and Social Media

In a 2013 forum discussion, Rhiannon Bury of Athabasca University, Ruth Deller and Adam Greenwood of Sheffield Hallam University, and Bethan Jones of Aberystwyth University, discuss the changes social media has made over the years with fan communities. They talk of how Twitter removes the barrier between celebrities and fan communities, giving easier access to a constant stream of content. They further mention the types of roles people can play in fandoms, and how people can be passive or active members of a fandom. People can refer to themselves as fans of a shared object but have different levels of how much they love it. Their example of this is through the fandom connected to the television series X-Files. Fans could interact with producers of the show, expressing their opinion of the television show and the characters, hoping to potentially influence the outcome of the television show itself. This is similar to the power music fan communities have over a shared object and how they can get their attention through responses to tweets or hashtags. Award shows and other companies began to see this, leading to awards based on the status of one's social media presence. In her 2017 article, Jie Ye-eun of the Korea Herald writes about BTS becoming the first K-pop group to win at the Billboard Music Awards, a historically well-known music ceremony celebrating predominately Eurocentric artists. Ye-eun explains the significance of this, and how they were able to win the award through fan interactions via social media engagement. This is significant for this thesis because it is a sign of fan communities's influence on a celebrity's career, especially when the parasocial relationship shared is built on trust and perceived friendship.

Once Twitter changed the question posed to audiences from, “What is going on?” to “What is happening?” this signaled a change in how social media could be used. The tagline change called for both users and researchers to consider the idea of “information sharing tweets” (Rogers, 2013, p. 4). This shift is best explained through the Black Lives Matter movement that gained mass awareness on Twitter. In their 2018 analysis of Twitter-based campaigns, William Housley et al. found various activities and actions in response to these initiatives. They discuss instances where social media platforms play a key role in the growth of activist campaigns, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. It started as a hashtag and eventually moved off-platform in the formation of protest marches and rallies. The community already existed, but the hashtag made it easier to organize and live on and off the platform.

Twitter offered a commentary space for fandoms and could use the social space they created to hold celebrities accountable or encourage them to use their platform to speak out about injustice. Conversations surrounding the murder of George Floyd from the brutality by police were flourishing in the fan community of ARMY. Stevesha Evans from the University of Texas at Dallas discusses the transformation of fandoms becoming involved with political discourse. In her 2022 article, she touches on how Twitter became an important method of communication for fandoms after the launch of MySpace and LiveJournal. Tumblr became an important aspect of fandom conversation as well and made “stanning” a favorite celebrity a normal activity to bond over. She focuses her article on the donation BTS made to the Black Lives Matter movement after fans voiced their initial disappointment with their lack of a response. BTS made the donation, and once they did, Evans explains how it led to the #MatchAMillion event created by Daezy Agbakoba, the first person to tweet out about the campaign. Lauren Johnson’s CNN article goes in-depth with the initial donation made by the K-pop group. It includes quotes from

the members as to why they decided to donate, citing their own experience with prejudice and how they have no tolerance for it. She quotes the original Variety Magazine interview with Rebecca Davis, where she sits down with the members to discuss their thoughts on the reactions to their donation. On a similar note, a 2020 article written by Kristine Kwak from Variety Magazine discusses the specifics of the total amount raised from the #MatchAMillion hashtag. It establishes a pattern of them listening to their fanbase and highlighting the unique relationship they have with their fandom, and vice versa.

K-pop

Scholarship on BTS covers a variety of topics, including their rise to fame and how they use their platform to address a variety of social issues. Björn Boman's 2019 article discusses the varying levels of success countries have when it comes to the music industry. He explains how the American music industry has historically been the top succeeding one globally, and how difficult it is to break through if one is not from a Eurocentric country. He discusses the popularity of Blackpink, a highly successful K-pop girl group, alongside BTS and how they succeeded in both the South Korean and American music industries. More so, the discussion of the group tends to include mention of BTS ARMY. In their 2020 article, Jimmyn Parc and Yeogeun Yonsue Kim discuss BTS ability to achieve global popularity in the time they have been active as a group. They go further to analyze the business strategies used by the band, such as making their music easily accessible through "international service providers such as YouTube, iTunes, and Spotify" (Parc & Kim, 2020, p. 24). They discuss multiple ways BTS has engaged with their fans and promoted their music despite difficulties faced by Big Hit, the original record company the band was signed to. There were some events that introduced K-pop to Western countries and paved the way for BTS to have the level of success they currently have.

This is addressed in Priyadharshini Ayyappaswamy's 2021 article, where they contextualize BTS's rise to success within the context of the "Hallyu wave", which describes the global popularity of Korean actors and singers, popularly referred to as 'idols' (p. 82). Ayyappaswamy explains how BTS evolved as a group and addresses pop culture moments that allowed them to become as successful as they have. So Yeon Park and Blair Kaneshiro, Nicole Santero, and Jin Ha Lee discuss in their 2021 article the behavior of ARMY, addressing the unspoken rules members of the fandom are expected to follow, as well as how hashtags are a common method for users to engage with the 'idols' of whom they are fans. BTS holds a prominent place in the global public sphere, and by default, so does ARMY. Those who are in the fandom are encouraged to consider their actions because one wrong move could potentially scrutinize both BTS and ARMY.

Parasocial Theory, Face Negotiation Theory, and Ontological Security

Parasocial relationship theory is applied to music fandoms and their ability to connect with the musician they are a fan of. The relationship between fandoms and musicians relies heavily on the notion of it being parasocial. The role of the audience, in this instance participants of the fandom, is crucial for the celebrity to determine the opinion of the public or if a social media campaign they create is successful. The difference between parasocial interaction versus relationship theory is addressed as they involve differing levels of participation. This comes from a 1956 article by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, where they apply it to radio, television, and movies. They emphasize how connections between a person with a large fanbase are possible and that, "...they can claim and achieve an intimacy with what are literally crowds of strangers" (p. 216). For example, when movie companies would push Marilyn Monroe to be the face of their film to entice crowds to engage with the perceived intimate relationship they had

with her, despite never meeting her. This concept is at the center of parasocial relationship theory. Even from the era of old Hollywood, filmmakers and television show hosts would attempt to blur the line that divides them and the audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This helps create a form of familiarity between the two parties and strengthen the perceived connection. This is similar to the way musicians have stand-ins on their social media accounts to produce content that makes it appear to be coming directly from them. Especially in the case of BTS, members of ARMY assume tweets come directly from the members from the main twitter account through unique emojis or by signing the tweet off with their name. While this theory will be expanded throughout this thesis, I wanted to provide a brief summary of this theory.

Parasocial relationships are developed from someone taking in a piece of media and creating an image of the person they feel like they know personally or would get along with in real life. For example, if someone were to watch a YouTuber's video, they may react similarly to them and feel like they could befriend the person if they were to meet.

Audiences now live in a world where there is a possibility to communicate ideas rapidly and instantaneously, through their device. When interacting online, audiences hope to get an instant sense of gratification when tweeting to a celebrity or a mutual fan account. This can happen through a reply to a tweet, DM, or post they created. There is a sense of excitement and perceived intimacy when there is potential to get a response from one's favorite creator. As stated by Kehrberg (2015), "In the era of self-mass communication, any message- whether blog post, meme, or tweet- has the potential to reach an expanding mass audience of receivers" (p. 86). This is why using hashtags is critical when attempting to connect with virtual fandom communities. If a hashtag isn't used, there is a strong chance few people with the same interest and intent will view the tweet unless it is reblogged or 'liked' by a mutual user. If a hashtag is

“active”, then it means it is currently being used by multiple users at once and has a higher likelihood of trending. There is a perceived increase in the likelihood that someone can have a virtual interaction with the person they’ve formed a parasocial relationship with if they interact with the trending hashtag. In turn, the app offers the affordance of creating a sense of community for a particular fandom. People can bond over wanting to get noticed by their favorite creator or by having the same interests. It’s important to look at social media through the lens of a social space because this is a popular method for fandoms to curate their presence. Not only can it allow for those not already included in the fandom to join, but there is potential for those whom the fandom is dedicated to view interactions and engage with the community as well.

Curating a persona online is crucial when entering online fandoms and developing a virtual community. Parasocial relationships play a major part when discussing celebrity and audience interactions. Depending on the user, this can determine how they want to have others perceive them with their content, thus leading to the next theory to be discussed in this paper: face negotiation theory. Face negotiation theory was conceived by Stella Ting-Mooney in 1985. “Face” is defined as our self-image and audiences can have multiple. There are positive faces where members desire to be liked and negative faces where members desire to be anonymous. It’s in our nature as people to want control over how others perceive us. Social media provides people to curate content to share specific parts of themselves online. One way this is done through Twitter is by curating a username that reflects the celebrity or fandom a user wants to connect with. People can still engage with these fandoms with their personal accounts. Yet, if one were to use those same accounts to do this, there’s a fear of being perceived as unprofessional or immature. This is why people turn to using negative faces to hide parts of themselves online. What makes Twitter a unique social space is the encouragement from the

creators of the app to perform in a particular way through the app. However, this level of performance changes based on who has ownership of the app. By having a key piece of their online identity reflect the parasocial relationship they're hoping to further, this leaves room for other users to connect with them for the same reasons.

The final theory I will be discussing in this thesis is ontological security. Fandom migration is common in the age of social media. In a time where there are countless social media sites at one's disposal, it's only natural for fandom communities to expand beyond one platform. Twitter was already well established at the time that Tumblr became popular, but they offered the same affordances to fandoms and enhanced the user experience, such as through the previously discussed hashtags. Fandoms can grow used to using the same platform to communicate with other members of a particular fandom community. When fandom migration occurs, people can feel threatened by this notion of change. Ontological security, as stated by Anthony Giddens, is defined as having a sense of stability from the perceived permanence of an individual's routine. In relation to fandom communities, this can include using the same social media site to connect with their favorite musician or other fans. In a 2016 journal article by Rebecca Williams, she conducted an analysis of ontological security with the fandom related to the popular television series *Twin Peaks*. She explains, "Given the importance of media fandom to everyday life, television fandom can therefore offer a source of ontological security for fans, although this can be disrupted when a series ends" (p. 2). The same type of disruption can be applied to musical fandom communities, which is what I will be focusing on throughout this thesis. If a band were to go on hiatus or the fandom of that artist were to migrate to a different social media platform, fans' ontological security would be threatened.

Chapter I: Fan Communities and Fan Culture

There are times when one develops a certain appreciation or love for a particular type of object. Whether someone loves an object is what separates them from being a fan and not being a fan of it. It is rare that something goes appreciated by solely one person, and when more than one fan gathers in support of a shared interest, this leads to the creation of a fan community, or more commonly known as a “fandom”. From their origins in the analog world, fan communities have found a home on a variety of social media platforms. Yet, while this is what most likely comes to mind when discussing fan communities today, they did not originate online. In fact, fan communities have been in the making for years.

The Move to Virtual Communities

When we hear something important, or find out exciting news, we are inclined to share it. Once that same news is spread to someone else, a transaction has started between the receiver and the sender of the message. There is an expectation that comes with opening-up about one’s interests. Ideally, the person receiving the news will respond with the same level of enthusiasm as the person sharing the information; “I told you something, now you do the same.” There are extensive routes that exist to communicate that information and it depends entirely on the people involved. Methods of communication have transformed extensively over the years, from writing a letter to a long-distance friend and talking to someone on the phone, to posting pictures from your summer vacation on Instagram. Rather than being confined to just one or two modes of communication, we now live in an era where we can choose how we communicate, and social media has become a common form of modern communication.

It took a long way to get here, as before “social media”, there was “Web 2.0” and before that, “Web 1.0.” Web 1.0” is defined as the original use of the internet. During this time, media companies controlled much of the content being put out into the mainstream. “Web 1.0” is

characterized through the term “info-web” and was dominated by one-way information conversation (Rogers, 2013, p. 3). This version of the internet did not allow for much talk-back, which is where “Web 2.0” comes into play. As stated by Alice E. Marwick (2013), Web 2.0 “celebrated the adoption of social technologies as a precursor to a better, freer society, and framed the collection and sharing of information as the bedrock for revolution” (p. 22). The discourse about Web 2.0—what we now refer to as social media involved the potential for regular members of the public to garner as much attention as was being given to media conglomerates. People were encouraged to participate and create an image of themselves online.

In the context of media fandom, one way this was encouraged was through the platform LiveJournal. When LiveJournal was launched in 1999, it was used as both a blogging and social networking site and adopted on a larger scale in 2003 by fans who produced their own content such as fan fiction, fan art, and other graphics (Bury, 2017). This is where the arrival of site-based discussions became prominent as opposed to more social sites. According to Bury, LiveJournal “...marked a clear shift away from the centrality of the group forum and the collectivity it engendered, to the individual blog and personalized network” (Bury, 2017, para. 39). Still, this revolutionized interpersonal communication because of the scale that was now accessible for forming connections through fandom. People were able to connect over shared interests form communities online.

One of the defining moments of online fan culture was the widespread visibility of online fan communities on the platform Tumblr in 2013. Tumblr, while still active today, peaked in terms of fandom activity in 2013 (Collins, 2022). Its popularity stemmed from its focus on the visual, and offerings creative affordances for its users that communicated across language borders. People could post gifs, fan art, and videos to showcase their appreciation for certain

media. It was a time when if you were active on social media and weren't a part of any fandom, you were almost ostracized from the platform. In essence, the widespread activity and visibility of fans on Tumblr normalized the idea of being a part of a fandom.

What is already widely discussed in scholarship are the psychological effects of people being able to easily access social media, but the question of why people continue to use these applications despite their well-publicized negative consequences has been overlooked. Social media is now often used to communicate quickly, and what I find most interesting about social media apps is the way they enable users to engage in conversation while not anticipating a response. What makes social media “social” is changing. There is a perception of fandoms that center around the stereotype of fangirls and a “notice me” mentality. While this may be the case for some Twitter users, this type of thinking neglects the potential Twitter holds to curate social spaces that are shifting how we perceive celebrity and audience interactions. The modern-day Twitter user “is no indistinguishable mass of languid couch potatoes, but a bubbling source of creation and production that challenges the power dynamics of the old producer/consumer binary” (Kerhberg, p. 86). There used to be barriers, both physical and social, that prevented fans from having direct contact with celebrities. However, the availability of “behind the scenes” content offered through the platform creates another kind of relationship between fans and celebrities—the parasocial relationship.

Parasocial Relationships: Offline vs. Online

Before proceeding, I want to distinguish the differences between parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions. Parasocial relationships are formed from having prolonged exposure to a type of media, whereas parasocial interactions occur from a one-time engagement with content. For the sake of this thesis, I will be using the term parasocial relationships to discuss fan

and fandom behavior because this level of engagement doesn't happen without repeated exposure to a particular medium. The term parasocial relationship was first coined by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl in their paper "Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction" in 1956. They define parasocial relationships as occurring when a face-to-face relationship between a "spectator" and a "performer" is alluded to and seemingly becomes personal (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). This term was used solely in the context of radio, television, and film but has since been applied to social media and other forms of new media. Parasocial relationships are crucial when discussing fan communities and fan culture. These are intimate connections being made between fans and celebrities despite the two groups never potentially crossing paths in-person. The more a fan interacts with a celebrity online, the more they begin to create an illusion of how that celebrity may act in-person. With the arrival of social media, this illusion is further enhanced based on the content a celebrity decides to put out in relation to their personal life. Fans can actively engage in rhetoric that deepens their sense of belonging and loyalty within a fan community. Conversing with other people who share an interest and feel the same type of parasocial relationship can strengthen the bond of a fan community. It is in these fandom social spaces where fans can have a sense of belonging and feel secure within themselves and society. Horton and Wohl's initial findings focused on the one-sided relationship between a fan and the shared object; they failed to mention the participation and sense of community that forms from being in a fan community (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). A fan community can be formed in a variety of ways, whether it is offline or online. What is at the root of both is the passion to share and bond over an object the community loves.

Fan Communities in the Offline World

Fan communities within society have become commonplace and have changed how we think of interpersonal communication. Before social media came to the forefront of pop culture, interpersonal communication could be thought of as an interaction between two or more people, expressing ideas, messages, and information amongst each other. Face-to-face interpersonal communication compared to communication on social media are similar to one another, but each come with their own unique methods of communication. In a 2004 study conducted by Nancy Baym and Mei-Chen Lin, they compared various types of interpersonal communication practices to assist with contextualizing the emerging media. They surveyed 496 college students and asked them questions about their most significant social interaction, where they controlled “the medium of the interaction (face-to-face, telephone, and internet) and relationship type (acquaintances, friends, family members, and partners)” (p. 308). Relationships can be maintained through various forms of media; it’s the type of media used that determines how the relationship is held together. Their findings supported the notion that local relationships were most likely to use face-to-face conversation and least likely to use the internet. Yet, with long-distance relationships, “the internet was used in nearly as many relationships as the telephone, and more than face-to-face conversation” (Baym & Lin, 2004, p. 313). People went from relying on word-of-mouth to utilizing social media as a way of expanding those connections with people. This is especially the case when it comes to fandoms, both in the cases of solitary and group fan activities. The varying ways fandoms behave can be seen through the 1992 writings of Lawrence Grossberg. He discusses the ways to distinguish between types of fan behaviors through how much they like a shared object and the intensity to which they like the shared object (Grossberg, 1992). In other words, fans can distinguish themselves through the value they hold in something. Fans can appreciate it on a surface level, on a quality scale, expressing how much

a shared object resonates with them. On the flip side they can appreciate, or love, a shared object so much so that, for example, they would participate in a social media campaign to bond with others over the same shared object.

One way the community fostered from fandom appears in the offline world is through fan conventions. Fan conventions are an important way for connections facilitated online to be further deepened with face-to-face interactions (Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). While relationships between fans and the celebrities they're fans of are important, another relationship that gets left out is the one between those in the fandom from the interests they share. These conventions offer opportunities for those who are "mutuals" online, meaning they reciprocate the following on the platform, to meet in-person. These spaces also provide a chance for fans to "cosplay," or wear attire similar to that of a particular character or object they are a fan of. Zines were also an object to bond over through fan communities because of how easily they could be distributed and enhance the sense of community.

Social media offers fans a platform to express themselves and connect with others in their fan community, creating connections that have the potential to be deepened offline (Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). Yet, there is also potential for these connections to be deepened online as well. Social media provides a hub where people can produce and engage with content that involves their fandom directly. This has led to fan culture blooming throughout social media platforms. Moreover, in-person interactions still occur with celebrities and their fans. From autograph signings, crowds forming outside of airports or hotels, and, unfortunately, through paparazzi photos, there are now seemingly endless ways one can interact with their favorite celebrity. However, social media offers quicker affordances to do so. How people interacted with their favorite celebrity at the beginning of the decade differs from how people currently do so. Now,

these platforms offer fandoms to interact with their favorite celebrity daily. The sender and receiver relationship between a celebrity and their fandom is consistently active unless explicitly stated otherwise, such as through a television or musician hiatus.

The extent a fan feels connected to their fandom is entirely dependent on them. The social media “boom” of 2013 sparked the beginning of a pop-culture renaissance that had fandoms at the forefront. What used to be considered abnormal was beginning to become the new normal in society. Despite the move from offline to online, fandoms still exist in both spaces. What further enhanced the drive to online platforms for fandoms was the accessibility and availability of content for television shows, movies, or music. Looking to Twitter, this was possible through their implementation of the hashtag and the trending features on the platform. Twitter has history of fandoms being housed on the platform (Evans, 2022) and the affordances offered to fandoms allowed for social spaces to be carved out through the platform. Especially in the case of intra-fandom interactions and fan-celebrity interactions.

Chapter II: Twitter as a Social Space

The rise of social media in the past decade is to be expected as it becomes more accessible to users. While there are existing debates on the negative aspects of social media use, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2021 states roughly seven-in-ten Americans say they’ve used any social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Facebook, MySpace, and LiveJournal were a handful of social sites that pre-dated the arrival of Twitter. Twitter launched around three years after these sites had already established themselves. These social media relied on existing offline relationships to thrive, and this is similar to how Twitter based its original algorithm. Once more users began to use Twitter, it extended beyond its intended purpose.

Origins of Twitter

Twitter was launched on March 21, 2006, in San Francisco, California, under the original name of “Twtr” by Jack Dorsey and his associates (Rogers, 2013). The inspiration for this platform, according to Dorsey, came from communications systems used for bicycle messengers and emergency services. He went as far as to describe it as a “new take on the address book” and intended it to be used as a “friend-following” tool (Rogers, 2013, p. 356). Yet, unlike other social media sites such as Facebook and MySpace, no mutual acknowledgement of a connection as required (Kwak et al., 2010). For example, when someone accepts a friend request on Facebook, the connection is automatically completed. On Twitter, users may follow but are not guaranteed a reciprocal follow. Because of this, while Twitter began as a platform to connect with friends, it has since grown beyond that function. Originally, when users opened their Twitter accounts, they were met with the home screen asking them the question, “What are you doing?”. This question would remain the same until late 2009, when it was changed to “What is happening?” (Rogers, 2013). This change highlights the transition of Twitter from an interpersonal application to that of user-generated mass communication. Rather than focusing on oneself as the subject, the user is questioned and given the option to share information.

Twitter offers a multitude of ways for people to spread content. One, especially in recent years, is through activism. Twitter has seen users using the platform to harness their activism, especially with the emergence of activist campaigns. For example, the “Black Lives Matter” movement began in the United States through the hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) on Twitter and has since extended into the offline world through rallies and protest marches (Housley et al., 2018). It should be noted that activism through social media is the subject of debate amongst social media users. How information is handled and spread through Twitter depends on users’

intentions; while some are active in spreading activist content while extending their participation into the offline world, others perceive the acts of “reposting” or “retweeting” as enough. The latter prompted the term “slacktivism,” which happens when users forward content to show “their approval” of the message but do nothing else (Housley et al., 2018). Regardless of how activist content was spread, however, Twitter became a base for easy access to new information, where users could witness live updates and engage in the conversation simultaneously.

Impact on Fandom Culture

The relationship between Twitter and fandoms is one of success because of the global scale that has been obtained using the app as a social space. Social media use is relationship-oriented and requires audiences to put forth effort into what they want to receive after. When someone opens Twitter, for example, they have the option of creating a tweet, reviewing their feed to respond to a user’s tweet regardless of the online “follow” being reciprocated, checking what hashtags are trending, or mindlessly scrolling to avoid doing another task. They can either connect with someone they know in their personal life or someone they’ve never met in person that they feel they know through the media they put out.

Social media has also been instrumental in online fandom interactions. As mentioned above, Tumblr housed a variety of fandoms, with fans drawn to the website in part because of the affordance of remaining anonymous when registering. Users didn’t have to provide their name or any personal information, even going as far as to not display followers and following count, which is something Facebook did with displaying one’s friend count (Collins, 2022). It remained so until the migration from Tumblr to Twitter. Tumblr launched in 2009, and by the end of 2011, the platform housed over ten million blog posts (Collins, 2022). Tumblr was purchased by Yahoo in 2013 for \$1.1 billion but faced financial hardships from “the fact that

Tumblr didn't require user's true identities, and that adult-oriented content permeated the platform, steer[ing] away potential advertisers" (Collins, 2022, para. 14). Fandom communities outgrew the affordances offered through Tumblr, such as adult content seen in fan art, and started to migrate in substantial numbers to Twitter.

On Twitter, there was a tendency to follow friends and celebrities related to sports, music, television, film, and other media types, and around the same time Twitter changed the question posed on its home screen, its target audiences shifted as well. As early as 2009, Twitter housed multiple fandoms, including Beliebers¹, Directioners², Otakus³, and K-pop fans (Evans, 2022). What separated Tumblr from Twitter, for one thing, was the ability to delete a blog post or tweet. For example, on Tumblr, once a post is made to the platform and is reblogged by another user, despite efforts to delete it, it will still be perceived by those who reblogged it. However, on Twitter if a post is deleted by a user, it will be permanently removed from that user's account regardless of whether someone retweeted it. The majority of these fanbases being located on Twitter allowed for networks within the fan community to flourish. When a user creates an account on Twitter, the year they joined is displayed on their page. Experienced people in the fandom can help those who are new to the fandom, going so far as to inform them of how to manage themselves in the community.

Twitter is a unique case in the context of user engagement because of people's different uses of the platform. Concerning celebrity culture, it is used both as a social network and for news dissemination. When people decide to 'retweet' a tweet, it gets farther from the original creator and has the potential to spread, if the original user's account is public. There is potential

¹ Fandom dedicated to the Canadian musician, Justin Bieber.

² Fandom dedicated to the British boy band, One Direction.

³ Fandom dedicated to those interested in anime, manga, and anything related to Japanese or East Asian popular culture.

for one's original work to spread throughout not only the platform but also the fandom itself. Knowing the potential for an original tweet to go 'viral' or begin to 'trend', music award shows began to create categories created specifically to garner attention via Twitter. Fandoms could now participate in Twitter campaigns to vote for their favorite artist in an attempt to win an award for the fandom and by default, their favorite artist. This type of self-mass communication behavior enhances the parasocial relationship felt within the fandom. Rather than the artist awarding the fandom with something, the fandom is giving an award to the artist. For example, fandoms may organize group projects to be completed at an artist's concert. This is seen as a chance for the artists to further perceive the support they have from their fandom.

When fan projects are not enough, Twitter offers fandoms a chance to compete to determine which fandom and artist has the most social media presence. One show that created such an award is the Billboard Music Awards. The winner was decided through "major fan interactions with music, which includes album and digital song sales, streaming, radio airplay, touring, social engagement, and the result of a global online vote by fans" (Ye-eun, 2017, para. 5). The "Top Social Artist" award was first given out in 2011 to the Beliebers, who continued to win the award until 2016. It was against this social media backdrop that, in 2017, the BTS ARMY began to grow its social media presence, with the award going to BTS for the following consecutive years, until 2021 when Billboard decided to discontinue it.

Music Fan Communities and Twitter

As stated above, fandoms aren't housed on one particular social media platform. It has become commonplace for fandoms to spread throughout and migrate to other platforms. Migration, as used in the offline world, is defined as being a "permanent or semi-permanent change of residence" (Fiesler & Dym, 2020, p. 3). When there is an inevitable change, either

through social issues or a shift in ownership, a user could begin to feel panicked and feel forced to move to another platform. A presumed threat to ontological security, specifically in the case of music fandoms, will influence users to migrate and participate in discourse through another platform. However, in the case of virtual migration, it can be defined as changing the use of one primary platform to the use of another. Virtual migration can happen for a multitude of reasons, similar to those of migration in the offline world. What was once considered a safe, comfortable social space, may be threatened with restrictions or advertisements, causing users to migrate to another platform where they have more freedom with the content they can create. Users of a particular platform may feel more comfortable after migrating to another, and they may gain a false sense of permanency. Fans assume the platform will never change and they can stay there, posting their content.

Following in the footsteps of MySpace, Twitter was an easy way for celebrities to make their brand or presence known to audiences within virtual communities. They could share their status, pictures, and videos of their everyday life, and in current versions, they can live stream their whereabouts. Heretofore, paparazzi, fan clubs, and fan letters were a handful of ways for celebrities to engage with the public. However, Twitter provided a shift in audience-celebrity interactions. Now the platform recommends celebrities for users to follow and engage with. The relationship with fans changes because there is more of a chance for fans to see moments of a musician's day-to-day life or possibly get noticed by a celebrity (Kehrberg, 2015).

Another way Twitter users can bond and engage with one another's pages, whether through accounts they follow or a stranger's account, is through the use of hashtags. In an article using the European songwriting competition, Eurovision, Tim Highfield, Stephen Harrington, and Axel Bruns analyze how Twitter users engage with the event through live-tweeting and the

varying trending topics that result from the commentary of the event. In this study, they found that performers the audience took notice of, whether through the performance itself or an outfit perceived negatively, could be tracked based on live tweets using a hashtag related to Eurovision. The incentives for using the hashtag were the chance to engage with others also commenting on the event, as well as for a chance to be featured in the actual program itself. Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns raised the question of how “second-screen activity might change television viewing habits, how fans and producers inhabit and adapt to this new space of engagement” (p. 317). When a word or phrase is preceded by the ‘#’ symbol, it enables the “manual or automatic collation of all tweets containing the same hashtag” (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013, p. 321). These have become more common in television and music media. The term “live tweeting” has grown increasingly popular when a popular event airs. On Twitter’s ‘trending topics’ page, chances are there will be a decent amount related to a television program currently airing at the time the user is accessing the platform. Whether by the intention of the producers of those television shows, or by accident, Twitter has become a crucial part of audience consideration in contemporary media (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013).

The same question can be applied to the relationship between musicians and their fandoms. There are different participatory levels when it comes to engaging with a musician via Twitter. Some use the “retweet” button to post to their account verbatim what the person tweeted; some use the “quote” tweet button to add their commentary in addition to what the person originally tweeted. There is another layer of those dedicated to a fandom where they attempt to gain the attention of the celebrity by tweeting the same tweet over and over again in the hopes they will get “noticed” – this could mean the person liking, retweeting, or in some rare cases replying to the tweet itself.

In the context of music fandoms, this is a way for users to live tweet about an album or tour announcement. Hashtags are an easy way for members of a fandom to connect with other members of the community. The use of hashtags through Twitter is unique because they “showcase online groups’ cohesion, helping to bring visibility to the topics they are promoting and ‘spread their relations with their idols’” (Park et al., 2021, p. 2). Throughout the growth of social media, fandoms have become intertwined with the development of such platforms. It is not alien to enter Twitter and see a trending hashtag that pertains to a particular fandom. Hashtags help fandoms reach other members of the fandom and create a sense of cohesion – under one unit can individuals of a fandom find one another. Despite the changes Twitter has gone through over the years, the intra-fandom interactions still follow suit with the intended “friend-following” (Rogers, 2013) nature the site was originally used for. Members of the same fandom are being connected to one another and encourages them to interact with one another.

Through Twitter, people who are fans of celebrities can reply to the celebrity themselves and with others who share an interest in the likes of that same celebrity. Twitter is not a rival technology for other media – it is complementary and is used to promote that same media (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013). For some celebrities, Twitter became a popular method to make themselves relevant to the public eye; others use the site to promote positive messages while simultaneously connecting with their followers. Celebrities can post content to their Twitter accounts directly (Bennett & Chin, 2014) or have a media producer do it for them. Twitter offers users a platform to share whatever is on their minds within reason. However, it is important to consider the different levels of participation that occur when using Twitter. There are participatory and non-participatory habits. Fans “participate” in a fandom when they actively produce content in response to the celebrity or engage with a tweet made by them from their

account. Fans who are considered “non-participatory” are those who have an account on Twitter, but only view the tweets being made from the account. Twitter removes the perceived barrier between celebs and their fan followers and creates an appearance of genuine connection (Bury, Deller, Greenwood, and Jones, 2013). The removal of this virtual barrier enhances parasocial relationships formed between a musician and their fandom.

A celebrity can interact with another user's post, retweet it, and show their fans the type of content they like to engage with themselves. This level of engagement, whether coming from the celebrity or their marketing team, furthers the sense of loyalty between a fan community and whomever or whatever it is dedicated to. The fan community may not know if the content is coming directly from the celebrity, but regardless, the parasocial relationship felt is still reinforced through the perceived connection and reciprocity. Reciprocity is not required for a parasocial relationship, but it does strengthen the connection. For example, in their discussion of the role of social media changing, Bury, Deller, Greenwood, & Jones observe:

“Twitter is a prime example of direct barrier-less communication (and action) between celebs and their fan-followers. When Stephen Fry retweets the latest charity org/event/needy-cause it is an example of how social media is able to generate activity and traffic in a simple, time-efficient, and inexpensive way.” (p. 313).”

This same kind of behavior can be said about BTS, and their influence over their fans. At the height of the George Floyd protests in 2020, BTS donated \$1 million to the Black Lives Matter movement. Using their influence to promote the Black Lives Matter cause, BTS was applauded both by their fandom and people who barely knew of them. Fans built on the momentum established by BTS by creating the hashtag “#MatchAMillion,” matching donations fans made to the Black Lives Matter campaign (Johnson, 2020). This donation project was spearheaded by

One In An Army, a group made up of volunteers who strive to help other organizations unite with their love for BTS, and by the end, they hit a donation mark of “\$1,026,531 with 35,609 donors” (Kwak, 2020, para. 3). Not only did they match the donation within 24 hours of posting the goal, but they went into the hashtag “#whitelivesmatter” to drown out the white supremacy and hate rhetoric being created with “non-sensical and anti-racist posts.”

This type of behavior is normally seen only in offline interactions, such as through protests. This is by no means the first time a fandom has felt moved by a musician's decision to support a philanthropic cause. Artists, such as U2 and Lady Gaga, encouraged their fans to participate in activism through their dedication to particular causes (Park et al, 2021). What makes this feat so notable is the motivation of the fandom itself. Members of BTS did not explicitly tell ARMY to match their donation or expect any kind of reciprocity in return. The group sat down with Variety Magazine for an interview to give their statements on why they donated. They shared their experience with prejudice and racism, and when they were asked about how the decision came about the group's leader Kim Namjoon, stage name RM, said the following:

“We were aware of the fans, the hashtags, and their participation. It was a decision we thought about very carefully: what could we do, as part of our overall message of speaking out against prejudice and violence? We discussed it very carefully with the company and that's how this came about.” (para. 4).

Celebrity activism is nothing new: for example, Lady Gaga's endless support and advocacy for gay rights and U2's dedication to poverty campaigns (Park et al., 2021). When a celebrity advocates for such philanthropic causes, fans often experience a strong desire to support those same causes. In the context of parasocial relationships, it is felt to enhance the bond between the fandom and the musician. The strength of fan activism “is built on shared

media experiences, a sense of community, and the wish to help” (Park et al, 2021, p. 3). It was the power of community that moved fans.

Twitter is where a majority of fandoms participate within their community and make connections with other users through the platform. Twitter changes the game when it comes to fan and celebrity interactions because of the perception a shared object might see a response to a tweet. More so, celebrities can choose to use their platform to bring awareness to social justice issues. The content a celebrity interacts with – whether through a retweet, reply, or a like – their followers will see that interaction. Fans in a music fan community, for example, can use this to voice their support or take it as an incentive to learn more about a particular social issue. While this should by no means be the standard about social justice awareness, celebrities can use their platform to their advantage to do so because of the affordances offered through Twitter. Creating hashtags and asking users to reflect on what they want to talk about, if something is “worthy” enough to be sent out onto the platform, has evolved the fan and celebrity interaction and what it can look like. Though the lack of reciprocity exists, it does not prevent users from participating on the platform.

Chapter III: BTS, ARMY, and the #LoveMyself Campaign

The United States houses a variety of musicians who attained a large, consistent longevity when it came to their careers. Most of these musicians, however, relied on the English language to do so. The U.S. music industry has been dominated by Anglo-American acts and has very rarely faced “competition” from Asia prior to the sudden rise of K-pop (Oh & Park, 2013, p. 390). K-pop is in a current “boom” in the music industry, but prior to this, “the Western network of music producers and distributors did not spot or recruit Korean musical talents into their production and distribution systems” (Oh & Park, 2013, p. 398). It wasn’t until the late 1990s

that Korean culture began to enter international markets in a phenomenon^[OBJ] *Hallyu*^{[OBJ][OBJ][OBJ]} is the phenomenon in which South Korean music, films, and popular culture gained visibility overseas, beginning in East and Southeast Asia, and then in the West. South Korean films began to be awarded International Awards, allowing the perceived temporary “fad” to diffuse throughout the United States.

Social media also fostered the popularity of South Korean pop culture outside South Korea. In the Korean music industry, there have been many instances where artists attempted to break beyond the local market. Japan is the second largest music market in the world with almost \$3 billion in revenue, as of 2018 (Boman, 2019). BTS had not seen too much success in their early days of debuting because of a scandal faced by Big Hit and lead them to focus on breaking into not only the South Korean music industry, but Japan’s as well (Parc & Kim, 2020). The U.S. music market, however, is a nearly \$6 billion industry and, unfortunately, means global success is reliant on breaking into this particular market (Boman, 2019). Breaking into the U.S. music industry is difficult to do. Many Korean artists attempted to do so, but it wasn’t until 2012, when South Korean artist Psy released his hit “Gangnam Style,” that success in the United States was achieved. At the time of the song’s release, it was paired with a visually appealing music video that was posted on YouTube, leading to the viral spread of the dance performed in the music video on social media. This, paired with growing use of social media in the early 2010s, cemented the South Korean music industry’s place in the United States music market – something that would be further proven with the debut of two major K-pop groups: the four-member girl group, Blackpink, and the seven-member boy group, BTS (Bangtan Boys).

The Rise of BTS and BTS ARMY

Since their debuts, both groups have successfully penetrated the US and UK music markets and managed to become “global superstars” (Boman, 2019, p. 8). While both groups have gained visibility and international popularity, there is a major difference between their respective fandoms. Blackpink’s fans, referred to as “BLINKS”, and BTS’ fans, “ARMY,” have a different level of engagement with the groups themselves. For example, Blackpink debuted under the company YG Entertainment in 2016 with their single “BOOMBAYAH” and continued to release EPs with four to six tracks at most until their debut album in 2018, “BLACKPINK ARENA TOUR 2018”. New projects by the group are one section of maintaining relevancy while giving fans a reason to engage with one another. What separates BTS ARMY from other fandoms is their ability to organize without having a strict organization system. Their dedication and devotion to BTS has been apparent since the group made their debut.

BTS first debuted in June 2013 under the company Big Hit Entertainment (renamed HYBE Corporation in March 2021). The original concept was for BTS to be a Hip-Hop Crew, hence why members Suga, J-Hope, and RM are rappers in the band, with the other members Jimin, Jin, Jungkook, and V being chosen by Bang-Si-Hyuk, the founder of Big Hit, for their “idol” like qualities (Ayyappaswamy, 2021, p. 85). Since then, the group changed aesthetic styles every few years or so to grow as artists and “shift away from simple episodes to more elaborate storylines and multi-layered storylines” (Parc Kim, 2020, p. 20). Their label, Big Hit, faced a scandal that made Korean media outlets place an unofficial boycott on any groups under the company at the time (Parc & Kim, 2020). They debuted their single “No More Dream” and released their debut single album “2 Cool 4 Skool” in 2013, but it wasn’t until their 2016 single, “DNA” that the group began to achieve international status, especially with their live performance at the Billboard Music Awards and receipt of the Top Social Artist award – an

award that is determined by major fan interactions with music streaming and social engagement alike (Mitchell, 2022). As of February 2024, when I accessed their social media accounts, despite the band being on hiatus to fulfill the two-year South Korean military service requirement, the band has amassed a social media following of 43.9 million on Twitter, 74.3 million on Instagram, and 64.2 million on TikTok.

BTS's ability to connect with their audience is built entirely on trust and the genuine desire to create their music, as perceived by their fans. This is especially the case when it comes to their social media presence. Each member of the group posts content to each platform the group is active on. They are most active on social media when preparing for another album or a "comeback" performance. This is a phrase commonly used throughout fandoms surrounding K-pop artists, used to describe the anticipation for new projects by their favorite artists. When a K-pop group prepares for a comeback, especially a group with a following as large as BTS, hashtags relating to the comeback are created by the record label. What separates BTS from other groups is their dedication to their craft, especially through storytelling. Once they transitioned out of solely making hip-hop music, the themes of their songs "changed from solely harsh criticism about school and society to positive themes related to overcoming hardships, particularly with support they have received from the ARMY" (Parc & Kim, 2020, p. 27). BTS continuously shows their support to their fans not only through social media, but directly through their own music. They acknowledge without the support from their fans, they would not be in the place they are now. It is this attitude that continues to draw new and existing fans to the band. It is why ARMY is so dedicated to showing their support for the band online because of the support the group shows for them. **ARMY's Online Presence**

ARMY, which stands for “Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth”, holds a powerful presence on social media (Park et al., 2021). Members of the BTS ARMY bring the same passion for supporting the group to the fan community on Twitter. There is no official path to becoming a member of ARMY; while there is official memberships fans can purchase to receive exclusive content (i.e., photographs, digital photo cards, pre-sale codes for concerts), it is not a requirement. Many fans who belong to ARMY but do not have such membership are still considered a part of the fandom. Yet, while there is no strict set of guidelines on how to participate, there is a standard members of the fandom hold themselves to. Whether it is acknowledged or not, actions done in the name of the fandom are perceived to reflect on BTS as a group. Part of the responsibility members of the fandom take on is to promote a good public image and remind each other that they “are the faces of BTS” (Park et al., 2021, p. 3). How the fandom acts are dependent on what the group is doing. If BTS is preparing for a “comeback,” or a performance to signal the release of a new album, then ARMY will organize to help break records for streaming or views on a new music video. This is what happened with the group’s single “Dynamite” in 2020 (Park et al, 2021; Chang & Park; 2019). If a new song is released, users will take to YouTube, for example, and create lyric videos to translate BTS’s songs (Parc & Kim, 2020). This is especially crucial for the fan community because during concerts it allows fans to sing along and “creates a close kinship among consumers with BTS regardless of linguistic barriers that K-pop bands generally have faced when going abroad” (Parc & Kim, 2020, p. 25). Those in the fan community of ARMY go out of their way to help other members feel engaged and included even though there may be existing language barriers. Despite these perceived barriers, they continue to organize globally online.

Twitter has become an intrinsic part of fan community organizing. Many fans rely on certain fan accounts for information related to the band or for a chance to organize through the platform. For example, the Twitter account “@BangtanTrends” was created when BTS fans Monica Chahine, Maggie Su, and another member of ARMY who has since stepped back, met through the platform in 2017. They created the joint account the following year (Moon, 2020), reflecting ARMY’s ability, as WoongJo Chang and Shin-Eui Park observe, to organize without organization (Chang & Park, 2019). It was through this Twitter account where Chahine and Su created hashtags that make it easier for BTS to appear in the Twitter trends chart. For example, @BangtanTrends, which as of writing this has amassed a following of 207.7K followers, created the hashtag “#5thFlowerPathofBTS” to celebrate BTS Festa in 2018 – the fifth anniversary of the group’s debut on June 13, 2013 (Moon, 2020). The hashtag “became the No. 1 Worldwide trend on Twitter with more than 800,000 tweets (Moon, 2020, para. 11). Similarly, fans also created accounts dedicated to translating tweets posted by the official BTS Twitter account prior to the “Translate” feature being introduced to the platform (Moon, 2020).

In a study that analyzed how members of ARMY perceived their fandom, participants were asked to measure their understanding of the structure of the fandom, team efficacy, and their confidence in the fandom. The study found that members are familiar with the nuances that come with being in ARMY. Out of 242 responses, 83% reported feeling confident in the ARMY fandom, 33% reported a lack of confidence and 16% voted for both, expressing how the size is both good and bad: “...we can mobilize quite fast for comeback goals or similar but this also often fuels a mob-mentality that is counterproductive and against what ARMY actually stands for” (Park et al, 2021, p. 6). Self-awareness and consciously engaging with the fandom are behaviors common to ARMY, especially on Twitter.

ARMY is dedicated to ensuring the members of BTS are seen in a positive light in the media, and BTS decided to give back to them. It has become so successful, that #LoveMyself is not just a hashtag – it is a phrase known and expressed in the offline world to further celebrate BTS and the fandom. Internal disputes, such as when individual fan accounts conflict with one another, can hinder fans’ ability to provide a safe space in a fandom. Yet, ARMY presents a unified front in the face of media that focuses on such negative aspects of the fandom, such as the mob mentality mentioned above. If a fan account were to tweet something that doesn’t align with the views of BTS, particularly hate speech, then that user would be held accountable by the majority of the fandom. This type of behavior is similar to interactions within a community in the offline world. If a coworker were to participate in hate speech directed at another coworker, they would be reported to Human Resources. Of course, music fandoms don’t have a department-based system for accountability; thus, there is a tendency when faced with conflict on social media to fall into a “loop” where users post back and forth, boasting about their opinions and analyzing who is in the wrong. This behavior can lead to the “mob-mentality” as mentioned in the previous paragraph. The credibility of a fan account tends to be measured by the amount of followers they have or how long the account has been active. Based on my observations, the longer the timeline aligns with that of BTS, the more likely other incoming members of the ARMY will be inclined to side with them. There is a level of stability that comes from a fandom continuing to be active alongside the group they are supporting.

The #LoveMyself Campaign

The social space created by the ARMY on Twitter enabled the launch of a full-fledged social media campaign. BTS dedicates much of their music to their fans, purposefully including lyrics to support and uplift their audience. Yet, with this hashtag they decided to take it

a step further. The band had already established a large following online by the time the campaign was originally launched with the hope of creating a sense of community amongst the fans of BTS. The level of dedication presented by the BTS ARMY does not go unnoticed by the group and the members make sure to express their gratitude in a multitude of ways. With the hashtag, the band encouraged fans to spread the message of positivity and self-love, as these are two major issues faced by the age range of people in the fandom, especially in the era of social media. As stated before, there is a lot of pressure to conform to what is deemed "popular" by the majority of the public and for fans to change themselves to fit the standards of society. The band expressed their desire for fans to embrace the flaws they have and realize they should love themselves despite their perceived shortcomings. BTS' #LoveMyself campaign was a precedent to their deep participation in activism.

The campaign officially launched on November 1, 2017, with the original account still currently active. It was a collaboration between the band, their label Big Hit Entertainment (now known as HYBE Corporation), and the organization UNICEF. It was originally conceived by the band and Big Hit Entertainment, but they wanted a partner to collaborate with, leading them to the Korean Committee with UNICEF, whose mission is dedicated to "improving human rights and lives of children and teens over the past seven decades as one of the largest international non-profit organizations" (LOVEMYSELF, n.d.). While the hope was to engage with the participatory nature of ARMY, BTS also expressed their willingness to raise money for global campaigns and to donate a portion of their income from album sales and 100% of all profits from the sale of goods to numerous social programs (LOVEMYSELF, n.d.). With the hashtag #LoveMyself, fans were able to spread the message of self-love and positivity. This campaign grew to high levels of engagement globally, and the band was invited to speak at the UN General

Assembly on September 24, 2018, and again on September 23, 2020, to address the events of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it had on their fans and other youth. Moreover, it deepened fans' dedication to the band. Even with their global scale and their popularity, BTS created a campaign through which fans could cultivate the more intimate issue of self-confidence. This gesture strengthened the parasocial relationship felt by ARMY towards BTS, creating a message that the band and the fans are in this together.

According to the official campaign website, at least 15,315,497 fans have used the hashtag “#BTSLoveMyself” since the campaign began (LOVEMYSELF, n.d.). This campaign gave the impression that fans receiving reciprocated communication with the band. The campaign posed a challenge to fans directly, which they were responsible for engaging with through use of the hashtag.

Over the last decade, ARMY has proven itself to be a fandom to be reckoned with, both with the unwavering support they show to BTS and through their dominating online presence. Despite BTS's current hiatus to fulfill their individual two-year military service requirement, as is required by law in South Korea, their fandom still maintains a community on Twitter. Their online presence was taken to another level once the group launched the #LoveMyself campaign. The hashtag proved to be an easy and sufficient way for members of the fandom to express their appreciation for others within the community, and for members of the group. Not only were BTS creating a campaign to spread a message of positivity, but they were also encouraging intra-fandom interaction. They wanted members of ARMY to be engaged within their community, leading to future instances of fan activism (Johnson, 2020) through the social space made by Twitter. The campaign would not have been as successful had it not been for the dedication and intense devotion seen through members of ARMY.

Chapter IV: Observational Analysis

Methods

Having referenced the history of fandom using Twitter as a social space as well as the success history of BTS and their fan community, ARMY, it is important to look at a case study of how the parasociality of their relationship is seen. BTS supports ARMY through their music and social media campaigns, while ARMY supports the band to help their streams and presence online. The #LoveMyself campaign is a prime example of the power a musician holds when they encourage their fan community to engage with a particular social issue – in this case, self-confidence and violence prevention.

An Observational Analysis of User-Generated Content through the #LoveMyself

Campaign











Previous research conducted through Twitter analytics is exemplified in Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns (2013) and their work on Eurovision and audience engagement through “live tweeting” of the event itself.

DATE	REPLY	HASHTAG	IMAGE?	ADDITIONAL TEXT?
23-3-20	PH PH ARMYs, hope you can donate here through Lazada. Minimum is 50 pesos. ^^ #StayStrong_ARMY #coronavirus #	yes	yes	no
23-3-20	you have no idea how much I needed this, or you may do. Thank you for existing in our lives. Those days have been th	no	no	no
23-3-20	جزاكم الله الف خير	no	no	no
23-3-20	We love you all so much. We will be waiting for you at the other end of this.	no	no	no
23-3-20	vocês são tudo 🥰	no	no	no
23-3-20	#힘내라_ 대한민국 #힘내라. 대구경북 #우리의응원을이어주세요 #BTSLoveMyself #ENDviolence #BTSARMY #BTS (https://y	yes	no	no
23-3-20	I love you so much 🥰 @BTS_twt	no	no	no
23-3-20	thank you so much for this, stay safe and healthy 🍷	no	no	no
23-3-20	junggoo 🍷	no	yes	no
23-3-20	emoji	no	no	no
23-3-20	emoji	no	no	no
23-3-20	🍷💖🍷 #StayStrong_ARMY #BTSLoveMyself	yes	no	no
23-3-20	🍷💖🍷 #StayStrong_ARMY @BTS_twt	yes	no	no
23-3-20	emojis	no	no	no
23-3-20	ARMY please give attention to this hashtag #NthRoomCase and show your solidarity to those underaged victims.	no	no	no
23-3-20	I miss y'all so much. I love you and please stay safe! 🥰💖	no	no	no
23-3-20	I miss them I miss them a lot but I know we can fight again this virus and soon we'll be close and our love will be bigge	no	no	no
23-3-20	thank you 🥰	no	no	no
23-3-20	I miss yall	no	no	no
23-3-20	i miss them 🥰	no	no	no
23-3-20	thank you so much babies 🥰💖	no	yes (video)	no
23-3-20	Hyung Line 🍷💖💖 #iHeartAwards #BoyWithLuv #BestMusicVideo @BTS_twt	yes	no	no
23-3-20	Thankyou~💖	no	yes (gif)	no
23-3-20	WHAT DIS	no	no	no
23-3-20	Yes! We shall succeed through the power of our connection!	no	yes (gif)	no
23-3-20	STAY STRONG BANGTAN, ARMY & EVERYONE 💖 #StayStrong_ARMY #BTSLoveMyself	yes	yes	no
23-3-20	All edits became TRUE 🍷 #iHeartAwards #BoyWithLuv #BestMusicVideo @BTS_twt	yes	yes	no
23-3-20	Every time bts official post/rt something bout @BTS_twt..ARMY :	no	yes (video)	no
23-3-20	never felt more proud to be a doctor.. this means a lot to us who are still working and fighting everyday, everyone stay no	no	yes	no
23-3-20	Thank you @BTS_twt , hope everyone stay safe and healthy 🍷	no	yes	no

Figure 2: Screenshot of Excel spreadsheet with replies to the March 23, 2020, tweet from the #LoveMyself campaign Twitter account.

Campaign Appreciation From Fans

The same level of engagement noted by Highfield, Harrington and Bruns in Eurovision tweets was observed in the responses to #BTSLoveMyself of the BTS ARMY. The tweet announcing the launch of the campaign received a variety of replies voicing their support and appreciation, with some already employing the hashtag in their replies:

- I STAN ANGELS WHO USE THEIR PLATFORM TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE
   @BTS_twt #ENDViolence #BTSLoveMyself
- so much love for this campaign!  #BTSLoveMyself #EndViolence
- I know I only stan for the right artist in my life Im proud of @BTS_twt
 #ENDviolence #BTSLoveMyself       

By including the hashtag, fans were demonstrating their support of both the campaign and the group. This signaled fans’ conscious decision to participate in the campaign, while at the

same time indicating to other users their membership in ARMY. Despite the campaign and hashtag being open to everyone, regardless of whether one was a fan of BTS, use of “#BTSLoveMyself” signaled to other users their active engagement with the fandom.

Support for Members of the Fandom

The purpose of the #LoveMyself campaign, as previously stated, centered around self-confidence and self-love for members of the BTS ARMY. ARMY is dedicated to spreading the message of positivity to not just oneself, but the community as a whole. Some Twitter users used their replies to the original post announcing the campaign to voice support for fellow members of the BTS ARMY:

- I know a lot of you young ones are in high school and (god forbid) may have faced or witnessed school violence. I've seen some too, just letting you know you've got a community of support and love from us.
- Loving myself is such a difficult decision. It is a decision, that will change your landscape. Another word for beautiful is, "be yourself", which also means love yourself enough to remove the walls. It's a beautiful thing.

These replies are a reflection of the level of community formed through the BTS fandom on Twitter. The fans reading the post could have scrolled past, passively engaging with the content through the other replies. Instead, they made a conscious decision to communicate advice to other members of the fandom, knowing the likelihood that members of the BTS ARMY would understand the tweet as intended to curate supportive messages for others in the fandom. Such behavior would not have been possible had it not been for the expectations set by the fandom to uplift other members of the community and encourage self-love amongst fellow fans.

Parasocial Relationship Tendencies Towards the Group

One pattern I noticed in observing the replies I gathered is fans' casual address towards BTS.

Fans on Twitter often addressed and replied to tweets with comparatively intimate phrases, such as "I love you" and "I miss you". While these phrases are normally reserved for relationships in the offline world, the meaning remains the same even when used online. It is one thing to tweet these phrases to a loved one on their Twitter account; it is another to tweet it to a worldwide famous K-pop group:

- Thank you so much, I really needed this right now! I LOVE YOU SO MUCH!
@BTS_twt 🥹💜🙏
- i love you guys so much. i hope all seven of you take care of yourselves well during this time and make sure you're eating and hydrating too. you guys mean so much to me and this really made me feel better about the entire situation
- I miss them I miss them a lot but I know we can fight again this virus and soon we'll be close and our love will be bigger than anything 💜💜💜💜

These particular responses were taken from the tweet from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Comments such as these reflect the parasocial relationship between BTS and their fandom through use of such familiar language as "you" and "we," and comments relating to the well-being of the members. The users are making a conscious decision to write encouraging messages to members of the band despite the unlikelihood they will perceive it. It's the intent behind the message that showcases the "parasocial" tendencies of the relationship because the replies are treating the band as if they know each other in real life, which chances are, they do not. From my observations, there is a level of trust seen between the fan community of ARMY

and BTS. They are reaffirming their love for the band and the fan community itself. They feel seen by the band and the campaign, going so far as to say “I really needed this right now”.

Emojis and Short Exclamations

One thing valued by BTS ARMY, and online fandoms in general, is the ability to create content and spread it easily. This is especially the case with fan-led social media campaigns because it is a quick way to get a topic trending on Twitter and to bring attention to the fandom or fan object one supports. Those behaviors carry over to general replying and tweets. When a user wants to engage with a tweet, but has nothing unique to add, they sometimes reply with emojis or short phrases to participate:

- Omg yes
- Angel
- bebito⁴

Despite the brevity of these replies, these fans are still actively engaging with the original tweet. While differing opinions exist within fandoms as to what constitutes the kind of engagement that constitutes fandom membership, on how best to engage within a fandom to be considered a member, fans such as the above are clearly actively engaging with social media content.

Subtheme: multiple replies from the same account

Less common than the themes listed above were some tweets sourced for this analysis that came from the same account. Out of the 500 tweets sourced, there were 15 instances where multiple

⁴ ‘bebito’: “baby”

replies came from a single account in response to individual tweets. This does not include these accounts replying to multiple tweets, but multiple replies to single tweets:

- 🇲🇻💜🌟 #StayStrong_ARMY #BTSLoveMyself
- 🇲🇻💜🌟 #StayStrong_ARMY @BTS_twt
- I LOVE U SO MUCH TAEHYUNG AH
- I LOVE U SO MUCH TAEHYUNG AH
- I LOVE YOU TAELEE :((
- YOU'RE AN ANGEL

Most likely, these tweets were created with the intent to hopefully gain the attention of BTS or the #LoveMyself Campaign directly. This type of “tweet-repeating” is common practice on Twitter. Many existing scholarships disregard any duplicate or repeated tweets, or multiple tweets coming from the same account. However, for this analysis, I wanted to include them because of the look they provide into the parasocial relationship between BTS and ARMY. Duplicate tweeting is a practice commonly seen in social media as an attempt to boost or increase awareness of online information, or in this case, a tweet (Cao et al., 2022). Duplicate tweeting is an instance where a user can either “retweeted an original tweet written by himself/herself” or when a user “posts the same or substantially similar original tweets to one or several topics multiple times in a row” (Cao et al., 2022, p. 2). As I observed through my analysis, this is common practice in fan communities, particularly in ARMY. While it may not

be the most effective method to increase awareness about the #LoveMyself campaign, especially due to spam-bot detection algorithms, it is still seen throughout fan communities on Twitter.

Discussion

This observational analysis examined Twitter replies from members of the BTS ARMY in response to tweets posted from the “@bts_love_myself” campaign account. This model of this analysis was inspired through a study of reactions to people with ostomies – a surgically created opening in the body that expels bodily wastes – that intended to challenge the stigma surrounding it (Rademacher, 2018). The analysis looked at a viral ostomy selfie and mass reactions it had online. Taking this model of examining reactions to created content online, I modeled the observational analysis to review themes presented in replies to the tweets from the #LoveMyself campaign. The campaign targeted those already in ARMY, but the creation of the campaign suggests intent to extend beyond the reaches of the fandom. This campaign relied heavily on the participatory nature of media and fandom culture, which is at the heart of the community fandom provides (Bury, 2017). Given the extent to which Twitter users engaged with the campaign, it was proven to be a success. The initial message of the campaign was to extend a helping hand to children and teens who are exposed to violence and provide a message of loving oneself and spreading that love to others (LOVE MYSELF, n.d.). ARMY is by no means the first fandom to take social media by storm. However, the degree of online engagement and participation by the fandom separates them from other fandoms. This dedication and willingness to share the message of BTS might be understood as obsessive; existing stereotypes often characterize fans as being too attached to the object of their fandom (Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). Yet, there is a difference between being too attached and being passionate. People can have an

interest in something that they deeply value without it consuming them completely. Perceiving fandoms in such a way is harmful to the positivity created from such communities.

BTS ARMY's influence in online fandom over the past decade is hard to ignore. ARMY creates community on Twitter through an overwhelming number of positive replies to the tweets analyzed in this analysis. In responding to these tweets, members of the fandom not only support the campaign and BTS themselves, but open doors to potentially connect with other fans and letting users know the community is there to support them through hardships. This relationship between fans within social spaces on social media tends to go ignored, overshadowed, or narrowed down to nonsensical behavior. Jenson (1992) mentions how because of existing media people consider fans as "two fan types— the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd...Fandom is seen as a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction...Once fans are characterized as deviant, they can be treated as disreputable, even dangerous 'others'" (p. 9). These images of fandoms delegitimize the positivity and benefits that come from being in a fandom, discrediting the validity one has to share their interest. It's these harmful stereotypes that motivated me to share the power of a fandom using Twitter's social space to their benefit.

This observational analysis of Twitter users replies to the BTS' #LoveMyself campaign reveals the importance of participation within fandoms on social media such as Twitter. When users replied to a tweet with language reaffirming their decision to join ARMY, it is a sign of the positive influence that can come from a social media campaign. When fans are given the opportunity to spread a message, especially when they feel safe to do so and are passionate about the object of their fandom, they will do it. The ontological security of a fandom can be reinforced through situations, such as the social media campaign spearheaded by ARMY.

This goes back to the etiquette expected of members participating in the fandom, mainly that pertaining to creating a supportive, comfortable, and loving environment to celebrate the accomplishments of BTS. As seen in the replies above, they do just that. Whether through sharing personal stories or curating motivational messages, members of the BTS fandom are consistently connecting with other users, enhancing the community formed through the fandom. The limitations of this study include the sample size of tweets gathered for this analysis. A larger sample size may provide different results. Another possibility for different results may be from choosing a different Twitter account to analyze tweets from in relation to BTS and the BTS ARMY, such as through their main account (@BTS_twt).

Closing Remarks

Social media and the affordances it offers fans is an area that is only beginning to be studied. It will continue to develop, and while it will take longer periods to analyze the further impacts of such affordances, it doesn't mean the information should be ignored. It is crucial to view what is happening with the transformation of Twitter (X) because fans are leaving and migrating to other social media. Fandoms are being further spread out across platforms. However, this isn't the first time there has been such a migration. When there is a sense of impending change, there is a tendency to want to abandon the platform and go to a different one with a perceived amount of permanence. Have these changes impacted fan communities on Twitter (X)?

In the hope that more research will be done in the future, this change of leadership will have an impact on how musician fandoms, and fandoms in general, will act in the future. When someone is in a leadership position on a social media site, whether they like it or not, their

actions have an impact on how people act. Elon Musk is setting a standard that can lead to the downfall of Twitter as a whole. The platform he has been given grants him opportunities to push forward his agenda, as well as hire people who only believe in the vision he is creating. If he was just using his own Twitter account to do this, while still problematic, it wouldn't be too big of an issue. However, he is the owner and CEO of one of the most popular social media companies and has continually abused his power to push his agenda of how social media should be used. He is continuing to silence marginalized communities who, before his ownership, used Twitter as a way to promote their ideas.

While the area of self-mass communication comes with its benefits, some take advantage of this tool to promote hateful messages. As stated previously, Twitter has regulations in place to prevent hate speech or people abusing a hashtag to “troll” the forum. However, these guidelines are only a perceived notion to help combat the overwhelming hatred that exists outside the walls of Twitter. Throughout writing my thesis, Twitter, now called “X”, has taken new ownership, but not without consequences. Prior to Elon Musk taking ownership of the platform, Twitter offered fans and fandoms certain kinds of affordances, from hashtags and creating accounts dedicated to share objects to help extend its reach. Since then, hateful practices (racism, homophobia, transphobia) have spread throughout the platform, seemingly making what was once a safe social space a dangerous one. Twitter users in fan communities have started to seek alternative routes for fan community engagement, such as through TikTok, but even this platform is having its ontological security threatened. What is happening to Twitter will determine how fandoms and fans in the future create their community based on the changes happening. Platforms afford what fandoms can do and intensify the communities that can be made throughout.

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