

**Labors of Love: An Analysis of Online Fan Labor and the Influence of Social
Media on the American Music Industry**

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Introduction

In May 2017, a South Korean boyband stepped up onto the Billboard Music Awards show stage in Las Vegas, Nevada, to take home the Billboard Music Award for “Top Social Artist.” They beat stars like Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande to win the award and, in the process, carved out a space for K-pop within the bigger American popular music conversation (Liu, 2017). Four years later, the seven members of Bangtan Sonyeondan, or BTS, stepped up onto a different stage in Los Angeles, California, and took home the American Music Award for “Artist of the Year.” It was a shocking moment for BTS and the audience alike, and Jungkook, the youngest member of the band, even wondered: “Who would’ve thought we could win Artist of the Year at an American awards ceremony?” (BTS & Kang, 2023). Indeed, how did a music group from halfway across the world beat American pop stars at their own game, on their own home turf? The answer, as the name of the award BTS won that night in 2017 would suggest, may lie in the power of social media within the music industry and the millions of adoring fans who harnessed that power.

Social media has greatly impacted and, in many ways, defined the last decade of human society. It has changed several aspects of life, from the political climates that govern nations, to the entertainment media that shapes pop culture, to the frequent communication that vitalizes interpersonal relationships (Brown, 2019). This research project aims to examine how one such facet of society, the American music industry,

has been impacted by one large subsection of social media: music fandoms. The music industry and its marketing practices have changed rapidly and immensely due to technological developments such as social media and streaming platforms, and their impact on fandom culture (Ogden et al., 2011). This paper examines the ways that fan labor on social media by fans of South Korean boyband BTS has showcased a subversion of traditional models for creating value in music, turning passive audiences into active participants in promotion and distribution, and subsequently fueling the rise of K-pop music in the American music market such that moments like BTS' first Billboard Music Award win were made possible. Through a deeper look at relevant social media moments during the career of the band BTS as case studies, this research project ultimately aims to investigate how and why PR efforts in music have shifted from labels to online fans and the autonomy of music listeners could mean for the future of the overall music industry.

Literature Review

Previous literature about the American music industry, the K-pop industry, music marketing, and social media provide foundational research related to the findings in this case study. The literature includes an overview of the inner workings of the music industry and music marketing over the years, research about the changes to music marketing caused by the addition of social media, and existing findings about K-pop and social media fandoms. The literature also provides a logical framework for analyzing the content reviewed in this case study.

I. Defining the music industry

To understand the impact of social media on the American music industry, it is important to first understand the American music industry itself. An industry refers to a system in which goods are factory-produced for mass consumption (Wikström, 2019). There are several competing ideas for what a music industry can be defined as. One view describes it as a set of interconnected networks and linear structures involved in the creation, reproduction, distribution, and consumption of music (Leyshon, 2001). Another definition proposes the existence of several disparate “music industries,” which share common interests. These industries are all concerned with the creation, management, and sale of music as a physical product, a digital product, a live performance, or intellectual property (Williamson & Cloonan, 2007). For the purposes of this research paper, the American music industry will refer to the people and the companies that participate in or facilitate the creation, distribution, promotion, and performance of music in the United States for consumption by the general public.

Only a decade ago, the music label was one of the most important parts of the larger music industry, and landing record deals with major labels was considered the ultimate goal for a musician (Kordestani, 2022). Record labels are essentially businesses that market recorded music and provide artists with the money and resources they need to create songs, along with additional industry perks (Neu, 2021). After helping an artist create music, labels then help promote the music through traditional publicity (magazines and newspapers, television, advertising), radio, and other marketing methods (McIntyre, 2022). Examples of these companies include Warner Music Group, Sony Music, and Universal Music Group, as well as several

subsidiary labels. Succeeding without the patronage of a record label has typically been incredibly difficult for most artists, leading minority artists especially to fall victim to exploitative record deals (Kordestani, 2022; Schwartz, 2020). That is, until social media and streaming technologies began to present alternative paths to success (Kordestani, 2022). Where music marketing and distribution efforts used to be in the hands of music labels, social media and streaming technologies made music marketing accessible to any music listener with an internet connection.

II. *The history of music marketing*

Music distribution in the United States began in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as sheet music, instruments, records, and phonographs became widely available, allowing people of varying social statuses to consume the same music (Hawley, 2000; Ogden et al., 2011). The biggest turning point, however, was the invention of radio broadcasting, which allowed for the dissemination of both recorded and live music to thousands or even millions of people at once, fundamentally changing the image of the “audience” for the music industry (Hawley, 2000). Thus, music became a mass-consumable product and the business of record production and marketing developed (Ogden et al., 2011).

Throughout the rest of the century, technological advances continued to shape the music industry. In the 1940s, television emerged, and many traditional radio shows of the time moved to this new medium. Variety shows, such as the *Ed Sullivan Show*, helped new artists become well-known through musical feature segments (Fink, 1991). In the mid-1950s, radio introduced the "Top 40" format for featuring songs to compete

with television, which entailed playing songs that sold the most records within any given week (Ogden et al., 2011). Both these shifts still influence media and the music industry today, with television variety shows and talk shows still regularly featuring musical guests and a plethora of popular radio stations still employing Top 40 charts to determine songs that receive airtime each week (Wikström, 2019). The history of the music industry shows that the media, especially radio, were gatekeepers of music and have always been part of an interdependent and symbiotic relationship with record labels (Hirsch, 1969).

III. *The music industry and the media*

One way to describe the constant interplay between musicians, record labels, and mass media is the “audience-media engine,” a model proposed by Patrik Wikström:

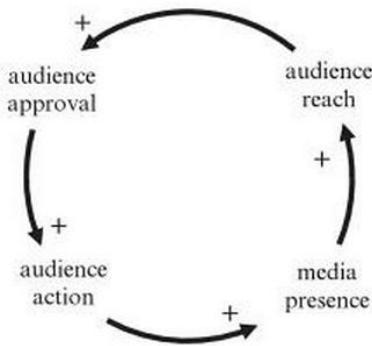


Figure 1. *The audience-media engine* (Wikström, 2006)

This model of the music industry focuses on how value is created among the artists, labels, audiences, and media companies within the larger music industry ecosystem. Wikström explains: Media presence represents the amount of media outlets

where the artist appears during a specific period of time, which a record label may try to increase through various marketing and licensing activities. Media presence results in audience reach, which leads to some fraction of approval of the musical works. Musicians rely on audience approval to drive audience actions, which include purchasing or streaming records and buying concert tickets. Audience action in large enough volumes can lead to an increase in media presence, which further increases audience reach, ultimately creating a positive feedback loop. (2006; 2019). If a musician or label is able to make the audience-media engine work in their favor, the sky is the limit. However, if the positive feedback loop is not created, success becomes incredibly difficult to achieve (Wikström, 2019).

IV. Streaming, social media, and service-dominant logic

What is interesting to note about the progress over time of the music industry is the gradual blurring of lines between audience action and media presence, and between what is considered music promotion and what is considered music distribution within Wikström's audience-media engine model (2019). Since its conception, social media has had a hand in several aspects of the music business to varying degrees. Even in the 1990s, when far fewer people were using online networking sites, collective efforts such as crowdfunding and other forms of audience-driven internet promotion were making waves in the music industry as the early stages of what would soon become modern-day online fandom activity (Baym, 2018). More recently, the rise of social media, paired with the advent of music streaming technology, significantly reduced the need for traditional avenues of media presence and music distribution, which are dependent on players like television or radio producers, music journalists,

record labels, etc. Instead, fans themselves often take on the role of promoters, distributors, and gatekeepers (Hracs et al., 2016; Ogden et al., 2011). This gradual shift can be boiled down to music on the whole becoming easy to access and share, thanks to peer-to-peer networking (Wikström, 2019).

Streaming revolutionized the music industry by allowing listeners to access music from around the world within seconds and to skip around between songs with ease (Luca, 2016). With social media added to the mix, individuals can share musical works with peers in their online network to listen to instantly, creating a way of popularizing music through virtual word of mouth at a speed and scale that was previously impossible (Grome, 2023). The result of the development of streaming platforms and the growth of online peer-to-peer information-sharing technology has been a digital music evaluation and curation system run by the masses, for the masses (Hracs et al., 2016; Wikström, 2019), giving artists and average music consumers some power over major record labels and traditional industry gatekeepers to determine trends in the mainstream music market (Stafford, 2010).

As Wikström's model of the audience-media engine showed, value in music is created through the approval and subsequent actions of audience members (2006). In order to tie this model with the affordances of social media, one can look at the modern music industry through the lens of service-dominant (S-D) logic and view musical works as value propositions by artists that users on social media engage with in various ways to increase the value of the original work (Toscher, 2021). The underlying idea of S-D logic is that humans apply their unique knowledge and set of skills to benefit others and

reciprocally benefit from others; in short, service is exchanged for service (Lusch & Vargo, 2014).

By viewing both the creation of music by artists and the integration of music on social media by audiences as services, rather than viewing music as having an inherent value determined by industry gatekeepers, S-D logic suggests that audiences and musicians can jointly create value for music within a larger social context (Letaïfa et al., 2016; Toscher, 2021). On TikTok, for example, which Toscher uses as a case study for S-D logic in the music industry, users can add value to songs through memes, dance challenges, lip-sync videos, and lifestyle content that uses music in the background (2021). Thus, the ability to leverage the capabilities of the most popular social media platforms can be a powerful tool for music promotion (Williams-Nelson, 2023).

V. Fandom culture and the music industry

The emergence of a mutually beneficial relationship between music creators and music fans as co-creators of value meant bypassing the traditional functions of music labels and music gatekeepers, leveling the playing field for artists with fewer industry connections and enabling both established and rising musicians to connect directly to global audiences (Grome, 2023). At the heart of the diminishing importance of traditional music industry powers is the rising importance of fan labor and participatory fandom culture on social media (Knopper, 2022; Wikström, 2019). Online music fandoms are the modern, digital successors of the fan club culture that began decades ago with Beatlemania (a term used to the excitement and passion of the Beatles' fanbase) and the devoted, often even parasocial, relationships fans would form with

band members (Field, 2023). Despite often being stereotyped as simply hysteria and the obsessions of young women, fans' emotional investment in musicians and sense of community within fandom spaces result in massive streaming, spending, and collective organizing power online that can make waves within traditional music industry structures (Field, 2023; Grome, 2023).

As streaming and social media have grown since the start of the 2010s, several music labels have been quietly thinning the ranks of their promotion teams to focus on revenue teams instead, and radio networks, once a crucial part of music promotion, have similarly been cutting costs (Mayfield, 2021). A study in 2022 found that 39% of the U.S. population aged 12 and up did not own any radios, while 82% of that same demographic was using social media (Edison Research, 2022). In 2008, only 4% of the population aged 12 and up did not own any radios, and only 10% of that same demographic was using social media, according to the study. Music labels are trying to catch up to the new music marketing landscape, in which radio and other traditional methods of promotion are taking a backseat to more organic forms of online music discovery and sharing (Mayfield, 2021).

Participatory, labor-driven fandom culture has become an important driving force for the evolution of the entertainment industry and, further, for its democratization (Jia et al., 2021). Fandom voting and purchasing power, collectively referred to as the fan economy, allows fans online to act as promoters and to fund or popularize musicians of their choosing by buying albums, merchandise, concert tickets, and even advertisements (Jia et al., 2021; Knopper, 2022). One symbol of that democratization has been a shift in the role that music charts play, with fandoms rallying together to

study listenership-tracking methodology and boost their favorite musicians' chart positions, ultimately turning charts into a fan-driven numbers game instead of something made by and for music labels (Leight, 2023).

VI. K-pop music, K-pop fan culture, and the rise of BTS

While many pop musicians' fans are now fixated on commercial statistics like chart positions and streaming numbers, K-pop fans are especially effective at mobilizing around specific goals, not unlike a music-industry version of political action committees. K-pop fans often plan virtual “streaming parties” to reach stream- and view-count benchmarks or pool money to disburse to fans so that they can buy multiple copies of songs and albums (Leight, 2023). Participation on social media is typically seen as a central component of consuming the genre (Elfving-Hwang, 2019), and K-pop fan labor is a significant form of value-creation, whether via organized streaming parties or purchasing campaigns, communication with artists through official channels, or online discussions and memes. Social media users have been an indispensable piece of the larger K-pop puzzle and the industry’s efforts to globalize (Sun, 2020).

The flow of South Korean pop culture into the global mainstream is known as the Korean Wave, or “Hallyu,” of which K-pop music is just one facet.

K-pop is characterized by synchronized dance moves, catchy beats, hook refrains and group performances, and its lyrics are mainly in Korean with additions of English words or phrases. Also, the term “idol” is widely used for referring to members and their fandom in K-pop groups. (Cho, 2023).

While the start of K-pop as a subsection of the South Korean music industry is generally accepted to be when the band Seo Taiji and Boys debuted in 1992, K-pop emerged as a significant part of the transnational Korean Wave in East Asia during the late 2000s, with groups such as TVXQ (2003), BigBang (2006), Girls' Generation (2007), SHINee (2008), 2NE1 (2009) and more taking center stage (Cho, 2023). Then, in 2012, "Gangnam Style" by PSY went viral on YouTube, signaling the entrance of K-pop into the global music market. A year later marked the debut of BTS, a group that would eventually rewrite the K-pop industry's promotional playbook and launch K-pop music to the heights of the American mainstream music market, paving the way for successors like Twice, NCT, Stray Kids, Seventeen, and more to follow in their footsteps (Cho, 2023; Glasby, 2021).

BTS began as underdogs in a near-bankrupt music company, up against bands with many more resources to spare within an extremely competitive industry (BTS & Kang, 2023). The BTS playbook for success was not a deliberately written one, but rather the organic result of the band's philosophy and the members' constant use of social media to communicate with fans. Although they were a rarity in K-pop music of the time, studies showed pop songs about mental and emotional health, anxiety, vulnerability, etc. were rising in popularity globally (Jeong, 2020). In an industry calling musicians "idols," the chaotic and humanizing vlogs BTS posted and the meaningful self-written lyrics they utilized stood out from the superficial, tightly managed image K-pop stars typically donned and created a significant emotional bond between the members of BTS and their fans (Branigin, 2023).

As members of a fandom become more emotionally invested in a musician, their willingness to participate in the fan community and perform acts of fan labor also increases (Proctor, 2021; Sun, 2020). Park Ji-won, CEO of the company behind BTS, HYBE Corporation, has described this emotional investment as a “sincere link” between fans and artists that allows the force of fandom to grow (Farley, 2022). Fans of BTS (also known as ARMYs), who largely did feel a sincere link with BTS, utilized social media to generate value for the band’s musical works and promote them within the larger audience-media engine of the American music industry (Proctor, 2021). They are one of the most active online communities in existence (Moon, 2020) and can primarily be found on Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Weverse (Farley, 2022).

While the previously stated literature touches upon a few individual instances of value co-creation efforts on social media by ARMYs and examines some of the broader changes social media has brought to the music industry, there is a lack of thorough research connecting the two. Existing research lacks a thorough analysis of the particular ways BTS and other K-pop bands have benefited from their fans’ deliberate usage of social media in a reciprocating exchange of services online. By looking at key points in BTS’ career as a case study through the perspective of S-D logic, this research paper takes a comprehensive look at the ways in which fans over time have begun to capitalize on the affordances of social media to actively promote and create value for music.

Understanding the methods of value co-creation in music employed by fans online is crucial to understanding how BTS and other K-pop artists and songs have managed to break into the American mainstream music market despite receiving little to

no support from traditional gatekeepers and patrons of the industry at the outset (Wang, 2018). The broader implications of those disruptions are such that older, top-down methods of distributing and popularizing music may be, in many cases, no longer viable. Thus, this research paper examines the altered roles of fans, artists, promoters, and gatekeepers in the current American music market, through a case study of BTS fans, to ultimately gain a better understanding of how social media impacts and will continue to impact the music industry.

Case Profile

To conduct detailed research into value co-creation among music fans, the band BTS and their fans, ARMYs, were used as a case study. This research paper analyzes moments of ARMYs engaging in fan labor on social media at various points in BTS' career to illustrate the larger impact of fan labor and social media on the music industry. To contextualize these moments, some additional history and background information about BTS and ARMYs is important:

BTS is a seven-member K-pop group that debuted under the South Korean music label Big Hit Entertainment (now known as Big Hit Music, a subsidiary of HYBE Corporation) in June 2013. Its members are RM (Kim Nam-joon), Jin (Kim Seok-jin), Suga (Min Yoon-gi), J-Hope (Jung Ho-seok), Jimin (Park Ji-min), V (Kim Tae-hyung), and Jungkook (Jeon Jung-kook). They have released dozens of albums both as a group and as individual members, and the band regularly engages with fans online across several social media platforms, including but not limited to: Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Weverse, and formerly VLive. Weverse is a proprietary social media platform

created by HYBE Corporation for artists under partnered and subsidiary labels to connect with fans through videos and feed posts. It later merged with Naver Corporation's livestreaming platform VLive to integrate livestreaming capabilities, as well (Hyun-Su, 2021).

Unlike most artists in Western music industries, while in their prime, most K-pop groups such as BTS go through multiple new album releases (known as "comebacks") each year, with a few months of downtime in between (Wong, 2018). Each comeback includes a new styling and aesthetic concept, a title track with its own signature choreography, and a plethora of promotional efforts. As a result, the K-pop music market tends to be highly saturated and, consequently, highly competitive (BTS & Kang, 2023; Wong, 2018). At the time of BTS' debut, three large entertainment labels dominated the industry, with the majority of high-profile acts emerging from these "big three" companies after extensive training and churning out highly polished music created by large teams of writers and producers (Te, 2023). In comparison, Big Hit was not a part of the "big three" entertainment companies and BTS started out somewhat ragtag, employing elements of hip-hop and raw, anti-establishment lyrics (Bruner, 2020; Siroky, 2022). Ultimately, however, it was that uniqueness and artistry that led to BTS' gradual rise to fame. As the group continued to explore several music genres, their honest and self-produced songs, intricate dance performances, and candid interactions with fans online appealed to both domestic and global audiences who valued both quality and authenticity from artists (Bruner, 2020).

BTS has won numerous awards and accolades in the decade since their debut, from topping music charts around the world to being given diplomatic status by the

president of South Korea (Al-Arshani, 2021). The band's albums, tours, and other promotional efforts (or lack thereof) have a powerful impact on the national economy (Young, 2022). BTS is also said to have paved the way for K-pop music to succeed in the American mainstream music market and is credited with changing the culture of K-pop to be more authenticity-driven in its music creation and social media usage (Romano, 2021).

The choice to use BTS and ARMYs for this case study was made in consideration of the band's expansive, influential career and their fans' substantial amount of activity on social media, which enable both parties to act as suitable representatives for the popular K-pop musicians and online K-pop fandoms, respectively, that came after them. Furthermore, any other K-pop groups, songs, and fandom interactions mentioned in this paper as supplementary examples for discussion will be among those groups that came after BTS and benefitted from similar instances of fandom-driven promotion on social media. Thus, this research aims to answer how and why certain acts of fan labor on various online platforms led to BTS' success and enable a discussion of what that means for the broader music industry.

Methods

The previously stated literature overviewing S-D logic provides a lens through which existing social media content showing BTS fans engaging in fan labor can be analyzed and then applied to the larger American music industry. Thus, this case study requires an understanding of several examples of value co-creation within the BTS fandom. However, while value co-creation for songs generally begins with the artist, the

way music is subsequently integrated into fan activity on social media varies greatly depending on the affordances of each individual platform and other factors related to the intentions and sentiments of fans. Often, the affordances of social media platforms intersect and overlap. For example, Twitter/X and Weverse both allow users to create in-feed text, image, or video posts that other users can “like” and comment on. Instagram and YouTube have both implemented their own short-form vertical video formats through Reels and Shorts, respectively, to emulate the capabilities of TikTok. Nearly every modern social media platform includes some form of a hashtagging feature. Therefore, to amass enough content within this case study to observe and analyze fandom behavior from the perspective of S-D logic, the focus of each observation is not on K-pop fans’ different creative activities on each social media platform, but rather on the overarching patterns of activity that are usually mirrored across multiple platforms.

To conduct this research thoroughly, both primary and secondary sources are utilized for gathering data and examples of value co-creation online. The primary sources used in this case study include several social media feed posts created by BTS, ARMYs, or other relevant accounts. The secondary sources include news articles that report and offer commentary on either single instances of fan labor or larger social media trends among BTS fans. Secondary sources are used in tandem with primary sources for this case study in order to gain a more holistic view of certain events and phenomena within online K-pop fandom spaces, which would otherwise be incredibly difficult to observe and analyze given the often immense volume of posts under a single hashtag or search criteria.

The instances of fan labor mentioned in this paper can be viewed as being divided into two categories: passive promotion and active promotion. Passive promotion is a form of value co-creation that is not intended to promote a song or artist, but rather the usage of a song for another purpose on social media, such as background music in a short vertical video. Active promotion is the opposite, wherein fans use social media in a deliberate and often organized manner to consciously promote and advocate for a song or artist (AMW, 2023). Both forms of value co-creation occur among fans of BTS and are therefore mentioned in this case study, however, it is important to highlight the distinction between the two to better understand the observations and conclusions made within the following research.

Case Analysis

In observing the various forms of passive and active fan labor performed by ARMYs on social media throughout BTS' career, several patterns emerged. The most prominent among them were the ubiquitous use of hashtagging features and trend lists across different online platforms and the integration of BTS' music into new, often humorous, political, or otherwise emotionally cathartic contexts. The following case analysis details ways these methods of value co-creation have appeared on various social media platforms and how they served as vehicles for the passive or active promotion of songs.

I. Hashtag challenge videos

One of the prevalent methods of online value co-creation seen in K-pop fandoms is the spread of challenges using hashtags and short-form videos. A look through social

media posts from BTS on Instagram, Twitter/X, and YouTube in the past five years showed an increase in the use of short vertical videos with captions that included hashtags prompting fans to perform dance or other challenges using the same hashtag. The band's TikTok account, meanwhile, used dance challenge hashtags from its inception in 2019.

The first challenge hashtags among BTS fans were in circulation before the widespread popularity of TikTok fully began in 2020-2021 (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022), and many were started by ARMYs rather than BTS. The earliest of these was the #BaseLineChallenge, which was created by Twitter/X user @JHSMEETSEVIL in July 2018 and used BTS member J-Hope's song "Base Line" for a short choreography video (Brown [@JHSMEETSEVIL], 2018). In an interview, Brown stated that she was inspired to create the dance challenge for J-Hope after the BTS member went viral a few days prior for doing the #InMyFeelingsChallenge based on the song "In My Feelings" by Drake (Li, 2018). Several thousands of ARMYs participated in the challenge, even more so after the band took notice of the trend on Twitter/X. Looking at this case through the lens of S-D logic, it was an instance of passive value co-creation. The initial service that added value to the song was its writing and release. The start of the dance trend by Brown and its subsequent popularity on Twitter/X was additional value created by BTS fans through the service of integrating the song with their own social media pages, knowledge of dance, and emotions such as enjoyment and admiration. Social media users participating in the challenge did not express doing so in order to deliberately promote the song "Base Line" in their posts, but rather expressed sentiments such as wanting to show off dance skills or make other ARMYs laugh because of a lack thereof.

Promotion of the song itself was therefore a passive effect of the widespread popularity of the dance challenge.

In the years since the #BaseLineChallenge, many other fan-created trends have emerged based on BTS songs. A recent example is the “All Night” challenge from 2022, which spread primarily on TikTok and Instagram Reels using an audio clip of the eponymous BTS song (namjooner [@uhkives], 2021). Like “Base Line,” the song “All Night” did not have pre-existing choreography. Thus, once again, the value co-created by fans was the use of the original song on personal social media pages, with the incorporation of dance and various emotions towards the TikTok challenge. However, unlike the earlier #BaseLineChallenge trend, social media posts about the “All Night” dance challenge indicate it was not a case of entirely passive fan labor. In both cases, fans regularly commented on the virality of the challenges. However, compared to fans’ tweets about the #BaseLineChallenge during the month of its popularity, tweets during the month when the “All Night” dance trend was popular showed a higher proportion of posts related to actively monitoring engagements with the challenge and encouraging streams of the song.

Similarly, the popularity of the fan-created “Like” dance challenge in 2022 (keehoswife7 [@keehoswife], 2021) resulted in ARMYs discussing engagements with the challenge and streams of the song in social media posts, until BTS eventually did the dance challenge themselves and added the song to promotional playlists (GMA News Staff, 2022). In the context of S-D logic, this was a case of back-and-forth artist and fan labor that began as a passive form of music promotion and resulted in active promotion by both BTS and ARMYs together. Another fan-created challenge, the

“Change Pt.2” transition trend, was popularized in December 2022 and took fans’ focus on promotion even further with a clearly stated goal of virality on short-form video platforms, as evidenced by numerous social media posts and comments explaining the challenge, encouraging others to join in, and discussing the song and trend’s potential for wide reach (Lynaee [@torialynnaee], 2022).

Throughout their career, BTS also initiated many of their own challenges across several different social media platforms to promote new music releases. The first of these was the #IDOLChallenge on Twitter/X in August 2018, a dance challenge fresh off the heels of Drake’s #InMyFeelingsChallenge and the subsequent fan-created #BaseLineChallenge (Gemmill, 2018). BTS later switched to TikTok to launch dance trends such as the #CNSchallenge and the #ONchallenge (Bruner, 2020). During the release of “Permission to Dance,” the group partnered with YouTube Shorts for a dance challenge exclusively on the platform (Spangler, 2021). A cross-reference of BTS’ music releases and social media posts showed that BTS increasingly used hashtag challenges and short-form videos to promote new music starting in 2020 until nearly every new title track or collaboration by BTS was promoted with a corresponding short-form video trend in 2023. Likewise, according to the social media platforms’ public count of videos created using each song’s audio, fan participation in these trends increased over time, in line with the overall rise in users of TikTok, Reels, and Shorts.

Like fan-created challenges, those created by BTS resulted in the promotion of music through value co-creation, but with a greater emphasis on value generated by BTS rather than fans, due to the group itself initiating and promoting hashtag trends. Tweets about the challenges created by BTS each comeback showed an increasing

proportion of ARMYs monitoring engagement with the challenge hashtags and measuring the usage of new songs on social media platforms.

The aforementioned observations of fan engagement with short-form video challenges indicate that between 2018 and 2023, as hashtag challenges became more common across multiple social media platforms, BTS fans gradually shifted from participating in the trends as acts of passive fan labor to deliberately creating and spreading hashtag challenges as active promotion for the band's music. This shift was further seen in the emergence of popular Twitter/X accounts dedicated to tracking music and hashtag campaign analytics (vale^{bts} [@kkukstudio], 2022) and these accounts' tweets about engagements on BTS hashtag challenge video trends.

II. Viral audio and video clips

As social media platforms have transformed to become more centered around audiovisual content over text (Muavia, 2023), so has much of viral content among K-pop fans in the last five years. On social media platforms that have video-sharing capabilities, users can add music to the background of any video they share. On platforms with specific short-form video features, the audio used in the background can be seen and used again by other people. Thus, the audiovisual aspect of social media is, by nature, an avenue for the constant passive addition of value to songs. In the case of BTS, the band's songs have been used as background music for a wide variety of videos across social media platforms, even for content unrelated to the song and by users unfamiliar with the band (Gulla & Venn, 2023). Fan-recorded videos of the band

singing and dancing (known as “fancams”) similarly permeate social media fan accounts and often spread to users outside of the BTS fandom (Romano, 2020).

Looking at the use and spread of BTS’ music in videos online through the lens of S-D logic, social media users could add emotional and promotional value to BTS’ songs by using short audio snippets of the music in different ways. In several posts, the band’s songs were added to the background of pop culture and lifestyle content. Within fandom spaces, including fandoms unrelated to BTS, songs were often also used in sentimental, humorous, or lustful compilation (or “edit”) videos. Additionally, some songs were first sped up or mashed up before use, following a popular remixing trend on short-form video platforms like TikTok, Shorts, and Reels (Murray, 2023). An example of all the previously stated value co-creation methods in one instance is the resurgence in popularity of BTS’ 2016 track “Blood, Sweat, and Tears” after fans sped up the song or remixed it with other pop songs. The fan-created audio clips of “Blood, Sweat, and Tears” were widely used across social media, especially on TikTok, even by celebrities and influencers, further promoting the original song in the process (Vaidehi, 2022).

Focusing on TikTok, specifically, a large portion of BTS fans migrated to the platform in 2022 when BTS became more active there (Porterfield, 2022). Many BTS songs used on the platform subsequently earned spots on lists of the most commonly used and viral TikTok audio clips (Santora, 2022; Statista, 2023; Vaidehi, 2022), while the band itself became the most viewed male artist on the platform in 2023 (Srivastava, 2023). These statistics suggest that acts of fan labor on TikTok to create new value for BTS’ songs were effective over time in promoting and spreading BTS audio clips to wider audiences.

Notably, the observed posts by fans discussing viral BTS-related audio and video clips on social media often referenced the viral reach of songs on platforms such as TikTok and Twitter/X and applauded the popularity of edits and fancams among “locals” (non-fans), indicating that ARMYs are self-aware as a collective fandom unit and attentive to current trending audio and video clips both within and outside of the fandom. Furthermore, fancams of BTS were not only posted and shared between ARMY accounts to enjoy BTS content as fans, but also were posted in unrelated contexts as a way to deliberately advertise BTS’ music to non-fans (Haasch, 2020). This behavior within the fandom indicates that a portion of ARMYs who engaged in fan labor by creating and spreading audio and video clips of BTS did so to actively promote the band to other social media users.

III. Songs as social and political statements

Another way BTS fans on social media add value to BTS’ songs is by attaching them to social and political movements and using the songs as a part of online activism. Social media activism by K-pop fans takes place primarily on TikTok and Twitter (Tai & Power, 2020). Activist posts observed on the two platforms either added political value to songs or built upon pre-existing political meaning in songs by re-contextualizing them into the sphere of social and political issues, through the use of hashtag trends, streaming parties, or edit videos.

The #PersonaChallenge is one such example where ARMYs started a hashtag trend centered around BTS’ music (in this case, the song “Intro: Persona”) to advocate for self-love, growth, and individualism (Rearick, 2019). Analyzing this phenomenon

through S-D logic, it was an instance of passive value co-creation in which fans expanded on BTS' original intent with the song lyrics by applying their own emotions to it and referencing personal experiences with identity and growth in a cathartic manner. BTS also started their own hashtag campaigns and attached new meanings to their songs by encouraging fans to advocate for social issues, most famously through the #ENDviolence and #BTSLoveMyself trends (Bowenbank, 2022).

A different variation seen with this type of passive fan labor was the use of BTS songs in large, pre-existing online socio-political movements. In 2020, during the height of Black Lives Matter protests, ARMYs on Twitter frequently used #BlackLivesMatter to share videos, lyric excerpts, and links to stream the song “Change” by BTS member RM and rapper Wale, which touched upon topics of racism and police brutality (Pawa, 2020). More recently, during the Israel-Palestine war in 2023, ARMYs on TikTok reinterpreted the lyrics of BTS member Jungkook’s love song “Standing Next to You” to take on a political meaning of standing with Palestine and used #FreePalestine with audio of the song (Aura [@lullaby__92], 2023).

A more active form of the aforementioned method of value co-creation observed among fans was the BTS fandom’s deliberate promotion of music to send a message collectively via music charts. An example of this is when BTS’ 2013 song “Attack on Bangtan” debuted at No.1 on the Billboard World Digital Song Sales chart a decade after release, due to an organized effort by ARMYs on social media to stream and purchase the song using #AttackOnBangtanToNo1 to express dissatisfaction with the Grammy Awards (Lejla⁷ [@holybangtanz], 2023; McIntyre, 2023). Similarly, fans streamed and purchased the 2017 track “Spring Day” to express their frustration and

sorrow over BTS' departure for mandatory South Korean military service, earning the song its first No.1 on U.S. iTunes as a result (Dash, 2023). In both cases, fan labor via deliberate promotional efforts on social media simultaneously added a new layer of meaning to each respective BTS song and drove up sales of the songs in a highly visible way.

Discussion

As previously stated, the ultimate goal of this case study is to draw conclusions about the impact of fandom-driven music promotion on social media on the music industry. Despite being a South Korean group singing mainly in Korean, BTS has been hugely successful within the American music market, and that success is commonly attributed to their fandom and social media (Romano, 2021). Therefore, analyzing the fan labor methods most commonly used by BTS fans has yielded insight into how motivated fans use their own social media accounts in various ways to add value to artists' songs and become an effective vessel for music promotion in the process.

Challenges videos and other hashtag trends or trending audiovisual content created by fans on social media often start off as a form of passive fan labor, as something made for enjoyment or catharsis, in line with typical K-pop fandom culture online (Elfving-Hwang, 2019; Sun, 2020). However, as the observations of ARMYs' social media posts showed, from 2020 onwards, fan engagement with such trends has increasingly morphed into active promotional effort. Past research explains that BTS fans are skilled at mobilizing around music streaming and purchasing specific goals, with or without any input from BTS themselves (Leight, 2023). The current findings

suggest that the same can be said about fans organizing and promoting social media content. There is an awareness among BTS fans of the promotional power of social media and awareness of how the audience-media engine (Wikström, 2019) works.

Just as BTS-related viral content on social media is now created by ARMYs and BTS alike, increased social media savvy among K-pop fans has combined with competitive streaming culture and resulted in hashtag challenges and trending content within the majority of the post-BTS K-pop industry becoming joint co-creative efforts between music fans and labels. For example, since K-pop as an industry is heavily dance-focused (Cho, 2023), TikTok dance challenges have become one of the most ubiquitous methods of K-pop fans, artists, and labels co-creating value for music on social media. It has proven to be a working strategy, boosting K-pop songs onto both domestic and international music charts (Pandya, 2023; Yamamoto, 2022). The success of BTS and K-pop acts that followed in their footsteps shows that relying on fan labor to boost artists on social media is highly advantageous for K-pop musicians trying to break into the American mainstream music market without having to face traditional industry gatekeepers. On a larger scale, this shift in marketing power suggests that songs in various languages by artists of various backgrounds can similarly break into the American mainstream through fan labor if the fandom is sufficiently motivated and knowledgeable about using social media strategically.

A key part of value co-creation is fandom motivation to participate, which increases as members of a fandom become more emotionally invested in a musician (Proctor, 2021; Sun, 2020). While several artists have a following on the same scale as or even larger than BTS, their fans are not typically motivated to engage in the kind of

passionate fan labor seen in ARMYs, potentially due to a lack of emotional connection (Bruner, 2019). Galvanizing fandoms online requires a sufficient emotional stake because it makes the artists' successes feel like the fans' successes, too. From the beginning of their career, BTS took advantage of the plethora of social media platforms available to them to be candid online and connect with fans on a personal level, then supplemented that candor with an equal level of honesty in their music and constant appreciation for fans (Romano, 2021). Thus, the deep bond that BTS formed with their fans can be considered the foundation for ARMYs' future acts of promotional fan labor.

In this way, BTS created a blueprint for a new, fan-driven music marketing engine, which can likely be applied to several fandoms if the right conditions are met. Within this new framework, from artists to fans, all the major stakeholders in the process of creating value for music have had their roles shifted because of the capabilities of fan labor on social media. As exemplified by BTS and several of the K-pop acts that succeeded them, artists and labels can delegate much of the task of active value creation to fans, but those fans must be emotionally invested and well-versed in using social media platforms. Fans can then capitalize on the affordances of platforms through deliberate promotional efforts, alongside passive forms of fan labor, ultimately doing their part to add value to a musician's work. Meanwhile, the role of artists and labels in the value co-creation equation has shifted to now being cultivators of deep, often even parasocial, bonds between artist and fandom, motivating fans to engage in more fan labor. If implemented, this cycle of value co-creation could possibly circumvent traditional gatekeepers of the music industry entirely, giving autonomy back to fans and artists to determine success in the mainstream music industry.

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