

“Make It Right”: Why #BlackLivesMatter(s) to K-pop, BTS, and BTS ARMYs

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Abstract

K-pop (Korean Pop Music) fans and artists became visible political actors in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement in the US in 2020. We investigate why K-pop fans and musicians mobilized to support BLM and, more generally, minority rights in the US by focusing on BTS fans, known as ARMY. We argue that the relationship between K-pop fans and artists is not unilateral, but mutual. Diverse voices and power differentials among K-pop fans exist, but were unified during this time. For example, Black ARMYs not only reminded other fans of racism within the fandom, but also asked BTS and their fellow ARMYs to support BLM. By considering K-pop as a battlefield of consent and resistance, we examine how K-pop and its fandoms have the potential for affecting local and national politics outside of South Korea.

KEYWORDS: Korean popular music, K-pop, Black Lives Matter, BTS, ARMY, Fandom

Introduction

Amidst the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020, news outlets noted the activism of K-pop fans and musicians. Fans and artists emerged as political actors and enhanced their solidarity with this social movement. More importantly, how they have engaged with BLM is related to the distinct elements of contemporary K-

pop and K-pop fandoms. For example, the relationships between fans and artists are not unilateral, but mutual. Fans and artists enjoy a symbiotic relationship, and equally inspire one another in their support of the BLM movement. However, this does not mean that they spoke with a singular voice. In fact, there were divergent opinions within the fandom and between the fandom and the artists. Whereas many K-pop fans approved of and agreed with their favourite artists' support for the BLM movement, others were disappointed that K-pop artists were slow to champion, or did not express even greater support for, the BLM movement. These critiques stem not only from the importance of international artists' stance against racism, but also because K-pop is heavily influenced by Black music. Furthermore, some criticized K-pop acts and companies' supportive messages as insincere, charging that they engage in cultural appropriation of Black culture. As such, K-pop exists as a site of struggle in which many interests and power dynamics are manifest.

Stuart Hall argues for the importance of popular culture as a site of contestation. Specifically, he writes, "Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged [...] It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (1981: 239). Though Hall's main point is to delve into the possibility of popular culture as a space where power differences between the dominant and non-dominant groups can be delineated, his neo-Gramscian viewpoint on popular culture is applicable as we explore K-pop fandoms today. In this paper, we describe how K-pop fans and artists have become members of an imagined community beyond temporal and spatial boundaries (Anderson 2006). Furthermore, we describe how fandoms and artists express their voices in the cultural space of K-pop, in which diverse interests co-exist. By focusing on the particular case of the most prominent K-pop group, BTS (*Bangtan Sonyeondan*, or Bulletproof Boy Scouts), and its devoted fandom called ARMY, we explore how their activities expanded beyond popular music and into political activism in the Summer of 2020.

The association between music and social movements is not something new. A number of scholars have examined the relationship between music and political activism (Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Eyerman 2002; Street 2002; Huang 2003; Rosenthal and Flacks 2011; Kutschke and Norton 2013; Street 2013; Shank 2014; Manabe 2016; Maultsby et al. 2018; Garofalo et al. 2020). The majority of studies have focused primarily on the role of music, musicians, and musical aesthetics with regard to political movements. For example, Ron Eyerman (2002) described how music and musical experiences affected the formation of people's collective identity and social movements. He focused on the American Civil Rights Movement and White Power Movements. Relatedly, by examining diverse popular music from Western rock bands to Japanese avant-garde musicians, Barry Shank (2014) explored how the aesthetic power of music influenced the ways in which people form identities and worldviews. Noriko Manabe (2016) examined the behaviour of musicians and the traits of their music during demonstrations against nuclear power in Japan, as well as the types of censorship they encountered. She did this by primarily focusing on four spaces of the antinuclear movement—cyberspace, street demonstrations, concerts and festivals, and commercial recordings. Hao Huang (2003) examined the political role of rock music in mainland China, *Yaogun Yinyue*, amidst the radical social transitions in China. Huang described how and why Chinese rock music conveys different meanings to its audience compared to Western rock music.

Previous scholars have also examined the relationship between the BLM movement and music. In the edited volume *Black Lives Matter and Music*, Maultsby et al. (2018) explored the variation in regional political activism via music. For

example, Denise Dalphond examined how electronic music was used to mobilize marginalized people in Detroit to protest against social inequality. Dalphond's ethnography emphasized the importance of Black women and LGBTQ individuals to both the BLM movement and the local music scene (2018: 105).

Whereas previous research focused mainly on musicians, music, and media, our study focuses on the activities of musicians (BTS) and their fandom (ARMY). The case of BTS and ARMY is also distinct in that fans are the main actors in the political activities we describe. Moreover, while their actions primarily take place on social media, their activities also have real world consequences.

Before we examine the distinct characteristics of BTS and their fandom's part in the BLM movement, we have to describe BTS. The year of 2020 was meaningful for BTS not only because they demonstrated the continuing growth of K-pop as an ongoing global cultural phenomenon, but because of their own astonishing success despite (and perhaps prompted by) the pandemic (1). In 2020, they were the best-selling artist worldwide, according to Billboard. On 5 September 2020, BTS scored its first Number One single, "Dynamite", on the US Billboard Hot 100 Singles Chart. This was the first Number One single on this chart ever by a K-Pop group (Savillo 2020). Since then, BTS has had two additional Number One singles—"Savage Love" and "Life Goes On"—on the US Billboard Hot 100 in 2020. Their two virtual concerts over one weekend, *Map of the Soul ON:E* was seen by nearly 1 million people and earned \$40 million (USD). Note that an audience of 1 million is equivalent to approximately 20 times the size of the audience at a stadium such as Citi Field in New York or Wembley Stadium in London (Rowley 2020). Their most recent album, *BE* (2020), is remarkable because the title song "Life Goes On" hit Number One despite the fact that it is sung almost entirely in Korean. In addition, all of the album's remaining tracks also charted on the Billboard Hot 100 the week of its release, and also on Billboard Global charts (Zellner 2020; Frankenberg 2020). *BE* also marks BTS' fifth Number 1 album worldwide and in the US in 2.5 years. The last group to achieve this feat was The Beatles (Caulfield 2020). BTS was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2021 for the Best Pop Duo/Group Performance—a first for a K-pop group (Bruner 2020; McCurry 2020). Hence, numerous media outlets in the US have celebrated BTS' achievements in 2020 (2).

Behind BTS' global success, there is a dedicated fandom, known as ARMY. ARMY is not only the largest K-pop fandom, but it is known among K-pop fans as being the most dedicated (3). The music video for BTS' "Dynamite" hit 100 million views within 24 hours of its release—this is a record for any music video on YouTube. We argue that the relationship between BTS and its fandom is unique, even compared to those of other K-pop groups and fandoms. Whereas Kathryn Lofton posited that the bond between BTS and ARMY is different because BTS works to provide a communal experience between itself and the fans (Davis 2020), we claim that this relationship is also akin to an exclusive romantic relationship or devoted friendship between BTS and ARMY.

This relationship might be considered in light of para-social interactions. This term was coined by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl and refers to a "simulacrum of conversational give and take" in the new mass media environment (1956: 215). For example, the idols (media performers) perform for the fans (media users) and give them their affection via *aegyo*, which are cute displays of affection and love (with hearts formed with one's fingers or arms for example) or sweet facial expressions (Jung 2011a: 165), but most importantly via their acknowledgement and gratitude. In return, the fans not only consume the artists' music, but also support them by managing campaigns to promote them. However, we argue that

the relationship between BTS and ARMY goes far beyond Horton and Wohl’s concept of para-social interaction. Whereas Horton and Wohl said that “the interaction, characteristically, is one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development” (1956: 215), as we will explore, the interaction between BTS and ARMY is neither one-sided nor driven by the artist. Rather, it is mutual and happens in almost real-time due to the intensity of interaction between BTS and ARMY via social media.

In many aspects, K-pop idols have to be perfect. Idols are also well aware that “mistakes, or even failure to please the agency, may have drastic consequences” (Saeji et al. 2018: 15). For that reason, idols are thoroughly controlled and managed by their agencies in the field of K-pop. In general, K-pop idols are not allowed to date. If they do, they do so in private. A practical reason might be that relationships distract them from their work. However, one of the main reasons is that idols can better serve as idealized romantic partners if they were single. When asked about their love lives by Western media, BTS often gives an answer that conveys the idea that “we have the love of ARMY and that is enough”. For example, in *Esquire’s* cover story from 23 November 2020, leader RM stated, “Our love life – twenty-four hours, seven days a week—is with all the ARMYs all over the world” (Holmes 2020). BTS member Jungkook even has the word ARMY tattooed on his hand. Whenever BTS gives interviews or receives awards, etc., the first thing they do is to thank ARMY and to tell them how much they love them. They also credit ARMY for every award they receive. The seven members of BTS (RM, J-Hope, Jin, Suga, V, Jimin, and Jungkook) have often quoted their manager and producer (Bang Si-hyuk) as saying that BTS is nothing without ARMYs.

When it comes to K-pop fandom, scholars have examined how fans consume, interpret, and reproduce K-pop, as well as how they build their sociocultural identity (see Pease 2006; Jung 2011b; Otmazgin and Lyan 2013; Sung 2013; Auh and Walker 2017; Han 2017; Keith 2019; Ter Molen 2019; Oh 2020). For example, Oh explored CODE9, a Copenhagen-based K-pop cover dance group, arguing, “K-pop becomes a new form of diasporic social dance that bridges the Danish youth with diverse ethnic, sexual, and cultural backgrounds” (2020: 29). Whereas previous scholars focused on general K-pop fandoms in different regions and local contexts, we investigate how K-pop fans, especially BTS ARMY, become globally connected and involved in the BLM movement. By looking at BTS fans’ involvement in political activism, we argue that the influence of K-pop fandoms is not confined to supporting their idols, but has also expanded to participating in other social and political phenomena.

Previous research on BTS and ARMY focus mainly on their online networks, their usage of new media, and the digital intimacy between the group and its fans (for example, see K.T. Lee 2018; Chang and Park 2019; J.H. Lee 2019; J.Y. Lee 2019; Ko 2020; Kim 2020; Vasileviciute 2020). Specifically, by considering ARMY as a prominent example of global fandom in the digital realm, Chang and Park analyse the emerging ARMY phenomenon. They suggest four key dimensions to understanding the digital fandom of BTS ARMY: (1) digital intimacy; (2) non-social sociality; (3) transnational locality; and (4) organizing without an organization (Chang and Park 2019: 265). Although their four key points are helpful for examining the characteristics of the global BTS ARMY, they are inadequate in describing BTS’ rapidly-evolving distinct ARMYs worldwide. For example, ARMYs’ political involvement in the BLM movement cannot be explained by non-social sociability defined as a neo-tribalism that “serves no overt political project or other external structured purpose.” (Chang and Park: 272).

In addition, as we will explore, many ARMY subgroups are extremely well-organized. There is actually quite a bit of differentiation among various local ARMYs. BTS and BTS fans' involvement in the BLM movement shows that K-pop fan activism has expanded to socio-political issues. It is important to note that, as we mentioned above, BTS fans did not merely follow BTS' decision to support the BLM movement. In fact, BTS' actions were called for by ARMY, especially Black ARMYs.

BTS ARMY

As Jeeheng Lee emphasizes in her book *BTS and ARMY Culture*, "ARMY is the most inclusive and diverse fandom of the world today" (J.H. Lee 2019: 167). ARMY technically stands for "Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth". In K-pop, each group has an official fandom and club in which fans can gather to effectively support the group or artist. Also, official fan clubs are given a specific name associated with the group they support (4). Given that names for fandoms are mainly assigned by the management companies, which also issues an official colour/colours and other emblems, the formal name of BTS' fandom, Adorable Representatives M.C. for Youth (ARMY), is arguably less meaningful than the identities associated with the name ARMY. The identity as ARMY is extremely important to its fans and is used by both BTS and their fans.

The term ARMY is somewhat confusing. It is used as the name of the fandom of BTS, but it can also confer an individual designation (namely "I am ARMY") or it can be the name of the entire community of individual fans or local group ARMYs. For example, there are many subgroups that are each referred to as ARMY. Some of these are organized by national origin, such as US ARMY, INDIAN ARMY, K-ARMY (Korean ARMY) etc., but others can refer to ethnic group identities (BLACK ARMY), sexual and gender identity groups (LGBT ARMY), occupations (Lawyer ARMY or BangtanScholars), or age groups (Noona ARMY—누나, "Noona" means older sister(s) to younger brother(s) in Korean, so this refers to older female fans). The collection of different groups is usually referred to as ARMYs, but the collective of all BTS fans and BTS ARMYs is ARMY. One can identify as ARMY as an individual, as a part of a localized collective, a part of the communities of communities, and/or in the single universal ARMY. In this way, people from across the world have become members of an imagined community (Anderson 2006); for BTS ARMY, it is more accurate to designate it as a community of communities. ARMYs express their solidarity with one another by saying "I'm ARMY", even though they do not have to know one another. Under the name of ARMY, BTS fans not only support the group but also connect with one another and in response to social causes.

K-pop fans and fandoms are unique because of their highly-organized nature. During an artist's live performances, fans not only cheer them on but also wait in line for days just for the chance to see them perform, if only for a few minutes on a talk show. Starting from 2017 to just prior to the COVID pandemic, these activities surprised the hosts of American shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, *Good Morning America*, *The Tonight Show*, and so forth. At their live concerts, fans are instructed via ARMY websites (see <https://www.usbtsarmy.com>) to use official fanchants – these show the support of the fans, but do not interrupt the verses or choruses of the songs (5). If you watch recordings of any BTS concert, you will hear these well-organized fanchants. Fanchants are as ubiquitous as clapping at the end of a

performance in Western concerts. BTS ARMY websites provide texts for fans for each song (for example, see US BTS ARMY). Fans also hold professionally printed signs of support—these are printed and distributed by the local fandoms to the attendees of the concert (see Figure 1). As it can be seen in the image, there is a certain directive written in diverse languages (see Figure 2).

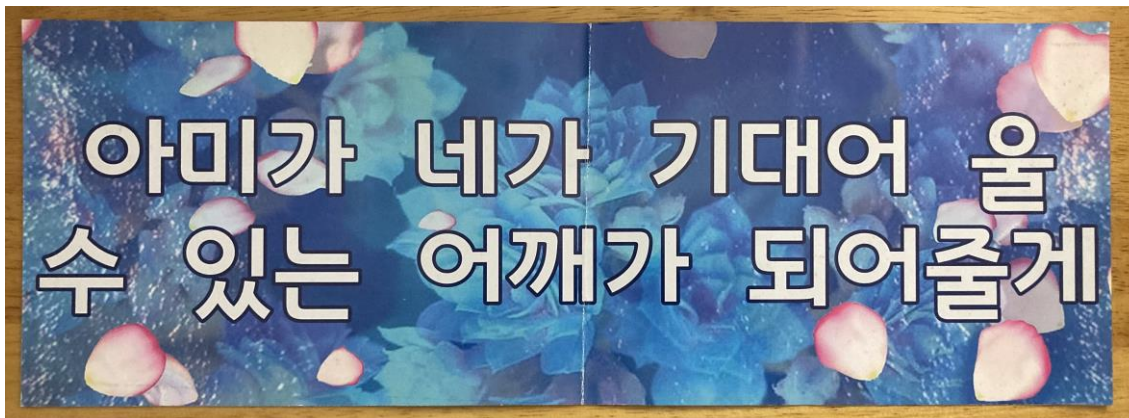


FIGURE 1. A printed sign of support for BTS’ concert in Chicago. The Korean sentence means “ARMYs will be a shoulder to cry on” (photo by the authors).

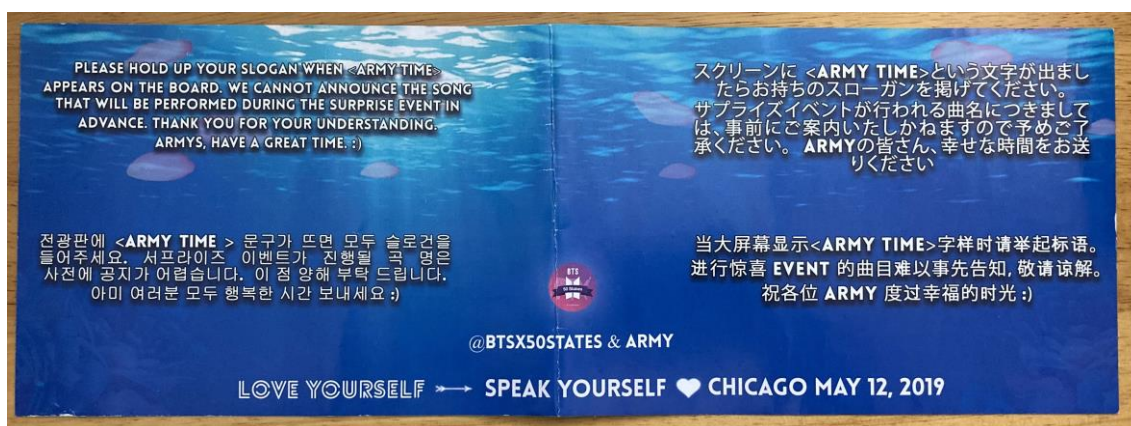


FIGURE 2. A certain directive written in four different languages (photo by the author).

ARMYs’ highly organized nature is effective in supporting BTS as they work to increase YouTube views, promote votes for different awards, request radio airplay of BTS songs, organize gifts to DJs who interview BTS, and many other activities. There are explicit directions on how to stream YouTube videos and Spotify songs to maximize the credit awarded for Billboard Charts and other counts. By dint of the hard work of their devoted ARMY, BTS was able to win the award for Top Social Media Artist at the Billboard Music Awards four years in a row (2017-2021). As of 20 April 2020, “Boy With Luv” earned the record for the most-viewed YouTube video in 24 hours, according to Guinness World Records (Herman 2020). On 22 August 2020, BTS broke its own record with “Dynamite”, which enjoyed 101.1 million views on YouTube in its first 24 hours (Iasimone 2020). As such, it is difficult to comprehend the global success of BTS without crediting ARMY’s mastery of social media, especially Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok. These supportive activities are all voluntary and have become localized. BTS ARMY in the San Francisco Bay Area in California (BAY AREA ARMY), for example, organized a promotional event at a local tea chain, Tastea, celebrating each members’ birthdays (ChimNoona

Twitter). Again, this is not a promotional event by BTS or its company, but by its local fandom.

BTS fans also rent large LED screens worldwide or buy full-page ads in publications to celebrate their idols' birthdays or other major events. For instance, BTS Member V's (Kim Taehyung) birthday is on 30 December, 1995. So, on 30 December 2020 fans not only sponsored large traditional and LED billboards all around Seoul celebrating his birthday (see the YouTube Channel *Walk Together*, for example), but China V Bar (a group of V's fans) paid for a 3-minute long celebratory message set to one of V's solo songs, "Winter Bear", to be projected on the entire surface of the Burj Khalifa building in Dubai, the tallest building in the world (Song 2020). Recently, during a March 24, 2021 episode of *You Quiz on the Block* that featured BTS, there were no commercial breaks because ARMY had purchased all commercial slots. They did this so that BTS would not be interrupted (AKP STAFF 2021), and BTS was not aware of this until they appeared on the show.

The fans' activities do not end there. They also engage in extensive charitable activities. In fact, there are many local ARMY organizations, including one that has solely focused on charitable activities in the name of BTS, called *One In An ARMY*. It is important to note that by no means are we suggesting that this is the only charitable ARMY organization. Rather, this was the group that was directly involved in the BLM Movement. The members of *One In An ARMY* have organized themselves into specific teams, much like any non-profit organization. These include a communications team, design team, research and outreach team, and web team (Hussain 2018). Moreover, various ARMYs have organized charitable campaigns, often in the name of the birthdays of different members. As a matter of fact, charity events and public donations of money, rice, schools, or trees are common and highly visible in the field of K-pop fan culture (Kim 2017: 190-192). Beyond charitable activities, ARMYs have expanded the boundaries of their fan activism to socio-political issues.

ARMY has not hesitated to raise their voices with respect to socio-political issues, including but not limited to: various refugee crises, racial discrimination, children's rights, global warming, COVID-19 pandemic, etc. As we briefly mentioned above, the fan collective *One In An ARMY* focuses on charitable causes related to social issues. While *One In An ARMY* has conducted many charitable activities in honour of BTS, we focus mainly on the #MatchAMillion campaign on social media for the Black Lives Matter movement. As such, ARMY does not use social media simply to increase the number of views on YouTube or the number of streams on Spotify, but also for political organizing efforts.

The Black Lives Matter Movement and K-pop

In the Summer of 2020, there were massive protests in the US against police brutality and systemic racism. George Floyd's death on 25 May 2020 served as one of the catalysts for these activities. After Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, was killed while in police custody in Minneapolis, Minnesota, local residents protested his death. Subsequent protests occurred in over a hundred cities. Specifically, after a video captured by bystanders showed a white police officer kneeling on Floyd's neck went viral on social media, massive demonstrations emerged. During the Summer of 2020, The New York Times reported that "protests have erupted in at least 140 cities across the United States, and the National Guard has been activated in at least 21 states" (Taylor 2020). In fact, other deaths of African

Americans were seen by many as emblematic of systemic racism and police brutality. These included the murders of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, and Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia, both of which occurred before that of Floyd (6). Along with their deaths, Floyd’s murder caused mass outrage across the US by reminding some that little had changed since Trayvon Martin’s death in 2012, which ignited the BLM movement to emerge for the first time (Orejuela 2018: 2).

Despite the Minneapolis police department’s account of Floyd’s death, several subsequent incidents sparked additional public outrage. For example, whereas an Afro-Latinx CNN reporter, Omar Jimenez, was arrested by Minneapolis police while reporting on the protests, a white CNN reporter, Josh Campbell, was treated politely by members of the same police force at the same event. Campbell revealed that the National Guard and the police asked him politely to move back (Hanna and Vera 2020).

The death of George Floyd also affected anti-racism efforts on the other side of the Atlantic. In Europe, a number of people responded to the Black Lives Matter movement. Esther King points out that “the daily racism experienced by Europeans is no less shocking” (King 2020). Floyd’s death also resonated among people across the Pacific. People in Asia, such as South Korea, Japan, and India, also expressed solidarity with BLM (Bhat 2020; Illmer 2020; Strother 2020). For example, around 130 people in South Korea gathered in Myeondong, Seoul, to show their solidarity with the BLM movement (Bahk 2020). According to Shim, the BLM movement is also important to Korean society because migrant workers, international students, and multicultural families in Korea have experienced injustice (Shim 2020). Hence, the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 expanded beyond the US to become an international social movement against racism.

Using social media, K-pop fans urged K-pop entertainment companies to take a stand for racial justice. For example, several K-pop fans in the US joined a hashtag campaign, #SMBLACKOUT, to critique prominent K-pop conglomerate SM Entertainment for its silence on racial injustice and the BLM movement. A K-pop fan, Davonna Gilpin, said “When artists and labels are silent on Black Lives Matter, they are complicit in our suffering” (Liu 2020). Gilpin also stated that “it was time for them to step up and say something. Especially because, all these groups or artists tour here [in the US], so they are very aware of how much of their American fan base is Black” (ibid.). Joseph Dorsey, a black K-pop fan from Chicago, said he wanted “K-pop artists to support the Black Lives Matter movement because the music industry has long benefited from adapting Black American music and Black American culture” (Park 2020). Some K-pop fans, including Ahomari Turner from Columbia, South Carolina, argued that K-pop artists should do something for BLM, “given their growing influence on the international stage” (*Korea JoongAng Daily*). In response to K-pop fans’ requests, SM Entertainment expressed support for the Black Lives Matter movement with the following public statement:

We are deeply saddened by the recent events in the United States, which are tragic examples of the systemic devaluation of Black lives [...] We are new to this conversation, but this is not a single moment. This is a key commitment that we will continue to support (SMTOWN 2020).

Despite their statement of support for the BLM movement, SM Entertainment was criticized for its complacency. For example, Tiffany Red, an African American composer who once worked with NCT Dream (one of SM Entertainment’s boy groups), stated “You aren’t new to this conversation, you are a part of this

conversation. We are the people who make your music. Why would you ever think that you're excluded from this?" (De Luna 2020).

The K-pop industry has long been criticized for appropriating Black culture and music, so some musicians and fans may feel that K-pop in particular owes BLM its support. The summer of 2020 witnessed a number of K-pop artists, including Asian Americans Eric Nam and Amber Liu of f(x) and many others, express their stance against racial injustice in the US and beyond, as well as their support for the Black Lives Matter movement (7).

In the US, however, it was BTS' announcement and actions that attracted the widespread attention of media outlets. On 4 June 2020, BTS released a tweet that stated:

우리는 인종차별에 반대합니다. 우리는 폭력에 반대합니다.
나, 당신, 우리 모두는 존중받을 권리가 있습니다. 함께 하겠습니다.

We stand against racial discrimination. We condemn violence.
You, I and we all have the right to be respected. We will stand together. (BTS
Twitter 2020).

This tweet went viral among K-pop fans and within the first week of its tweet was "retweeted around 1 million times" (CBS News 2020). Besides the statement of support, BTS and its company Big Hit Entertainment donated \$1 million to the BLM movement, though they did not mention this donation in their statement of support. However, press coverage of both the statement and the cash donation was swift and extremely positive. Inspired by BTS and Big Hit's donation, fans across the world began a hashtag campaign, #MatchAMillion, to encourage ARMYs to match BTS' donation. Within a day, ARMYs raised and matched BTS' \$1 Million donation (ibid.). We also note that BTS' initial donation was made in a round number in US dollars and not in Korean Won—this demonstrates their support of the BLM movement in the US and provides a clear signal to US ARMY. BTS and Big Hit's support is notable as it demonstrates the dynamic interaction between K-pop fans and artists: a relationship that can spark social protest.

In fact, BTS and Big Hit's donation was a response to Black ARMY's requests. The Washington Post reports that "after their fans flooded hashtags with #BlackARMYequality and #BlackARMYsMatter, supergroup BTS and their label, Big Hit Entertainment, donated \$1 million to Black Lives Matter" (Liu 2020). According to Jeeheng Lee, BTS was able to shatter the long-standing norm that "idols are forbidden to talk openly about social issues", thanks to ARMYs' fervent support of this movement (2019: 158). Social media made it possible for these interactions to happen in a very short time span. Artists and their fans already frequently interact on social media. More than once daily, BTS posts texts, photos, live video conversations with fans (on V LIVE or YouTube), episodes of their reality show *RUN BTS!*, videos of their music performances, and backstage interactions to Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, and to WeVerse (Big Hit's own social media platform). Also, many fan Twitter accounts constantly post news of their own—some of these accounts have over 1 million followers (see @choi_bts2 for example).

Among ARMYs, Black ARMYs specifically raised their voices in support of the BLM movement. They came up with hashtag campaigns, such as #BlackARMYequality, #BlackARMYsMatter, and #BlackOutBTS, not only to support the BLM movement but also to emphasize their experiences with racial discrimination. Indeed, hashtags are employed in the digital realm for diverse socio-

political issues, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #OscarsSoWhite", #TakeAKnee", #NeverAgain, and #IceBucketChallenge. According to Sarah Jackson et al., "Hashtags, which are discursive and user-generated, have become the default method to designate collective thoughts, ideas, arguments, and experiences that might otherwise stand alone or be quickly subsumed within the fast-paced pastiche of Twitter" (2020: xxviii). Jackson and her colleagues describe how quickly hashtags have been normalized and adopted as "a way to connect multiple sites of shared interest, and mainstream media outlets and politicians, noting their ubiquity, have used them to engage on a range of topics and debates" (2020: xxviii-xxix).

In the #BlackOutBTS campaign, Black ARMYs posted their selfies and a photo of their favourite members of BTS side-by-side along with positive messages (Mohan 2020). As a matter of fact, #BlackARMYSmatter and #BlackARMYequality were already used by Black ARMYs in 2018 to protest against racism within the fandom (Reddy 2020). By utilizing those hashtags, Black ARMYs criticized the presence of racial inequities among ARMYs and complained of racism within the fandom. According to Matt Hills, any given fan culture is not simply an undifferentiated community, but one with a social hierarchy "where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status" (2002: 46). #BlackARMYequality is a case in point of how fans compete over status while being present in the same community. Black ARMYs raised its concerns again in 2020 to signal the importance of racial equality beyond the fan communities.

For those of us that follow K-pop, these are common occurrences—successful groups and their management companies are extraordinarily responsive to their fans. A recent example of an offensive use of a cultural icon occurred in Blackpink's music video for "How You Like That". The video was uploaded in late June 2020 and received 86 million views in its first 24 hours (a record at the time). Indian BLINK (BLINK is the name of Blackpink's fandom) immediately protested the use of the image of Ganesha, a Hindu deity, in the music video and organized a petition against Blackpink's management company, YG Entertainment. This petition demanding the removal of the deity garnered 4,500 signatures. Four days after the June 26, 2020 release of the video, a new version of the music video without Ganesha was posted to YouTube (Lee 2020).

K-pop fans are outspoken and will openly complain to a group and its management company. The groups and their management companies monitor Twitter and, in the case of BTS and some other groups, WeVerse for fan conversations. Fandoms also regularly rent vans that use LED screens to prominently display their displeasure with management or with their favourite groups. These vans are then driven and parked near the management offices, cafes, and restaurants their employees frequent. For example, in BTS' music video for "Dynamite", some fans of BTS member Jin complained that he did not receive enough screen time. His fans rented multiple trucks that displayed text and pictures (similar to PowerPoint slides) that documented Jin's success as a solo singer, and criticized Big Hit for their unequal treatment of Jin (Miyano 2020). In addition, fans sometimes lodge complaints against their idols. Some fans (E.L.F.) of Super Junior demanded that members Kangin and Sungmin be kicked out of the group due to bad behaviour. Moreover, they called on other fans to boycott Super Junior until these two members were removed. They started the hashtag and campaign "Criminal_Kangin_FanDeceiving_Sungmin_PermanentRemoval" to expel two members of Super Junior. By 2019, Kangin and Sungmin were no longer part of Super Junior.

While K-pop groups have traditionally stayed silent on political issues, they may be asked to support political movements that affect their local fandoms as their global fandoms increase. We argue that BLM was one such event as US ARMY may be disproportionately comprised of minorities (Saeji 2020). In an attempt to impede the anti-Black Lives Matter movement, K-pop fans hijacked the hashtags #WhiteLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter by linking the hashtag to fancams (fan-recorded videos) of their favourite K-pop stars. So, if one searched for #WhiteLivesMatter or #BlueLivesMatter during late June 2020, one would be bombarded with videos of K-pop performances filmed at live concerts. The political activism of K-pop fans did not end at supporting the Black Lives Matter movement: this activity literally used K-pop content to overtake hashtags developed against BLM.

In fact, K-pop fans may have influenced the US presidential election in 2020. Evidence suggests that President Trump's rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, had disappointing attendance numbers. Over a million tickets were requested, but only 6,500 people attended the rally at the BOK Center, which seats 19,000 people. Trump's campaign had built an outdoor area to handle the expected crowd overflow. TikTok users and K-pop fans claimed that they requested extra tickets with no intention of attending the rally (Reddy 2020), as a way to protest Trump's support of white supremacist ideology.

Conclusion

When Psy's "Gangnam Style" became a global smash hit in 2012, most people would not have anticipated the mobilization of K-pop fandoms in socio-political issues. Though we have mainly examined the Black Lives Matter movement, K-pop fandoms' political activism is not confined to one issue in a single country. For example, ARMYs across the world expressed their concern and empathy to Hong Kong ARMY, when they saw a photo showing a BTS Kookie (Jungkook) doll left in a Hong Kong protest site in 2019 (Lin 2020). Since the photo hints at the possibility that a BTS ARMY was arrested by police and had to abandon their doll, ARMYs utilized the hashtags #HongKongProtests and #SpeakYourself (a well-known phrase used by BTS leader RM) to post supportive messages. These activities also work to elevate attention to global political movements, and in this particular situation, to Hong Kong protests against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill. Similarly, Thai K-pop fans raised the profile of their anti-government movement, which broadly reflected the frustration of the youth generation (Tanakasempipat 2020). Armenian K-pop fans stood in front of cameras holding a signboard written in Korean in the hope of receiving global recognition of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan from K-pop fans worldwide (JeonAe 2020). Thus, we argue that K-pop's global reach has the potential to enact political change outside of Korea.

According to Harrington and Bielby, four related debates—cultural globalization, defining the media audience, methodology, and self-reflexivity—have been mainly examined by scholars of global fandoms (2007:183). Focusing on the case of BTS and ARMY in the BLM movement, we explored two main questions of global fandom studies; (1) who, what, and where the media audience is, and (2) how members of a popular music fandom construct and express their own voices in the context of globalization. Also, we contribute to both the research on the role of popular music on political activism as well as the work on K-pop. The former emphasized the content of the music and the musician itself, while the latter focused on the lack of organization of the digital community of fans. By examining

BTS and ARMY, we argue that the fandom can prompt political activity by the artist, which in turn can prompt great political action among the fans. As such, fans and artists are inspired by each other in supporting social movements. These activities not only strengthen the community of ARMY but also demonstrate that the synergism of the shared activities of the artist and the fandom strengthen the bonds between fans and artists. We claim that ARMY’s involvement in the BLM movement is notable not only because it is the way in which they express their empathy but also because, as Black ARMYs showed, it demonstrates that ARMY is a community in which diverse voices coexist. BTS ARMY is extremely well-organized and was able to help motivate BTS to issue a statement and donate funds. In fact, the effectiveness of the fandom has been repeatedly demonstrated in their ardent support of BTS, but in this situation, they prompted BTS to act on a political issue.

Most recently, the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes and negative bias incidents due to COVID-19 in the U.S. and elsewhere has led to the hashtag #stopasianhate and #stopAAPIhate. In March 2021, BTS released a statement utilizing the above hashtags to condemn racism against Asian Americans, and stated that they had also experienced racism as Asians when traveling outside of Korea. Their statements resonated with fans across the world and with Asian Americans, as well as Asians in other Western countries.

The political power of the BTS ARMY is important for K-pop itself because it shows the possible trajectory of K-pop as a global cultural phenomenon. It also means that an in-depth understanding of racial diversity among fans is needed in the field. BTS ARMY also includes social science researchers, some of whom have recently conducted a BTS ARMY Census that counted about 400,000 respondents (see <https://www.btsarmycensus.com>). With the global expansion of K-pop, we are just beginning to see how the interaction between artists, fandoms and companies might address social issues such as racism to, as the BTS song title suggests, “Make It Right”.

Endnotes

(1) We argue that exposure to K-pop culture increased as people spent more time on social media during the pandemic, which we consider to be one of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(2) For example, in 2020 the Wall Street Journal Magazine named BTS their “Musical Innovators of the Year” (Florsheim 2020), and the music publication Consequence of Sound named BTS their 2020 Band of the Year. BTS was named Time Magazine’s 2020 Entertainer of the Year, and identified by Esquire Magazine as “the biggest band in the world” (Holmes 2020).

(3) As of April 2021, BTS’ Twitter account had 34 million followers, BTS’ TikTok account had 31 million followers, and its YouTube channel had 47 million followers.

(4) For example, the name of Wanna One’s official fan club is Wannable. TWICE’s official fan club is ONCE. BLINK is the name of K-pop girl group Blackpink’s official fan club. Big Hit’s new group, ENHYPEN, debuted on 1 December 2020 and with its debut came the name of their fandom, called ENGINE, which is supposed to refer to the fandom not only as a driving force (an engine), but also as a strong connection (sharing a common gene).

(5) An example of fan chant from the chorus part of “Boy With Luv” (transcription by the author):

1'20" - 1'28"

Main Melody

Fanchant

Love is nothing stron---ger Than a boy with love

B T S B T S B T S B T S

(6) Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, was killed by police. The death of Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia, is also related to racial discrimination (see Fausset and Oppel Jr. et al).

(7) K-pop artists including Crush, Jay Park, Mark of GOT7, Amber, Eric Nam, Jae of JYP band DAY6, and Jo Kwon, among others, expressed their support for the Black Lives Matter in the US, “paying homage to African-American culture as an important source of inspiration for modern day K-pop” (See Korea JoongAng Daily 2020).

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