

BTS ARMY's #BTSLOVEYOURSELF: A Worldwide K-Pop Fandom Participatory Culture in Twitter

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Abstract

Korean popular music (K-pop) fandom is under spotlight as the K-pop industry has rapidly grown transnationally. Fandom practices across nation borders in social media has grown out from supporting their idols by buying the records, continuously discussing idols' personal life, and attending live music concerts, to supporting social causes in the name of the idols. This paper investigates fandom participatory culture of creating and supporting social activism message in social media. By collecting and analyzing a large-scale of fandom activity data from Twitter, we investigate to what extent fandom participatory culture is prevalent and important in transnationalism of K-pop, in particularly social activism in social media. By analyzing the Twitter data of ARMY on #BTSLOVEYOURSELF, we show the participatory culture is what gives the fandom and their messages bigger effect in social media which is beyond the idol's industrial well-made representation and image. However, there is also a possibility of inter-cultural intermediaries of fandom practices to echo idol's message in social media and to define success for the multi-billions industry.

Keywords: K-pop fandom, participatory culture, social activism.

1. Introduction

For the past 20 years, the Korean Wave has experienced numerous changes, in geographically and culturally significances. The Korean Wave has expanded outside the East Asian countries to many parts of the worlds. North America, Western Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and South East Asia have admitted the fever of Korean popular cultures from television melodrama, movies, cosmetics, to K-pop. *Hallyu*, the official term of Korean pop culture, originally implied the exports of a few cultural products as means of soft-power diplomacy. Among of *Hallyu 1.0* earlier products are television drama, movies, and a few pop songs. Today Korea has developed its popular cultures into all relevant youth cultures and has become one of the most popular cultures for global youth in their teens and twenties [1]. *Hallyu 1.0* has successfully diversified ranges of products from the essential, such as television drama and K-pop, to semi-essential, such as street food, cosmetics, and video games, and para-*Hallyu* products and services, like drama site tourism and plastic surgery [2].

Global popularity of Korean Wave has set an example of transnational cultural flow. South Korea since the beginning of *Hallyu 1.0* has actualized to theboth growth of domestic cultural industries as well as the export of those products. In the early stage, upon its success in China and other Confucian countries, it was only taken as cultural proximity to Confucian values found in them [3]. Nevertheless, cultural proximity is no longer a reason for Korean Wave's global expansion. The role of social media in the efforts of Korean Wave transnationalization is interesting because it opens access to many and more people to acknowledge and enjoy Korean popular culture. Billions view of Psy's pop music video 'Gangnam Style' is mainly due to its YouTube popularity. Therefore, social media has shifted the notion of global cultural flows of local popular cultures [1]. Social media also takes the role in making the more exciting cultural phenomena circulating around Korean Wave, in

particularly K-pop. That is the worldly growing fans community, so-called the fandoms, and their fans practices.

Fans in the era of advanced communication and technology are part of the international popular culture industry in social media to engage in unwittingly publishing their idols. Henry Jenkins describes fans as ‘textual poachers’ who ‘get to keep what they take and use it as the foundations for the construction of an alternative community’ [4]. With the greater help from social media interaction dynamics, fans nowadays actively produce and circulate information about their idols and within the same time produce products, like fanfictions, fan videos, fan arts, fan social movement, and many more in associate with the idols. With excessive affect as their driving force, they actively produce and circulate information about their idols, and products associated with their idols. In addition to the sequence and circular action of produce and circulate is that it sometimes drives the actors of industry to make decision of the services or products. B2B (business to business) practices has become B2C (business to consumer) and consumer to business. This community driven fan practice is called the participatory culture. Fans undergo and become part of process to participatory cultures, such as: affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem solving, and circulations. Fandom online participatory cultures enables fans create and share with others. Experienced members help less experienced ones acquire knowledge and take care issues; thus members build up feeling of association with each other and come up with norms and ethics that work within the fandom community [5].

Social media for popular culture industry today has become an important forum that encouraged community participation to make connection, build a transnational audience, receive feedbacks on their contents from audience, and often borrow from other cultures [4]. Fan aesthetic, according to Jenkins, starts on the selection, inflection, juxtaposition, and recirculation of ready-made image and discourses [4]. Actions of managing and coordinating artistic production, gatekeeping, curating, cataloguing, editing, scheduling, distributing, marketing/advertising, and retailing articulates the complex roles of becoming a fan. Fans with better access in social media, however, conflicted in the duality of accumulating cultural and symbolic capitals of their creation, while on the other hand, they are bounded by commercial imperatives [6]. The participatory action in the fandom is closely identified with the practices in marketing and consumer behaviour, where consumers are conceptualized within the perspectives of brand communities that are socially and culturally constructed in shared experience, enthusiasm, and emotion in relation to the brand. Such brand community will associate their identity and way of life, have relevant knowledge and skills, exhibit willingness to be involved the process of innovating the brand, and have the capability and motivation to work involuntarily to the expenses of the brand they follow or worship [6].

ARMY or A.R.M.Y stands for Adorable Representatives M.C. for Youth is a self-made fandom of K-pop boyband BTS or *Bangtan Sonyeodan* or their English name: *Beyond The Scene*. It is officially recognized as BTS’s official fandom in 2013 not long after the band’s debut. In one of its features, CNN called ARMY the world’s most powerful fandom which relates to their limitless commitment to access every idol’s platform to support BTS. One dedicated member even said that she persuaded friends and family to log in with multiple accounts to optimize BTS streaming abilities or views in YouTube [7]. Later after the UN General Assembly speech, another Western mainstream media, Vogue, wrote about BTS becoming ‘superhero’ to the fans by delivering emotionally connected and relevant to youth in the whole world about self-acceptance [8]. This article was later appraised by ARMY by putting it in their social media front pages.

BTS’ management, Big Hit Entertainment, has courted the fans with social media strategies to stay engaged with BTS online and offline, for example in the music concert. They set rules for online social media, streaming application as well as offline in music

concerts. They even control the selling of official merchandise of BTS; Bluetooth equipped concert light stick that will be lighted on in BTS concert with systematically colour coordinated light nuances is the most popular of them all.

BTS' close relationship with ARMY is claimed to be the reason the fandom is fully committed to them. Fans feel connected with the band's songs and lyrics as well as their active social media postings. BTS' extended play or album in 2018 'Love Yourself' released with four different versions appraised more international fans. The album and single with the same title reached top charts in many countries in North America, Latin America, and Asia. This album was later becoming BTS' open gate to world social campaign alongside UNICEF to against violence toward children and teens, end bullying, and promote self-love for children and teens around the world. In accordance with this goal, ARMY bashed the social media with hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF that echoed in social media massively and made #BTSLOVEYOURSELF the top in Twitter Trending Topic Worldwide for months in 2018. United Nations later in September 2018 invited the band to speak at the 73rd General Assembly to deliver the message on behalf of the youth generations. In 2019, UNICEF and BTS released a series of video campaign featuring international artists and youth social activists.

BTS, ARMY, and the powerful hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF has become self-explanatory of the power of social media power. This paper argues to what extent the practices of ARMY fandom participatory culture in social activism echoes in social media is prevalent to its true causes.

2. Methodology

To analyze how ARMY fandom's participatory culture in social activism, we collected fandom activity data in Twitter using big data analytics online application Keyhole (<https://keyhole.co/>) and Audiense (<https://audiense.com/>). We watched three prominent Twitter accounts related to BTS' social activism hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF: @bts_twt BTS' official Twitter account managed by the management and often by the band member themselves, @BigHitEnt Big Hit Entertainment official account, and @BTS_ARMY ARMY's official account since September 2018 to September 2019. We record the fandom activity when tweeting using #BTSLOVEYOURSELF in Twitter. We choose this period (September 2018-September 2019) because of major events for BTS career and for the fandom as well. On 25 September 2018 BTS was invited to UN General Assembly to speak in front of world's leaders and on the same date next year which is one year anniversary to the speech a video campaign was released and an official website with entitled name (<https://www.love-myself.org/eng/home>) was launched to re-echo the message. World mainstream media since then appraised BTS and ARMY for its commitment to the issue and their big name in K-pop as well as world music industry.

Following the album Love Yourself released in 2018 and after the UN speech, hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF was multiple times top in Twitter Trending Topic Worldwide. This indicates that millions of tweets, replies, and retweets circulated using the hashtag creating global ripples.

We collected 9822 data from Keyhole and Audiense by the end of September 2019. The data was a combination from Twitter and Instagram as the biggest sources and with more engagement (presented by number of replies, retweets, likes, most seen and identified as 'popular tweet'), and a few minor social media platforms with lesser engagements. Twitter later found as the most active platform and we decided to collect more data and began our analysis from there.

The data is divided into several groups; they are segment distribution, demographics, trending topic conversation, and sentiment. We then incorporate the data with thematic

analysis to see the bigger picture of the participatory culture behind worldwide trending #BTSLOVEYOURSELF.

3. Results

Segment distribution in Twitter of hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF was circulated by three audience domains; they are BTS and Big Hit Entertainment, ARMY using its official account and ARMY using their personal accounts, and mainstream media (majority coming from Western media and online publication during the UN speech period). The most numbers of distribution came from the fandom, ARMY, with 52.2% of all tweets referring to the hashtag. To max up the distribution, ARMY used its official account and member's personal account that affiliates with BTS and ARMY by putting identification like 'support', 'army worldwide', 'BTS fan', 'BTS', 'fan account', and 'kookmin' in the Twitter bio. The rest 32% and 33.8% came from official account of K-pop industry and mainstream media which also got impact from retweets, likes, and replies from ARMY.

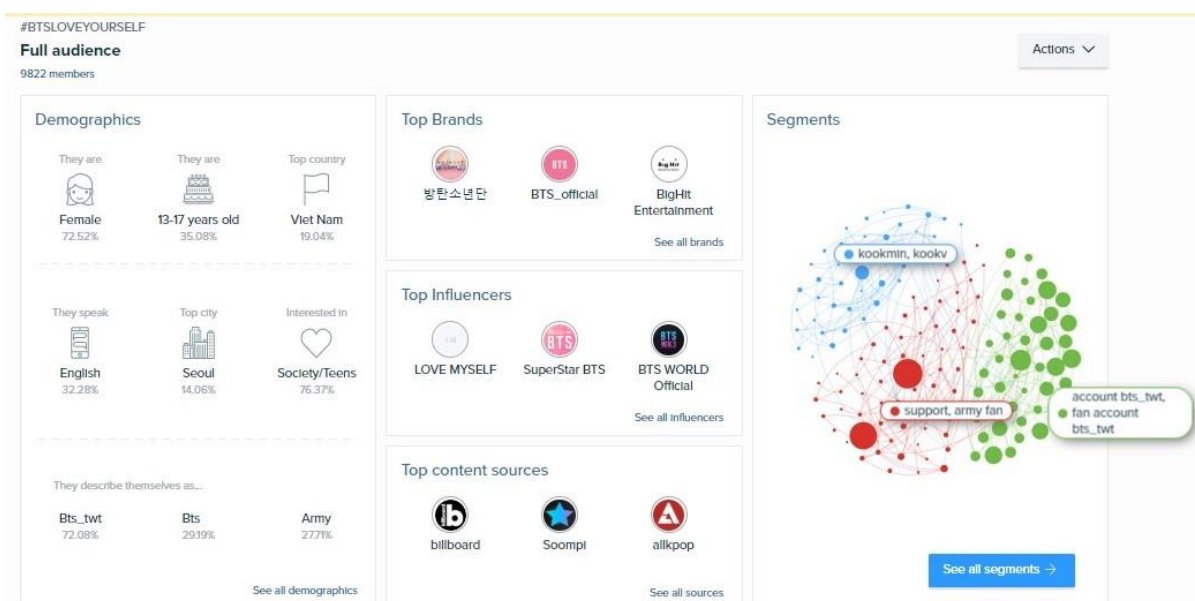


Figure 1: Audisense summary of demographics using #BTSLOVEYOURSELF

Gender majority of ARMY that circulated #BTSLOVEYOURSELF in Twitter is female (72%) of all fans' accounts. They are 13 to 17 years old (35.08%) and speak English as their language in social transaction in Twitter, although most of them (19%) coming from South East Asia countries, such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia.

Conversations with the hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF are divided into three themes: cause related (end violence, stop bullying, promote self-love, etc.), BTS' other publication, and fans' internet aesthetics. Fans, in engaging with cause related tweets using the hashtag, are accommodating three types of content. First, they create own/original tweets using the hashtag. They write about their own experiences on the issue and story of their struggles with bullies. Fans praise BTS by showing how thankful they are to have found and chosen BTS to be their idols because they speak about the taboo thing (mental health) other people are afraid to speak up. Fans often use GIF and video of BTS members in their reply to show emotions. Second, other fans who read the tweets give response by using reply button (Reply). They use the same hashtag to amplify the message. Third, they share the tweet and/or the story under #BTSLOVEYOURSELF hashtag with retweet (RT) or retweet with reply (RT with reply) buttons. This action will make many other Twitter users, most likely non-fans, user read the

tweets and create awareness around the issue. These three actions can be done each of or all at the same time.

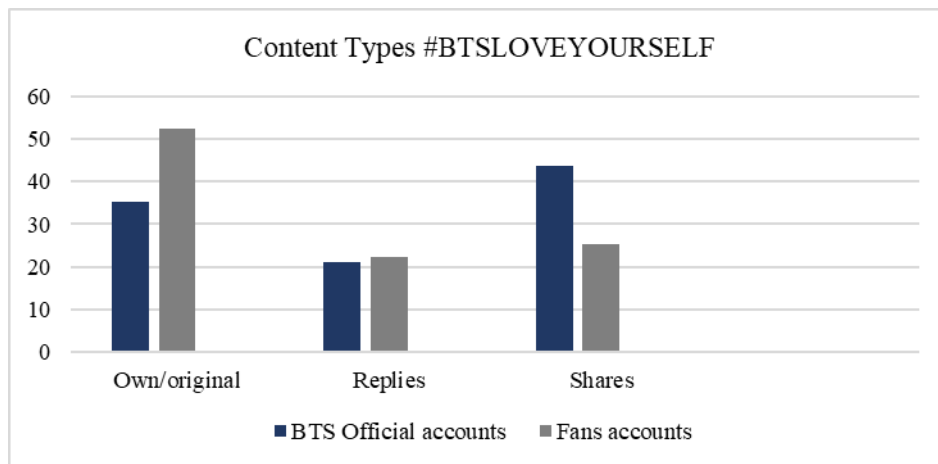


Figure 2: Audisense summary of content types #BTSLOVEYOURSELF

Most of the tweets circulating applying #BTSLOVEYOURSELF are positive vibes (55.26%). The sentiments are shown by using words to show emotions (love, like, hate, disappoint, angry, etc.) and emoticons. The happy and positive vibes tweets were circulating during the weeks of UN speech, video campaign and website launched, new album released, and live music concert. The lowest sentiment resulted during the live music concert period due to missing out or online ticket booking problems.



(A)



(B)

Figure 3: Sample tweets of ARMY circulating news of BTS UN General Assembly speech in September 2018 (A) and of a fan echoing the message by posting her story to promote the cause (B).

Fandom participatory cultures behind hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF was seen in bigger picture by utilizing thematic analysis. We found that ARMY fandom's top involvement exists in segment distribution, demographics, trending topic conversation, and sentiment. The big data analytics shows that ARMY controls the distribution, dominates the demographics, sets the trending topics, and occupies emotions in circulating messages using hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF. However, the domination is not only directly related to the issue of end violence towards children and teenagers, against bullying, and promote self-acceptance and self-love, but also other fandom activities related. Keyhole recorded almost 40% of tweets circulating using hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF are also using other hashtags, like #giveaway, #boywithluv, #kookmin, #jimin. Other song titles in new album released in 2019 incorporated with industry-made hashtags, like #boywithluv, circulated alongside #BTSLOVEYOURSELF. Fans' aesthetic in the form of art, fanfiction with pairing and slash themed, and videos also dominated the timeline with hashtags, such as #kookmin and #jimin, for sometimes after new music video clip released. Fans' related events, such as giveaway and live music concerts, included with hashtags, like #BTSgiveaway and #loveyourselfworldtour, dominated the Twitter timeline sometimes during the data collecting period. Therefore, the hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF circulation in Twitter Trending Topic Worldwide has not ultimately become the representation of the issue BTS stands with UNICEF and the ARMY.

4. Discussion

Fan activity in social media play an important role in performing the global reach and popularity of the idols. These international fans serve as ambassadors and promoters as they are bound to like and share these postings which will show on their individual pages. They also often take the role as the content creators.

Twitter, as one of the most active fan spaces, which was originally more limited to connecting idols with their fans, has now become a platform controlled by the fandom to share idol stories and connect with other fans for various cause they or the idol's created. One can see the ongoing process through which young people have revived and renewed the public's symbolic power as they struggle for social justice; they also push back against structures and search for new ways to express their identity. Popular cultures are tapped to express their collective identities and frame their critiques. Through appropriative and constructive aspect of participatory culture, a more playful type of activism is emerging.

Fan activism in K-pop fandom is as a result of diffusion of digital technology with socio-political activities at organizational, institutional, and individual levels. The internet community has built a participatory space which centralized in empowering characteristics of a free, space-less, and timeless space [10]. Therefore, this environment forces members to participate and get connected.



Figure 4: Some of protesters posters in student rally against the Indonesian government in September 2019.

The fandom organizer, in this case is ARMY, have assumed the role of cultural intermediaries, capitalizing on the algorithms of social media to appropriate, copy and paste, as well as circulate idol images across converged media platforms. They have also actively incorporated the self-made hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF to disperse idol's message in wider audience. Sometimes when the tweet from official accounts using Korean language, some fans are involuntarily help with English or local language translation, thereby

linguistically localizing and trans-nationalizing idol texts for global fan audience consumption; this practice is called fan-subbing [9]. The practice of fan participatory culture can unsettle the global mediascape by allowing multiple mediations of cultural text and presenting a new model of content distribution and its organization based on consumers' voluntary work.

In September 2019, the echo of participatory cultures of BTS ARMY fandom were seen among banners and posters in the massive student's rally against the government in Indonesia. The photo of the banners and posters were circulating on the internet with various ARMY slogan tagged, such as: 'speak yourself' and 'ava korea' (an internet cynicism for K-pop fandom who use their idols photo as their social media profile pictures). Many were responded positively with the students' posters and appraised them for taking BTS' name up for positive causes, like urging the Indonesian government to finalize the Bill Draft of the Elimination of Sexual Violence. The fans proudly use their fandom identity to speak up for causes with bigger impact, and the internet citizen are backing them up.

5. Conclusion

Despite the fandom's willingness and commitment to 'help' idols sending their message, their involuntary incorporating the social activism hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF as other consumerism fan practices, like album selling and live music concert, help enhance transnational consumption of the industry's actual merchandise, where they would also act as 'middlemen' in the merchandising of idol products. The industry's organizers, however, claimed no material benefits, these fandoms could benefit from an intangible symbolic income. Therefore, the fandom is cultural intermediary of idols' global text, as well as cultural producers of their own idols' aesthetic creations. The later with the help of transnational algorithmic competence of fan-made worldwide known hashtag like #BTSLOVEYOURSELF could help fans to gain cultural capitals that can be used for personal or smaller group interests.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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