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BTS & ARMY: A South Korean Music Group and their Fandom Create a New Grassroots Movement for Social Change

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Abstract

This study links the discourse analysis of social innovation, social entrepreneurship, and cultural analysis of BTS--a South Korean music group--and their global fan base--ARMY. Despite its diversity in form, the current narrative of social innovation in academia has been limited to western market constructs, business, or technological innovations, while the *process* of social innovation remains under-researched. The BTS and ARMY movement has been a growing study in scholarship, as their collaborative efforts redefine a new form of human connection through digital intimacy, creating a grassroots movement for social and cultural revolution. By integrating and analyzing diverse concepts of social innovation literature with a variety of scholarship, the BTS and ARMY movement is a prime case study of a non-western framework for the process of social innovation. Their collaborative efforts and *togetherness* not only challenge the Western-dominated music hegemony but proved that non-western subjects and/or subjectivities are deconstructing definitions of culture, creativity, and social innovation exclusive to western frameworks. This asserts that non-western cultures, like Asia, can be a changeable force to the west, and western hegemony can no longer be a dominant force in the global context.

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Introduction

BTS is a music group from South Korea and consists of seven members including three rappers (RM, Suga, J-Hope), and four vocalists (Jin, V, Jimin, and Jungkook). BTS is an acronym for 'Bangtan Sonyeondan' which translates to 'bulletproof boy scouts' in Korean. Bangtan means to be resistant to bullets, therefore, to block out stereotypes, criticisms, and expectations that are aimed at the youth like bullets. In 2017, BTS later rebranded its name to 'beyond the scene' with a new logo of two opening doors. According to Billboard News, the doors "symbolize youth who don't settle for their current reality and instead open the door and go forward to achieve growth," (Herman, 2017). Herman (2017) explains BTS' new brand identity promotes its fans toward continuous progress and self-development. Regardless of the name/brand change, I agree with music critic YoungDae Kim (2019), that from the beginning until now, BTS' stated purpose was and is to protect the values and ideals of the world's underdogs by telling a positive message of self-love through their music. Kpop scholars like WoongJo Chang (2019) and Shin-Eui Park (2019) also agree that the essence of BTS music carries a universality in the message of hope and self-love despite despair and obstacles brought by societal injustice. That wholesome message of self-love paired with creative artistry created mutual reciprocity, the foundation of BTS's relationship with their fans, ARMYs. ARMY carries a double meaning: it is both an abbreviation of Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth, and fans as an 'army' will stand with and protect BTS. ARMYs consists of more than 40 million official members and is known to be the most diverse fanbase-- in race, sex, gender, ethnicity, age, and religious beliefs.

My curiosity for BTS started around the end of 2019 when I randomly came across a 'BTS' Mic Drop dance practice reaction video' on YouTube. Reaction videos are essentially

people watching videos. Content creators (or YouTubers) would record their spontaneous emotions or reactions while watching an existing piece of content. Video contents are not limited to e-games, sports, interviews, music videos, movies, etc. Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, reaction videos have become even more relevant and popular. "Viewers watch these videos because they enjoy the momentary emotional connection of seeing those on screen react to content the same way they would" (Bhatt, 2021). Shephali Bhatt from the Indian English-language-business-focused daily newspaper, The Economic Times, explains how viewers can empathize with each other in real-time and find common ground through digital platforms. Having the ability to virtually share and sympathize with what is culturally relevant in real-time creates an emotional connection of understanding despite being in isolation.

The reaction video I stumbled upon was three African American male hip-hop dancers in their mid-forties, with full-time jobs and families, absolutely enamored and excessively enthusiastic, or in slang, 'stanning' over BTS. This sparked my interest because as a non-Kpop listener, I stereotyped Kpop fans limited to Asian female teenagers. However, as I fell into the BTS rabbit hole, I quickly realized my ignorance of the power and impact of Kpop and Kpop fans, especially BTS and ARMY. I, too, have subconsciously joined the bandwagon of the majority who has misjudged and undermined BTS and ARMY, because a large amount of media coverage of BTS is either poorly researched at best or xenophobic at worst, often sensationalizing BTS' success. Instead of referencing BTS as artists, they are referred to as a 'phenomenon' insinuating that their success is not explainable. Furthermore, beyond their musical accomplishments, BTS and ARMY together, have been galvanizing momentum as key players in the global social justice movements.

Hence, this project largely focuses on the social and cultural movement of BTS and ARMY and how it is a relevant case study as a process of social innovation. I will argue how scholarship defines social entrepreneurship and social innovation, as well as its limitations of it, and the necessity to expand beyond western ideals and philosophy of knowledge and processes of social and cultural movements. In Section 1: "Western hegemony and the structural barriers of the Korean and Western music industries," I give an analysis of how western ideals that have been centered as universal truths are now being challenged by alternative societies in the digitally networked era, such as the BTS and ARMY movement. I briefly introduce the Kpop industry in the context of an economic phenomenon of Hallyu, or the Korean Wave. In Section 2: "Social innovation framework as an iterative process based on reciprocity," I give an overview of the current scholarship on social innovation, its affiliation with social entrepreneurship, and how the concept is understood and taught. I reframe social innovation as an iterative process based on interactive relationships and incorporate the process of the BTS and ARMY movement created through digital intimacy. The movement itself can be a changeable force to both Korean and Western hegemony in the music industry. In Section 3: "BTS and ARMY creating 'togetherness' in success and for social justice," I incorporate how the BTS and ARMY movement organically progressed into becoming key players for social justice. The purpose of this project is to expand how social innovation understands 'togetherness' and being 'social' through grassroots social movements. The BTS and ARMY movement is a newer approach to social innovation and is the opposite of the current scholarship where SI is heavily focused on western market-based logic that can be measured, assessed, and calculated.

Section 1: Western hegemony and the structural barriers of the Korean and Western music industries

The information we collect, learn, and know have and has been dictated by what the western ideals deem to be valid, scholarly, and academic. Thus, when it comes to the broad umbrella term under academia, it is safe to assume that media studies, communication, or terms like social justice, social, creativity, culture, or solutions to social issues have been defined or taught in a monolithic western approach. And the field of social innovation is no exception. Even if non-western scholars attempted to diversify knowledge, they often subconsciously and unintentionally reinstate western theory, knowledge, philosophy, and ideology. The message of 'West is best' or 'West vs. the rest' became a universal truth that is "more than a theoretical product, and was reinforced in everyday practices" (Albuquerque, 2021). Afonso Albuquerque (2021) is a communications scholar that claims that western scholarship had ultimate authority on what is true knowledge, and other non-western countries continue to emulate western practices in their own countries. The idea of educating the rest with western ideals goes back to the early 1800s when western expansion began. Cultural theorist, Stuart Hall (1996), describes the western ideology and philosophy as a label that "refers to a type of society that is developed industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, and modern". Hall (1996), Albuquerque (2021), and media studies scholar, Dal Yong Jin (2021), agree that "the centrality of the West is so pervasive" (Jin & Albuquerque, 2021), that the common and colonial belief is those non-western countries are unable to develop their societies without learning from the west. As a result, western standards have become the global standard and have held the highest in the moral hierarchy that is reinforced in various ways. For example, "non-western scholars make "complicit endeavors by post-elites acting as 'internal colonizers" (Albuquerque, 2021). Albuquerque (2021) critiques

that after being educated in the west, non-western scholars act as 'internal missionaries' to bring back western ideologies to their home countries. The practice of 'internal colonizing' was also applied by Suman Lee, a music executor, recording producer, and the owner of SM Entertainment. SM Entertainment is the first music agency in South Korea that pioneered Hallyu, or the Korean Wave-- created the very first Kpop artists with the aim of export.

Hallyu was already an economic and global phenomenon since the early '90s (Jin, 2019; Kim, 2019). Hallyu symbolizes the spread of Korean arts and cultural products in forms not limited to sports, e-games, Kpop music, drama, cosmetics, food, etc. Since then, Hallyu has evolved and stapled itself as a global brand— "which is not authentic Korean culture but is accepted as a hybrid or transnational product" (Jin, 2018, 2019; Song, 2020). In other words, Hallyu was a blend of Korean culture mixed with global elements, catering to their global consumers. For example, inspired by foreign models following the format of how boybands were created in the UK, Suman Lee started Kpop with a combination of dance music from the US and the *idol* training system from Japan in the early 90s. Being a hybrid music genre, the purpose of Kpop is to provide the ultimate audiovisual experience for its audience through a perfected emotional performance: "to provide a comprehensive and sensory experience through blockbuster-style music videos and performance" (Kim, 2019; Kim, 2021). To achieve such perfection, Kpop artists, also known as *idols,* could spend anywhere from five to seven years exclusively training and learning how to dance, sing, perform, create their stage personas, and perfect the total Kpop idol package before debuting: "entailing charming looks, trendy music, spectacular performances, and high production values" (Lie, 2012; Kim, 2019; KBS DOCU, 2020). According to Kpop scholars like John Lie (2012) and Ju Oak Kim (2021), YouTube poster KBS DOCU (2020), the formula of rigorous training and careful grooming of idol trainees

was to meet a certain standard of aesthetics and quality for global export, that may appeal to western audiences. Like many Kpop idol groups, BTS too was put together by a music agency, and the members followed the training format Lee had established as the Kpop process and formula. Dal Yong Jin (2018, 2019, 2020), John Lie (2012), Sooho Song (2020), and Jenna Gibson (2018) agree that Korea has indeed become one of the top non-western countries that meaningfully exports almost all its cultural forms, to both Western and non-western countries. Hallyu is understood as intentional economic practice focusing on the export of culture, also known as a type of *cultural flow.*

According to Jin (2019), two things are noted when cultural flows occur: 1) which direction it takes and 2) who are the key players that initiate the cultural flow. For example, Hallyu permeating the Asian region is described as an *intra-cultural flow*—an East-to-East export and Hallyu spreading in the west is described as a *counter-cultural flow*--an East-to-West export. It is important to acknowledge that this practice is not a colonial, cosmopolitan practice where nations force cultures to be consumed by other nations they are seeking to dominate and enforce assimilation. Rather, I would describe the tactic of sharing cultures through various mediums of art and music, especially Kpop, as *soft power.* Through Hallyu, South Korea succeeded in utilizing its soft power to not only export Korean cultural products but also to spread Korean culture that allows natural assimilation by other non-Korean consumers. Since the establishment of Suman Lee's SM Entertainment, numerous music agencies emerged and the Kpop industry continued to make efforts to break through the western music industry but to no avail.

The western music industry--specifically the US/UK-- has held dominance and had the ultimate authority of deciding which music, song, or album (sung in the English language) would

find success and popularity around the world. This means non-English songs would not even have a chance to be played on the radio, let alone be mainstream and even be commercialized in the western music market. "In the late-2000s, the leading K-pop agencies recognized the importance of maintaining their presence in the regional markets—China and Japan—after some prominent K-pop artists—BoA, Rain, and Se7en—failed to draw sufficient attention from the US music market" (Kim, 2021). Kpop and cultural scholar, Ju Oak Kim (2021) observe that despite strategic marketing and financial backing from major South Korean music companies, the glass ceiling of the western music market was too tall for mainstream Kpop artists to reach. It is as if breaking the glass ceiling of the western music industry validates the Kpop industry's efforts as a universal success, especially in their business, technology, and innovation. Nonetheless, BTS' story is unique. The most fascinating detail lies in the fact that BTS' popularity first began in North America and West Europe before reaching Asia and South Korea-their origin. Despite BTS' identity being culturally specific and their songs are mostly sung in the Korean language, why would a non-Korean speaking audience find BTS' music universal enough to advocate, spread, and popularize in the west?

When they first began, I would describe BTS as the ultimate underdogs of the Kpop industry as all odds were against them when it came to agency representation, financial capital, and media exposure in South Korea. "The structural locality of the Korean television industry is an important factor for BTS, which has been heavily dependent on internet media" (Kim, 2021). In their earlier days, BTS had to rely on alternative media platforms (outside of traditional Korean media) such as YouTube, Twitter, and Naver to promote themselves because the Kpop industry was dominated by larger music agencies. Over the past two decades, the three mega powerhouses known as the 'Big 3'-- SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP

Entertainment—"have developed cooperative partnerships with South Korea's leading broadcasters—KBS, MBC, SBS, and CJ E&M—to secure appearances of their affiliated idol groups on primetime television" (Kim, 2021). Kim (2021) explains that the collaborative efforts between the Big 3 music agencies and major broadcasting companies solidified music industry hegemony, which also determined the success and fame of the appointed Kpop group. This meant that primetime television exposure was the most important way for an idol group to be successful as it leads to more airtime posing for commercial ads, interviews, game shows, etc. Thus, many aspiring Kpop idols wanted to be backed by wealthy and influential music companies because even with solid support, Lie (2012) explains the success rate of becoming a Kpop star was 1000 to 1. The most successful case of Kpop in the US was PSY's 'Gangnam Style', and despite PSY being robustly backed by the American music industry's top promoter, Scooter Braun, the hype didn't last. Kpop songs that go viral in the west are still considered a mere phenomenon or a brief trend. This implies that despite having connections with American music expertise and influence, "the US market was a solid fortress that wouldn't budge, even for the Big 3" (Kim, 2019). I would speculate the West's attitude towards non-western and non-English content as inferior due to their established hegemony in anglophone music. Subsequently, the rest of the Kpop groups formed by smaller music companies were not recognized but rather marginalized in the realm of Korean television exposure, including BTS. The fact that BTS was able to break such obstacles set by the Korean music industry's structural barriers and create their unique path to succeed in the west is seen as a miracle by anyone who understands the mechanism of the industry. I would agree with Kim (2019) that "BTS overcame their shortage of capital by fully utilizing the new media revolution as they fostered intimacy with fans" (Kim, 2019). Openly sharing and blurring the lines between personal and celebrity

boundaries on social media exposed BTS to a larger public audience outside of Korea. Their frequent two-way interaction not only helped build intimacy with ARMYs but organically produced solidarity of empowerment to improve and grow together.

BTS became the biggest music group in the world solely based on social capital—their fans--, and not on financial capital or marketing methods. This is quite compelling as it positions the band as being counter-cultural to both the Korean and Western music industries. BTS was also put together by Bang Shi Hyuk, founder of Big Hit Entertainment. Back then, Big Hit was a small music company that was unable to promote BTS due to being on the brink of bankruptcy. BTS' debut in 2013 was out of sheer luck: to be a filler for another group that canceled last minute on a primetime channel. Even after their debut, BTS' appearances on television were cut short or not aired at all, only to be replaced with other 'more worthy' artists--affiliated with the Big 3. With the lack of agency representation, financial capital, and media support, BTS were underdogs for the reasons I just said. However, with the advancement of digital network societies, the dynamics of what is central or universal are rapidly shifting. The 'who' and 'what' are now dictated by anyone who can use voice their opinions on the internet via social media because, in a digitally networked society, there is room for counter-hegemonic social and cultural movements that can challenge preexisting established structures. As mentioned before, BTS' presence and popularity weren't backed by agency support but by their devoted fans' proactive efforts. ARMYs spent months organizing efforts to beg radio stations across the US to give BTS' songs a chance, showering DJs with gifts and food, despite criticism and mockery. Their persistence eventually paid off because the US contacted the Korean music association to export BTS albums. This was revolutionary because it was the first case where "the US would ask another country to export a non-English speaking album to be played on the radio in the US"

(KBS DOCU, 2020). Without BTS or their agency playing a role, ARMY's efforts alone allowed BTS to break the structural barriers of the western music industry as the first Kpop group act. Therefore, the people who recognized BTS' authenticity and talent became the 14million ARMYs who raised BTS. Communications, media studies, cultural, and Kpop scholars such as Sreberny-Mohammadi (1997); Chang & Park (2019); Song (2020); Kim (2021); Albuquerque (2021); Jin (2021) would describe ARMY's contribution as a nontraditional and unconventional process that can be a changeable force to the dominant Kpop industry as well as the dominant western music industry:

> "A non-western (specifically Asia) can be a changeable force to the west as it offers innovative insights and paradigm shifts on bottom-up grassroots culture, human connection through digital intimacy in a network society, and resistance to cultural imperialism and western ways of institutionalism"
> (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997; Chang & Park, 2019; Song, 2020, Kim, 2021; Albuquerque, 2021; Jin, 2021).

There is an ongoing discussion on how the BTS and ARMY movement is not only revolutionary to the traditional norms of achieving musical success, but it created something extraordinary: an alternative global culture and social movement redefining processes, networking, relationships, and systems, especially in academia and social innovation. As I have argued for new norms, I will redefine the SI framework as an iterative process based on social and cultural impact.

Section 2: Social Innovation framework as an iterative process based on reciprocity

Based on the premise of how western academia defines social innovation, and how the BTS and ARMY movement is linked with social innovation, it is important to unpack the term. Social innovation is a multi-faceted and multi-functional concept with diverse attributes and is often associated with social entrepreneurship. Before social innovation and social entrepreneurship, there was corporate social responsibility (CSR), which was a "pursuit of social value creation through combining social impact and sustainability with profitability" (Phillips et al., 2014). Phillips et al. (2014), explain that the value of gaining profit came with the responsibility of easing social issues—the notion of giving back to the community--has become a requirement in not only businesses but government and other organizations. However, corporate social responsibility literature continued to be positioned in ways to enhance performance for profitability that benefitted the company, rather than questioning the motive of companies maximizing for-profit. Even though Phillips et al. (2014) argued for more accountability within roles of management; "taking account both the interest of owners and other stakeholders that affect or to be affected by the activity of for-profit enterprises" (Phillips et al., 2014); much of corporate social responsibility literature was more of a gesture for social good with no real outcome. Due to companies and organizations failing to 'give back to the community, there is a growing disillusionment of government and business sectors which consequently caused a rise in "hybrid organizational models" (Buckland & Murillo, 2013; Phillips, 2014; Grieco et al., 2015). As the boundaries between nonprofit and for-profit sectors are becoming blurrier and the relationship between business and community have become important, hybrid models looked to social innovation and social entrepreneurship to ease social issues.

Social innovation and social entrepreneurship became an emerging concept also known as the hybrid fourth sector or hybrid organization to meet social needs. Social innovation scholars, Buckland (2013), Murillo (2013), Phillips et al., (2014), and Grieco et al., (2015) explain the focus of social innovation and social entrepreneurship is to be socially mission-centered, unlike traditional organizational beliefs of separating economic value from social value. They further claim that maximizing both social and financial gains create a share value creation that can also benefit owners and other involved stakeholders. Phillips et al., (2014) claim the *role* of the entrepreneur (or manager) appeared to be a crucial factor in driving and directing the social mission and/or innovation. Lettice and Parekh (2010) also side with Philips et al.'s (2014) claim that "there is a necessity to be attentive to *who* undertakes social innovation and *how* to undertake social innovation" (Lettice & Parekh, 2010 & Philips et al, 2014). In other words, I would develop the definition of *who* undertakes social innovation as social innovation relies on the involved participants--in relation to each other and in relation to the context in which they have developed. Thus, social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, and social innovation are often linked as a family of terms because social innovation creates social outcomes that benefit a particular community or group--"the underlying drive for social entrepreneurship is the creation of social value as opposed to personal or shareholder wealth" (Phillips et al., 2014, p.3). Social entrepreneurs still utilize business approaches and act as change agents to initiate "social creation characterized by pattern-breaking change or innovation" (Phillips et al., 2014, p.3). From a business standpoint, the practice of gaining profit while bringing social good to the community seems feasible. However, I disagree with Phillips et al.'s approach because the social innovation framework does not seem any different from corporate social responsibility literature. To me, it still describes the social innovation process as

a pre-planned operation meant to be led out strategically with good management. I argue that BTS and ARMY's relationship wasn't a preplanned operation to result in an outcome of engagement in social justice on a global scale. Even BTS and ARMY couldn't predict their outcome as their movement started simply by forming a mutual relationship. This indicates that although social innovation is a growing area of study, the concept itself is new, and the *process of social innovation* is heavily under-researched, unable to cleave from concepts, comparative studies, or analysis tied with market-constructs according to SI scholars like Heloise Buckland & David Murillo (2013), Alex Nicholls (2009), and Geoff Mulgan (2006). I would also include that even if the process of social innovation resulted in a social-good outcome, it was measured within the bounds of financial contribution to the organization or institution.

Alex Nicholls (2009) observed that over time, the understanding of the social innovation framework gradually expanded to initiate systemic change. Social Innovation evolved from "a commercial activity delivering a public good to delivering solutions to social problems using radically new models that promote systemic change" (Nicholls, 2009) and improve society, or "generate a social value rather than an individual value" (Buckland and Murillo, 2013). Nicholls (2009), Buckland (2013), and Murillo (2013) agree that concepts revolving around social innovation may no longer traditionally be confined exclusively to management theory but broadened to include various disciplines in the social sciences. Although social innovation is redefined as promoting social change, I still think social innovation literature failed to separate from business and technological concepts, thus the approach for systemic change is still initiated through a formulaic process. For example, Buckland et al., (2013) came up with a systemic-change-formula to explain the process of social innovation in this order: diagnose the problem/frame the question, brainstorm ideas, test the phase, produce ideas to be mainstream,

secure finances, and lastly franchise and license the process as needed. Applying the previous type of linear process for the social innovation framework may work for certain situations that need to be measured and calculated to showcase quantity in numbers. However, there are limitations to this current brand of social innovation, as the assumption of "fixing market-driven technological problems will also (naturally) fix social problems" (Ginwright & Seigel, 2019). Ginwright (2019) and Seigel (2019) critique the narrow assumption made about social innovation because it not only oversimplifies social issues as formulaic design challenges but limits the decision-making process for solutions with a one-way and fixed conventional approach. They agree that this model may work for small-scaled issues but cannot reach macro-level societal issues such as preventing institutional racism or harmful power dynamics that form structural barriers. To separate from the market-constructed definition, I will redefine 'social' and 'innovation' in the following.

Generally, 'innovation' in social innovation is used to describe different ideas, thinking, and action outside the norm, routine, or mainstream. Although innovative practices and activities may become mainstream, *new* ideas are motivated by "the goal of meeting a social need" (Mulgan, 2006) or simply "that work at a systems level to promote systemic change" (Mulgan, 2007). Per Mulgan (2007), innovation is not something *new*, but an upgraded approach to making something *that works for social good*. Expanding on Mulgan's (2007) definition of social innovation, I would include translating different ideas into practical approaches appropriate to their social or cultural context is what describes the social innovation process. As much as Evers & Ewert (2015) support social innovation being a different kind of idea, they also critique that defining social innovation as a process emphasizes less on innovation and more on being 'social'. To them, "social equates to improvement*"* (Phills, 2008); *improvement* is *better;*

better is *effective;* "social innovations are those that at any given moment, raise the hope and expectations of progress towards something 'better'—a more socially sustainable, democratic/effective society" (Evers & Ewert, 2015). I would further build on Evers and Ewert's (2015) take on social innovation and emphasize that *effective* innovation cannot exist without being social in the context of being relational. To me, being *social* equates to a two-way interactive relationship that builds innovation that "differs from prevailing routines, forms of thinking and acting" (Evers & Ewert, 2015). Combining Nicholls' (2009) definition of social innovation as a process, social movements exist because of interactive relationships and reciprocity. For example, the rise of BTS was not an overnight or accidental sensation, but rather a timely process of many participants to recognize BTS' musical content as something special with a universal appeal, that could convince the public. When BTS was shunned by Korean media, they turned to social media and expressed their journey of discrimination as Kpop idols, mental health, and their fear of the future, by engaging in live chats with their fans. Unlike Kpop idols in that era, BTS told real stories people wanted to hear and stories that people could not or would not tell--especially raw feelings of pain, anxiety, and depression youths did not learn from schools or their parents. "In an era marked by so much anguish and cynicism, BTS has stayed true to their message of kindness, connection, and self-acceptance" (Bruner, 2020). As Bruner (2020) notes, for the cynical Korean society, BTS' music didn't end their message with criticisms of that society, but rather expressed positivity of self-reflection and practical ways to endure the reality of hardships. BTS' honesty, deep lyrics, and messaging paired with fascinating visuals had the ability to impact the general audience in a powerful way. Within the context of youth seeking hope and clarity, the creativity and complexity of BTS' content naturally created a

dialogue between BTS and their fans, and among the fans themselves, creating an alternative digital network community, and a foundation for friendship.

It is common among celebrities, regardless of being western or non-western, to use social media for connection and communication with the public. However, BTS and ARMY share a culture of learning, which makes their relationship different from other boybands and their fandom. BTS "reshaped the pop industry's understanding of social media including human connection and digital intimacy, as the ultimate digital celebrities" (Bruner, 2018; Kang, 2020). The genuine interaction and communication BTS consistently had with ARMYs, resisted the traditional one-sided relationship between celebrities and fans. Almost after every award show, concert, or song/album release, BTS, sometimes individual members, in smaller groups, or altogether, would go *live* on social media via an app called Vlive to first and foremost thank ARMYs for their achievements and success. Then BTS openly share the process of what went on behind the scenes and how they felt before, during, and after their stage performance, and explain the creative process of their musical content. Their behind-the-scenes vlogs or video footage were also released on their official YouTube channel called Bangtan TV. These live feeds gave a space where ARMYs and BTS chatted like old friends and as a result, propelled organic accountability and appreciation of sharing their lives together. Establishing 'digital intimacy' from the start, the increasing number of fans did not deter BTS' consistency of being authentic or sincere. Through their music and attitudes, BTS continuously acknowledged their accomplishments, existence as artists, and gratitude completely to ARMY's support and love. ARMYs reciprocated their love by advocating BTS and sharing what their music stands for. BTS and ARMY truly believed in each other and that they make each other better and grow. The

reciprocity between BTS and ARMY further illustrates the practice of togetherness through digital intimacy.

The way BTS gained fame based on their relationship with ARMY cannot be depicted as a fixed or linear formula as Buckland & Murillo's (2013) approach, but as a spontaneous process through intentional relationship-building in networked space. In that context, I would argue that social innovation is not and cannot be a *finished product*, but an *indefinite process*. This also implies that while social innovation offers finished products and outcomes, it also has abstract elements of being iterative "cultural processes dependent on social movements, an idea, a principle, etc." (Rudowicz, 2003; Pol & Ville, 2009; Nicholls, 2009). The principle of loving yourself despite circumstances and advocating for the underdogs was BTS' message that spoke to the global audience which reinstates that social innovation can even "act as larger symbols of hopes and aspirations" (Evers & Ewert, 2015), or "a cultural focus, aspiring to meet unmet human and social needs" (Lettice & Parekh, 2010). In agreement with the social innovation and cultural scholars like Rudowicz (2003), Nichols (2008), Pol & Ville (2009), Lettice & Parekh (2010), and Evers & Ewert (2014), the shared culture of learning between BTS and ARMY is a fitting case study for social innovation as a progressing movement dependent on cultural and social impact. *Culture*, according to Ludwig (1992) is,

> "Representing a composite of all traditions and values, beliefs, behaviors, customs, and rules as well as economic, political, and technological forces that operate on a given group of people at a given time within a given place"

> (Ludwig, 1992; Rudowicz, 2003).

The reciprocal relationship between BTS and ARMY had ultimately created their own culture of learning. For example, BTS' music had created universal empathy as many people found BTS' lyrics relatable. Fans were able to recognize their pains through BTS and relate to their struggles. Author and philosophy professor, Jiyoung Lee (2019) describes and assimilates this phenomenon to the philosophy of *becoming a minority* with BTS and ARMY. In other words, BTS' lyrics helped ARMYs to empathize and relate to BTS' pain and struggles in mind and heart despite differences in circumstances. Although BTS spoke about social injustice and societal barriers specific to South Korea, themes such as the widening socioeconomic gap, disheartened youth, societal pressures, discrimination, racism, etc., were universally relevant. BTS didn't sugarcoat hardships with false hope but spoke about their struggles and reflections on who they are and encouraged listeners to not give up on themselves.

Establishing social innovation as a continuous 'cultural' process that is based on reciprocity is further elaborated by a philosophy professor and an ARMY, Lee (2019), who describes the BTS and ARMY relationship as "friendship created through mutual support" (Lee, 2019); and Evers and Ewert (2015) supporting Lee's philosophy as a "cultural and social movement revitalizing elements of self-organization and creating new forms of solidarity" (Evers & Ewert, 2015). A shared culture and perspective across national borders are what bring positive change, despite the course of development being marked by a high degree of risk and uncertainty. The way ARMYs have virtually networked with BTS and among themselves through technology has formed into a unique society, creating new power dynamics, and a sense of solidarity. Their bond in creating an impactful grassroots movement for social justice on a global scale reinstates Evers and Ewert's (2015) take on social innovation being simply more *effective,* and Mulgan's (2006, 2007) approach to social innovation being motivated by a

goal to meet a social need to create something that *works* at a systems level. The BTS and

ARMY movement is not a fixed or planned strategy for an outcome, but rather an evolving

process made by unintended choices-- what culture scholar Elizabeth Rudowicz (2003) calls

a *cultural meme:* a two-way interaction of creativity and culture-- that became

innovative *after* the outcome.

Section 3: BTS and ARMY creating 'togetherness' in success and for social justice

Several factors that have contributed to BTS' success include the message of their music/lyrics, their authenticity and consistency as artists, and how digital intimacy they had with their fans. ARMYs helped BTS break the norms established by both the Korean and Western music industries and accomplish success in an unconventional way. A few notable achievements include BTS and ARMY together virtually breaking all the records in the music field. For example, despite their songs mostly sung in the Korean language, they've topped No. 1 in more than twenty different countries; breaking the Beatles' record of three Billboard No.1; Michael Jackson's 36-year record as the first foreign artist to top Oricon charts; and "selling out concert tickets and world tours, conquering global music records, and social media" (Mendez, 2019; Bruner, 2020; Song, 2020; Westenfeld, 2020; Reid, 2021). As of January 2022, BTS's fans have accumulated to more than 40 million official ARMYs; 43.6 million Twitter followers; 63.3 million subscribers on YouTube 'Bangtan TV—"with over 1000 videos reaching 1.3 billion viewers, surpassing those of other broadcast stations" (Moon, 2018; Chang & Park, 2019; Mendez, 2019; Reid, 2021). In November 2020, Wall Street Journal Magazine "awarded BTS the music innovator award, as the band transcends all cultural barriers" (Floreheim, 2020). As of 2021, Talia Voon (2019), from an independent music media company in Southeast Asia, covered an article about how BTS broke 13 Guinness World Records with a total of 25 records in the categories of music, social media, entertainment, and culture. This indicates that the BTS fandom is unmatched when it comes to their enthusiasm for networking online— "their high-level of organization shown through their proactive online presence and their unique bond with BTS and within the international fandom makes them stand out from other fandoms" (Moon, 2018;

Lynch, 2020). ARMYs being power players in the digital network society were able to achieve voting numbers that helped BTS win various awards.

Beyond their musical accomplishments, the solidarity between BTS and ARMY has only continued to grow and together they have unintentionally become drivers for social change on a global scale. I used the word 'unintentionally' because the primary goal for spreading Korean cultural products (Hallyu) was comparable to the traditional approach to social innovation: "to break through Western markets for profit, and not necessarily promote positive social goals" (Chang & Park, 2019). Hallyu scholars Chang (2019) and Park (2019) explain that Kpop fans typically did not accept Hallyu to ease social issues but consume desirable products/brands. However, BTS and ARMY's practice of forming *togetherness* created the opportunity for a grassroots movement centered around social justice to occur, which caused noise in the media and the music industry:

> "As leading figures in the pop industry, BTS' unprecedented arrival brought industrial, cultural, and social impact that created heated controversies and backlash among the public, mainstream media, and the music community which allowed for the band to engage in the power dynamics with the national, regional, and global media industries"

> (Reddy, 2020; Kim, 2021).

Mainstream media was not prepared for BTS and ARMY making headlines, breaking structural barriers, and taking up the global charts by storm. This is largely due to social media and digital technologies changing the traditional dynamics of the relationships between celebrities and their fans in the entertainment industry. Instead of exercising one-sided—para-

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social" (Seo & Kim, 2020)—relationships, fans were dynamically involved in the process of growth and advancement *with* their celebrities. For example, instead of one person or group extensively investing in their favorite celebrity or sports teams, fans became more than consumers of product but "rather interactive participants, content developers, and proactive contributors, that have the power to influence and impact their artists for success" (Chang & Park, 2019; Lynch, 2020). Kpop scholars Chang (2019), Park (2019), and Lynch (2020) are revealing that fans have become active contributors (or like *partners*) in their artists' creative process and success. Lee (2019) defines this initiative as a 'network image'; instead of the concept of having one creator and one art lover, everyone can participate in the creation. For example, when BTS links their production to fans, ARMYs respond, "the band recreates its production, ARMYs interpret it with songs, music videos, images, and through the response of analysis and theories" (Lee, 2019). Per Lee (2019), the give-and-take interaction between BTS and ARMYS motivated each other for creative expression, and the genuine friendship was the key to empowering both artist and fandom--ARMYs being part of the *innovative process* of BTS' success and being responsible *to do good* and act as a global social justice movement. Dr. Lee defines this movement as a 'rhizomatic revolution', a theory borrowed by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. A rhizome is a type of stem or a continuously growing horizontal plant that can be underground or overhead. Without a defined center, Deleuze illustrates a horizontal network where everyone has ownership to participate. This would also explain how voluntary ARMYs are being proactive in their gift and roles to create a social goal. For example, BTS created quality music and art for healing, and were relatable as human beings; "the band's authenticity and wholesome message of finding hope and self-love created a universal appeal that united the youth and older generation, differences in culture and races, western aesthetics,

and Korean values" (Kim, 2019). BTS' sincerity, authenticity, and message of loving yourself

built ARMYs to be what Kim (2019) describes as "an indie, grass-root style of bottom-up

fanbase". As a result, ARMYs are passionate about spreading the band's music by acting as

agents of good news to improve social morale, because they also have been healed and inspired

by BTS. ARMY as a grassroots movement led to a few progressive events. First, ARMYs

created a borderless affinity, bond, and solidarity with each other across nations, countries, and

borders. This naturally made the fandom diverse in age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and religious

beliefs. Second, "voluntary and bilingual ARMYs translated texts (of BTS music/lyrics) in

multiple languages, shared them widely across social media platforms in real-time, and engaged

in various discourse including topics on cultural differences as well as other BTS content" (Kim,

2019; Reddy, 2020; Bhandari, 2020). For international ARMYs to enjoy BTS content together in

real-time, the Korean language was translated to the different languages by volunteer-ARMYs

who wanted to spread the content in their language. Many ARMYs have commented that BTS'

music often brought healing regardless of the different stages in life each fan experienced. It is

important to note that ARMYs 'missionary work' in this context is different from Albuquerque's

'internal colonizing' of western ideals because ARMYS are from diverse international

backgrounds. Instead of spreading ideals specific to Korea, they spread inclusivity that can better

humanity and society based on hope, love, and togetherness. Hence, ARMY's passion and

primary focus were to make the world a better place, all in the name of BTS.

     For example, ARMYs are powerhouses for public relations (PR) and charity. A few

notable accomplishments include ARMYs raising funds to match the same amount of BTS' $1

million donations to the Black Lives Matter movement within 24 hours; regrowing rain forests,

adopting endangered whales, raising funds to feed LGBT refugees, and building hospitals in

rural areas in China for covid-relief patients, execute scholarly projects to defend and exonerate

misconceptions of BTS, and hold academic conferences to discuss matters of social justice

(Moon (2018), Reddy (2020), Westenfeld (2020), Lee (2020). They also have created virtual

platforms where community service is offered—i.e. various professionals like lawyers, mental

health and social workers, and educators provide services pro bono. ARMYs are the most

organized virtual fandom carrying out massive global projects to renew positive social values

and ideals, inspired by BTS. Their force for positive social action and community engagement

has become an economic force and a global social justice movement.

Conclusion

This study explores the cyclical and iterative process of social innovation that is impacted by relationships or togetherness, which impacts cultural movements, which again impact social movements. The emphasis lies in knowledge expansion and contextualizing current social and cultural trends and patterns. BTS and ARMYs have engaged in the power dynamics with the national, regional, and global media industries in various ways. The scope and effect of the BTS and ARMY movement are increasing evermore in a highly digital networked society. Nonetheless, the BTS and ARMY influence will not always be welcomed or acknowledged because the continuous tension between established structures and media digitalization will continue. For example, although BTS' record-breaking achievements, global economic impact, and social justice activities are incomparable to other Kpop or western artists, the band or their fans are not acknowledged by Korean media or western establishments like the Grammy Awards. It is not the first time Grammys have gotten heat with their conservative selection of awarding specific, anglophone artists. However, I question if the west, in general, is ready to accept choices outside of western cultures and get over the obstacle of language barriers, because such hurdles did not hinder a reciprocal relationship between BTS and ARMY. What BTS had with their international fanbase was built on sincerity and heart, which is the essence of any relationship. Simply, innovation naturally occurs when there is a mutual and amicable relationship. Or even if there is a pre-planned operation, there is no outcome in the absence of social skills. True meaning and impact result from togetherness and reciprocity--knowing how to be socially inclusive. Within this context, how will social innovation engage and be taught in a networked society? Is western academia ready to accept such unconventional practices with ambiguous processes and unpredictable solutions?

BTS' global success wasn't a strategized or marketed East-West transcultural dissemination nor an intentional spread of western culture to the East, but rather an organic impact caused by a grassroots movement of an alternative digital network society of ARMYs. Obtaining a strong relationship for social good may sound like a conventional concept but according to Lee (2019), the success of BTS and the ARMY movement relies on love, solidarity, and togetherness, which is unmatched and cannot be repeated by other bands and their fandom. Lee (2019) describes these values as a cultural revolution of BTS and ARMY. In an age where inclusive collaborative efforts and togetherness define success, the essence of the BTS and ARMY movement isn't something that BTS or their agency Big Hit created alone, but a movement that BTS and ARMY created together. This is especially crucial to understand as the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the rise of xenophobia, exclusivity, and invisibility of Asians and Asian Americans. Thus, there is an urgency to expand the moral dialogue to create a shared understanding of voluntary changes in behavior and understand alternative possibilities of social innovation and human connection in the context of globalization. The BTS and ARMY movement offer profound insights into what the process of an evolving and successful social innovation looks like. Thus, I would emphasize BTS's impact on Korean and western media as neither cultural nor counter-cultural, but as 'alternative' and 'counter-hegemonic.

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