Joining the ARMY: Community, Friendship and Intimacy on K-Pop Twitter

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Abstract

Fans of K-Pop music use Twitter to form active online communities, developing strong relationships with one another, exchanging information and often mobilising for causes beyond the scope of fandom. This paper focuses on fans of the Korean Pop band BTS, known as ARMY (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth), as a case study to examine how fan communities can develop through social media and leverage those bonds to organise themselves, create relationships, share knowledge and drive action.

Key Terms: Community/Communities. K-Pop. Fandom. Fan Culture. Music. Mediated Intimacy. Twitter. Social Media.

Fan culture, and in particular music fandom, has been a longstanding part of cultural appreciation. Historical examples such as "Beatlemania" demonstrate how fandoms can form active and engaged communities (Crow, 2019). However, social media has made it much easier for online communities to form strong bonds that transcend musical appreciation. This is particularly true for international fan communities centered on the appreciation and consumption of Korean pop music (K-Pop) (Crow, 2019). One of the most well known fan communities online, are fans of the K-Pop group Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS) (Yong, 2018). BTS are a seven-piece K-Pop group who are known for music, choreography and value-driven messages (Bhandari, 2020; Park et al. 2021) that resonate with their fans. One factor that makes BTS particularly unique is their global and visible fan community (Barksdale, 2020), despite the fact that the majority of their content is entirely in Korean (Kelley, 2017). Known online by the moniker ARMY (Adorable Representative MC for Youth), participants have flocked to Twitter; forming relationships with one another, with the artists themselves and even organising themselves for social causes. To many, ARMY constitutes one of "the most powerful and visible fandoms on social media" (Park et al., 2021), due to their broad reach and volume of participants. Fan culture - in particular, K-Pop fan culture - has often been acknowledged in the media to be vociferous and hysterical (Barksdale,

2020). This paper focuses on ARMY as a case study to examine how fan communities can develop through social media and leverage those bonds to organise themselves, create relationships, share knowledge and drive tangible action. Fans of BTS use Twitter to form a robust and active community, connecting deeply with their idols, sharing knowledge and friendship and organising for causes beyond the scope of their fandom.

The development of ARMY as a community online is partially the result of a manufactured phenomenon, called "Hallyu". Hallyu, translated in English as "Korean Wave", refers to the production of Korean cultural products with the intent of embedding itself in popular culture - originally driven by the Korean government (Yong, 2018). "Hallyu 2.0" refers to the rapid growth of social media as a way of sharing Korean products not only domestically, but also with Western fans in America and Europe (Yong, 2018). The geographical and linguistic distance between Korean and the international fans is central to the development of K-Pop communities, such as ARMY on Twitter. Global fans are "profoundly dependent on social media for consuming hallyu" (Yong, 2018). In this landscape, fans are reliant on social media and other participants in the community to help them connect to their favourite pieces of popular culture. This includes a dependence on translators, who voluntarily translate materials from Korean to English and other languages (Aisyah & Zainudin, 2019). Aisyah and Zainudin (2019) state that these translators "act as a mediator between K-Pop idols and their global fans" (p. 33), and that this service is one of the most vital elements of online community building (Kelley, 2017). Crowd-sourced translations are one example of what Aisyah and Zainudin (2019) call "social communication behaviours" (p. 33). Fans who cannot understand the materials without the assistance of translators feel a sense of bond and connection to those translators. This was further reinforced in a series of interviews conducted by Kelley (2017), in which a community member asserted that "…it brings Korean fans, as well as International fans, together and bonds us as one family" (para. 17).

An integral part of Hallyu 2.0, and in turn ARMY, is the relationship that social media facilitates between community members and the members of BTS. Through frequent posts and the capacity to respond directly, Twitter provides a sense of mediated intimacy that has the capacity to establish a deeper bond between the fans and their

favourite artist (Barksdale, 2020). Chang and Park (2019) assert that, by participating in Twitter regularly, the members of BTS create a "reciprocal, creative and social intimacy" (p. 270) between themselves and their fan community. The nature of Twitter and ability for fans to respond directly means that these Tweets, despite being publicly available, have a feeling of privacy and intimacy about them. This strengthens the community as a whole, as they feel connected to and aligned with the band members (Chang & Park, 2019). Unlike many Western artists, communities in K-Pop are designated names and, as such, identities by their idol groups (Crow, 2019). Communities are often assigned a group name and colour, shortly after the idol group debuts (Crow, 2019), indicating a sense of implicit leadership from the idols themselves. Crow (2019) states that, in K-Pop, identity and a sense of community are central to fandom. In mediating the relationship between the millions of community members and the band, BTS are a particularly unique case, in that they excel at developing this form of intimate exchange (Bandwagon, 2021). Barksdale (2020) suggests that this sense of emotional connection with their fans is what gives rise to such a strong fandom community. Not only do these exchanges enable fans to feel connected to the band but, in the exchanges below social media posts, fans are able to find one another and connect to the broader community (Barksdale, 2020). Park et al. (2021) characterise the relationship between BTS and ARMY as a "horizontal relationship as friends and allies" (p. 10), indicating that despite their pseudo-leadership as the central force under which community members gather, the band members do not seek to lead or organise their fandom, allowing ARMY to function as a freestanding, self-organising community.

Separate to the community designated by BTS as artists, ARMY has used Twitter to form a freestanding, self-organising community founded on their shared interests that both exchanges knowledge and facilitates personal bonds. Propelled by a mediated intimacy, the participants have developed a unique, non-hierarchical structure that allows members to contribute and share information, but also develop strong interpersonal relationships and communal identities. According to Barksdale (2020), the friendship and intimacy gained from participating in fandom is a central element to K-Pop fandoms. In fact, many scholars consider much of the success of K-Pop broadly to be a result of the communities that have formed to support it (Kang et al., 2019). As Chang & Park (2019) indicate, "The phenomenon of ARMY is a process of organising

without a structured and rationalised organisation" (p. 275). To this end, ARMY have organised themselves in order to share and create content about BTS. While much research focuses on how fan creations (e.g. fan fiction) create a community, Crow (2019) counters that fandom is about the creation of an "ideological space" (p. 7) that brings about a shared identity, rather than the fan creations. Malik & Haidar (2020) compare ARMY to a community of practice, wherein every member develops a unique contribution. As it applies to ARMY on Twitter, many individuals have taken on many different roles. There are accounts dedicated to many facets of BTS fandom, whether it be translating content, sharing news updates, creating original fan works and organising events and activities (Malik & Haidar, 2020). As Malik & Haidar (2020) state, "The fandom activities of *stan* Twitter are done with the collaboration and participation of all the community members through interaction and discussion" (p. 9). Jung (2012) concurs, maintaining that K-Pop fandom activities "engender meaningful and deliberative conversation across different societal groups" (para. 5.1). Examples of this exchange of knowledge and support within the confines of ARMY include donating time and expertise in translating materials, volunteering to tutor and practice Korean and providing career-specific advice to other community members (Park et al., 2021). In fact, Bhandari (2020) delineates ARMY's greater community to a series of varying, interconnected ecosystems including: translation, activism, collection of data and news, original content such as book clubs, and academic tutoring. ARMY is founded on reciprocity; relying on participants to distribute, circulate and share fandom specific information (Crow, 2019).

Beyond knowledge sharing, one of the most important ways ARMY builds a community on Twitter is by developing interpersonal relationships. In an ethnographic study of ARMY members on Twitter, the responses indicated that the inherent cohesiveness of the community was motivated and driven primarily by friendship networks (Chang & Park, 2019). To this end, Chang and Park (2019) discussed ARMY through the lens of Maffesoli's (1995, as cited in Chang & Park, 2019) work on modern tribalism. Chang and Park (2019) describe ARMY's community as "a neo-tribal formation in which the basic need for human connection is facilitated, mediated and even transformed through digital technology" (p. 264). In another survey of ARMY Twitter users conducted by Malik and Haidar (2020), the primary reason users indicated joining Twitter was to find others who share similar interests, where they

struggled to find people who shared those interests in real life. Twitter mediates this process, reinforcing belonging despite physical distance between members (Chang & Park, 2019). The survey conducted by Malik and Haidar (2020) further indicated that users joined the ARMY community as a way of filling a void caused in their real lives due to negative connotations about fandom. It was this void that brought members closer together and strengthened their bonds (Malik & Haidar, 2020). The combination of users' engagement with one another and their participation in fandom-related exchange is what Yong (2018) considers to be the driving factor of ARMY's success in developing a community. Per Chang and Park (2019), the "digital intimacies of cyberspace" (p. 268) provide a natural progression from the development of personal bonds through to the self-sustaining organisation and mobilisation.

One example of how ARMY functions as a community is in the way they have used Twitter to organise and mobilise for causes, arguably beyond the scope of fandom. Mobilisation and activism in the context of fandom is not a new phenomenon. Jenkins (1992, as cited in Madden, 2020), sees fandom communities as convergence of popular culture and participatory culture that enables and, in fact, encourages civic skills to be cultivated. Through Jenkins' view, fan activism has traditionally involved lobbying for causes related to fandom, including protesting the cancellation of a show or reacting to a musician's behaviour (Madden, 2020). Social media has additionally enabled celebrities to use their platforms to mobilise their fans to take part in philanthropic causes (Park et al., 2021). What makes ARMY stand out from this, is that their capacity for organisation is not only about the artists themselves, but about the shared values that go beyond the bounds of the reasons for which they are gathered together. Madden (2020) argues that fanaticism and activism go hand-in-hand, and explain ARMY's commitment to external causes as a result of social issues being filtered through popular culture (Madden, 2020). The ARMY excel at leveraging their power, using hashtags to drive conversation in order to promote both social change and their idols, in an instance of what Jung (2012) calls "bottom-up fan activism" (p. 3). This behaviour is enabled without a central leadership; through an informal structure in which community members - in particular, accounts with a large following (Malik & Haidar, 2020) - use their platform to spread the message, propose action and encourage others to "show up for the cause" (Park et al., 2021). Despite sharing little-to-no relation to their fandom, the ARMY flooded hashtags related to the

"Million MAGA March" during the 2020 American Presidential Elections with short videos of their idols, rendering the hashtag unusable by those responsible for its creation and ineffective in its original purpose (Boren, 2020). Jung (2012) believes that the Web 2.0 environment has given rise to this kind of behaviour in fan culture. Fans believe that, speaking as a group using hashtags or certain en masse behaviour, amplifies their voice and visibility of their values. In this way, they are using the force of a global fandom for community engagement and civic responsibility, without leadership from the band themselves. As Jung (2012) reinforces, "The ethic of mutual aid is strong in ARMY" (p. 276) and highlights that, while this ethic is founded in the creative message of BTS, it is reinforced and highlighted by ARMY (Jung, 2012).

The #MatchAMillion initiative is another pertinent case study that examines how ARMY use fan culture and community cohesiveness to respond to social issues. Linked to the Black Lives Matter movement, the #MatchAMillion campaign is demonstrative of how a community can organise without leadership. In June 2020, media reported that BTS had donated US$1 million to the cause (Park et al., 2021) and, without leadership or direction, ARMY used Twitter to match and exceed that donation within 48 hours (Madden, 2020). This cumulative donation was gathered by sharing the hashtag #MatchAMillion, encouraging the community to match the band's donation. 48 hours later, the hashtag had been used hundreds of thousands of times (Park et al., 2021), underscoring the size and scale of the engaged ARMY community online. Park et al. (2021) speculate that the campaign was made possible because of the shared value system inherent to ARMY combined with the wide-spanning network of accounts that drive the conversation (Bhandari, 2020). This capacity for philanthropy is what Madden (2020) considers inherent to fandom, particularly in the wake of more participatory media forms. By being able to connect with their artist and with one another, fans are empowered beyond the role of "passively hysterical" as many depictions of fan culture show; instead, having the power to drive conversation at a large scale. As Madden (2020) expands, "The values inherent in fandoms have become basis for political action." (para. 5). In a survey conducted by Park et al. (2021) following this campaign, the majority of respondents saw their efforts as being "somewhat unique" to ARMY as a community (p. 6). Park et al. (2021) saw this success as a result of the team composition of ARMY, with their previous examples of social collaborative success driving conversation leading to a strong sense of team.

Through the development of participatory social media communities, K-Pop groups such as BTS have been able to expand on their success and develop a stronger fan base. In turn, by communicating directly with the artists, fans are able to find one another and deepen their connections. This shared interest has developed into a community of shared values; one that stands alone separate to the relationship with the band. ARMY's knowledge-sharing systems and their strength in driving conversation is an example of how online fan culture can become more than the passive hysteria conceptualised by the media (Madden, 2020, para. 5). Studying ARMY, it can be understood how fan culture can become an "ideological space" (Crow, 2019, p. 7) that encourages a culture of sharing, knowledge exchange, intimate relationships and civic responsibility without the requirement of a formal, organisational structure or a source of leadership (Madden, 2020). In the future, there is space for deeper studies into how fan communities are formed. Going beyond the scope of influence of "Hallyu", further research into how ARMY make decisions would provide deeper insight into how they choose the social values with which they align themselves. On Twitter, ARMY demonstrates that fandom communities can behave as a cohesive community despite their geographic, linguistic and cultural differences.

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