

**K-Pop Idols are not your Friends: How Identity Curation, Parasocial Relationships in
the BTS Fandom, and Financial Gain Intertwine in the Attention Economy**

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The ubiquity of social media platforms and the proliferation of online content in the attention economy lends itself to various influences such as identity curation and the development of parasocial relationships. Keys to success in the Korean popular music (K-pop) industry include strategic self-presentation where personal identities are carefully curated for likeability and the cultivation of parasocial relationships with fans in an act of digital intimacy. The K-pop industry utilizes this complex interplay between parasocial relationships and identity curation to its benefit – social and financial, but this is to the detriment of fans who regularly engage in parasocial interactions. The relationship between K-pop idols like BTS and their fans is shaped by a complex interplay of identity curation, parasocial interactions and economic influences, creating a culture within the attention economy that promotes censorship of genuine authenticity, and farms emotional capital for financial gain.

The Globalization of K-Pop

Korean popular music (K-pop) is a form of popular music originating from South Korea about forty years after the Japanese occupation of the country and was heavily promoted by the Korean government who believed exporting entertainment could help them recover from the financial crisis (Souders, 2022). The genre incorporates hip-hop, pop, rock, electronic, and R&B music, and reached global popularity in 2012 with the release of “Gangnam Style” by Psy, a Korean entertainer (Chiyoko & Riain, 2020). The K-pop idol industry is made up of solo entertainers and group acts. These entertainers are referred to as “idols”, and they undergo a severe training process which includes voice training and choreography years before their debut to the world (Souders, 2022; Zhuang, 2019).

BTS, a South Korean K-pop group that debuted in 2013, has played a pivotal role in the globalization of K-pop. This group consists of 7 male members who have been praised for

their seemingly authentic and genuine connection with fans, referred to as “ARMY”. Their music centres around mental health, self-doubt, and heartbreak, which is significantly different from the subject material of their peers (Donabedian, 2021). Their music encompasses effective ethos and pathos appeals – their lyrics and the themes of their performances evoke certain emotional responses, and they constantly encourage fans to love themselves and pursue their dreams. The meteoric success of BTS mirrors the exponential growth of the K-pop industry on a global scale. According to Stacey Vanek Smith, a Global Economics Correspondent for NPR, BTS alone generates approximately USD 5 billion annually for South Korea, which is 0.5% of the entire South Korean economy (Smith, 2021). An ongoing census conducted by BTS ARMY Census, a fan-run organization, reveals that as of 2022, the BTS fandom spans 100 countries. 69.7% of the respondents are over 18 years old, and 96.23% of them are female. Additionally, the survey found that one in three ARMYs holds a college degree (BTS ARMY Census, 2022).

Identity Curation in the K-Pop Industry

In the intensively competitive K-pop industry, identity curation is an essential strategy for idols to maintain relevance and connect with fans. The gruelling nature of the idol industry encourages extreme dieting, cosmetic surgery and the suppression of authentic personalities in an attempt to create and promote the ideal entertainer (Lie, 2012). Idols are portrayed as blank, perfect slates upon which fans can project their desires. Strategic self-presentation is promoted by management agencies to foster relatability and generate likeability. However, this tactic harms both idols and fans in the long run. Idols are forced to maintain a censored public persona to stay relevant and marketable, causing mental distress. Meanwhile, fans are fed lies and delusions, they develop parasocial relationships with their idols, leading to unrealistic expectations and potential disappointment.

BTS is known for their physical appearance, music, impressive choreography, and most importantly, for their unique emphasis on self-love, equality, and being authentic. They are marketed as a success story of 'underdogs' who overcame all odds and rose to global success, and while this is true, the fact remains that they are still celebrities who practice strategic self-presentation. Using self-branding techniques, they have emerged as globally influential figures who promote traditional hierarchies of celebrity status. Marwick (2015) discusses the advent of the microcelebrity and how they promote a flawed message of inclusivity by marketing their status as attainable for the average person. Microcelebrities reinforce traditional hierarchies of fame by “appealing to audiences using the familiar trappings of thin but buxom bodies, sports cars, and designer clothes” (Marwick, 2015, p.157). BTS and their management promote these same success hierarchies behind their ‘underdog’ image, and this is harmful to younger fans who strive to emulate them, as success cannot be achieved by all even when following the same formula.

It is evident that significant effort has been invested into their career, however, it may be beneficial to consider a more genuine approach in their promotion of the message to be true to oneself and unapologetic to the world, as they tend to censor themselves and aspects of their personality to remain marketable. Identity curation or masking personalities for public consumption is marketable and facilitates parasocial connections with fans, which can be profitable. However, this creates detrimental and impractical expectations, ultimately leading to disillusionment and potential disappointment for the fans in such connections.

Parasocial Relationships and Digital Intimacy

The emergence of parasocial relationships within the context of the BTS fandom highlights the capacity of digital media to forge intimate connections. Social scientists Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl first described parasocial interactions (PSIs) as a simulacrum of conversational give and take between a performer and a spectator, leading to parasocial

relationships (PSRs) where the spectator is obliged to remove effort, but if they remain involved, it leads to the addition of fantasy. These relationships are inevitably one-sided, and reciprocity is only suggested, as the performer creates an illusion of intimacy (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956). In the present day, online platforms facilitate PSRs with celebrities and influencers. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a surge in PSRs, as people used them to supplement social needs and decrease loneliness (Jarzyna, 2021). Social media became a connection tool for many, and BTS' heavy online activity during that period resulted in even stronger PSRs among fans (Souders, 2022). The individual members utilized live-streaming services to establish a more profound connection with fans, fostering digital intimacy. Such connections cultivate a perception of closeness and reciprocity, strengthening the fan-idol bond.

Unlike the Western music industry, the K-pop industry is heavily reliant on parasocial relationships and encourages them. The industry is built on the obsession of fans and uses these relationships to generate album sales and boost profits (Fany et al., 2022; Zhuang, 2019). BTS is known for sharing vlogs where they express their personal thoughts and experiences, and variety-style shows such as *BTS Bon Voyage* where fans watch them on travel adventures and playing games for rewards. They are also active on the fan café *WeVerse* app where fans can purchase exclusive media content, communicate with their idols through chat threads, and shop from their exclusive merchandise (Souders, 2022). *WeVerse* was developed by BTS' management agency and promotes parasocial relationships. Regular messages from the idols contribute to the distorted belief that fans are having personal conversations with them.

V Live is a live-streaming platform that BTS popularly uses to communicate mediated authenticity. It creates an illusion of intimacy between the fan and the idol, making the fan see the idol as a friend rather than a celebrity on a mass communication live stream. From a

series of interviews Chiyoko & Riain (2020) discovered that BTS fans use digital media to judge idols' authenticity. These fans feel like they know BTS personally and argue that idols are as genuine on hour-long live streams as they are in real life since no one can uphold a false personality for that amount of time. BTS uses strategies like calibrated amateurism to sustain this engagement and maintain their parasocial relationships. Abidin (2020) defines calibrated amateurism as a contrived authenticity that influencers use to establish intimacy with their followers, creating a less censored and more spontaneous image. Reade (2020) asserts that this portrays a more relatable personality, which is highly marketable. Most fans engage in parasocial relationships for escapism, so such practices are very effective in maintaining intimacy and relevance for BTS.

Parasocial relationships can be harmful to both fans and idols, they lead to privacy violations and mental health issues when fans become unhealthily obsessed with their idols, while idols may feel pressure to maintain a curated image. *Sasaeng* fans are a common phenomenon in the K-pop industry. They are extreme fans with unhealthy curiosities in the private lives of K-pop idols. Sasaengs will go as far as stalking their idols, sneaking into their hotel rooms, and even physically assaulting them (Williams & Ho, 2016). These fans are deeply involved in parasocial relationships with their idols and feel betrayed when they fail to meet these expectations. An extreme example of their antics is the *#cutforkookie* self-harm movement on social media, started by a sasaeng who believed BTS member, Jungkook, was in a relationship (Cage, 2021). Idols in the K-pop industry often keep their relationships hidden to avoid such situations, as sasaengs tend to retaliate with online harassment and threats, which are also directed towards their romantic partners. Sasaengs try to outdo each other with outrageous acts towards idols in hopes of going viral, regardless of morality and ethics. In the attention economy, algorithms incentivize attention-seeking actions, creating problematic parasocial relationships with celebrities.

The Contribution and Commodification of Fandom in the Attention Economy

The BTS fandom, ARMY, plays a pivotal role in the attention economy where engagement and visibility are of paramount importance. Unlike Western music fandoms, K-pop fandoms like ARMY are characterized by fan-made content, trending hashtags, interactive challenges, and significant spending, contributing to visibility. However, the intense devotion and commodification of fandom raise concerns regarding overconsumption and obsessive behaviour. A significant contribution of ARMY to the attention economy is organizing streaming parties, where they set a target goal of views to garner for BTS whenever they release a song or publish a music video. They coordinate similar events for billboard charting, award voting, and merchandise purchases, with the aim of breaking records for their idols (Souders, 2022). These campaigns gain significant exposure for BTS and foster a sense of community and belonging among fans through affective citizenship (Donabedian, 2021).

Campaigns that farm emotional capital to promote BTS are common on social media and in person. Fans buy billboards and advertising spaces to advertise the group on public transportation buses, in cafes, and in popular spots during special occasions such as the members' birthdays, anniversaries, or career milestones (Donabedian, 2020; Jung, 2011). They require a huge collective effort, and in doing so promote a sense of community among fans and serve as public relations to garner attention for BTS. Jung refers to such fan activity or free publicity as "fancom". Fancom or "fan company" describes how fans essentially manage their idols and promote their endeavours, which is different from the pre-existing Western notion of fandom where fans simply adore and worship their favourite entertainers (Jung, 2011). Fancom is a common practice used to share press releases about recent idol activities, such as new album releases or music video productions.

The BTS fandom is one of the most active and fast-growing fandoms on social media – they produce and share digital content that leads to financial capital for the K-pop group.

Media scholar, Henry Jenkins, who theorized “participatory culture”, explains that fandom encapsulates a community with diversity, equality, and sociality, where the fans are cultural producers and consumers. They engage in participatory culture by producing and circulating media content, and they acknowledge its contribution to their well-being (Jenkins et al., 2015). Jenkins et al. (2015) also argue that the digital age has not enhanced the participatory nature of fandom but has drastically broadened the range of people who can participate in fandom. Considering the diversity of the BTS fandom, which spans over 100 countries (BTS ARMY Census, 2022), this statement is true. Business Insider reported that in 2021 the top 4 used hashtags on X (formerly Twitter) were all BTS-related (Walsh, 2021). In addition, many fan-run translation pages on X make BTS content accessible globally (Donabedian, 2021). Another participatory culture or fancom practice they engage in is the creation and spamming of certain narratives that paint the idols in a positive light, and the policing of BTS-related content (Souders, 2022). In using this tactic, the algorithm is manipulated to promote these messages, thereby promoting the visibility of BTS to a wider audience. These efforts effectively enhance BTS's presence in the media landscape, reflecting the synergy between the fan community and the group.

The Financial Implications of Parasocial Relationships

The purchasing behaviour of BTS fans is heavily influenced by social and psychological factors. Casual fans might purchase a few official merchandise items to support BTS, but fans who regularly engage in parasocial interactions with the group are prosumers that tend to spend a lot of money on their idols. Zhuang (2019) argues that fans’ purchasing behaviours for their idols’ merchandise represent a form of self-identity. It provides a sense of belonging within the fandom but also provides emotional satisfaction. Zhuang (2019) likened this sense of self-identity and belonging that fans gain as a collective to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, specifically the “love and belonging” tier which states that people need interpersonal

relationships and a sense of connectedness to a group. Fans in parasocial relationships are generally known for their tendency to engage in overconsumption, and this mass consumerism often leads to wastefulness (Fany et al., 2022), but they find a way to justify it because their purchasing behaviours are essentially driven by a need for belongingness. BTS fans form a unique collective emotional identity, motivating them to spend money on their idols as it brings them satisfaction and emotional gratification.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the parasocial relationships between BTS and their fans and how they are shaped by a complex interplay of identity curation and economic influences, creating a culture within the attention economy that promotes censorship of genuine authenticity, and farms emotional capital for financial gain. This exploration slightly underscores the complex interplay within the K-pop industry. As BTS continues to navigate the intersection of authenticity and commerce, the global phenomenon they embody serves as a microcosm of the broader tensions in the attention economy.

This paper contributes to our understanding of the intricate dynamics between identity, fan engagement, and economic interests in the K-pop landscape. Looking forward, it is important for fans to maintain a healthy balance between parasocial and real-life relationships, as being able to respect their idols' personal lives and choices, and not interfere with them promotes a much better idea of fandom. BTS should also be more conscious of how they reinforce these parasocial relationships, and how they perform relational labour. They should be able to express themselves freely and honestly, without fear of losing love or approval, and should have professional help and guidance to cope with the challenges and pressures of being in the spotlight. The implications of parasocial interactions may be financially beneficial and emotionally satisfactory, but in the long run, they are mentally taxing for both parties.

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