

THE FANDOM OF *HALLYU*, A TRIBE IN THE DIGITAL NETWORK ERA

The Case of ARMY of BTS

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Abstract

Hallyu, the Korean Wave, has entered another stage with the emergence and dramatic success of BTS, a seven-member South Korean boy band, and its uniquely engaged fandom. The band's fan club, ARMY of BTS, through their social media presence and other internet activities, is a significant factor in the band's success. Unlike traditional fandom, ARMY has built a huge base of support by championing the message that everyone must find their own personal taste and voice, demonstrating in the process the tribal power of global fandom as a far-reaching cultural phenomenon that exceeds the scope of traditional fan clubs. Adopting a grounded theory approach through our ethnographic research, we identified four primary dimensions of this emerging fandom: (1) digital intimacy, (2) non-social sociality, (3) transnational locality, and (4) organizing without an organization. We found that, in conjunction with Maffesoli's concept of the "tribe," these four dimensions help us to understand how the relationship between BTS and ARMY transforms the private realm of the tastes and desires of their fans into cultural, political, and economic expression in the public realm. Thus, this global fandom, the tribe in the digital era, potentiated by the internet and the new forms of sociality created by social media, is effecting tectonic sociocultural change on a global scale.

Keywords

ARMY; BTS; digital era; fandom; *Hallyu*; Maffesoli's tribe

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, South Korea's arts and culture have become enormously popular in neighboring countries such as China, Japan, and many Southeast Asian countries, and have even spread to Europe and the Americas, as well as to the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa. This Korean Wave, *Hallyu*, has emerged as a powerhouse spearheaded by Korean pop music, or K-pop, as well as other products of Korean popular culture, such as TV dramas and movies.

While *Hallyu* is certainly an economic phenomenon, it is, perhaps most importantly, a profound socio-cultural departure from the norm and has attracted the attention of many of international scholars who have produced many academic anthologies and special issues in scholarly journals since the late 2000s (for example, see Ainslie and Lim; Choi and Maliangkay; Chua and Iwabuchi; Jin and Kwak; Jin and Yoon; Kim, *The Korean Wave*; Kim and Kim; Marinescu; Lee and Nornes; Ravina; Yoon and Jin). In particular, scholars have explored various socio-cultural approaches to *Hallyu*, including the following: analyzing it as mimicry of Koreanness (Chung, "Medium Hot, Korean Cool") or as a soft power (Kim and Ni; Nye and Kim; H. Jung); applying Bakhtin's dialogism (E. Min); identifying the sentiment of "Asianness" (Lee and Ju) or cultural familiarity (Kim and Nam); positioning it as an expression of multiculturalism (M. Kim) or globalization, transnationalization, and localization (Chung, "From National to Transnational"; Fuhr; Khoo; E. Lee; Leung); use of the internet, digital media, social media (Cho; E. Jung; Kim, "Hallyu"; Russell; Yoon); and the anti-*Hallyu* backlash (Ainslie et al.; H. Lee).

Studies on global fandom have generally framed local context as the site for fandom construction and tended to focus on different regional characteristics and new collaborative relationships between artists and fans (Chang and Park; W. Min; Noh; S. Park; Sohn). Interestingly, in global fandom, *Hallyu* is accepted as a hybrid and transnational form, rather than an expression of authentic Korean culture in any pure sense. In addition, rather than simply enjoying products and services of *Hallyu*, the fans themselves create subcultures through a bricolage of mimicry and invention (Chang and Park), producing phenomena not seen in the traditional entertainment industry. Many studies have shown that young people all over the world like *Hallyu*, its products and culture, because they are motivated to achieve self-realization through their fandom (S. Park 29). For instance, one study found that women in the Middle East were able to negotiate a greater degree of social autonomy through their engagement with *Hallyu* fandom (Noh). As a social phenomenon, *Hallyu*-inspired global fandom inspires socially responsible behavior, for example, as fans donate blood as a group or volunteer for traffic control to protect their idol artists in airports. In this way, global fandom has become a force

for positive social action and community engagement and a site of resistance to dominant, self-seeking capitalist value system.

However, *Hallyu* is not disseminated for the purpose of promoting positive social goals, nor did fans initially accept *Hallyu* as a social issue. Rather, *Hallyu* fandom has been a kind of viral meme (a term coined by Richard Dawkins) that has spread undirected, disappeared, and been reborn in the course of transforming, processing, reproducing, and self-propagating in the uniquely fertile ground of social media and cyberspace (Chang and Park). *Hallyu* fandom, though arising in local contexts from private tastes of fans, eventually blossomed in social media into an expression and a driver of positive social values on the global stage.

Hallyu, the Korean Wave, has now entered another stage with the emergence and dramatic success of BTS,¹ a seven-member South Korean boy band, and its uniquely engaged fandom. Engagement with ARMY,² BTS's fan group, has rendered *Hallyu* fandom more robust, unexpectedly expanding to unprecedented levels. For example, it was the active support from ARMY, as well as BTS's artistic work, that led the group to winning top place twice on the Billboard charts.³ With their ensuing fame, BTS was invited to speak about self-esteem, a critical issue for young people worldwide, at the United Nations General Assembly. Their speech immediately garnered reactions and comments from their young fans on social media. BTS was able to reach and affect young people with their message about the importance of self-love in a way that many prominent philosophers and educators cannot, suggesting that the concept and role of fandom in the digital age have been profoundly reconfigured. Accordingly, we contend that *Hallyu* fandom should not be seen merely as a phenomenon of the popular music industry but rather as indicative of the ubiquitous emergence of an independent and unprecedented socio-cultural transformation.

Thus, we define these global fandom activities as a tribe by using Maffesoli's concept of tribalism and describe their characteristics in our social world. Writing in the 1980s, on the eve of the revolution in digital communication media, Maffesoli argues that the values of the private realm, relegated during the pre-digital modern era to the close core discussion networks of family and community, have increasingly emerged to create reconfigured virtual communities, segmented groups of affinity-aligned people, which he calls tribes. He presciently saw this development as both a driver and indicator of tectonic social changes. The fandom phenomenon that developed over the course of the twentieth century in popular entertainment media can be regarded as one of these indicators. We argue that, with the advent of the digital revolution, and the explosion in the tools available to users to appropriate, create, and deploy content, a fundamental, qualitative change has reshaped our social world. As Maffesoli writes there is a

vitalism to argue for the power of the basic sociality - the 'being together' - of everyday life, [a] collective consciousness for life-affirming, [a] Dionysian quality of the transcendent warmth of the collectivity (*divin social*). (x)

In this paper, we examine the phenomenon of a burgeoning global fandom through the case of the ARMY of BTS, a neo-tribal formation in which the basic human need for connection is facilitated, mediated, and even transformed through digital technology. We present our digital and on-the-ground ethnographic research and analyze the characteristics of digitally potentiated neo-tribalism, with a special focus on the critical role of social media and other digital communication media. We suggest, as a direction for further research, that the effects of this phenomenon exceed what is conventionally understood as the cultural sphere to have significant effects in the global economic and political spheres.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

Our research into ARMY of BTS has proceeded along two tracks: (1) an examination of some of the theoretical literature on fandom and postmodernity in popular culture studies, as well as the literature on *Hallyu* and its fandom; and (2) conventional and virtual ethnography with fans, online forums, and expert observers.

To approach the literature on *Hallyu* and its fandom, we actively explored the posts and comments written/created by members of BTS and ARMY on their websites and social media (including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Weibo, and Instagram⁴) in order to trace how the most private and everyday details of their lives and thoughts are circulated in and shape the digital field of global fandom. Building on this virtual ethnography, we conducted a series of interviews with both experts and participants. The experts we interviewed included two managers (who wished to remain anonymous) working at Big Hit Entertainment, a reporter with Yonhap News Agency (in South Korea), a cultural critic, and a consulting firm CEO. We also conducted interviews with seven, geographically dispersed active members of ARMY, including two from the U.S. one from China, along with a Russian, and three Koreans. Facebook and Twitter were used to connect and communicate but the actual interviews were conducted in person, with the exception of two that were conducted by phone. Interview follow-up and clarification were done by email. Since most of the respondents are minors, we have chosen to withhold their identities.

We chose to use an inductive grounded theory approach to understand our data, rather than the more conventional hypothesis-first deductive approach, because

we saw its open-ended data-driven, as opposed to hypothesis-driven, approach as the best fit for the novel and unprecedented elements of our topic. In grounded theory, all relevant textual, ethnographic, and other qualitative data is gathered and recursively analyzed for themes and common elements that then lead to the formulation of theoretical structure that organically fits the data. This usefully avoids the pitfall of selecting and shaping the data to fit the theory. In practice, grounded theory is both inductive and deductive, as questions are refined and focused in real time by the concepts emerging from the data as it is collected and analyzed. Figure 1 illustrates our research process. We began by gathering our substantive data—our virtual and on the ground ethnography—and verifying, analyzing, comparing, and grouping its features. We then evaluated existing sociocultural studies of *Hallyu* for concepts that helped make sense of our data and developed our four dimensions of *Hallyu* fandom. Once we had developed this conceptual structure from our analysis of the data, we were able to evaluate it against available social theoretical models and recursively use those theories to deductively shape our continuing research. Through this process, we were able to analyze the empirical elements, information, and theories gained from our literature and ethnographic research and identify four key dimensions critical to developing an understanding of the emerging tribalized digital fandom seen in the ARMY of BTS: (1) digital intimacy; (2) non-social sociality; (3) transnational locality; and (4) organizing without an organization.

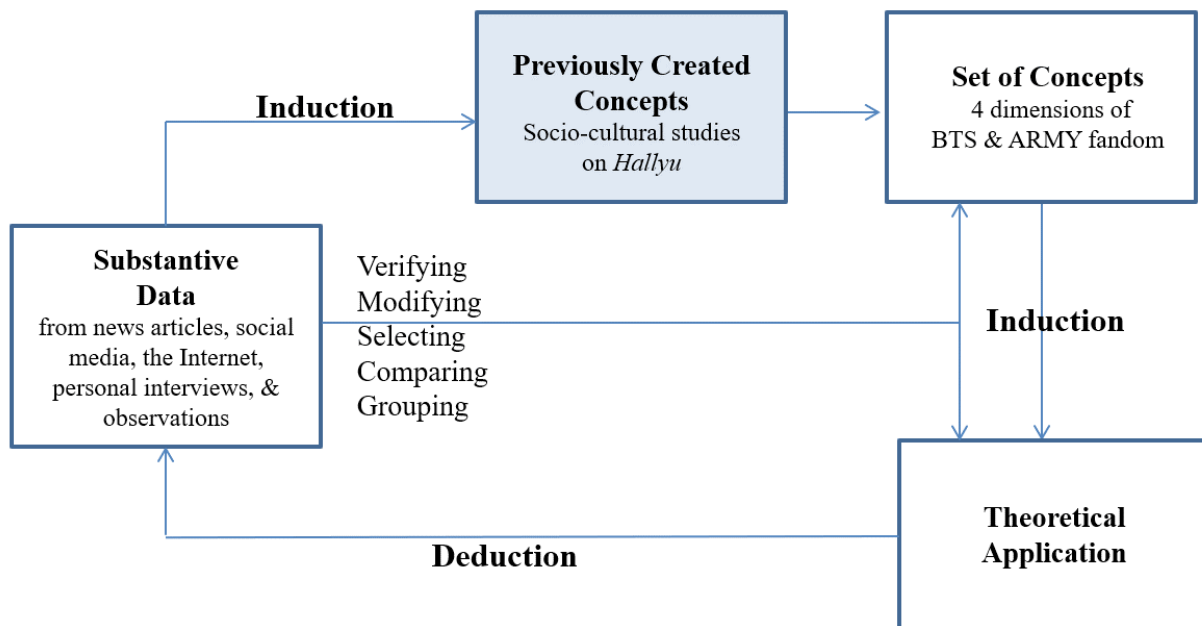


Figure 1. Research Design

III. FAN, THE TRIBE

Maffesoli identified a “new tribalism” and defined it as characteristic of our time. In our view, with the game-changing growth of the internet and digital communication technologies, his ideas are even more meaningful today. He foresaw that the differentiation of what was then called the masses into small affinity-based groups with a common affective repertoire and an in-group focused moral code of “collective privacy” would become a new social model (Maffesoli 91). Hypothesizing that “a new (and evolving) trend can be found in the growth of small groups and existential networks” (40), he argued that segmented tribal groups would be generated from the cultural transformations of nostalgia for an imagined past of hedonism, tactile experience, and shared aesthetic values. This neo-tribalism would be based both on a religious pathos and an attachment to localism, which he terms proxemics⁵ (40). In the ARMY of BTS phenomenon of digitally enabled fandom, we see the profound changes Maffesoli predicted, being wrought in real time by the emerging social forces of the Information Age.

According to Maffesoli, technology reinforces affective belonging both within and across groups. The structure and function of clan, village, and tribal social formations, with all the affective if not substantive human connectedness and sociality traditionally associated with these forms, are reproduced in facsimile by the communicative matrices of “cable TV [and] computer bulletin boards (for amusement, erotic or functional purposes)” (139). It is an ephemeral and ad hoc tribalism that emerges in this “electronic nebula” (139). We contend that the dynamics Maffesoli identified with the technology of the late 1980s has only intensified with technology of the late 2010s.

Social media is the decisive game-changer in today’s social landscape. It has fundamentally changed sociality as well as the conventional media paradigm by realizing users’ private expressive aspirations in the public realm of the internet. Web apps such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so forth, make possible with their technologies and reflect with their popularity unprecedented possibilities for participatory cultural practices. In allowing audiences to become producers as well as receivers of mediated communication, they enable the formation of virtual communities of shared affinity and affect, even as they depend on these communities for monetization. It is in this fertile cyber-ground that an intensified tribal fandom has emerged that, potentiated by web technologies and social media tools, allow fans to create virtual communities that add value—in knowledge, content, affective rewards, and social capital—to their pursuit of their chosen passion (Creeber 19).

In one example of how social media has reshaped the social landscape, in a mid-2000s study of college students' use of the social network service, Facebook, Ellison et al. investigated the new forms of social relationship and social capital building made possible by increasingly pervasive social media applications. Focusing on Facebook use among college students, they found that "Facebook use . . . appears to play an important role in the process by which students form and maintain social capital" (1161). They conclude: "Our findings demonstrate a robust connection between Facebook usage and indicators of social capital, especially of the bridging type. Internet use alone did not predict social capital accumulation, but intensive use of Facebook did" (Ellison et al. 1164).

Thus, the participatory nature of social media has created new configurations of social possibility, which Maffesoli refers to as "the undefined mass, the faceless crowd and the tribalism consisting of a patchwork of small local entities" (9).

Their outlines are ill-defined: sex, appearance, lifestyles - even ideology - are increasingly qualified in terms ('trans,' 'meta') that go beyond the logic of identity and/or binary logic. Briefly, and taking the terms in their most accepted sense, we can say that we are witnessing the tendency for a rationalized 'social' to be replaced by an empathetic 'sociality,' which is expressed by a succession of ambiances, feelings and emotions. (Maffesoli 11)

Maffesoli uses the terms "tribe" and "tribalism" metaphorically, focusing on cohesion in the sharing of social values, which are both local and intrinsic to the experience of sociality. "It is this constant interplay of the static (spatial) and the dynamic (becoming), the anecdotal and the ontological, the ordinary and the anthropological, that makes the analysis of the collective sensibility such a potent tool" (Maffesoli 19). He argues that we must alter the ways in which we view and analyze social groupings, leaving aside the conventional model of rational organization to embrace Max Weber's (1978) socio-historical analysis of "emotional community" (*Gemeinde*) (Maffesoli 12). Emotional communities are ephemeral, their nature poorly defined and composition subject to change; they provide local flavor but have a lack of organization and are not routinized (*Veralltäglichung*) (Maffesoli 12).

Maffesoli's emotional community can be connected to Illouz's "emotional capitalism." In her book, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Eva Illouz interprets our society as "emotional capitalism," observing that the emotion becomes the essence of economic behavior and the economic logic dominates emotional life (5). As Azuma observes in his book, *General Will 2.0: Rousseau, Freud, Google*, the nation no longer yields social solidarity, rather it is produced when the model of a networked society collapses traditional social hierarchies and

deploys random emotion to build social solidarity. Thus, Rorty claims that “theory has become a means to private perfection rather than to human solidarity” (96).

In light of this analysis, we can see that, the participatory nature of social media leads to Hartley’s “DIY Citizenship,” which invokes diverse “do-it-yourself” modes of engagement, tool deployment, and community networking that replicate traditional forms of social engagement with mediated belonging. Hartley’s DIY citizen “creates their identity and individuality through a process of choosing from the semiotic material on offer”.

“Citizenship” is no longer simply a matter of a social contract between state and subject, no longer even a matter of acculturation to the heritage of a given community; DIY citizenship is a choice people can make for themselves. Further, they can change a given identity, or move into or out of a repertoire of identities. And although no one is “sovereign” in the sense that they can command others, there’s an increasing emphasis on self-determination as the foundation of citizenship. (Hartley 178)

Ratto and Boler propose that DIY citizenship in the twenty-first-century is an “amalgamation of politics, culture, arts, and technology that in turn constitutes identities rooted in diverse making practices” (18). Thus, various forms of cultural production and intervention, beyond passive cultural consumption, are thereby enabled in the resulting popular culture fandom.

We built upon the research, ideas, and theoretical frameworks developed by these scholars to analyze our findings and begin to explain the global phenomenon of an emerging tribalized digital fandom. On the whole, we find that the fandoms, constituted through the digital intimacies of cyberspace, gradually proceed from the realm of personal relations and individual experience to an expanding sympathy with social, and even political, issues that organically connect to the experiences of BTS and ARMY members. A moving target, as this living phenomenon has extended in real time to the global stage, it has started to reveal its cultural and social complexity and potential to both reflect and drive social change. In order to understand this postmodern reconfiguration of the private and the public, the personal and the political, in an entirely new, technologically potentiated social space of unprecedented communicative scope, we have identified four key dimensions for analysis: digital intimacy, non-social sociality, transnational locality, and organizing without an organization. In the following section, we discuss each in detail.

IV. FOUR DIMENSIONS OF GLOBAL FANDOM AS A TRIBE

Briefly, these four dimensions provide windows into self-making in postmodern fandom. Digital intimacy best characterizes the private and intimate conversation and exchange between BTS and ARMY. It reflects the participatory ethic of social media attributes of expressiveness and sociality. Where previously media was public and solemn and did not reveal the level of the unconscious, the phenomenon of digitalization reveals the unconscious imaginary of the public through its most private use while, at the same time, becoming a language and engine of opinion. Non-social sociality refers to the emergence of a qualitatively new form of sociality, one which proceeds from the individual's personal tastes and agenda, a realm that was not regarded as a social context in the modernist era. BTS's songs speak to the irony of this "non-social sociality," in which members of the younger generation respond to the band's sympathetic lyrics with an affective affinity, yet do not aspire exercise overt social influence themselves. In other words, individual revelation of personal experience and reflection organically creates an affective consensus of self-improvement that, even in the absence of an activist intention, is still converted into a social intervention: the message of "love myself/yourself." Transnational locality refers to BTS's strategy of using traditional Korean culture, or former idols, paradoxically and playfully. Thus, BTS emphasizes their use of Korean traditional culture by revealing local characteristics, yet their venue is transnational and cosmopolitan. Finally, by organizing without an organization, we mean that fans are able to freely create multiple self-identities as organizers, leaders, and followers, in cyberspace. ARMY's activities accordingly show spontaneity and flexibility, or boundarylessness between organization and individual, leader and follower, paradoxically based in an apparent organizational awareness and ethic of teamwork.

In the following sections, each of these features of fandom as a tribe in the digital era is discussed in detail.

A. Digital Intimacy

Social media and the internet are clearly at the core of the success of *Hallyu* and BTS. Indeed, digital technology has actually wrought profound cultural changes at every level of the whole society. The media sought to establish a highly personal form of communication based on intimacy and trust (Luhmann 17).⁶ In pre-digital modern society, the private and the public domains were exclusive and distinct, with the private being constituted by close, in-person communications and the public by distant, impersonal communications. In the digital age, however, the

boundaries between private and public domains have become blurred, as the cyber revolution becomes an increasingly conditioning force that shapes the contingencies of human sociality as well as economic and political contexts. Where previously the technologies of communication were public and solemn, and therefore did not reveal the public unconscious, now the technology is paradoxically a hyper-rationalized product of modernity that reveals, expresses, and speaks to the public unconscious through its most private use, so that it becomes a language of visceral, archaic, public desire, and aspiration at the same time.

Jin-Mo Lim, a Korean pop music critic, writes “[a]s Bang Si-Hyuk [who actually produced] BTS agreed, the main factor in BTS’s success is social media. Via social media they were able to communicate with the world public. This intimacy actually is the most important keyword in popular culture” (cited in J. Park).⁷ BTS not only uploads photos and videos to social media every day, but each band member also is a one-person creator who actively shoots, edits, and uploads his own creative contents individually. In these audiovisual contents available via the internet, BTS members become actors, directors, and technicians. Each member also creates his own web-broadcasting, such as “Mandako” by Jimin and V, “Hope on the street” which covers J-Hope’s choreography exercises, “Hwagae Market” by Suga and J-Hope, and “One Minute English” by RM and Jungkook. For BTS, social media is not just a fan-management tool but also a daily home ground that allows fans and band members to share their lives, opinions, and critical comments about their work. Global fans get to know about Korean culture through BTS. They are curious what Korean young people care about; they express empathy with the challenges young Koreans face and recognize commonalities with their own situations. In addition, BTS communicates their lives through social media, creating casual dialogues with ARMY, which in turn feed BTS members with sources of creative inspiration.

This active communication via social media creates a reciprocal, creative, and social intimacy between BTS and ARMY members. This intimacy is easily observed in fans’ comments on the music videos of BTS from the first debut song to most recent song, “Idol” (available on *YouTube*), where, for example, fans often praise BTS for their progress in dancing. As Suga Xiu, a YouTube fan, put it: “Their moves are more sharp and prominent. [They are] always improving [and] that’s hard work.” The intimate knowledge developed via social media lets them recognize and praise BTS’s subtle improvement.

BTS member J-hope said, “I think I get a lot of inspiration from the trivial part, and I feel that there is something that I want to empathize with in the feelings and emotions of many people by releasing them to music” (cited in J. Park). In a personal interview, Duk-Hyun Jung, a Korean cultural critic, calls this phenomenon

a “culture of bonding,” and uses an analogy of “a new flavor comes out as if the kimchi is fully fermented.” Jung noted that the infinitely self-similar and iterated feedback between BTS and ARMY is almost fractal.

What emerges is a special form of emotional exchange, digital intimacy, as traditional boundaries between private and public are breached and reconfigured. Noting that all sociality is constituted by a “succession of ‘we’s” which he refers to as proxemics, Maffesoli observes that “the constitution of micro-groups, of the tribes which intersperse spatiality, arises as a result of a feeling of *belonging*, as a function of a specific ethic and within the framework of a communications network” (139, italics in original). Maffesoli’s concept of proxemics allows us to analyze spatial dimensions of the transformations from traditional sociality and mechanisms of group solidarity and identification to the new groupings made possible by the digitalization of intimacy. The internet offers to individuals and small groups the unprecedented power to expand their spatial reach and build distant intimacies and social solidarities.

Intimacy between people is intrinsically private, yet it paradoxically shapes the public realm (witness, for one example, the pervasive use of sexuality in advertising for almost any kind of product); this paradox is amplified and inverted in the digital era, as the publicness of the internet—a massive public infrastructure project with unprecedented public reach—paradoxically makes possible new forms of intimate sharing and self-making. Illouz argues in *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* that the emotional and economic realms under capitalism are mutually constitutive in their discourses and practices and produce social configurations in which effect is inextricably intertwined with economic behavior, and emotional life “follows the logic of economic relations and exchange” (7). The entertainment industry is the harbinger of emotional capitalism as it both expresses and creates a culture in which emotions become the essence of economic behavior and economic logic dominates emotional life. The historical self, traditionally the site of emotional connection and continuity, becomes tied to the discourses and values of the economic and political spheres in emotional capitalism (Illouz). She notes that

[as] the conventional division between an emotional public sphere and the private sphere [becomes] saturated with emotions [it] begins to dissolve.... [In the] new culture of emotionality... the private self never has been so publicly performed and harnessed to the discourses and values of the economic and political sphere (4).

In this new “cold intimacy... the private psychological self ... [becomes a kind of] public performance” (Illouz 78) capable of morphing fans’ personal tastes, and economic choices, into institutional changes. Through the powerful medium of social media, “a technology which presupposes and enacts a public emotional self

and in fact even makes the public emotional self precede private interactions and constitute them,” BTS and their fans transform “the self into an emotional and public matter” (4-5).

B. Non-Social Sociability

In Maffesoli’s lexicon “the social” denotes an ordered arrangement of political parties, associations, and stable groups formed by the rational association of individuals with stable identities and autonomous beings. “Sociality,” on the other hand, refers to passionate, sometimes incoherent, often ambiguous circulations of meaning, value, and “symbolic structuring” (Maffesoli 95, 106) among individuals and groups with shifting, contingent identities. It is the underlying ambiguity of symbolic structuring that shapes sociality. People perform as many roles as the various tribes in which they participate, achieving solidarity by building and maintaining emotional consensus built on forming and reforming intimacies. These intimacies then create a pathway to consensus on social issues, a process fans experience as spontaneous and powerful.

This postmodern non-social sociality manifests as a neo-tribalism which, in its discursive self-positioning, serves no overt political project or other external structured purpose, rather tribal formation is driven by the members’ collective experience of the present. “Neotribalism... refuses to identify with any political project whatsoever, to subscribe to any sort of finality, and [its] sole raison d’être is a preoccupation with the collective present” (Maffesoli 75). Here, non-social sociality is not the phenomenon explained by the social (the institution) but can be understood as the result of a sociality defined by emotional factors such as passion, taste, and personal intimacy.

On ARMY’s Twitter page, there are many tweets and retweets by members about the social benefits of their fandom; examples include the following: “BTS is the lifeblood of my weary life”; “I get comforted and get strength”; “They are 90% of my happiness”; “RM is good in English so I have to study hard too.” Many ARMY members say that they are being positively influenced by BTS’s advocacy for self-esteem. Notably, this was demonstrated by the in-person interviews with various ARMY members, not only in Korea but also abroad. A teenage ARMY member in the U.S. confessed that “BTS has been the power ... that sustains my daily [life and] school life” (personal interview, 8 Aug. 2018). Her mother told us that, because of ARMY’s positive influence, she allowed her daughter to be the active in the group and even allowed her to attend a BTS concert in a large U.S. city, a three-hour plane ride away.

Many ARMY members testify that they are drawn in by BTS's lyrics, which express the universal themes of youth, especially their agony and fear. They get comfort and empathy from the lyrics and are inspired to feel they no longer need someone else to save them; this theme of saving themselves can be heard in BTS's recent song, "I'm Fine." This immediacy and emotional relevance sets BTS apart from other K-pop groups whose songs are actually produced by so-called "K-pop machines," Korean entertainment companies that churn out new K-pop groups through a unique but harsh trainee system. In contrast, the members of BTS are seen by the public (via social media) to be autonomous individuals working together collectively to understand, catch, and musically express themes important to their generation. Their confessions, such as "It's okay to live without a dream" (Suga) and "I did not enjoy the things I liked because of my depression" (RM), either in their songs or social media posts, send to their fans the powerful message that we all deserve to live, fight, and survive in life.

BTS does not foreground social issues, rather they start with the most personal issues which gradually become more public, first within the band's active communication and then via social media with their fans. This feeds back into their creative work, completing the emotional circle of digital intimacy. This emotion, while not actual action, does provide an inner energy that both impels action and lends affective color to the action. Eun-jung Lee, a Yonhap News Agency reporter who has traced Korean entertainment industry for many years, pointed out that, taken together, BTS's musical performance, excellent contents, and the synergy of each member's unique abilities, condition the social values of ARMY members through their very personal musical tastes. Thus, BTS and ARMY themselves have a real influence in the world (Eun-jung Lee). This is evident in their recent public activities outside the arena of music and entertainment, such as their speech at the U.N. General Assembly. These public interventions arise from their very intimate and personal experiences. As Illouz has observed, emotion is "the 'energy-laden' side of action, where that energy is understood to simultaneously implicate cognition, affect, evaluation, motivation, and the body" (2).

C. Transnational Locality

On the global stage, Korean boy bands have developed a reputation for visuality, sharp group dance, catchy melodies, and light feminine masculinity (Chang and Park; S. Jung). Initially, this was all true of BTS too. However, many music critics point out that BTS incorporates hip-hop, Latin pop, synthpunk, R&B ballads, house, rap, and rock in a variety of sub-genres, such as Mumbatone (a genre that combines Electro House with reggae), which creatively respond to the latest trends.

At the same time, BTS also actively incorporates Korean music themes and dances, as can be seen their latest song, “Idol.” Thus, BTS and their songs exhibit what we call transnational locality.

This transnational locality can be found in the various responses by local fandoms in each region. For example, an ARMY member in Russia shared her own and her peer ARMY members’ observation that BTS first visited Russia and became popular, sparking the formation of Russian ARMY, through the “Bridge to Korea” held in Moscow in 2014, shortly after BTS’s debut. Since then, BTS has become popular worldwide, and Russian ARMY is especially proud that “BTS got popular worldwide after visiting Russia.” Also, while K-Pop fans usually respond to the sharp group dance or light feminine masculinity of the boy bands, in Russia, ARMY members like that BTS’s songs are bright and light. They think that this reflects the spirit of Russian music and social atmosphere (personal interview, 12 Aug. 2018).

BTS have started to question their identity as K-pop artists in the vein of modernity’s idols. BTS and ARMY use traditional Korean culture, for example in the title track “Idol,” which is well suited to Korean music, while playfully expressing the aesthetics of a postmodern statelessness. They have mixed rhythms from Korean folk music with those of Afro Gqom, a genre of house music derived from South Africa, while showing off Korean traditional culture on social media. These moves, not nationalist in intent, present a context of diversity in the hybridity of a new localism in the cosmopolitan sphere. Because the musical elements in BTS tracks are mixed from diverse genres, the band’s identity and output are not confined to the K-Pop genre, and indeed fans have become fans without knowing that BTS originated as a K-Pop band. In this way, ARMY simultaneously overcomes parochialism and assimilation while showing new types of localization of an imported culture.

Cultural and personal dynamism is based on the tension between heterogeneous elements. Cultural practices can spread and accept third parties through paradox, division, rupture, and ad hoc contradictions that constitute a pluralism of modern neo-tribalism (Maffesoli). Thus, we are far from the ideal of modernity: Western rationalism. Rather it is the productive and contingent tension between heterogeneous elements that generates the cultural and individual dynamism of the new tribalism. Through the “the splintering, the break-up, the contradictory in action... the constitutive plurality of [a] contemporary neo-tribalism” something emerges that strikes a new balance between local particularism on the one hand and transnational cosmopolitanism on the other (Maffesoli 105). Maffesoli calls this the “classic dichotomy between culture and civilization,” and notes that “culture in its founding dynamism has no fear whatsoever of the stranger... civilization is

barricaded behind a cold fear, [while] culture can grow and accept the outsider” (106-107).

At the same time, Rorty notes that “we have to start from where we are,” and thus in building cosmopolitanism, we run the risk of an “ethnocentrism of a ‘we’ ... which is dedicated to enlarging itself, to creating an ever larger and more variegated ethnos” (198). He does not advocate this ethnocentrism per se but acknowledges that cosmopolitanism as a universal principle cannot stand without communication, acknowledgment of multiplicity, and consensus. Thus, through conversation and persuasion, we aim at a cosmopolitanism that transcends the ethnocentrism of liberal and social democrats. The culture that BTS and ARMY represent may be hybridized, rather than traditional Korean culture, but it is interpreted as a universal consensus.

D. Organizing without an Organization

While not organizations in the conventional sense, the fan clubs nevertheless organize spontaneously and flexibly. The phenomenon of the ARMY of BTS is a process of organizing without a structured and rationalized organization that turns itself into spontaneous reactions and interactions of recursive and contingent self-making. Their social media and OTT (over the top) activities cannot be explained by conventional organizational theories. There is no leader, everyone is (nominally) a leader, and everyone can partake in the action. When BTS arrives at the airport for concerts in the U.S., some members of the local ARMY spontaneously form a kind of guardian group, keeping the throng of fans in line to make sure they do not generate any shameful spectacles or accidents. As a teenager ARMY member in the U.S. stressed, “ARMY is known for its members’ ethic of showing up when needed” (personal interview, 7 Aug. 2018). The structure in which this organizational behavior arises is actually very simple. If a member of the local ARMY community proposes any necessary thing to do for the mission of ARMY, word spreads rapidly and those who are available respond by showing up for action. During our virtual ethnography of BTS and ARMY’s social media outlets, we found that organizational cohesion is motivated by friendship networks, which exist for the purpose of congregating.

These structures are supposedly flexible and easily accessible to the users, giving them a direct line on their problems. In the friendship networks, *reliance* (the link) is experienced *for its own sake*, without any projection; moreover, it may be *ad hoc* in nature (Maffesoli 23). As Jin-young Kim, an M&A consulting firm CEO who has consulted for many arts and cultural organizations told us in an interview, “Fan

clubs raise artists. See all the advertisements to cheer up and encourage members of diverse K-pop groups that cover the walls in the subway stations.” Kim is witnessing that the fandom based on spontaneity is getting stronger, even incubating their star. As mentioned above in the Digital Intimacy section, ARMY fans adore BTS and are invested in their progress as singers and dancers. As V, a member of BTS, confessed in his Twitter account on 29 May 2018, “ARMY is the group that has brought us here, and I think it’s really the wings that made us great singers.”

Even without a central coordinating organization, ARMY successfully coordinates services and produces goods. For instance, it is well known that ARMY has been operating a so-called “attack team” to increase the number of radio submissions for the Billboard Music Awards, and ARMY’s dedication to boosting these indicators for those rankings.⁸ Given the peculiarity of the power of radio in the U.S. music market, the contribution of American ARMY is critical to the band’s success. Another example is that, in addition to the official offers by the Big Hit Entertainment, ARMY members are actively engaged in activities such as lyrics production, translating lyrics, as well as fan-made gadgets. It cannot be exactly measured, but many of our interviewees, including ARMY members and the experts, claimed that the market of fan-made BTS goods is much larger than that of the official Big Hit Entertainment-endorsed goods.

BTS’s global fandom and ARMY’s activities continue to expand. Interestingly, while each region of the world has its own distinctive character, ARMY is known for the strong and friendly relationship between Korean and overseas ARMY groups. This relationship is considered an anomaly among most K-pop fandoms in that “both sides have pet names for each other: K-Diamonds and I-Lovelies” (Kelley). The ethic of mutual aid is strong in ARMY and is part of an organic perspective in which all the local groups spontaneously and synergistically reinforce the creative message of their band. This organically generated mutual aid for spontaneous organizational activities contributes to “a sort of vitalism that ‘knows’ implicitly that *‘unicity’* is the best response” to challenges (Maffesoli 24). As one of our expert interviewees, Jin-young Kim, said, “This kind of new organizational activity, which does not control, is even felt as something religious. I think for any organizations or businesses there is something to learn from these organizational activities based on spontaneity... It’s not just that they are a success in a simple industrial structure based on the excellence of their music, but the new organizational model of BTS and Army should be of great interest to researchers in business administration.”

It is important to remember that the fandom’s organizational model is not based on modernist rationality (Maffesoli). That is, the “consensus is more the result of a posteriori ‘affectual adjustment’ than an a priori rational regulation” (Maffesoli 143). ARMY’s organizational behavior does not generate a hierarchy but creates an

ecological flow of simultaneous and horizontal diffusion driven by the individual's activities and mediation in a constantly expandable public domain. In pre-digital modernity, when the distinction between the public domain and the private domain was clear, a singular identity (a private self with a public face) formed the individual self. In this digital era, multifaceted connections, which are changing flexibly in response to circumstances, define the individual self. This multifacetedness is not created in advance but is created and transformed continuously and simultaneously in the process of social communication and organizing. Thus, as organisms in organization with other organisms in the ever-shifting contingencies of an organic media-scape, digitally enabled global fandoms continually form and reform both bonding and bridging social capital in response to the organizing contingencies of the moment.

V. DISCUSSION: SELF-MAKING AND IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Taken together, these four dimensions of the globally emerging digital fandom represented by the ARMY of BTS—digital intimacy, non-social sociality, transnational locality, and organizing without an organization—reveal the broad shape of a qualitatively new private to public mode of self-making and identity negotiation. In cyberspace, fans routinely generate and use multiple identities, through which they engage in and negotiate the terms of relationships and affinities that are non-social, in the sense that they are usually not in person yet are paradoxically intimate. BTS's speech at the U.N. General Assembly, in which they advocated for young people loving and accepting themselves, illustrates a digitally mediated caring for their fans that establishes a non-social intimacy across the traditional boundary between public and private. In turn, fans also circulate local and specific expressive culture in a hybridized reconfiguration of affect and meaning across traditional boundaries of nationality and ethnicity. The fluidity and multi-valence of the identities that fans generate and deploy predisposes them to enact organizing roles that are not dependent on a traditional organizational structure but change in response to the contingencies of the moment.

Creeber argues that, as the new media tools dramatically enable and increase interactivity, audiences are allowed to experiment with and compose their own identities from diverse, often contradictory sources (18), a process Hartley calls "DIY citizenship" (177-185). This enables us all to create our own multifaceted notions of personal identity (Creeber 18). Yet, it is less identity and the specific trait which prevail than a vague, ambiguous, contingent, and ironic meta-awareness that circulates (Maffesoli 90). In the cyberspace arena, experience, projection, and imagination reinforce one another and their synergy forms symbolic wholes, which

become the basis of rich matrices of sociality. This is “another way of describing the *puissance* which binds together small groups and communities” (Maffesoli 59, italics ours). A “mass-tribe dialectic” is formed that is “without centre and without border... [in] endless and rather undefined movement” (Maffesoli 129). Thus, in this space social activities are no longer ordered according to a logic of separation, rather “everything is combined, multiplied and reduced, making kaleidoscopic figures with ever changing and varied contours” (Maffesoli 147). We see this in the diverse activities of ARMY, in which each member takes multiple and flexible identities and roles, as is increasingly the norm for social engagement for most young people in the world today.

Sherry Turkle, in her book, *Life on the Screen*, notes the positive effects of the flexibility and freedom of virtual identity formation outside of physical constraints. While all human social activities can be understood as a journey of building identity, in the cyberspace venues offered by social media, identity formation often becomes more frequent, simultaneous, and even addictive than typically seen in analog, offline social engagement. Whether offline or online, people form identities in the crucible of desire and realization by leveraging the tensions between identification and differentiation. Thus, actors form their identities through the process of constructing and practicing their identities in a group in which they seek recognition of both sameness and difference. The process of identification and differentiation, in other words, is intrinsic to building both bonding and bridging social capital in the situational and ad hoc organizing of ARMY.

In the context of the proliferation of content networks, individuals identify and differentiate themselves through the ordinary and routine acts of posting, sharing, and liking information and thought. Linking to an article also implies an identification or agreement with the content and the author’s opinion. Commenting, on the other hand, offers the opportunity for differentiation, as does silence. Thus, identification and differentiation take place habitually, through both action and inaction. Networks of groups and self-identified individuals, through this process of identifying and differentiating, produce, drive, spread, and reproduce content. Identification and differentiation are not macro-level resolutions or strategies, rather they are enacted dozens of times a day; in endless small ways, the pervasive tug of identification and differentiation connects and spreads content while realizing identity. Thus, in the universe of social media, an individual’s public self is a recursively constructed, selective representation of their private experiences and imaginings. The convention of creating a public-facing representation on an official artist website has become obsolete as the private and public spheres of self-making are collapsed into a horizontal circulation of digital intimacy and sociability on diverse social media outlets. The private realm has now become an indispensable feature of the infrastructure of the public realm. The way to expose and define the

self is no longer limited to social participation and public activities. The individual's taste and everyday life, their emotional and personal areas, are merged into a new public storytelling, which in turn shapes the individual's experience.

VI. CONCLUSION

Social media and the consequent digitalization of cultural processes have enabled fans to project their emotional experience and key elements of their identities onto other, digitally imagined fans who, in a “synergy between the archaic and the technological,” become members of a neo-tribal fandom (Maffesoli and Vincent). In our study of the ARMY of BTS, we see how fandom in the digital era constitutes a cycle of digital sociality that effects an epistemological transformation in the intimate and the political, radically reconfiguring the traditional proxemics of the private and the public. The tribalized digital fandom of ARMY emphasizes, just as Maffesoli said, a *horizontalism* characterized by non-hierarchical collective intelligence and new forms of social solidarity (Maffesoli and Vincent), thereby reframing political action outside the conventional arena of politics. Thus, along with many scholars, we see fandom as a key to understanding modern life in our increasingly mediated and globalized world, as the impact of new technologies increasingly shape fandom and the legal, historical, and political contexts of fan activity (Gray et al.) recursively refigure the conventional public sphere. Thus, in this unique historical moment of burgeoning digitalization of human sociality, the social and cultural model we see developing in the ARMY of BTS's fandom represents a significant departure from the expression and impact of conventional fandoms.

The socio-cultural *puissance* of BTS and ARMY can be summarized as follows: The ARMY of BTS represents a sociocultural force that presents a social model for our cyber-future. As digital media becomes increasingly able to foster intimacy between fans and stars, the interaction between them gains social consequence. For instance, in the process of artists and fans co-creating songs and lyrics, representations of the internal pains and anxieties of young people are revealed in starkly personal and intimate ways, generating recognition and solidarity within the youth and empathy from anyone who has ever experienced similar pain. The injunction to love ourselves, delivered in BTS's speech at the UN General Assembly, is a stronger, more immediate, and more authentic message to young people than any philosopher's speech. Formations within this digital tribal fandom are spontaneous and self-governing. Nobody is a leader where there is a joyful but clever organization in which everybody is a leader collectively; action seems organized yet there is an absence of observable organization. In this emotionally

constituted tribal society, formed through the most personal and expressive social media, we are witnessing in real time the emergence of a new and unprecedented, yet realistic, social model for the digital era. Thus, we contend that the social creativity in this emergent trend merits both further investigation and institutional support, rather than pressure to conform to the old system, as these tribes in the digital era create their own political and ecological system.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the 2018 Hongik University Research Fund.

Notes

1. BTS is short for “Bangtan Sonyeondan,” which can be translated from Korean as “Bulletproof Boy Scouts.” “Bangtan” means armor or something that is resistant to bullets. The name signifies resistance through blocking the “bullets ... [of] stereotypes, criticisms, and expectations” that adults aim at teenagers, and the group’s stated purpose is to protect the ideals and values of adolescents (Trabasso). BTS debuted on 13 June 2013.
2. ARMY is the name of the official fan club of BTS. It carries a double meaning; it is both an abbreviation of Adorable Representative M.C for Youth and, since “bangtan” means armor, a signifier that BTS’s fans constitute an army that will stand with and protect them. The name was officially adopted 9 July 2013, by a vote at the group’s official fan Internet café.
3. BTS won several awards for new artists, including the Golden Disc Award and the Melon Music Award in 2013, and the Seoul Music Award in 2014. Yet, since they were not introduced by one of the three major Korean entertainment production companies (SM, YG, or JYP) their debut did not initially attract much media attention. However, BTS continued to gain prominence and their third full album, *Love Yourself: Tear* (2018), debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200. And, *Love Yourself: Answer*, the repackage of that album, also debuted at No. 1, which made BTS the only K-Pop band to achieve this far, having twice hit No. 1 on the Billboard Music Awards.
4. BTS maintains an active social media presence. All the members post about their daily lives on social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo, which many journalists and scholars see. This as a major factor in building and maintaining the band’s huge fandom base.
5. Maffesoli employs the notion of “proxemics,” from US anthropologist Edward Hall, “to pay attention to the relational component of social life” through the lens of spatiality (123). Maffesoli sees the dynamism of social life as residing in the constellations of affinity in affective space.
6. According to Luhmann, in his book, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (1982), a type of system is thus created for intimate relationships, which ensures that the personal level has to be included in the communication (14).
7. As of 31 May 2018, the number of subscribers on *YouTube* “Bangtan TV” is 8.54 million, with over 1,000 videos reaching 1.3 billion viewers, surpassing those of other broadcast stations. They have produced more than 25 programs as of September 2018. For example, there is “Bangtan Bomb,” which features BTS’s small daily routines and the behind-the-scenes story of overseas tours and the year-end stage. There is also the *YouTube* video series, “BTS Episode,” which includes the process of making the film and behind-the-scene stories. There is also BTS Kkul (Honey) FM 06.13.
8. *Forbes* listed BTS as the most retweeted artist on *Twitter* in March 2016. The following May, *Twitter* launched its first K-pop emoji, featuring BTS. In May 2017,

the band became the first Korean group to win at the Billboard Music Awards when they won the Top Social Artist Award. *Time* named BTS one of the 25 most influential groups on the internet in June 2017. All of these nominations and awards can be attributed to the very active work of ARMY.

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