From Gangnam to Global: K-pop transcultural fan labour and South Korean soft power

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the steady global popularity of South Korean pop music, known as K-pop, has brought with it a rise in scholarly inquiry surrounding not only the reception of the music itself, but also the potentials it possesses in terms of soft power for the nation state. Much of the focus has been directed towards initiatives at the level of the government, the industry, and even the recognition of audiences across the world. Adding to this field of study, this project instead proposes to investigate how global fan labour in particular plays a role in the cultural diplomacy field through its inherent connectivity. More specifically, this project aims to elucidate the ways in which K-pop fan creation exists as a transcultural labour network that resides within the affective spaces of attachment and exchange. Through employing a conjunct political economy and fandom studies lens, this thesis argues that it is the value of affective attachment constructed and promoted by the labour of fans that not only positions the fandom as active agents of soft power alongside industry and government but allows the work to be transformative in its position as a resistive experience and expression.

Keywords: K-pop; transcultural fandom; fan labour; soft power; labour networks

Dedication

To the seven brilliant constellations who ignite the mikrokosmos and to my Mapo 1 gremlin: 진짜 이 모든 건 우연이 아니다. 항상 진심으로 고맙고 사랑한다.

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Finally, this thesis wouldn't have been possible without the dedication and time of the fan creators who colour our fandom experiences with so much vibrancy and life. You were the heart and soul of this project, my inspiration and my motivation. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all that you do, for free, for your fandoms. As I said in my interviews, you are the backbone of this community and I hope all of you remember this. I hope this project accomplished even a tenth of what you all have done to make our community what it is. I love all of you.

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Glossary

Bias	A fan's favourite member of a music group or the member in a group they relate to the most.
Comeback	When a particular group comes back or releases new music. This often involves lead-in promotions called 'teasers', a release party or livestream event, and promotion on Korean music shows.
Dance cover	A practice of fans covering K-pop dances for either public performance or online video sharing
Fanart	Art made by fans.
Fanfiction	Fan-made fiction utilizing the fan text as source material.
Fansites	Fans who provide professional-quality photos of idols for free, often taken at various schedules or events.
Manager account	Used within certain factions of K-pop fan spaces to describe fans who actively work like a "manager" to protect their idols from defamation and unfair treatment.
Paratexts	Created material related to a fan object, but distinctly different. Usually used to describe fan transformative work, such as fanfiction or fan art.

Chapter 1.

“So speak yourself”: An introduction

Entering the grounds of Seoul Olympic Stadium on any given BTS concert day is like entering another realm of existence. But on the last day of the group’s three-day concert series, “Speak Yourself: The Final”, it’s like nothing you’ve ever experienced before. Once you emerge from exit 6 of the Sports Complex station, you’re hit with an electric atmosphere; alive, buzzing, excited energy permeates the air as people run from side to side. In the distance stands the stadium itself with its own official treasures of merch lines and company-provided activities, but you’re not headed there yet. No, because in the 500 meters beforehand exists a world of its own, a world dominated by fans. The road towards the stadium seems endless, but this is just where the fun begins. If you get there at the right moment, sometime squished between 11 am and 3 pm, you get to see it in its true splendor.

Sandwiched between exit 6 and 7 sit three separate buses, each decorated in advertising for a different member: Jimin, V, and J-hope. Fan creators line the sidewalks outside of the sister baseball stadium, their mats flushed against the concrete displaying everything from photocards, handmade necklaces, slogan towels, and even photobooks for purchase. Each mat is swarmed by fans, blurring the boundaries between where one ends and the other begins. As you continue to make your way, you’ll often come across a lengthy queue of fans, piquing your interest. *What are they lined up for?* And, more importantly, *what did you miss?* You’ve been checking your Twitter feed all day for the famous freebies that fans will give away outside of any event, but for this particular concert, fan creators have put out all the stops. On your list is the glitter enamel pin at 3 pm from an American artist who flew in for the concert, a Jimin plastic fan giveaway at 1 pm from your favourite fansite (location TBD), and the small Yoongi[1] picket set to be released at a random time near the Lotteria restaurant. You must keep an eye on the time, in fear of missing it, because these are limited quantities.

[1] The first name of BTS’ lead rapper, SUGA, aka Min Yoongi.

Without warning comes a chorus of shouts to your right as a mob of fans run towards the parking lot just outside of the main walkway. Your heart seizes. *What's being released? Should I line up?* You panic, but you're already in the previous line. Should you move? Should you scour Twitter to find out? As you fish your phone out of your pocket, two fans from your current queue who've made it to the front pass by. You quickly realize what you're currently lined up for: it's the Yoongi pickets. You missed the tweet, but luckily your instincts were correct. The panic inside dies down. You take a second, look around as your head tries to calm down. The fans around you in line are not only Korean, and you detect at least 3 different languages being spoken. It makes you think of the fan you met the day before, who had travelled all the way from the U.S. just to experience the concert grounds. She didn't have a ticket, but she did have Twitter, the ultimate guide to fan merch.

Yoongi picket finally secured, you make your way further into the grounds and set off to the next stop on your fan merch journey. Forgotten are the event grounds themselves because that can wait; right now you have 5 hours to spend on collecting as much fan merch as possible. You, along with 50,000 others, will spend the day running, queuing, talking, laughing, and ogling. Because this is what you love; this is your fandom.

And while it is easy to celebrate this experience when you occupy the position of a fan, it also is met with challenges in terms of mainstream recognition of the true power experiences like these hold. These challenges manifest in the disconnect between a fannish understanding of the role of fan creation in the fandom space and that which is presented in non-fandom spaces, depicting fan practices as excessive or consumptive. Fan practices like those showcased in the above anecdote are not the site of interest, and if they are, rarely are they investigated through the implementation of ethnography or subjective experience. This is even magnified within academic circles, particularly those that even study global fandoms pertaining to Korean wave products like K-pop. The focus has too often been directed away from these practices as sites of cultural connection and influence, put on either the sheer excitement of K-pop's transnational reach (Kim, Mayasari, & Oh, 2013; Han, 2017) or analyzing the strategies enacted at the governmental or industrial level to achieve this success (Kim, 2018; Lie, 2012; Shin & Kim, 2013).

But why?

1.1. Questions and main objectives

This thesis asks exactly that: why *not* focus on fans? Why *not* put their experiences in dialogue with the wider landscape of meaning making and creative labour? Why *not* see where the potentials lie in the power they possess in this new era of K-pop production and consumption? It is exactly at this intersection where this thesis was conceived, born from a love of fandom, my own position as a fan creator, and my desire to shed light on the real motivating drive behind the Korean Wave's international success: the fans. Dubbed as the "agent[s] of globalization" (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013), international fans have been regarded as a key ingredient in the transnational popularity of K-pop groups abroad. Scholars have nodded to the initiatives put forth by fandoms to raise awareness through their networked publics (Choi & Maliangkay, 2014; Fuhr, 2016; Khiun, 2013) but it is those exact networks that have been too often sensationalized or misrepresented. Steps are missing, links are not fully contextualized, and, ultimately, they have not been understood from the level of the actual network. The largest factor, being how the network spans across the globe and connects back to the domestic South Korean fandoms, has hardly been analyzed or put in conversation with our understandings of fan labour practices, outside of analyzing the production of fan content on a micro level (Sun, 2020). If these practices are important, where is the focus on them? The focus should be on the transcultural work that fans engage in, outside of the mainstream images of screaming fangirls on *Good Morning America* or dated notions of how fanfiction operates. The focus should be on discussing the importance of fan labour as points of entry, from reaction videos on YouTube to well-researched Twitter threads that start trending in real time. The analysis should be on how content creators represent the backbone of K-pop fan communities, with fansites[2] providing key entry points for newcomers through their professional-quality photographs, with some even being used by world-famous brands such as Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent.

[2] "Fansites" or "*hom-ma*" in Korean are fans who provide professional-quality photos of idols for free, often taken at various schedules or events. Photos are often uploaded onto Twitter or the fansite's own webpage.

To approach this topic and to focus the analysis on these ideas is to sit snugly on the border of political economy and cultural studies--to talk about work but to also discuss affect; to question the notions of labour, but to also illuminate the emotional connections working through the text establishes for fans. While cultural studies operates as an umbrella idea composed of interdisciplinary work within the social sciences and focuses on what Hartley (2003) explains as an insistence on culture being investigated "as a cause rather than an effect of economic circumstances and political outcome" (p.92, cited in Flew, 2012, p.66), political economy here is operating under the definition from Baldwin et. al (2000, cited in Kang, 2014), exploring "issues of power and inequalities that are associated with the allocation of resources and the formation of wealth" (p.36). These are complicated points, and ones that often contradict one another. In this sense, then, this thesis does not necessarily ask the question of *if* the work K-pop fans satisfies a Marxist definition of labour, but rather sits with the assumption that it is, indeed, labour: so what? How does it work, who does it affect, and why? Why does a fan write 50,000 words of YoonMin ABO fanfiction, and why does this matter? What does it *do*? In turn, how does a team of group order managers organizing a month-long album sale bring those fans closer to their artist, despite the fact that the benefits of this endeavour have the potential to reach up to the Blue House?

This is not to say that fruitful scholarship on the subject does not exist. Studies have looked at the transcultural nature of K-pop fandom abroad, the intricacies of K-pop networks in constructing identity, and have analyzed the methods through which K-pop is disseminated globally through participatory fan culture. There have been studies exploring the intersections of fandom and industry in utilizing social media in the transnational spread of K-pop products (Jung, 2015; Jung, 2011), analysis of the hybrid language forms of both international fans in fandom spaces as well as K-pop products themselves (Lee, 2018; Chun & Park, 2017), and, of course, a plethora of scholarship mapping the spread of K-pop fandom across the planet (Kim, Mayasari, and Oh, 2013; Otmazgin & Lyan, 2013; Han, 2017; Sung, 2014; Choi, 2014). The fandom, through their participation, plays a key role in the success of K-pop abroad (Otmazgin & Lyan, 2018), but the erasure of the role domestic fans hold in the initial stages of content spreading is indicative of scholarship's Western bias. Too much focus, though, has been placed on analyzing the *why* behind K-pop and Hallyu's success, with scholarship either falling on the political economic side of the fence of strategic top-down government policy (Oh,

2018; Walsh, 2014; Kim, 2013; Lee, 2013), or the role social media in the Web 2.0 era has played in terms of access (Ono & Kwon, 2013; Khiun, 2013; Jung, 2015; Jung, 2011; Jin & Yoon, 2016; Kim, 2018; Fuhr, 2016). But this thesis aims to find the intersection of these points by employing the perspective of fans in particular, focusing less on the sensationalism of individual transnational fandom spaces and more on the landscape of connection established through transcultural fan labour practices across the world.

Arguably, the Korean Wave would not have the success it enjoys if not for that process of transnational practice, both within the digital realm and in physical spaces. In direct terms of South Korean soft power, what Nye (2004) understands as a country's ability to influence others in the global sphere and shape perceptions, the explicit initiatives both the industry and the government have undertaken are directly reliant upon the participation and active contributions of fans. But this thesis aims to look beyond this, as well. By employing a political economy of communication framework, this project desires to critically analyze how binary conceptions of exploitation and production limit our understandings of the potentials of power. I will also be attempting to subvert and complicate our preconceived notions of both fan identity and labour, uncovering how biases towards fans and fan culture result in an erasure of the subjective fan experience, something that is crucial in understanding how participation functions in relation to value (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). This thesis will be playing with these tensions between political economy understandings and interpretations of labour, and the affective value expressed through a cultural studies perspective. Because one cannot be complete without the other, and both are not mutually exclusive.

This project then focuses on the fans, not the corporations/government—my main concern is how a fan practice such as creation can act as a powerful tool at the level of the fandom. Here, we are understanding that creation as the construction or production of paratexts[3], but also in the creation of bridges between fans. As this thesis will delve into, fan labour here is understood as creation as it produces something, whether that is a tangible product or a connection to the artist. In that context, this project investigates how that labour is decontextualized, taken out of the space of

[3] Created material related to a fan object, but distinctly different. Usually used to describe fan transformative work, such as fanfiction or fan art.

working *for* the government in their cultural diplomacy project, and instead a productive means of establishing affective attachment that equates to a fannish form of value. In this regard, however, I propose to understand how previously held notions of fans' role in the soft power acquisition process have shifted. Rather than see fans merely as consumers being exploited by the industry and consequently the government, this project employs a cultural studies approach to understanding how affective attachment can be *resistant* to hegemonic forces, and how the top-down approaches to soft power have seemingly failed to consider the power in which global fandoms hold. This will be discussed through the perspective of fan labour as a transcultural network, wherein meaning making and connection operate through a networked understanding of ties and relations.

To do this, however, this thesis asks the initial question of how transcultural fandom complicates understandings of labour, and, ultimately, to what extent fan labour reappropriates previous top-down approaches to capitalizing on fannish practices and affect? Through these questions, this project intends to uncover how cultural diplomacy efforts have been constructed through the work of free fan labourers, utilizing the admiration and loyalty of fans to propel South Korean culture into the global arena. However, it is too brazen of me to assume fans are willingly giving themselves and their free labour time to their artist (and, consequently, the industry) blindly. My aim is the exact opposite; to showcase the inner workings of K-pop fandom structures and why they operate as such. Labour is what makes the fandom run, both paid and unpaid, and it is essential to understand why fans create, what they view as value, and how that translates into the global reach of K-pop products abroad. As stated earlier, this is not solely an exploration into the political economy of K-pop. It is also an ethnography of the transnational fan experience, a story of passion and production. Fans have agency; fans are smart; fans are powerful. Fans are actively working towards establishing power within a landscape that seeks to rid them of it. And it is ultimately through these research questions and this perspective that this thesis takes its roots to highlight the potentials pop culture and fandom can have in the realm of global opinion and soft power. Through these means, my research will attempt to highlight the crucial role fan creators play in the global reach of K-pop, and, ultimately, the perceived success of South Korean cultural diplomacy. Not only does it aim to delve into this, but this thesis ultimately

proposes that fan labour itself *is* soft power, a kind that moves away from our conceptions of the nation state.

1.1.1. Outro: The path least taken

To accomplish these endeavours, this thesis does not necessarily progress in a traditional fashion. This is intentional, for the subjective experience of fans, too, is not as linear. The normal elements are all here: an introduction that you've just had the pleasure of reading, a literature review, methodology, a discussion of findings, and a conclusion. How we will progress throughout, though, may seem scattered to some. Ideas will ebb and flow in each section, some resurfacing at later times and some earlier. I guess I just like to keep the reader on their toes. This is also deliberate because I believe certain ideas, while they may stand as background, need to be introduced in the context of a discussion or my methodology. Each section, too, is prefaced with an anecdote. We are in the business of experience here, and I want to give you exactly that. How can I talk about subjectivity without giving you a little of my own?

To begin, this thesis will provide a necessary overview of fandom studies as it has historically been understood and where it stands today. A historical understanding is crucial to highlight how traditional views of fans in a more general sense still permeate critical scholarship's view of media consumption today. This leads into how fandom as a concept is understood and practiced, followed shortly by an in-depth review of the terrain of scholarship on creative labour in relation to fan labour, setting one of the foundations for my later analysis of K-pop fan practices. From there, we progress into the next background chapter, where a survey of the landscape of soft power and cultural diplomacy in relation to public diplomacy and international affairs is conducted, specifically within the context of South Korea. This is followed by the historical overview of the Korean Wave, its various phases, and an understanding of K-pop as a cultural product.

This thesis then progresses into the third chapter, wherein an explanation of the methods and methodology undertaken is presented. Ethnography is the structural foundation of my data collection, speaking directly to the desire to unearth experience and centre this thesis' discussion around affect. This is conducted through participant observation, as this thesis began, autoethnography, and interviews. This is nicely

complimented by a mixed methods survey on content creation within K-pop fandom settings, as well as a qualitative analysis of key government documents, news articles, and social media posts. Through these means this thesis aims to offer a comprehensive view of both the operations of fan work as well as the subjective experience of creators within different social contexts.

All of these elements combined, this thesis thus continues with a discussion of the findings in Chapter 4 where we delve into understandings of K-pop fan labour as a transcultural labour network. Here, time is spent examining the findings from both the survey, interview, autoethnographic, and participant observation data, all blended to construct an understanding of the subjective fan creator experience. What emerges from this is not only a considerably nuanced perspective on the transference of culture between fan spaces, but also conceptualizing how the paradigm of power in the cultural and political sphere has shifted.

Chapter 2.

Into the magic shop: Theories of fan identity through connection and hierarchies of transcultural fan production as labour

I always love when it's a member of BTS' birthday. The excitement the night before, the lead up to 12 am KST, the first few celebratory tweets on Twitter. It's pre-planned hashtags, collective Twitter icon changes, and sometimes even singalongs (anyone who experienced #JinDay 2018 knows what I'm talking about). It's trending topics, waiting for the members to tweet, and oh, *god*, those never-before-seen photos. It's an *event*. It's something *special*. The seven days each year that mark the annual celebration of Kim Namjoon, Kim Seokjin, Min Yoongi, Jung Hoseok, Park Jimin, Kim Taehyung, and Jeon Jungkook: they're *magic*.

And wrapped within the revelry of birthday celebrations on fandom Twitter happens to be my favourite part of all: the fan made content. You see one of the beauties of fan Twitter (and Tumblr. And Instagram. And Facebook) is getting to experience the plethora of fan creators who occupy those spaces, who furnish my timeline with vivid art, eloquent fiction, captivating videos, and brilliant covers. And while these exist in the space of transcultural fandom on the day-to-day, birthdays are an extra special time, where adoration through art is poured into 140 characters. Some have waited weeks to post their content. Others have been up all night to make it *just right*, wanting to do their bias[4] justice. But all of it becomes available within that 24-hour timeframe, painting (pun not intended) our timelines or dashboards or feeds with the richness of love and adoration, the expressions of thankfulness and appreciation. It's all there, all shared for free, for us fellow fans to consume, to like, and to share.

I write this anecdote not only because today, as I construct this chapter, is Min Yoongi's (aka SUGA) birthday, but also because it embodies the main ideas of this section, namely that fandom exists as a space of creation and circulation. Fan communities, particularly those discussed within this thesis, are rich in content and

[4] A 'bias' is a fan's favourite member or the member in a group they relate to the most.

construction, but all roads lead back to their source text: the fan object. But rather than understanding the relationship to that fan object, I am more concerned with what comes out of it. This project is at its root focused on the ways in which affect and affective attachment are a *result* of fan work (or what will later be showcased as fan labour), and how that excess of attachment holds the key to shifting our understanding of non-state actors within the realm of soft power.

The fandom experience is something that, really, cannot be explained unless it has been just that: experienced. If I were to describe to you the way “Moonchild” by BTS’ leader RM makes me cry, sitting alone in my room, feeling like he’s speaking directly to me, I don’t think you’d understand. If I were to tell you that this song, this album, has saved me time and time again, I don’t think you’d believe me. If I tried to explain the countless ways in which my participation in album releases, waiting until the exact millisecond that a music video drops, allowed me to feel so entirely whole as I celebrated with my fandom in an online space, I really, truly, do not think you could comprehend it. That is, unless you’ve experienced something similar. That’s fandom--an experience that can only be theorized and studied by those who have partaken in it, who have fallen head over heels for something and found that that cultural object, that person or character, speaks to their soul.

Several scholars have attempted to explain the localities of fans affinity for K-pop (Min, Jin, and Han, 2019) and how networks of K-pop fans operate in the digital as well as physical space (Jung, 2011; Lee, 2018). However, what is ignored is the lived experience of being a fan. How can one study a community external to their own? Even the implication of embarking on a “study” of a group of human subjects, implementing knowledge and biases that may be in direct contradiction to the beliefs held by such a community seems to be counterproductive to what, exactly, that study was attempting to unearth. How can you understand dynamics, motivations, limitations, and boundaries without those exact lived experiences? Being embedded in the fan network, understanding the intricacies and organizational structure, is thus crucial. It is, as I have stated, an affective and emotional (because what is one without the other, really?) experience that can only be reflected upon by those involved. Those participants and audiences who *know*.

What is required is application of empirical fandom research, and a fully conceptualized understanding of what is means to be a fan and to be a part of the wider context of fan culture. To begin this project, we must also focus on the connection between fan and fan text, analyzing how fan work plays a critical if not essential role in that relationship. But to do this comes back to interrogating the experience of fandom at the level of the fan, approaching theories of identity and fandom as an extension of everyday through fandom as a framework. While these ideas have arisen across multiple disciplines, they are also integral to my own research in this project, particularly how fan work is connected to affective connection. But rather than attempting to cultivate an understanding of *why* fans do what they do, this project is more concerned with how understandings of fan identity as a collective manifest in affective production. More importantly, asking questions of how fan belonging is understood and how work is embedded within that framework. And how, ultimately, work possesses a dual purpose of resistance and retribution that contributes to a market, gift, and political economy.

2.1. "Persona, who the hell am I?": Defining fans and fandom

To engage with these ideas, what is ultimately warranted is an understanding of specific terms and how their definitions have shaped the course of fan studies as a practice. The first of this, evidently, is what we understand a 'fan' to be. Delving into the term's etymology, Oxford English Dictionary reveals that it takes its roots in a term also used to define it: the idea of the 'fanatic' ("fan", 2014). This is pertinent, as this understanding of the fanatic has coloured the terrain of fan studies for decades, representing the exact thing fan scholars in the first wave of fandom studies have pushed back against. 'Fanatic', scholars have suggested, brings with it connotations of hysteria, obsession, and compulsion (Jenkins, 1992; Jenson, 1992; Shuker, 2014). In particular, scholars were concerned with the overwhelming pathologization of fans in mainstream media (Sandvoss, Gray, & Harrington, 2017; Jenson, 1997), depicting the figure of the fan as a mindless consumer, powerless to the allure of mass consumption and media (Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs, 1992). Rather than seeing the idea of the fan as a dirty word, scholars took aim at the notion of powerlessness and "othered" nature that fans were perceived as embodying through this connection to the amplification of its 'fanatic' origins.

Of notable relevance was the ways in which female fans in particular were "othered" by mainstream culture, the pathologizing label linking to depictions of female hysteria that have permeated cultural understandings of female emotion throughout Western history (Poland, 2016). In their exploration of female fans of The Beatles in the 1960s, Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs (1992) explain how the female expression of affect these fans demonstrated occupied a space within mainstream culture as 'rabid' and pathological in nature. These frenzied female fans when congregated, as Jenson (1992) discusses, became stripped of their individual agency, merely depicted as irrational crowds, "sobbing and screaming and fainting" due to "an uncontrollable erotic energy is sparked by the chance to see or touch a male idol" (p.15). There was a strict boundary between appreciation, or what scholars have explained as the *aficionado* and the fanatic (Duffett, 2013; Jenson, 1992), one which has been upheld not only within popular representations of fans, but also carried onwards into the realm of scholarship.

The difference, ultimately, lies in the act of consumption. Older ideas of fan studies saw being a fan as being resistant in nature, opposed to the consumer culture label that had been instilled upon fan-identifying individuals based on their own patterns in consumer culture (Hills, 2002). This permeated into even the fan spaces themselves, as being a 'good fan' meant you resisted the label which was thrust upon you, creating space between one's own identity with their cultural object and the stigmatized nature of consumptive patterns (Cusack, Jack, & Kavanagh, 2003). Being a 'good fan' meant leaning into the Frankfurt School notions of demonizing mass consumption and consumer culture, siding more with the idea of the aficionado than a fanatic. But as scholarship progressed out of this binary, where one was either bad or good, others called for a more nuanced perspective on how fans operate in relation to capital. Hills (2002) proposed an understanding of the fan that delved into the position of consumer, rather than departing from it. Instead, they understood fans to occupy a dual space of both consumer and critic, specifically in their fan practices and participation in fandom culture.

2.1.1. Fandom as practice and production

With this more nuanced conception of the 'fan' necessitates a formulation of the community with which these dual characteristics take shape. While, naturally, many fans exist outside of the framework of a community space, this project is rooted in the

intricacies and manifestation of fan spaces as sites of production and connection. Exploration into the experiences of individual fans who do not attach themselves to a specific space is significant in the realm of fan research, but for the purposes of this study, not necessary. Rather, this thesis warrants an understanding of both the virtual and physical spaces in which fans occupy and understanding how the community aspect of fan collectives is crucial in conceptualizing the motivations behind production. There are several categories through which scholars have constructed the fan experience in a more abstract sense, namely the fanbase as a collective of individual fans who feel a connection to a fan object, and the fan community being a physical manifestation of that fan base characterized by a mutually supportive social network of people who can and do regularly communicate with each other (Duffett, 2013). While these two terms do seem useful, they lack the conceptualizing ability to explain how fans interact, congregate, connect, and experience through their fan texts. They also fail to reveal how production is characterized in fan spaces.

Rather, the term ‘fandom’ seems to be better suited to our cause, and has been the word fan studies scholars have leveraged in their discussions of fan theorization (Duffett, 2013; Jenkin, 2013; Sandvoss, Gray, & Harrington, 2017; Jenson, 1992) ‘Fandom’, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, can be understood as “the world of enthusiasts for some amusement or for some artist” (“Fandom”, 2019), and while not entirely false, it is vastly oversimplified. Fandom is a ‘world’, but in the same capacity as our outside world is heterogeneous in nature, its inhabitants fragmented along the lines of values, intersections of identity, and beliefs (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Borders are drawn but fluid (Thornton, 1995), the lines between where one fandom starts and one ends are not always as translucent, but ever present. Fandom is the construction of what ‘is’ and ‘isn’t’, what sometimes can be and what is most definitely not. But above all else, it is not just the process of including or excluding what counts as a specific “fandom”, but also the construction of connections and “new networks of knowledge” (Hills, 2014, p.19). It is how the intersections of identity through these networks construct new knowledge or complicated understandings of a text’s meaning that are as individual as they are communal.

One’s engagement in fandom, then, is personal as well as collective (Duffett, 2014). What we like and how we like it are both indicative of our own personal identity as a fan, as well as how we identify with the fan community with which we engage

(Sandvoss, 2014). There is a dialectic at play, a dialogue that constructs the identification of a fan on two levels--the social and the personal. Like the varying forms that traverse the terrain of subcultural landscapes, fandom, too, is both dually influential, with the collective impacting the individual and vice versa (Woo, 2015). Fandom, as Duffett (2013) explains, signifies the role of the fan community as a network of people who look after each other on the basis of shared interests and beliefs, cultivating a place that starts as personal and culminates into something that maintains fannish interests through fostering a sense of belonging.

At the centre, however, rests the fan text. Fans are fans for a reason: they feel an attachment to a person or piece of media, an attachment that motivates them to pursue those spaces of community that fandom provides. Much in the same capacity that the fan has been pathologized, so too has this relationship been categorized as imaginary. The relationships between fans and their fan objects have been characterised as excessive or obsessive, even going as far to be defined as “an intense fantasy” by some (Jenson, 1992; Harris, 1998b). Within schools of sociology, this relationship has been viewed as parasocial in nature, wherein the attachment or perceived knowledge fans have around their fan text is equated to an imaginary relationship (Chung & Cho, 2017; Baek, Bae, & Jang, 2013; Nayar, 2009). This relationship is unidirectional in nature, mainly on the part of the fan engulfed in a sense of “knowing” a celebrity or idol based on interviews, information, or brief encounters. The idea of the parasocial relationship is not strictly bound to fans and their fan texts, but has often aligned with that pathological view of the “fanatic” as the individual who has crossed a boundary, their perceived relationship with their fan text being leveraged as a means to defend or promote them in the public sphere.

Regardless of the nature of this ‘imaginary’ relationship, the function of fans’ connection to their text is anything but fantasy. What this connection offers is ultimately a means through which fans construct their identity. As Hills (2014) explains, in music fandom such as K-pop, the relationship is always personalized, as fans do not have an *imaginative* connection to their artists’ material but rather experience a connection directly to the artist themselves. In turn, the connection to fan experience through paratext or the creation of paratexts is what truly constructs the fan objects (Genette, 1997, cited in Sandvoss, 2014). Paratexts of pop music, then, promote a sense of personalized fan-artist connection, instead of focusing on the industry side of things that

pose a threat to the bond between celebrity and fan (Hills, 2014). Duffett (2013) illustrates this notion through claiming fans are indifferent to the role they play with the media companies, as their main concern is with the fan object as primary emotional relationship. This circles back to the idea behind intention and connection as two vital points that guide the production of paratexts that continue the bond between fan and artist.

What this primary connection thus fosters is the expression of affect through production. Fan creation, as Lamerichs (2018) explains, is what adds the final element in constructing fandom as a concept, claiming that the definition of fandom refers “to the interpretive and creative practices in which invested audience members engage” (p.14). Lancaster (2001) echoes these notions, stating that the foundation of fan culture, as it characterizes fandom, is premised on creative expression and communal activity (cited in Hills, 2002). The element of production, the creation of content through metatexts is the establishment of a fandom space. Fan production is what distinguishes merely a fan-occupied platform from being a fandom or fan community, but also is the means through which fans establish hierarchies within themselves. This is what is meant by examining how fandom structures replicate the everyday experiences within the fan community space, where the fan is not merely a viewer, but an active participant in hierarchies of taste (Bakioğlu, 2018; Galuszka, 2015). These hierarchies are both implicit and explicit, organizing how fandom conducts itself and how production within the hierarchical space is performed at its various levels.

Fandom in the context social and subcultural capital

This replication of external features in the internal fandom space aligns with much second wave fandom scholarship, probing further into how social structures of the “outside” world influenced and became replicated within fan communities themselves (Sandvoss, Gray, & Harrington, 2017). Like subcultural studies, fandom was understood through Bourdieu’s lens of cultural capital (Hills, 2002; Fiske, 1992). In this sense, the budding community of fans can also be viewed as a social hierarchy, where status and access are competed for (Hills, 2002). This is a contested notion, as MacDonald (1998) points out, as the norms upon which fandom structures lie derive from ideas of tolerance, equality, and community. There are implicit and explicit rules to fan cultures that allow for fans to build up different skills and knowledge (Hills, 2002). Jenkins (2013)

adopts Bourdieu's idea of hierarchies of taste to explain how certain ideas or values are premised over others within fandom spaces, offering a similar view to Thornton's (1995) idea of subcultural spaces as taste cultures which culminate around particular interests and values, but recreate social hierarchies within these spaces. Fiske (1992) explains this using Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital as fans investing and accumulating a form of capital surrounding taste, where the cultural system promotes and privileges certain cultural tastes over others. While Bourdieu was utilizing this in an act to explain official versus popular culture, the same ideas of those who have and have not, those who are in and out, can be applied to subcultural terrain of fandom.

This form of capital relating to knowledge and taste aligns with a melding of social and subcultural capital. As Chin (2018) elucidates, social capital within the fandom context is similarly premised on proximity and knowledge, with hierarchies forming along the lines of knowledge, level of fandom, access, leaders, and control (MacDonald, 1998). Chin (2018) argues that these social hierarchies can be attained through knowledge and reputation even on seemingly non-hierarchical, rhizomatic platforms, but access to the fannish object also plays a significant role. This echoes notions of subcultural capital, as Thornton's (1995) idea of "hipness" or ways of knowing (in addition to *who* you know) endows fans with a certain status within subcultural spaces. This 'status', according to MacDonald (1998) is achieved through an individual fan's knowledge, level of fandom, access, leaders This gives way to a culture of "big accounts", those who have been fans the longest, have achieved experiences of proximity and intimacy with their text (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012), and know what's "in" and what's "out". Subcultures function in this capacity, a relational difference between "us" and "them", contrasting themselves against a mainstream but also giving way to a hierarchy that is equally as dichotomous.

The result of constructing these hierarchical structures within the fandom space is fans partaking in the conversion of capital. But much in the same way as cultural capital having links to economic capital (Garnham & Williams, 1986, cited in Thornton, 1995), so too does subcultural capital inevitably have ties to the economic realm, namely in relation to how that capital is acquired. As Baym (2018) explains, pop culture texts offer the raw materials for fans to build not only their own social worlds, but also cultivate that very nature of fandom itself: fan production. As Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington (2017) point out, fan communities proved to be productive entities for their own means,

highlighting one of the key notions that characterize the fan culture experience. Fan culture, then, is marked by construction of paratexts. Likewise, despite the existence of a hierarchy based on subcultural capital, the labour is performed by individuals at all levels of the structure in a variety of capacities. As Sandvoss (2005, cited in Sandvoss, 2014) states, the work fandoms do in creation of new textual episodes, reshaping and reclaiming, conditions our understanding of a cultural object, embedding personal and collective identifiers that allow us to create meaning. These personal readings that bleed into the collective are what identify fan culture and fandom as a space of identity. Fan texts and fan writing are central tenets of fan practice (Harris, 1998b), affording an individual fan a level of agency over their object and fan experience (Harris, 1998a). In this sense, the creation of content is what both individualizes and communalizes the experience of fans who partake in renegotiating meaning through the construction of paratexts. It is a personal expression of a collective reading that becomes, in many cases, the glue of experience.

2.2. Fan work and participatory culture

Production, as scholars have pointed out, thus represents a key tenet in the relationship between individual fans, their fan object, and each other. It is, namely, what fandom is founded on and disproves original notions of fans as passive consumers (Duffett, 2013). It is the move beyond simply loving something into the realm of actively engaging with and expanding upon those texts. Thus far, we have discussed the relationship fans feel towards their texts and their communities, but fan creation operates within those spaces to keep the collective functioning. As Bacon-Smith (1992) noted in their study of female fans in the Star Trek fandom, while the fan object remained the centrepiece to form communities and community practices, it was the rewriting of texts through a culture of work that constructed collective meaning. It is, as Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2016) point out, a means of claiming collective ownership over stories, objects, or products. Jenkins (1992) understands this through the idea of ‘poaching’, wherein fans incorporate the raw materials of media texts into their own identity through the creation of paratexts. These paratexts, as scholars have pointed out, are transformative through their struggle over a text’s meaning (Fiske, 1992; Tushnet, 2017), allowing the fan to negotiate space through their fannish object. Fan production, then, is crucial not only for expression, but an expression of a text’s meaning as it links to identity. Fan objects

mean something to fans; they link to parts of their identity. In the case of K-pop fandoms, this can be the message from the artist, the personality of the artist(s), or even the music itself. Regardless of the reason, creating paratexts such as fanfiction or fanart are often a means of exploring identification with the artist in a multitude of capacities, but also in a number of different ways.

The work of creation fans engage in exists in a multiple of different capacities, each of which aids in the fostering of connection for individual fans to not only the fan text, but also to the wider fan community. Fiske (1992) proposes that production falls into three different categories: semiotic, wherein meaning makings of identity and social experience happen through the semiotic resources of the commodity; enunciative where meanings are shared through the ways fans talk within the fandom space; and lastly, textual which manifests in the creation of fantexts. Though Fiske was writing about fan engagement in the early 1990s, these three forms still stand today. Textual production, as I have pointed out, has increased with the move towards digital fan environments, manifesting in forms such as fanfiction[5], fanart[6], and fan-made videos. In the context of this paper, this extends even further with the K-pop fandom, with texts such as dance cover videos, fansubbing, translation work, and fansites being prominent examples of this form of textual production that signifies the transnational K-pop fan experience, both online and off.

It is that exact idea of fan work becoming a part of the everyday that has intensified within the last decade following the rise of digital culture. Many scholars have cited that the terrain of fan culture has increasingly blurred the boundaries between producer and consumer, especially in the wake of the Web 2.0 era, with it a new definition of how fandom operated and viewed itself vis-a-vis the mainstream. But in this redefinition also came an alternative understanding of how fan work, specifically, operates, both in and outside of the fandom context. As Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2016) have pointed out, fan culture is a participatory culture, wherein each member theoretically understands their contributions as being important and key in constructing a connection to others within the community. It is a culture wherein creative expression and engagement is encouraged, knowledge is shared collectively, and the barriers to

[5] Fan-made fiction utilizing the fan text as source material.

[6] Art made by fans.

entry are relatively low. Duffett (2013) understands this as the collective action towards shaping texts that fans bond over, an activity which points directly to one key ingredient in shaping fandom as participatory culture: the blurred lines between producer and consumer. Gone is the understanding of fans as passive consumers through the lens of the 'fanatic', replaced by an understanding of fan communities as key players in the flow of media culture. What was previously a clear divide between producers and consumers before the spread of the Internet in the 1990s (Guerrero-Pico, 2017), has now been replaced with the idea of consumers as co-creators alongside industry (Banks & Humphreys, 2008, cited in Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), harkening to Bruns (2006; 2008) idea of the 'produser'.

This idea of the 'produser' is native to what Jenkins (2006) understands as 'convergence culture', the era of Web 2.0 where "where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (p.2). It is here where the boundaries between producers and consumers have been blurred, allowing for media co-creation between both parties. While Jenkins (2013) is celebratory of the lack of distinction between producer and consumer, championing the idea of participation for anyone, other scholars are skeptical. Stanfill (2019) relays that this collapse of distinctions between producers and consumers creates fan production as a normative and celebratory feature, one that does not come without its consequences. Instead, Stanfill signals to what De Kosnik (2013) understands as fan work constituting a form of labour, claiming that

> instead of being dismissed as insignificant and a waste of time at best and pathological at worst, should be valued as a new form of publicity and advertising, authored by volunteers, that corporations badly need in an era of market fragmentation. In other words, fan production is a category of work. (p.99)

This sentiment is one that has been highly discussed within the realm of fan production and corresponding scholarship, as fan work does not simply exist within the boundaries of fandom spaces. As discussed, fandom exists in the everyday, and with the rapid exposure of fans in the Web 2.0 era has come the mainstreaming of fan content online. It is easier now than ever to participate in fan spaces such as Twitter, Tumblr, or YouTube, but these are spaces that anyone outside of fandom can also access. More importantly, these are spaces of collective contribution, sites that Baym and Burnett

(2009) discuss have been spaces to mobilize the autonomist Marxist idea of 'immaterial labour', a concept that has risen with the glamorization of the digital world (Hardt & Nergri, 2000, cited in Baym & Burnett, 2009). This blurring between producer and consumer that we have witnessed in the rise of convergence culture provides the fertile terrain for the increase in immaterial labour disguised as meaningful contributions (Hardt & Negri, 2004, cited in Milner, 2009). Platforms that are home to fandom spaces have become, in the eyes of some autonomist Marxist scholars, social factories, where the location of production has now shifted from the setting of a factory to society at large (Andrejevic, 2009; Ross, 2013). Through this lens, scholars argue that our daily interactions online have become the raw material for capital accumulation (Negri, 2005; Ross, 2013), a notion that does not exclude the productive operations of fandoms. On the contrary, fan production seems to be fit quite definitively in the understanding of how labour manifests in online interaction.

2.2.1. What's labour got to do, got to do with it?

Discussing fan work as labour in this context warrants an understanding of how this thesis is understanding labour more broadly, and what its relationship is to participatory culture. In a traditional Marxist understanding of labour and its relationship to capital, the focus is put on exactly that: the relationship. As Rubin (1972) explains, the study of political economy deals with the human activity of work, on its function as a social form, concerned "with production relations which are established among people in the process of production" (p.x). In this sense, then, the study of political economy is not an analysis of scarcity or prices, but rather a focus on the social relations and culture within given power structures. Marx, as Rubin points out, adopted this focus when it came to analyzing relations under capitalism. Rather than focus on issues of scarcity or allocation, Marx was concerned with *how* workers were regulated through their working activity under the processes of capitalist economy. Relations were a key tenet, as Manzerolle (2010) highlights, and Marx viewed the enclosing of social relations between workers as one of the means through which labour could become exploited. But let us take a step back for a moment: what is the difference between work and labour? What does it mean for one to be exploited?

In a general sense, the distinction represents one of the many dialectics Marx saw within the capitalist economy. Dialectics are a significant feature in understanding

the relationships that take shape under capitalism, an idea that branches from the work of Friedrich Hegel, who saw the world as composed of contradictory phenomena (Fuchs, 2020). Similarly, Marx applied this notion to understanding the dialectics of class struggle in capitalist societies, where capital and labour much like the working class and capitalist class stand in direct contrast to one another. In class societies, according to Marx, the working class must sell their labour time to the capitalist class in order to survive, indicating yet another dialectic taken shape: alienation and the process of transforming work into labour. This alienation, for Marx, was a result of workers being separated from the means of production, where work lacked meaning due to being alienated from the process and products of it (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Fuchs, 2020). For Marx, alienation from labour was not a subjective thing, but a part of the capitalist system, the basis of waged labour (Rubin, 1972), and the main motivator that would drive workers to be exploited in order to survive. In this way, work, understood as the general characteristic of human production, becomes labour, organized through the relations of class (Fuchs, 2020). Consequently this alienation, in a Marxist understanding, does not simply remain within the relations of labour and labourer, but expands into all aspects of working class life.

Because the goal of the capitalist economy, ultimately, is profit. To do this, yet another dialectic is constructed: the dialectic of labour and capital. According to Wood (1999), the goal of capitalist society is not to produce goods and services, but to produce capital and capitalist profit. To do this, labour is necessitated, as labour is what produces capital and commodities. As Fuchs (2020) highlights, “without labour, there is no capital” (p.77). The capitalist system makes its priority the process of production and self-expansion of capital (Wood, 1999), where the products created through labour become private property owned by the capitalist and sold as commodities on the market (Fuchs, 2020). In this way, labour represents the key ingredient in what constructs value. This is the basis of Marx’s labour theory of value, wherein labour time determines exchange value (Fast et al., 2016; Rubin, 1972; Fuchs, 2020). Marx saw value in two capacities: use-value and exchange-value, where use-value performs a qualitative function, satisfying human needs; exchange-value is the market value, the quantitative amount that commodity is sold for on the market (Fuchs, 2020). Both forms are produced in different capacities, introducing yet another concept relevant to our understanding of labour and value: concrete labour vs abstract labour. In the simplest of terms, concrete

labour is human production at its core, which constructs a product's use-value. As Rubin (1972) explains, concrete labour constitutes "[labour] as the totality of technical methods" (p.70). It is, as we can understand, the specific labour time required to impart a specific quality into a commodity, i.e. creating its use-value. Abstract labour, on the other hand, is exactly that--the abstraction of labour, the abstract concept of socially necessary labour time to create a commodity. This is where we see a commodity's exchange-value imparted (Fuchs, 2020; Rubin, 1972). It is the abstract labour that is undifferentiated (Marx, 1887). In this way, Fuchs' (2020) argument that the labour theory of value Marx presents is truly a theory of time under capitalism makes sense; it is in this discrepancy between the labour-time in a concrete sense becoming a key aspect of the capitalist system.

Labour, in this way, is exploited through the creation of surplus value. Marx's idea of capitalist exploitation, according to Saad-Filho (2002), looks at the difference between value produced by labourers and the value appropriated by them. This surplus value is the additional time the labourer works, and is ultimately appropriated and exploited by the capitalists. According to Fuchs (2020), Marx saw the value of an item in relation to the total time of production. Surplus value, then, is the excess value derived from work, beyond the required labour time that is required for the labourer to live. In this way, value is not necessarily what characterizes things, but rather the human relations through which those commodities are produced (Rubin, 1972). Specifically, it is through the relations of labour that surplus value is produced; the dialectic between use-value and exchange-value, concrete and abstract labour. But ultimately, it is produced through the concept of labour-time, the unpaid portion of a worker's labour within the framework of class relations (Fuchs, 2020). It is the exploitation that constitutes the surplus value, exploitation that exists beyond the workday and branching into all aspects of the worker's life. It is, as Manzerolle (2010) explains, the cooperation of workers that creates surplus value. It is the commodification of labour, wherein the worker's "creative power is reduced to a marketable commodity and sold as a value" (Rubin, 1972, p. xxv). Labour, then, is a commodity.

This signals another key component that constitutes traditional Marxist understandings of labour relations: the commodity. Namely, the concept of commodity fetishism. To Marx, the role of commodity exchange was integral to understanding the capitalist organization of society (Wood, 1999). Everything operates through the

commodity, as even human subjectivity becomes something to be purchased through the organization of labour relations (Fuchs, 2020; Wood, 1999). Creative power, according to Rubin (1972), is exchanged for a wage or salary, which can then be exchanged to purchase the products of labour. However, the worker is unable to purchase their own creative power; only things. The commodity becomes central, then, to understanding class relations under capitalism.

Let's get digital, digital: Knowledge economy and digital labour

While Marx's labour theory of value remains an integral part of understanding how labour-time becomes commodity, and how use-value versus exchange-value differ through the relations of production, it has been the subject of many critiques. Namely, these critiques have grown through the expansion into Web 2.0 and digital content. One area that will inform this thesis that has emerged as a result is the Autonomist Marxism tradition, focusing on the subjectivity of the worker, specifically in relation to creative production. According to Gill and Pratt (2008), theorists in this tradition saw creativity and the autonomy of workers as a point that would bring about change. Scholars such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identified what they described as the "informationalization" of labour, as work was becoming more computerized and standardized. The worry in this tradition was that commodities were becoming less material in the Marxist sense, and more creative, cultural, and focused on service or information (Dyer-Witheford, 2001). Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), an Autonomist scholar, coined the idea of immaterial labour to describe this new shift towards information in regards to labour, claiming it was labour that produced the cultural and knowledge portions of a commodity (Scholz, 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). According to Lazzarato, immaterial labour was increasingly involving activities that do not seem like traditional notions of "work", existing not only in the spaces of professional workers but also in the acts of everyday experience (Lazzarato & Negri, 1997, cited in Dyer-Witheford, 2001). This understanding is of particular importance given the "everyday" nature of fannish production, wherein the ability to produce and consume has now shifted away from traditional modes of creation and dissemination, and towards the ubiquity of online knowledge content.

While the concept of immaterial labour has been the site of much contention, namely in the realm of understanding that even immaterial labour has a material form

attached to it (Gill & Pratt, 2008), or that the discussion of cultural production has little empirical or theoretical engagement with *culture* itself (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008), understandings of how this form of knowledge labour and the precarity surrounding it still are relevant to how we conceptualize work in the online sphere. For the sake of this project, understanding how fan work as immaterial *and* material manifestations of affect operates both within the fandom as well as the political economic sphere are crucial. Precarity is of heightened importance as it brings with it understandings of how unpaid labour takes shape. While the internet certainly did not lead to precarity (Fuchs, 2020), the acceleration of digital technologies and their affordances have certainly aided in the shifting of the workplace from physical to digital, making the potentials for exploitation more ubiquitous (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008). As Scholz (2013) states, "shifts of labor markets to the Internet are described as an intensification of traditional economies of unpaid work" (p.1), bringing with it a new understanding of production and labour.

As digital environments have shifted the face of labour, they have increasingly become what Gill and Pratt (2008) describe as “the service and knowledge economy” (p.2). Digital labour, then, has been analyzed through the proposition of a multitude of different concepts. Mosco and McKercher (2007) have discussed the role of knowledge labour to address the wider terrain of knowledge creation through informational work beyond just the manipulation of symbols. Looking at labour in the digital sphere through this perspective emphasizes the collective aspect of knowledge as labour production, something Terranova (2004) explains reveals how knowledge production is never individual. Fuchs (2010), similarly, looks at this labour in terms of informational labour, conceptualizing online labour environments through Marx’s class concept of exploitation. Fuchs takes this concept in reference to information capitalism, “a category that is used for describing those parts of contemporary societies that are basing their operations predominantly on information, which is understood as processes of cognition, communication, and cooperation, and on information technologies” (p.180). Informational labour is embedded in the online formulations of the knowledge economy, as participation in the digital spaces are aligned with information as a commodity.

The everyday thus becomes the factory and audiences are a key link. In global media environments, consumers play significant roles as consumer workers in the processes/practices through which value is co-created in the market (Moisander, Könkkölä, & Laine, 2013). Consumers not only generate content and data, but also

configure the service-providing offerings that help the media industry thrive. Though writing decades prior, Smythe (1977) highlighted the relationship between mass media industries, capital, and audiences through their theory of the audience commodity. Audience commodity was introduced in the context of Marxist media theory, where the focus is placed on messages and manipulation of content of the media. Audiences work for advertisers with their leisure time, opening new arenas for commodification in the domestic sphere. Through this lens, audiences are the product of mass media, not the content--they are commodified and sold to advertisers. To Smythe, “the material reality under monopoly capitalism is that all non-sleeping time of most of the population is work time” (p.3). Manzerolle (2010) shifts this understanding to view the role of the digital realm, mapping it onto Marx’s ideas of formal and real subsumption -- the idea that there are divisions between work and leisure time, and the reality of an erasure of divisions. This idea translates back to conception of the “prosumer” (Toffler, 1980) or the “produser” (Bruns, 2008; 2006), wherein the participatory environment of the internet, the “audience” also becomes a “prosumer” commodity (Noguera et al., 2013). As a prosumer commodity, our everyday interactions become something to be sold (Manzerolle, 2010), harkening back to the concept that our everyday actions become labour.

In this sense, labour online becomes what Terranova (2004) calls “free labour” in that it is both unwaged but also freely given, emphasis on the latter. Freely given labour has become part of the online environment, stemming from the early stages of the Internet’s inception, but also seeping into the participatory nature of our online interactions. Socially, we have seen the normalization of work and play becoming increasingly intertwined (Gill & Pratt, 2008), where labour now is linked to feelings of compulsion (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Free labour illustrates the notion of “playbour” or enjoying work so much it does not actually feel like *work* (Ross, 2009, cited in De Kosnik, 2013) keeps users creating. Work within online spheres, specifically within the realm of creation, have deeply rooted identities in passion and love, the arts itself being likened to self-expression and the pursuit of pleasure (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gill, 2011). This leads creators to the process of self-exploitation, as labour becomes a pursuit of self-gratification (Ekinsmyth, 2002, cited in Percival & Hesmondhalgh, 2014), the desire to cultivate a full expression of artistic passion embedding itself into the framework of creators both online and off.

While many have proposed that this type of work coincides with notions of free labour, a few propose a different approach. In discussion of immaterial labour, Hesmondhalgh (2010) posits that the Marxist idea of exploitation does not fit the current cultural economic climate. Cultural labour, as Hesmondhalgh reveals, is freely given, turning towards Terranova's (2004) idea of free labour as a double-meaning—free as unwaged, but free in terms of freely given. As the author posits, creative labourers have more autonomy over their labour within the digital economy. The author argues that labour does not always mean exploitation, as the Marxian sense of the term conjures notions of a separation between production and the labourer, which they claim is not established in the cultural sector. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) echo this notion through this proposition of creative labour, expanding upon previous definitions of knowledge or informational labour to focus on the subjective experience of creators in relation to their labour practices. This, for the authors, is what has been lacking in the pursuit of understanding labour as it exists within the digital and creative economies.

Looking at value specifically, Fast et al. (2016) challenge our understanding of free labour, too, by circling back to our original conceptions of what constitutes *value*. To the authors,

> Whether a productive activity should count as labor in the first place depends on the answer to the question: who creates what type of value for whom? If by labor we mean the productivity that generates exchange value for someone else (as opposed to work, which generates instead use-value for one- self), then the mere existence of the asymmetrical power structures that underlie such productivity calls into question the merging of free and labor into one concept. (p.964)

The problem, here, is that there is a tendency to use the concept too indiscriminately — it may not always be voluntarily given and might not always be enjoyed, and there are varying levels of autonomy to forms of free labour; and also it is often described as a new phenomenon born out of the digital age (Fast et al., 2016). What is important, here, is understanding the role of surplus value in relation to unpaid work. As Fuchs (2010) points out, the rate of exploitation is infinite if pay goes to zero.

2.3. Fan work as free labour

Fan work, then, can be understood as a form of free labour, especially considering that a vast majority of the work performed is unpaid (De Kosnik, 2012) and fans rarely receive financial compensation for their production (Milner, 2009). This stems from the earlier discussion of increased fan production, where a focus on fan produsage as a form of agency downplays the action of media producers of co-opting fan activities for profit (Bird, 2011). Freedom through production, according to Bird, is just an illusion, a sentiment that has been echoed by scholars within the field of fan studies and online labour. Instead, fan communities become embedded within the idea of the social factory, where production of fan texts is but another source of profit for media companies. The framework of labour, though, allows for a perspective through that guise of productive liberation according to Stanfill (2019), and for us to see who benefits from fan activities and in what capacity. Fans work because they feel connected to their text, performing what Stanfill defines as “lovebor”, the work of loving an object and showing that love through production (p.151). As Peaslee, El-Khoury and Liles (2014) highlight, "fan labor is essentially driven by fans' connection to the object of their fandom" (para. 3.7). This “lovebor” is performed not only with the sole idea of promoting a text, but also in constructing community, an idea that the author connects to notions of reproductive labour and the fundamental human capacity to connect to others that is often dismissed in discussions of traditional ideas of labour (Stanfill, 2019). Because fans operate through a framework of love, the author postulates that this makes them more vulnerable to exploitation.

Fan work as an expression of affect is precisely where scholars see the creation of fan labour as *free* labour taking shape, particularly in how that affect is mobilized through creation. Milner (2009) discusses the reliance of media companies on fan participation and loyalty, claiming survival in a saturated media ecology rides on the labour performed by fans. The activities fans engage in works within the capitalist economy, and fans work collectively within their communities to distribute, produce, consume, and reproduce the texts they desire. Fannish practices, according to Milner and their study of the fandom economy, are a productive reinterpretation of free labour that help, through their circulation and dissemination, build the brand of a media text.

Fans' engagement with their texts is thus not merely passive participation, but active labour in the form of free production, distribution, and marketing.

This theory of fandom and labour can be seen across genres and platforms through which fandom convenes. As scholars point out, platforms such as Twitter or Facebook are already sites of the commodification of interaction (Andrejevic, 2009; Bakioğlu, 2018), but they also function as integral pieces to any media company's marketing strategy (Guerrero-Pico, 2017). Companies, according to Galuszka (2015) have begun to recognize the innate economic benefit of fan content in these spaces, seeing it as a form of free labour to promote the fan text. Fans and their community building activities, like those presented in the role of the fansite, are constant sites of exploitation and unwaged labour for the texts. According to Bakioğlu (2018), and their case study of the fan labour involved in the YouTube channel of LonelyGirl15 (LG15), fans are exploited as a means of promotion, distribution, and production. In this specific instance, the author noted how the LG15, a successful YouTube channel and brand, capitalized on the participatory nature of their YouTube fandom in order to extract value from the creative production given by fans. The success of the LG15 team, Bakioğlu claims, rested on the terrain of social media and the creative culture existing within fandom. Bakioğlu thus points to the blurring of boundaries in the Web 2.0 era between producer and consumer, claiming this disintegration of a clear binary leads to inevitable exploitation of fans and their productive participation. The author directs the focus to the exploitable nature of a gift economy that online spaces promote, as the need to participate and "share" online allows for pockets of extractability to occur.

In the music industry, this issue accounts for much of the global success that artists see. Baym and Burnett (2009) discuss fan labour in relation to what they call the "Swedish model", where the online labour of fans has directly led to the international success of Swedish indie bands. Baym and Burnett claim that fans have moved past the role of simple admirers, and have quickly become publicists, promoters, advocates, and marketers for artists. This correlates to traditional understandings of audiences as not only feedback loops (Andrejevic, 2008), but also as sources of knowledge labour who help with publicity (Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Andrejevic, 2008). Again, the direction is focused on the culture of fandom as a whole. Fans adopt tasks such as dissemination and marketing through their innate need to participate as a community. The user-generated content in which fans create is no longer devoid of meaning or value. On the

contrary, it has now become a main means through which companies and entertainment houses promote artists in the global market, highlighting what Milner (2009) recognizes as unofficial labour that builds the brand of the media text for the company.

This brings up a key idea that is relevant not only to discussions of fan labour and fan autonomy, but also to this thesis project: value. While we have established how value works in a Marxist understanding of labour and capital, the notion itself is more complex when put within the context of fandom. Stanfill (2019) argues that fan activities add value to media objects by doing work without monetary compensation in return, producing a net benefit to the industry that results in a Marxist idea of surplus value. In this sense, fan work is exploited labour, even if the work does not feel like labour, because there is still a value being extracted from human action. While some could argue that having the tools to produce and "poach" in the online environment provide fans with more agency over their work, Stanfill believes that access to the means of production does not equate controlling them.

But the motivation behind work is a key tenet in the construction and evaluation of value, something that stems back to understanding why fans are, well, fans. Milner (2009) suggests that fans labour in order to achieve goals for their text, seeing the success of a piece of media or an artist as the paramount goal for working. Others, however, argue that the pursuit of work is motivated by their connection to not only the media, but also to the community of fans they belong to (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Whether this is premised on access (Ito, 2017), or adding to the collective meaning making (Jenkins, 1992), fandom operates as a gift economy (Hellekson, 2009; Turk, 2014; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Jones, 2014; Bakioğlu, 2018). This concept stems from the work of Lewis Hyde (1983) who understood a difference between commodity culture and gift economies, stating that gift economies establish a relationship rather than a transaction between individuals (cited in Jones, 2014). Production within fandom operates through the notion of exchange, but this is usually through what Hellekson (2009) explains is a three-part system: giving, receiving, and reciprocation. The last of the three is important, as reciprocation does not operate through payment but through showing appreciation. If the gift is a work of fanfiction, this could happen through commenting, sharing, or giving "kudos". The "gifts" of fandom require time and skills, which is acknowledged in their fannish value.

Many scholars have highlighted how fandom operates under the idea of the gift economy, where information is the most valuable currency on the web (Jenkins, Green, & Ford 2013; Hellekson, 2009). Jenkins, Green, and Ford (2013) add to this by examining Hyde's (1983) dichotomy of commodity culture and the gift economy as alternative systems for measuring merits, where the commodity is focused on profit and the gift moves towards community building. Through this lens, the commodity has value equal to exchange value, while a gift has worth that cannot be monetized. Worth, in this case, is aligned with meaning, one that cannot be reduced to just the exchange of value between producers and audiences. It is, as scholars have pointed out, an existence of symbiosis not conflict, as both the market economy and gift economy are present in the online realm (Terranova, 2004). However, understanding how fandom works at the level of intra-communal exchange reveals that even within the gift economy, replications of hierarchy within the external market are present through the acquisition of social capital.

2.3.1. Shadow economy & social capital

Unlike the exchange for profit of the initial cultural text itself, fan-made texts are circulated for free. But why, you may ask? Clearly fans must be getting *something* out of it? Textual productivity within fandom typically works within the fandom gift economy framework, wherein fans do not write or produce texts for money, but instead operate under the assumption of potential prestige within the community (Fiske, 1992). This brings up what Fiske understands as the "shadow cultural economy", drawing on Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital. In the scholar's perspective, the operations of production and circulation that occur on the level of fan creation lie outside of the economics of the cultural economy, but share features of it. Instead, what is gained is cultural capital, wherein fans who create or create access gain recognition amongst the group. As Tushnet (2017) understands it, fans create solely for this purpose, seeing prestige through their reconfiguration of fan objects. The acquisition of social capital is, ultimately, worth more than financial gain, with the exception of fan artists who sell their work through fan events (Fiske, 1992). This illustrates Bourdieu's theory of culture, where culture is intertwined with the inner workings of society, reflecting back into the production and consumption of cultural texts (Gartman, 2012). Understood plainly, this results in the cultural sphere mirroring the economic, as actors compete in order to accumulate resources or forms of "capital". Cultural capital, in the same way, is thus

intimately linked to economic capital, as the cultural struggle over distinction connects directly to economic forces of consumption and materiality, where certain commodities become legitimized and reproduce economic notions.

Assuming fans do not know the economic value being generated by their actions is a contentious stance to take (Deuze & Banks, 2009, cited in Jenkins, Green, & Ford 2013). Bringing in how fans feel about themselves in relation to capital is a crucial element that is often dismissed or erased from academic discussions of fan work through the lens of labour. Do fans view themselves as exploited? Do they see the active incorporation of their metatexts into the framework of media production as “theft” (Lothian, 2009, cited in Peaslee, El-Khoury, & Liles, 2014) that adds to surplus? Do fans even want financial compensation for the work they do? Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) bring these ideas into discussion with the understanding of fan labour and participation as “free”, claiming that nothing within the participatory culture of online space is “free”. Whether it is the platform itself, the content from the media producers, or the work enacted by fans, there is always an exchange of something, always a value being generated. This is crucial because it applies to the alternative argument that fans are not receiving anything from their contributions. However, as Duffett (2013) points out, the majority of fans are indifferent to the role they play with media companies, their main concern being their fan object. This signals an interesting counter to both aforementioned arguments, and points to the stark difference between how fans view themselves versus how scholarship describes them.

While scholars have pointed out that all forms of participation within the fandom space can constitute a form of labour (De Kosnik, 2013; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), our main priority within this thesis is the production of paratexts or the production of access to texts. Fan participation as a whole is a vital aspect of the culture itself, but for the purposes of this project, I am interested in how the production of fan texts or the work put into constructing access to texts relates to an affinity for transcultural fandom and the extent to which it translates into an affinity for the fan text’s country of origin, South Korea. In this way, Terranova’s (2004) idea of the dual nature of free labour in being *freely given* also comes into play, as the work of fans illustrates labour that is performed through the capacity of affect and love. As Terranova explains, free labour is both enjoyed and exploited. How we understand value directly ties to our understandings of exploitation, as the digital sphere and creative labour of fans complicate these

notions. As Andrejevic (2009) highlights, there is a distinction between “user-created content” and “user-generated data”, with the latter being the portion that is extracted and commodified (p.419). What, then, is the value derived from “user-created content” like fanfiction or fanart or even more material goods like cupsleeves or slogans? Understandings in this capacity of value in a traditionally Marxist notion do not seem to fit the bill here. As Hesmondhalgh (2010) warns, unpaid work is not a novel idea, not something proliferated by the internet, and wages are not the only form of reward.

Understanding value, though, is crucial, as the value constructed through fan production does not exist solely within its own domain. As Hills (2002) explains, one cannot be separated from the other, much like use-value cannot be separated from exchange-value. Critiquing Adorno, Hills argues that we need to take into account what people actually *do* with what they’ve consumed (aka the final consumption). Use-value is important to fans because even as they depart from the role of the producer and they find a use for their text, they're still caught up in the exchange-value system because their appropriation of a text is the 'final consumption' stage, pulling the text away from the exchange value and towards the private use-value. Hill introduces a “dialectic of value”, branching off of Adrono’s work, wherein fans are both simultaneously inside and outside the processes of commodification, circling back to the idea that fan objects have a personal “use-value” which is re-positioned within the processes of exchange value. In the same way scholars have understood the gift economy as coexisting in symbiosis rather than conflict (Terranova, 2004), so too does Hills (2002) understand that fandom economy is embedded within the capitalist economy.

But what of fan creation as its stands as labour? Remembering that fan work exists within a gift economy, Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) understand that a *commodity*, namely the original fan text, has a value, but gifts possess fannish worth. Through this stance, value can be understood in Marxist terms of exchange-value, but worth is the qualities associated with things that cannot be equated with price that are significant to the fan community. Worth is aligned with fannish meaning, a meaning that the authors see is unable to be reduced to just an exchange value between producers and audiences. There is more going on with how goods allow audiences to make meaning and express themselves. The act of fan creation is thus an embodiment of identity and construction of meaning. As mentioned prior, attachment to fan objects occurs through the process of meaning making, but this extends into the realm of

creative work. The fan experience is grounded in feeling as Lamerichs (2018) relays, and this results in the production of affective reception, wherein the media text itself generates affects within the audience, but the meaning from that text is only constructed through the reinterpretation of it by the audience. As De Kosnik (2013) explains, fans imbue their fan objects not only with meaning but also with work via their production. Fan labour is, then, an extension of the fans -- is driven by a connection to not only the object of fandom (Peaslee, El-Khoury, & Liles, 2014) but also the fandom itself.

This brings us back to how to understand and theorize fan work in relation to how the fandom understands themselves. Looking again at Stanfill's (2019) position of 'lovebor', the incorporation of passion into work is translated as something that is central to the fan identity. However, as we have hopefully relayed, free labour is not always exploited labour. Lovebor in this way represents a key idea in merging the two fields of view, seeking to incorporate this drive to create fueled by not only the connection to artistic pursuit, but also the fan text. But as Stanfill also points out, lovebor facilitates the production of community. The question of value and exploitation is muddled, especially in debates of who benefits from production in the web 2.0 environment, as Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) highlight that critiques of free labour often reduce audience labour to alienated labour. This thesis, rather, is concerned with how fan work *as it stands* creates a value that is neither value nor worth -- it is affective experience that recontextualizes the notion of soft power.

2.4. O!RUAFAN,2?: Theories of aca-fan and fandom as method

With these key frameworks in mind, the position of the researcher in relation to fandom experience necessitates proper methodological considerations to interrogate the space fanwork occupies in relation to power. In their analysis of productive fanship, Lamerichs (2018) states that "the study of fans requires a methodological framework that can account for its social, creative, and affective features" (p.47). And I completely agree. Upon ethics approval from the SFU REB, one of the means through which this was enacted for this project was through autoethnography. I have relied heavily, as I am sure you have noticed, on my own experiences within the K-pop fandom space, both online and off. This method can be understood through the position as an "insider researcher" (Hodkinson, 2005, cited in Woo, 2015, p.25) or what Lamerichs (2018) calls

“insider ethnography” (p.49). Here, focus is put on the researcher’s lived experience as it relates to the field of study, the researcher themselves being an insider within the subculture or field of study. But simultaneously, autoethnography allows us to expand and add nuance to theory or quantitative findings (Lamerichs, 2018) through the perspective of an insider. As discussed, story is ultimately what is relayed here (Deitering, 2017), providing a perspective that incorporates the researcher’s own history in relation to the subject of study (Lamerichs, 2018). But story, as we know, finds itself ripe with contradictions. On the one hand, autoethnography asks the researcher to provide an honest account of their experiences as part of the community. On the other, it also requires the research to critically analyze their biases and subjectivities as clouding judgement on issues at stake. This tension, ultimately, is important.

I have employed this method primarily for this specific tension, to challenge not only myself but also collective understandings of how fandom operates. Being an insider in a fandom space means adopting the title of “aca-fan” (short of academic fan) or “scholar-fan” (but, for the purposes of this project, let’s go with the first), a position that Hills (2002) describes as "a scholar who also happens to be a fan or becomes a fan through the cases that s/he researches" (p.51). This position is a hybrid position, someone who is not only a researcher of this space but also a member of it too (Guerrero-Pico, 2017; Jenkins, 1992; Hills, 2002). The tension produced from that positionality of both a member and outsider was key to interrogating my own biases or previous understandings of how fan creation operated. But just as the binary between theory and practice is socially constructed, so too is the dichotomy between researcher and participant built by conceptions of what each term entails. Rather, this intersection of identity lends itself to how I aimed to build the knowledge about the practice of fandom produced in this thesis, as Deitering (2017) explains that “knowledge needs to be situated, personalized, and rigorous” (p.10).

There is a hesitancy, though, to view this method as being legitimate, primarily due to the potential of bias in analysis. Some scholars have suggested putting a distance between the self and fandom to rid the researcher of any prejudice or partiality (Silverman, 2006, cited in Lamerichs, 2018), while others have called for employing a middle ground between one’s position as a fan and as a researcher (Conquerhood, 1985, cited in Lamerichs, 2018). While this is understandable, that is exactly the tension discussed above that is required in order to convey the nuances of lived experience.

Instead of a middle ground, the identity of aca-fan is explicit in its identity as a fan as a means to understand the space of study, but also employ theory to understand what is occurring. In the same vein, not everyone can study fans. Contrary to what Duffet (2013) argues, there requires a level of trust (Lamerichs, 2018), and, ultimately, understanding. As previously mentioned, fandom is nuanced at a base level, but comprehending transcultural fandom practices requires an insider knowledge that is based upon years of experience within the framework. It also requires, as discussed, a level of subcultural or social (read: not cultural) capital in order to gain access to certain facets of fandom space and into certain realms of fan work. It is one thing to observe and interview, and an entirely other thing to truly understand how that work operates within the time and space of a subculture such as K-pop fandoms.

In the case of this project, my role as aca-fan informed virtually every step of the data collection process. It facilitated my connection to the community as it was pre-established, informed me of what avenues to investigate, and helped shape the structure of my research questions. For interviews, I know what is involved in fan production because I have *engaged in it*. This helped formulate what questions I was to ask and how I asked them, from the perspective of a fan. It directed how I thought through this project, so often thought of from a top-down ideology, looking at the "dominating" sources of power rather than from the position of those who are still pathologized in implicit and explicit ways. Fandom, then, was the method. Being a fan was the means through which an understanding of structures, culture, and motives was cultivated. This is a tricky idea to play with, but this project operates under the notion that one cannot understand, to the extent that one needs to, fan cultures without being a fan themselves. As the aforementioned scholars have discussed, there needs to be a level of understanding that can only be truly grasped through the experience of *being* a fan. Hence why I say: fandom is the method. Many scholars, as this thesis project will hopefully elucidate, have missed this point; they have missed it by a lot. That is why rather than simply operating under the idea of strictly autoethnography as an insider, this project employs direct fanship as a method of interpretation.

I want to preface this by explicitly stating that while I identify as an aca-fan within the K-pop fandom framework, my fan identity is mainly premised specifically in the ARMY community, those who are fans of BTS. This does not take away from the accuracy of my accounts, as I have not solely been a fan of BTS over the course of my

K-pop fan journey. I have been involved in 3 different K-pop fan communities (BIGBANG, Winner, and now BTS), and thus through an autoethnographic approach, I will consolidate and analyze each of my findings from this historical framework. I believe this to be beneficial, as it grants me as a researcher a vantage point to examine trends, discrepancies, and themes throughout the course of K-pop fan production. However, as stated, much of the accounts within this thesis will be based around BTS and the corresponding ARMY community but will be analyzed through the lens of transcultural fan practices that I believe are relevant to most K-pop fandoms as a whole.

As well, I am not solely a fan approaching this topic from one specific perspective; many of my fan activities have been conducted through both an international and a domestic fan cultural lens. I have participated in Korean-based fan activities, such as music shows, cafe events, exhibitions, and fansite activities that, as this thesis will reveal, transfer over into the international context. However, these practices originate from South Korean fan activities mainly due to proximity. Similarly, I have also conducted and facilitated fan practices that are situated in an international fan context, such as organizing group orders, participating in charity activities, and pre-concert events such as flash mobs. While these practices inform one another, the purpose of this address is to situate myself on the border of both, not fully embedded in either structure. This is only more complicated in dialogue with my position as a researcher, who participates but also holds a critical lens to the activities that ensue. The reason for this ultimately stems back to understanding how these events and practices have transitioned into transnational and *transcultural* practices throughout the network of K-pop fandom spaces.

Autoethnography in this project is not just limited to my participation in fan events, but also includes my role as a fan worker. I draw on my own experience as a BTS-specific group order manager (GOM) since 2019 and how that role translates into providing my community with access to BTS-related merchandise. Put simply, a GOM facilitates group orders of official and unofficial merchandise for fans either in a specific region or country. They work directly with sellers (either fans or the official merchandise platform) as well as the buyers, ship items to a PO box in South Korea, and then work to consolidate and send the items to themselves. From there, GOMs plan what are called

'meetups'[7] in their cities on a number of different dates to give all buyers their orders. This is a common occurrence in K-pop fan communities, as it allows fans to access products and save on shipping costs. In the findings and discussion section, I draw on many of the experiences I have had as a GOM alongside my experiences more broadly as an ARMY in different contexts.

This same positionality of the aca-fan informs the second method employed in this thesis project: participant observation. In autoethnography, my position as an aca-fan allowed me to draw from prior knowledge and personal experience, but it is important to note that my experience, while potentially informative of *some* fan experiences, is not universal. Holding the space of an aca-fan allows me to not only offer perspectives on my own subjective fan experience, but also, in relation to studying the space, establish trust (Lamerichs, 2018). Being a member of the community allowed me to access that community, to know when and where and why events were important, and how to observe certain practices or rituals. Participant observation as a method stems from my autoethnography, the two of which overlap in the discussions of this thesis. I chose this method to complement the inward nature of autoethnography with an outwardness of participating (Lamerichs, 2018), as both a reflection of the internal and external to provide a more concrete understanding of the frameworks of fan creation.

According to Alder and Alder (1987) there are two forms of participant observation: opportunistic and convert. In the former, the researcher conducts their study within a community they are already a part of. In the latter, the researcher becomes a member through their research. While both cases, according to the authors, tend to blur, this was not the case in this project. Instead, I relied on my aca-fan nature and my membership to the K-pop group, BTS' fan community, ARMY. I have explicitly been a part of the fandom since 2016 and have extensive knowledge in both the workings of international ARMY fandom, as well as domestic Korean ARMY fan practices. This stems from living in South Korea on and off from 2014 until 2019, as well as being an active member in online fandom spaces such as Twitter, Tumblr, Daum fancafe, and, more recently, Weverse. Each of these represents a key platform where ARMY from both the international and domestic sphere interact, mainly through forms of

[7] A 'meetup' is where the GOM and buyers meet on a certain date at a designated time, usually in a public setting, to exchange the ordered merchandise.

fan content. Being an established member of specific online and offline ARMY communities allowed me to understand, as a researcher, why certain events held communal significance. Over the course of the 4 months that my research took place, knowing where to find information about birthday celebrations, billboards, giveaways, trading, or anniversary events was absolutely crucial and stemmed solely from my position already within the fandom space.

More specifically, participant observation was conducted in the online fandom space specifically of Twitter, in addition to at fan-led events and official schedules in both Vancouver, Canada, as well as Seoul, South Korea. Online participant observation was undertaken through my own “fan account”, a Twitter account dedicated strictly to fandom participation. I participated in streaming parties[8], conversations surrounding new song/album releases, and general day-to-day fan activities like retweeting pictures or videos. This was on-going, complemented by official events run by entertainment companies within the industry, participant observation was employed at the Love Yourself: Speak Yourself “The Final” concerts in Seoul. Two out of three days were attended, and on each day I also engaged in fan-run events like giveaways and trading that happened outside of the stadium prior to the concert starting. These were all-day events, where I arrived at the stadium in the morning and would engage in fan activities for approximately 5 to 6 hours until it was time to enter the stadium for the actual concert itself. Each concert lasted just over two and a half hours.

On the fan-led events side, in Seoul, I attended cupsleeve events for three of the BTS member’s birthdays: Jungkook, RM, and Jimin. Due to the timing of my stay in Seoul, the primary focus was put on Jimin-related events, as his birthday fell in the middle (October 13th). From September until early December 2019, I attended a total of 35 birthday-specific cupsleeve events (duplicate visits were not counted in this total). At each event, I participated in the buying of member-related beverages where I received a fan-created cupsleeve, as well as other “goods" like photocards and stickers. On average, 2 hours was spent at each event to allow for time to engage with the space, but also observe the variety of fans who participated. All events were discovered and chosen using listings on Twitter by individual fansites or fans, as well as through a fan-

[8] Streaming parties are events where fans will collectively listen to a group’s song or album together, connecting either via a hashtag on Twitter or even moving to platforms like Discord to communicate.

run website, “ARMY Map”. This site is provided in Korean, English, and Chinese, and it acts as a guide to all fan-run events taking place throughout South Korea. ARMY Map is updated almost daily and provides fans with access to not only birthday cupsleeve events, but also locations of billboard or subway advertisements.

In Vancouver, similar events were attended as a participant. These came in the form of two birthday events, one for V and one for Suga, both members of BTS. These took place in December of 2019 and March of 2020 respectively. Like the events in Seoul, these too offered fans “goods" alongside the cupsleeves, like photo cards or stickers. They also offered a curated menu of food or desserts specific to the member, either pertaining to the member’s favourite flavours, or their individual BT21 character[9]. For V’s birthday event, I participated from the beginning until the end of the event, also assisting with photocard giveaways and sticker handouts. Only 3 hours were spent at the Suga event due to time constraints. In both cases, I was informed of the events via Twitter, as I am part of a local ARMY Twitter community. This space is where events are not only announced, but also discussed throughout the planning stages, as the hosts are often a part of the community itself.

As these examples showcase, participant observation, too, is reliant on the knowledge of the “insider”. Lamerichs (2018) highlights how participant observation, like autoethnography, relies on one’s ability to *know* how to participate and in what capacity. But in the same vein, participant observation is contradictory (Thornton, 1995), reiterating earlier issues with the idea of the aca-fan: when one is a part of the group, one adopts the views of the group. However, when one is an *observer* exclusively, one is only able to write what they see. It is the same contradiction found within Bourdieu’s ideas of subjectivism versus objectivism; it is the difference between understanding the world through the individuals within it and opting to objectively analyze the relational structures that shape practices and conventions (Thompson, 1991, cited in Thronton, 1995). To Bourdieu, both sides were too narrow and one sided to truly provide an understanding of the social world.

[9] BT21 are characters designed by the BTS members in partnership with Line Friends Corporation. They were originally announced in 2017 and have since been used to create merchandise for fans.

Being an insider also lent itself to my third method: interviews. Qualitative interviews were employed to understand the nuances of K-pop fan creator experiences and to get a richer sense of how creators themselves viewed their position in relation to the fandom, as well as their artist. To do so, I relied on my insider knowledge of K-pop fan spaces, and recruitment was done through both snowballing methods as well as posts on Twitter, Tumblr, and in fandom-specific Facebook groups. Overall, 24 participants were involved in interviews, all of whom identified as fan workers or creators within one or more K-pop fandoms. Like Woo (2015) describes, being an insider and being a fan afforded for a natural conversation to occur in most cases, moving outside of the realm of artificiality to become more akin to an interaction between two fans. The interviews themselves were semi-structured, with a list of open-ended questions that were referred to but not concretely followed. Each fan was asked what type of content they created or work they performed (a very loose definition of fan work was employed, as to not put limitations on fan production), average time spent on projects, and how they see their work in relation to both the fandom and their artist.

These interviews were conducted face-to-face in both Vancouver, Canada and Seoul, South Korea, as well as virtually, from September 2019 until February 2020. Each interview lasted for an average of an hour and fans were encouraged to go beyond the questions, free to discuss any facet of their work or their experiences within the fandom space. Interviews were also recorded, fully transcribed and thematically coded utilizing inductive, grounded theory to let the data speak for itself. This employed an interpretive reading of the data (Mason, 2002, cited in Jin & Yoon, 2016), as I did not want to allow any potential bias in relation to both labour and the fan experience cloud the initial coding stage of transcription. Similar themes were coded for and analyzed, especially in relation to why fans conduct the work they do and how they see the broader terrain of fan work in relation to fandom practices.

To complement this, the final form of data collection was performed through a mixed methods survey. This survey was hosted online, through the Google Forms platform, and was primarily focused on fans' reception of South Korea in relation to K-pop and Hallyu products. As with interview recruitment, the survey was advertised in common community spaces online. This was mainly on Twitter and Tumblr through my own personal fan and professional accounts, as well as in specific K-pop groups on Facebook with permission from group admins. In total, the survey received 176

responses from over 24 countries. Out of the 176 respondents, 81 of them identify as a fan worker or creator. 11 total types of fan creation were coded for from the survey results, ranging from fan writers, to fan artists, to theorists and even meme-creators. Of these 11 types, the highest percentage coded for were fan writers, with a total of 40 respondents identifying with this position. 32 indicated they create fan art, 14 perform dance covers, 7 work within the realm of music or singing, 8 make fan-related videos, 5 run a fanpage, 2 create K-pop-related memes, 2 host fandom events, 1 does translation work, 1 works as a fansite, and 1 creates fan theories. Of course, many respondents occupy more than one space, an occurrence that also appeared with interviews as well.

In addition to the above methods, general qualitative analysis was applied to tweets surrounding fan work in particular fandom spaces, primarily Twitter. In total, 91 tweets were analyzed in relation to concepts such as fan work, industry success in the global sphere, soft power, as well as conflicts with fan labour. These tweets were collected through qualitative means, a walk-through method of participant observation (Thornton, 1995) but in an online space. This again connects back to my position as an aca-fan, as I frequent fandom spaces on Twitter and Tumblr where I was able to collect these tweets as they appeared in natural time. Many of the tweets collected were in relation to fandom-specific events that occurred and being able to engage with those events afforded me the ability to find fan reactions via tweets or Tumblr posts.

2.4.1. Scope

With each of these methods and my area of focus there are, of course, the scope of this study must also be addressed. The first and key area in which this study situates its scope correlates with my sample of research participants. As stated, my position as a K-pop fan offers certain affordances for studying fans, but these affordances are mainly only within one specific fan community: the BTS ARMY. It is relevant here to note that not everyone who identifies as a fan of a K-pop group is a fan of all K-pop groups. In fact, many within the ARMY community do not claim the title of “K-pop” as being a part of their interests because they do not see BTS as being included under the umbrella of K-pop. This is not the thesis to make that argument and I do not intend to do so, as I believe each fan holds their own subjective definition of the term ‘K-pop’ that are all equally valid. However, the key point here is that each fan exists within their own fandom sphere, whether that be dedicated to one group or multiple. While I listen to a variety of

Korean artists, I consider myself a part of only one fandom, that being ARMY. As such, while I did recruit in a variety of different fandom spaces, due to my position as an ARMY, many of the responses I did receive were from ARMY members. This again goes back to what Lamerichs (2018) discusses as the trustworthiness of the aca-fan. ARMY who know me or who have interacted with me in the fandom space had a higher chance of trust than those who either come from a different context or are a fan of a different group.

In the same vein, my interview sample was predominantly from North America and South Korea due to language and proximity. These contexts are also those which I as a researcher am most familiar with and going back to the idea of access, these two areas represent fandom spaces I am familiar or have experience with, therefore I was aware of how the practices of labour manifest or exist in each context. Time and space played a factor here as well, as the majority of my interviews as well as participation in fan events occurred in person and required me to be in either Vancouver, Canada, or Seoul, South Korea to do so. My interviews, however, maintained a wider scope, as I received responses from over 24 countries, and this was due to the accessibility and ease of the method itself.

Ultimately, however, the most significant area of mention is simply the project in and of itself, as subjectivity is just that: subjectivity. It is not universal. These experiences are not and cannot represent the whole that is the subcultural terrain of K-pop fandoms. Taking a monolithic approach to viewing K-pop fans as part of one fandom in this fashion is detrimental to any attempt at a nuanced understanding of how fandoms function, and is, frankly, also just plain incorrect. We are dealing with individual's personal connections here, their loves, their passions. Those cannot be universalized. I do not want this project to fall into the same pattern of others who have attempted to apply theory or practice in a blanketed sophistication, attempting to pass a simple study's results as being the defining feature of fandom. This has happened both within the general fandom studies practice, as well as in the attempts at studying fandom that *Hallyu* scholarship has performed. What I present here is not that. There is no way to document or express the unique experiences of all fans of K-pop groups due to the personal nature of their attachment and the ways in which their own intersectionality informs their expression of fannish affect. I cannot endeavour to claim that I am revealing the entirety of experience; that is simply impossible. Rather, from this study, I

aim to elucidate how the general themes of fan labour in K-pop fandoms observed through the various methods I have employed indicated a shift in power relations and dynamics of value.

Chapter 3.

From Seoul, with love: riding the waves of *Hallyu* and the network of transcultural fandom

"Can you believe we really just braved a typhoon for Joon[10]?"

We're sitting at one of the cafe's long benches, the wind raging outside as it sweeps up the umbrella of one fellow ARMY waiting to come inside. The lineup was (and still *is*) around the block, but nobody's surprised: today's event is something else. It's just a few days before BTS leader RM's birthday, and my friend and I are sitting in a quaint little music cafe right by Gwangnaru station (a place, I admitted much early on, I had never been to before). We were here, of course, to celebrate RM's birthday with the rest of the ARMY who were spread out throughout the cafe, desperate to get our hands on the beautifully designed *mono*[11] cupsleeves, stickers, photocards, and even macarons. It wasn't just that though; cupsleeve events are an *experience* in the best way possible. Cafes elaborately decorated in the fashion of each member, sometimes even, if you're lucky (and apparently today we were), member-themed treats to go along with your beverage of choice. And today's was no exception. The cafe was arranged in true RM style; wooden accents, soft music playing, records displayed throughout, and even a small shrine-esque arrangement of photos and books all pertaining to his interests. It was perfect.

As we sit and wait for our drinks to be served, I notice the conversations around us. As with any K-pop event you attend, there is more than just Korean being spoken. English, Pourtugese, Chinese, Japanese--fans from all over have congregated here in a collective celebration of our favourite leader. It's thrilling, being in the presence of so many and knowing that we all are here for the same thing. But the amazing thing was how these conversations were occurring between different parties; native Portuguese speakers speaking Korean, explaining to those around us that they had come to Korea

[10] The nickname of BTS' leader, RM, whose real name is Kim Namjoon.

[11] *Mono* is RM's second mixtape, released on October 28, 2018 (Hareed, 2018).

solely for the birthday seasons. I was stunned. They flew thousands of kilometers just to experience these fan-led events.

I shouldn't have been shocked, though; this was nothing new. While less extreme, I, myself, had just moved roughly 8000 kilometers to be immersed in K-pop fan-run events (though, under different circumstances of course) and it wasn't even the first time I'd travelled for K-pop. But what stood out to me was the growth and expansion of this practice of pilgrimage, if you will. It was indicative of not only K-pop's global reach, but also the knowledge of domestic Korean fan practices such as these events within the international fandom spheres. Here we all were, different cultural backgrounds and positionalities, congregating in the same space. Somehow, from all corners of the globe, we had all found the same event, motivated by the same love and interest. There was no government-led event or tourism promotion within this space; this was all fans. And that was significant because it signaled a new shift in the understanding of how K-pop moves as a transcultural text, a shift that while existing before, was not always acknowledged.

3.1. History of cultural policy in South Korea

The Korean Wave, also known as *Hallyu*, was, for all intents and purposes, an accident (Oh, 2018). Birthed from the rapid speed of networked globalization in the early 2000s, the Korean Wave began finding its first initial swell with the success of dramas within the East Asian market. The real starting point of *Hallyu* and the origin of its name is highly contested within academic circles, some marking the start with Winter Sonata's success in Japan as early as 2004 (Hayashi & Lee, 2007), while others argue it can really be marked by K-pop group HOT's branching into the Chinese market (Jung, 2015; Fuhr, 2016), a marker that many also attribute to the beginning of the term *Hallyu* (Lee, 2015). While the exact start may be hard to track, what is not is how *Hallyu* and the broader Korean cultural industries became an integral part of the country's international relations over the course of the last decade, becoming a primary factor in the nation's pursuit of soft power.

Within the realm of *Hallyu* scholarship, as it is known, the notion of soft power in relation to cultural products like K-pop is not a novel discussion. In a general sense soft power is, according to scholar Joseph Nye (2004), the theorist who coined the term, a country's ability to persuade rather than coerce others into wanting "the outcomes that

you want" (p.5). It is, in Internet cultural terms, a country's ability to be an influencer. Juxtaposed against 'hard power', i.e. a country's influence through force via their economic and military presence, soft power looks at co-opting through attraction of culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye & Kim, 2013). It is a country's ability to shape the international preferences specifically, to attract audiences in the pursuit of acquiescence (Watson, 2012). This manifests in not only offering economic aid, acts of charity and promotion of norms, but also in the presentation of a country's history, ideas, and, ultimately, culture. Culture represents a key aspect, especially for the work of this paper, as this has been one of the many means through which the South Korean state has sought soft power via their cultural diplomacy strategies.

Cultural diplomacy, especially for South Korea, has been a key ingredient in the soft power recipe. Put broadly, we can understand cultural diplomacy as a form of foreign diplomacy focused on the exchange of ideas and mutual understanding (Nye & Kim, 2013). Scholars have defined cultural diplomacy along the lines of public diplomacy, as culture is used to support a country's foreign policy goals (Mark, 2009, cited in Kim & Jin, 2016). Through cultural diplomacy, states are able to utilize the richness of their culture as a point of public diplomacy, promoting their national identifiers in order to either construct or strengthen relations within the international political arena (Kozymka, 2014, cited in Kim & Jin, 2016). It is through these means that nations are able to promote their culture to construct a nation brand, where the cultural products become commodities that represent the nation state in the global sphere (Aronczyk, 2013, cited in Kim & Jin, 2016). As Watson (2012) indicates, it is that exact idea of constructing a nation brand through cultural goods that South Korea has undertaken with the promotion of the cultural industries and state-led soft power initiatives.

The cultural or creative industries were not always the focus of South Korean foreign policy, but the state has progressively become more focused on them as a site of national growth. According to Kim and Jin (2016), state-led developmental models and an export-oriented economy have been a fundamental part of government policy since the 1960s, with top-down enforcement of regulations and reforms being the norm up until the 1980s. South Korea has been regarded as a developmental state since the 1960s, where a state-driven approach to the economy has been enacted (Lee, 2013). Following the Korean war, the 1950s saw broadcasting become an integral part in the

re-building of the country and strengthening post-war recovery (Lee, 2016). Under Park Chung Hee's authoritarian government of the 1960s, popular culture was unable to express social and political awareness, instead focusing on constructing a favourable image of South Korea (Lee, 2016; Lee, 2013; Kim, 2016). It was not, according to Lee (2016), until the 1990s when political democratization and economic neoliberalization essentially laid the groundwork for what we now know today as the Korean wave, aka *Hallyu*.

The 1990s were a key time in our understanding of *Hallyu* as both a cultural product and soft power tool, as they saw movements on all levels towards utilizing the cultural industries for national gain on the governmental end. During this time, the cultural sector saw the vast deregulation of content and the promotion of creative expression paralleling a freer consumer atmosphere of individuals who were interested in consuming popular culture (Berg, 2015; Lee, 2016). Seeing the potential, there has been a steady progression of *Hallyu* becoming embedded within government policy, predominantly starting with the Kim Young Sam government in the 1990s with focus put on the official globalization policy (Nye & Kim, 2013; Fuhr, 2016; Lee, 2011). The Kim Young Sam government not only abolished pre-censorship of media to allow for more creative freedom (Kim, 2016), but also set up the Cultural Industries Directorate in 1994, prioritizing the industrialization of culture and internationalization of Korean culture in the global sphere (Lee, 2013). The succeeding Kim Dae Jung government of 1998 to 2003 continued this, providing financial support of 148.5 million to the cultural industry (Nye & Kim, 2013), as well as shifting the previous Ministry of Culture and Sports to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism with the hopes of both culture and tourism becoming an economic resource for the country (Kim, 2016). Kim's government also advocated for the cultural industries occupying a section of the country's pillar resources, giving a boost to IT and cultural production following the 1997 financial crisis (Lee, 2013; Fuhr, 2016). This revealed itself through the enactment of the Basic Law of Cultural Industries Promotion in 1999, where a policy framework was constructed in order to define the cultural industries and put their promotion as a state responsibility (Lee, 2013; Fuhr, 2016). This was significant, as it indicated a direct shift towards utilizing culture as a key component in South Korea's economy.

Moving into the 2000s, the uptake of regional popularity in Korean cultural products spurred governments to catapult *Hallyu* as a means of fostering foreign

diplomacy. Under the Roh Moo Hyun's government that followed in the mid 2000s, more cultural diversity in products was advocated for (Nye & Kim, 2013) and *Hallyu* was acknowledged as an economic potential for the nation (Kim, 2016; Lee, 2011). Following the popularity of the Korean drama "Winter Sonata" in Japan, the government became hopeful that this new "wave" would be a catalyst for transnational cultural dialogue, mainly within the Asian region (Lee, 2013; Fuhr, 2016). The following Lee Myung Bak government of 2008 to 2013 was more export-driven, putting promotions into place such as the Brand Korea initiative to enhance the nation's image through popular culture, desiring to maximize the market and brand value that *Hallyu* offered (Nye & Kim, 2013; Lee, 2013; Lee, 2015). This signalled not only utilizing culture as a means of diplomacy but leveraging it as the nation's image on the world stage.

This Brand Korea initiative coincided with a focus on utilizing Korean cultural products as a specific national brand. It is also during this time that there is a shift towards branding these cultural products with the "K-" marker, with the government creating initiatives such as the National Brand Committee and Korean Wave promotion taskforce (Lee, 2013). Under Lee's government, soft power became an area to pursue and expand, with the construction of a national brand and the combining of culture and technology under the umbrella of the "creative industry" (Lee, 2011). *Hallyu* was seen as a core tool of soft power in relation to nation branding, with Lee aiming to even expand beyond culture industries into more creative industry sectors like fashion and food (Kim & Jin, 2016). In the years that followed, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism alongside the Korea Trade-Investment promotion agency set aside a budget for culturally-related programs in order to promote South Korea's national image (Nye & Kim, 2013), as well as the Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) focused on orchestrating all government and industry endeavours to create *Hallyu* (Lee, 2015). Government policy and the incorporation of more Korean Wave-focused practices paralleled the increasing popularity of Korean cultural products, both regionally and globally.

3.2. The Birth of *Hallyu* 1.0: A fellow 90's baby

As mentioned above, the popularity of South Korean television programs and music groups abroad came as a surprise to many. This was because Korean content, until the 1990s, was largely only consumed and distributed within Korea itself (Jung,

2015). However, a restructuring of the global economy following the financial crises in the late 90s and early 2000s led to the restructuring of the Korean economy, with one of the most notable changes being the shift to focusing on cultural products (Kang, 2014; Jung, 2016; Fuhr, 2016). While it happened by accident, many factors have contributed to the rise of *Hallyu*, specifically the increasing production and sales cost of Hong Kong films, the growth of Japanese satellite TV stations, the rise of Taiwanese cable TV stations, and the devaluation of the Korean won following the IMF crisis in the last 1990s (Kim, 2018). This resulted in neighboring Asian countries preferring to buy cheap Korean media products, leading to an extensive increase in Korean drama exports (Fuhr, 2016). On the Korean side, the creative industry was becoming more and more saturated, needing to find new markets and thus leading to an expansion outwards (Nam, 2013). The government was eager to offer acceptable images, values, and styles to surrounding countries, emerging as a competitive player in the profitable regional media market against Chinese TV market (Nam, 2013). What resulted was the rise in popularity of these cultural products, namely Korean dramas. This first initial uptake in the 'waves' of *Hallyu*, known as *Hallyu* 1.0, was primarily concerned with Korean dramas becoming popular throughout Asia (Jung, 2015). Along with this came the term itself emerging in the vernacular surrounding this popularity.

But what is *Hallyu*, exactly? Kim (2018) states that the word itself stands for "Korea" and "stream/flow"; in Korean "*han*" and "*ryu*" (p.26). In regard to meaning and impact, Kim and Jin (2016) define *Hallyu* as "the rapid growth of domestic cultural industries and the exports of domestic popular culture to the world" (p.5514). According to Lee (2015) the term was first coined by Chinese media in the late 1990s, used to describe the sudden popularity of Korean pop culture among Chinese youth. Others, however, claim the term was coined by the Chinese-speaking world in the late 90s to refer to the popularity of Korean dramas, particularly the 1997 airing of "What is Love?" on Chinese television (Kim, 2018). It did not just stick to China, however, as dramas began to find popularity within other parts of the East Asian region, one particular example being the wild popularity of drama "Winter Sonata" in Japan following its 2003 airing (Chung, 2015). The popularity in Japan represents a key moment in the history of the Korean Wave, as Oh and Park (2012) state that Japan would go on to represent *Hallyu*'s biggest and most loyal market.

It did not, evidently, just stop at Korean dramas, however, and for the purposes of this project, our focus will be primarily directed towards the role K-pop specifically played in relation to *Hallyu*. Some even argue that the term was created by the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism to promote popular K-pop songs in the Chinese-speaking world (Kim, 2018). Along with this focus on the cultural industries also came the restructuring of the popular music scene, particularly the commodification and rationalization of it through the creation of what was called an “idol system” (Kang, 2014). The 1990s were an important time in our understanding of what K-pop has become today, as it brought with it a new generation of young people who had grown up consuming American media products due to the de-regulation of South Korea’s media systems and who possessed different values from the older generation (Jung, 2016; Jung, 2015). South Koreans were able to travel without government permits, the ban on Japanese cultural products was lifted, and Korean cultural products were no longer restricted on what they could discuss (Kim, 2018). There was a new focus on global culture, and a new urge to adapt Korean cultural products to the trends youth were seeing overseas, particularly that in American media (Fuhr, 2016). Export-orientation on a broader cultural industries scale also became a necessity for small-to-mid sized music companies in South Korea due to the decrease in record sales from the 1997 financial crisis.

This new global culture and focus on exports greatly impacted Korea’s music scene, resulting in the birth of what is known as “idol music”, aka K-pop. First “wave” K-pop groups followed the Japanese “aidoru” system, with an audition process, in-house training, and “manufacturing” production style initiated by what was to become one of the biggest music production companies in South Korea, SM Entertainment and its CEO, Lee Soo-man (Jung, 2015; Lee, 2015). This system would become the basis for later K-pop companies such as JYP Entertainment and YG Entertainment (Jung, 2015), bleeding into our later discussions of the *Hallyu*’s second wave. One group who can be attributed to this radical shift in music production is Seo Taiji and the Boys, arguably one of the first “idol” groups. Seo Taiji and the Boys seemed to represent this new generation, who moved away from older generations of pop music known as ‘gayo’ into a newer, more ‘globalized’ sound (Lee, 2016). Due in large part to the restructuring of broadcasting at this time, the culture of music shows shifted away from singers and towards idol programming. The concept of music shows increased in number, oriented

towards the new youth market, and broadcasting became deregulated resulting in the creation of private commercial stations such as SBS in 1991, and Mnet and KMTV in 1995. Seo Taiji were the first Korean group to incorporate American influence into their aesthetic (Jung, 2016), and the members became the lead figures in K-pop's future direction (Kim, 2018). Seo Taiji and the Boys thus represented a new shift domestically in a “modernized” Korean pop music that incorporated not only new sounds, but also elements of youth culture such as fashion and dance (Fuhr, 2016). Alongside this, though, the group seemed to symbolize the direction Korean music was heading in terms of international reach and production.

The success of Seo Taiji and the Boys and the construction of the idol system led to even more success abroad for Korean artists, many of which were under the supervision of SM Entertainment. H.O.T, a group coming out of this SM star making process, became the most popular boy band in South Korea before becoming popular in China in the early 2000s, both through mainstream media but also through online spaces where fan communities congregated (Jung, 2015; Fuhr, 2016). This first wave surrounding K-pop, though not as impactful as its successor, was heavily dominated by the success of idol groups from the entertainment company, SM Entertainment, finding mass regional popularity in East Asian countries by carrying on these new traditions of globalized signifiers like fashion, language, and music (Jung, 2015). S.E.S was a girl group out of SM as well, but was specifically designed to be marketable internationally, even going so far as to include a Japanese Korean member (Maliangkay, 2015, cited in Jung, 2015), a trend that would carry on into the 2.0 era.

3.3. Moving into *Hallyu* 2.0 and the global expansion

If the 1.0 wave can be originally attributed to the regional success of Korean dramas in the 2000s, the second wave of the mid-2010s undeniably can be characterized by 2 interrelated concepts: transnationalization and, you guessed it, K-pop. But what is K-pop, really? The definition is a tricky one. Looking again at the OED, K-pop is defined as simply “Korean pop music” (“K-pop”, 2016). While straightforward, again we see how definitions fail to encapsulate the true essence of the terms we are working with. Kim (2018) expands this definition by stating that K-pop encompasses all forms of Korean popular music, regardless of genre. Others have not just expanded it beyond genre, but also extended it into an understanding of how K-pop acts as a

metatext incorporating elements beyond the music itself (Han, 2017). Ultimately, however, K-pop functions as a transnational cultural good. By transnational, what we are referring to here is the interlinking and interactions of communities beyond national borders (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994, cited in Jung, 2009). In this wave, which scholars have dubbed *Hallyu* 2.0 (Jin, 2016; Shim & Noh, 2012), K-pop specifically became a product consumed on a global scale, an occurrence that has both government intervention and the spreadable nature of Web 2.0 to thank (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Fuhr, 2016). Many scholars will place the birth of *Hallyu* 2.0, this move into the transnational, in 2012 as it marked the release of PSY's unexpected crossover hit, Gangnam Style (Lee & Kuwahara, 2014; Han, 2017; Sung, 2014; King-O'Riain, 2020). However, I want to pause here to emphasize that in the context of K-pop and K-pop fandoms, "Gangnam Style" cannot be a starting place. There is a difference, here, between virality and popularity, between reception and *acception*. "Gangnam Style" was an ephemeral, viral hit; it was a meme. If the second Korean Wave is marked by its acquisition of a transnational *fandom*, as we will see, then attributing the start of this wave to the meme that is "Gangnam Style" does not adequately fit this definition. That is what is lacking here: an understanding of the difference between virality and establishment of a fandom.

Within this realm, K-pop's success during this period in attracting global audiences has been heavily attributed to the hybridized nature of K-pop as a cultural form, with "Gangnam Style" being no exception. By hybridity, scholars have discussed how K-pop exhibits the melding of two or more cultural forms or styles across national or cultural boundaries (Kraidy, 2005). Bhabha (1994) understands hybridity as the forming of identities within the space between the global and the local, wherein incorporating elements of different cultures in constructing a "third space" has allowed K-pop to be positively received by foreign, non-Korean speaking audiences (Jin, 2016). This is evidenced in the linguistic sense of incorporating English into K-pop songs (Fuhr, 2016; Chun, Lo, & Park, 2017), the expansion beyond just American influences into integrating global music influences (Min, Jin, & Han, 2019), as well as even utilizing foreign producers to create the music (Oh & Park, 2012). To this end, the hybridity theory in relation to K-pop has been viewed as a means through which at the beginning stages of production, the 2.0 wave K-pop products were globally oriented.

With the elements of the physical product in place, the ability to access global audiences is a crucial, if not *the* crucial element required for K-pop's success in this

period. Scholars have all pointed to two elements that made this possible: Web 2.0 and government initiatives. Focusing on this first portion, the second wave of *Hallyu* can be understood as one primarily focused on the online space, marked by this shift towards connecting with global audiences through the participatory tools Web 2.0 as afforded. Social media played a key role in the acquisition of the transnational reach of K-pop, as platforms like YouTube offered the right tools to host the highly visual and linguistic elements of K-pop music videos (Lie, 2013; Jung & Shim, 2014; Kim, 2018). Social media sites like YouTube and Twitter became the main avenues through which companies were able to reach global audiences due to their spreadable nature of both the platform and the K-pop content (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Ono & Kwon, 2013; Oh & Park, 2012). This was crucial in understanding how K-pop as a global media product was able to reach international audiences, alongside the government policies in place.

3.3.1. *Hallyu* 2.0 and policy

These policies were enacted through this perspective of transnationalism to leverage the Korean Wave, specifically, as a means of soft power. From 1999 to 2011, moving from the 1.0 era into the 2.0 era, exports of Korean dramas and films doubled, with an export revenue of *Hallyu* products recording a 553% growth between 2001 and 2011, a growth that cannot be explained without understanding the role of government support (Berg, 2015). This increase is due in large part to the ways in which governmental discourse also shifted, as Kim and Jin (2016) indicate how, while the governments of Kim and Roh in the 1.0 stage stressed the importance of industry, Lee in the 2.0 wave highlighted it in the context of building a nation brand and *Hallyu* as a global bridge to Korean culture. The following Park Geun-hye administration, as controversial as it was due to the 2017 impeachment (Choe, 2017), approached it from both perspectives, focusing though on the role of ICTs in expanding *Hallyu*, promoting convergence between Korean cultural products and ICTs. This convergence aligned with Park's plan to build a new creative economy based on the creative industries (Berg, 2015). There has also, according to Lee (2013), became an evolving partnership between the cultural industry itself and government bodies over the Korean Wave, with entertainment companies collaborating and working with governmental bodies to promote Korea abroad. Such examples as the Visit Korea year committee and Korean Cultural Centre in Paris sponsoring SM's "SM Town Love" world tour in Paris, as well as

the creation of SM Town and the KT K-Live concert halls in Seoul (Kim & Jin, 2016). Under the Park administration, K-pop began to be rapidly integrated with other cultural industries, utilized as a promotional tool in the global sphere.

In this pursuit of soft power within recent years has been the implementation of K-pop, specifically, into nation-branding tactics. Having generated $177 Million USD worth of exports in 2011 (Maliangkay, 2015), the Korean government during the 2.0 era was highly aware of the success internationally of K-pop. As a result, the government has been quick to leverage K-pop in its cultural diplomacy efforts, supporting such initiatives as a K-pop-specific YouTube channel that was established in 2011 as a way of attaching global audiences (Fuhr, 2016). Even further, the K-pop as a soft power tool has become a national project (Oh, 2018; Choi & Maliangkay, 2014), seeing the promotion of Korean sentiments and commodities through K-pop groups such as Girls Generation (Epstein, 2014) or BigBang (Kim, 2018). This extends into the technical sphere, too, as K-pop has links to the digital economy as well, with K-pop idols often advertising for known Korean tech companies such as Samsung or LG. This goes beyond simply visual advertisements and even blends into the products created through K-pop: the music. This is, as Kim points out, a strategic marketing tactic, manifesting in music and accompanying videos such as BigBang's "Lollipop" song. Instances such as this represented a key feature in cultivating *Hallyu* as a soft power tool at all levels of the industry (Lee, 2013), constructing a definition of K-pop as a product beyond just the music and into the realm of overall experience.

3.3.2. I'm a big fan: K-pop fandom and theories of the transcultural

While these issues have still transferred into our contemporary understandings of *Hallyu* and more specifically K-pop as a cultural product, there needs to be more emphasis put on the role fan labour has played in that success. More importantly, how the fandom has shifted from being merely transnational into transcultural *through* labour practices. Previous approaches to understanding the globalized nature of K-pop fandom have only put emphasis on the fascination of international audiences, studies focusing on really unearthing why fans are fans. Some posed cultural proximity (Oh & Park, 2012), while others proposed the opposite, looking towards the tensions of cultural difference (Min, Jin, & Han, 2019). Others have even taken the position of subcultural resistance to the mainstream, regardless of cultural context (Han, 2017). While several

studies nodded to the effort fans put into disseminating and promoting K-pop artists in the global arena (Otzamgin & Lyan, 2013; Sung, 2014), very few have investigated even in contemporary times the efficacy and intricacy of globalized K-pop fan labour in relation to the product's international success.

Focusing specifically on fans, K-pop fandoms have often been the site of focus for contemporary *Hallyu* scholarship. Their presence in the 2.0 wave was crucial, as Otzmagin and Lyan (2013) claim they are the "agent[s] of globalization" who have aided directly in the expansion and success of K-pop products abroad (p.70). Understanding how this global fandom can be seen as transnational has been a point that not only exists within *Hallyu* scholarship but has also permeated traditional discussions of fandom studies to an extent. Jenkins (2006) has proposed an understanding of "pop cosmopolitanism", viewing transnational cultural products like anime through the lens of the transcultural (p.156). Through this perspective, the affordances of the online sphere offer an understanding of how global cultural products can be disseminated and consumed through new, more networked avenues in the age of media convergence. This helps to theorize how K-pop amassed such a globalized following of fans, in what Jenkins calls a diversification of fandom spaces, but it only goes so far. Hodkinson (2002), alternatively, has proposed viewing international fandoms of global media texts as being "translocal communities", global fandoms that expand beyond the realm of the online into the physical world (cited in Duffett, 2013, p.240). While this is useful for our understanding, particularly later in this project, of how the immaterial labour of fans manifest in physical spaces like cupsleeve or giveaway events, both the idea of pop cosmopolitanism and translocal communities fail to conceptualize the cultural aspect of shared experiences beyond the local or the global.

The focus, instead, needs to be put on how an understanding of transnationalism relates to the idea of transculturalism. Rather than being simply oriented towards the concept of nation-states, transculturalism can be defined as "as a means of capturing the dialogical possibilities of affinities of experience that both literally and figuratively exceed the parameters of the nation-state" (Lau, 2003, cited in Morimoto, 2013, 1.3). Considering Annett's (2014) definition, transcultural is the cultural aspect of the transnational. Transcultural fandom does not necessarily mean that culture becomes a melting pot, but how specific practices (in the case of this thesis, specific labour practices) are carried out and influenced by moving through different cultural context. It

is about the differences that shape the practice as much as it is about the practice influencing the differences. It is, in Anne Tsing's terms, the friction that is important. Scholars Lori Morimoto and Bertha Chin (2017) understand that by transcultural, we are not just speaking to a specific culture, geography, or national difference/similarity, but the transcultural nature of fandom stems from a moment of affinity between the fan and the transcultural object. This circles back to Annett's (2014) understanding whereby transcultural fandom, in particular, finds "a sense of connection across difference, engaging with each other through a shared interest while negotiating the frictions that result from their social and historical contexts" (p.6). This move beyond the transnational and into the transcultural allows us to "conceive of extranational subject positions that assert themselves to varying and always shifting degrees at the levels of both the individual fan and fandom generally" (Morimoto & Chin, 2017, p.176) and understand how acts of shared experience even within the online sphere represent the ways in which fandom spaces can be understood as transcultural.

This is not to say this idea has not been explored in the context of K-pop. Han (2017) has investigated the ways in which the tension with mass culture represents a constant dialectic that characterizes K-pop transcultural fandom. Similarly, Min, Jin, and Han (2019) have explored how the dual nature of K-pop fandom as both transnational and transcultural has allowed for fans to develop an affinity for a form of Korean culture. In both cases, transcultural fandom is emphasized as giving reason or motivations within the fandom context. However, in the same capacity that fan studies as a whole is in dire need of shifting focus away from Western spaces of fandom, so too should *Hallyu* studies direct its focus towards how the interplay of cultures across geographical boundaries traverses the barriers into the transcultural. It is crucial, for studies have merely premised themselves on specific sanctions of transnational fandom, emphasizing how the fans of K-pop are *transnational* rather than investigating the ways in which fan practices and fan culture in K-pop spaces have become *transcultural*. This is important, as scholars have too heavily focused on the reasons as to why fans are fans of K-pop and debating the extent to which it relies on the "Koreanness" or hybrid nature of the product. Rather, I want to focus the argument here on how the culturally mixed, the blending and adopting that happens within transcultural K-pop fandom spaces signifies a push towards a potential 3.0 era marked by grassroots initiatives and a shift from top-down to bottom-up. Though we are not implementing the pop cosmopolitanism theory,

Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) offer a better understanding of how the transculturality is what it is important, stating

> Despite debates about "odorlessness" or "fragrance," what travels most readily across national borders may well be that which is the least culturally pure, that which is already shaped by multiple points of contact between dispersed cultural influences. These "impure" products create openings for pop cosmopolitans to find something familiar even amid their search for diversity, and they give expression to the unsettled feelings of diasporic audiences that may not feel fully at home in either culture. (p.281)

As the authors state, it is neither the "ordorlessness" nor the purity of the cultural product that resonates with audiences, but the space in between that allows for openings of recontextualizing culture. These openings as the quote relays are the exact places that fandom moves from the space of being merely transnational into being transcultural in shared practices that emerge and evolve through the friction of difference as common ground.

Global network of fan labour

In the fandom space, contact and connection are absolutely key, as to speak of transcultural fandom is to speak of participation. Audiences, as we know, are not always passive; they create, consume, and reconfigure media texts through their creative practices, and K-pop fandoms are no exception. They have been the driving force behind the success of K-pop abroad, as Choi and Maliangkay (2014) claim that they are not a derivative but autonomous from the industry, led entirely by global fans. One of the biggest forms this comes in has been translation, a practice that has emerged out of the anime subbing discussed earlier in this thesis (Fuhr, 2016). Translation, as will be later analyzed in our discussion section, is one of the key pillars in overcoming the language barriers that initially prevented K-pop from crossing national borders.

K-pop fan labour does not only exist within the realm of the fandom, however. The government and industry have also recognized the potential fandoms have in the success of K-pop products, adopting fan labour practices like dance covers into Korean cultural diplomacy efforts. Dance covers[12] have quickly become a site through which industry and government have moved to capitalize on K-pop's popularity, with K-pop

[12] A practice of fans covering K-pop dances for either public performance or online video sharing

dance cover contests becoming a phenomenon over the last several years (Fuhr, 2016). This is yet another means through which placemaking and K-pop tourism in the country is taking shape, but the key ingredient here is the fan labour that went into not only the original practice of dance covers (which, as any fan will tell you, still is thriving within the community) but also the work put into contestants of these government-led events. As Choi (2014) discusses, the creativity and work of fans is never regarded at the state or industry level, as it is too “preoccupied with how to funnel the cultural allegiance of fans into a lucrative pilgrimage business to the self-designated Mecca of K-pop, Korea” (p.113). The emphasis is put on the fandom as it exists, rather than *how* it operates as a means of cultivating affinity, and that is the exact space that ultimately need to be regarded.

On the industry side, fan led initiatives and participation has become the site of free promotion through the configuration of affective and immaterial labour in the digital realm, specifically on the same sites fans consume official content. Earlier discussions of YouTube as a place for 2.0 fans to congregate also lends itself to understanding how in the age of ‘prosumption’, fans themselves create paratexts surrounding their idols that fashions them as globalized labourers (Khiun, 2013; Choi & Maliangkay, 2014). Using the example of KCON LA, a convention dedicated to all things Korean culture (KCON, 2021), Kim (2018) discusses how organizers rely on the affective labour of the global fanbase to create media campaigns. This is a common practice, as Choi and Maliangkay (2014) explain how the industry itself relies on the input of fans, their work they do in suggestions or feedback being integral for the industry’s longevity and success in the international market (Oh & Park, 2012). The authors explain that "instead of being a buyer with no other power but purchasing end products, they are trailblazers, expanding the cultural breadth and depth of K-pop products. Their 'cultural brickwork' braces global K-pop strongholds, as their labour of love furnishes the productive core with distributive momenta" (p.10). This fuels the need for a connection between fan club representatives or key figures in fandoms, viewing audiences and international fans as adjunct producers.

But as Kim (2018) reiterates, fan labour even in this capacity is a complicated issue, as

> in the broad scheme of things, many of these fans might be involuntary actors in the manipulative workings of affective labor; but many would attest that they were there for the sheer joy of being part of a large community that endorses and celebrates their passion...it feels strange to witness fiery love born out of icy machinery to spin profit, but in K-pop parlance, striking sincerity and calculating profitability might have no trouble being synonyms. (p. 197)

And this is precisely the tension this thesis aims to unpack. Scholars have explained how despite the affordances and perceived liberties that social media sites offer, that user-generated content from fans can still be strategically implemented for the industry's advantage (Kim, 2016; Swan, 2018; Khiun, 2013). While this understanding is useful in its theorization, this project instead is focused on shifting the focus towards the potentials for power that transcultural fandoms have through their labour practices.

3.3.3. Fan labour and the (de)construction of the nation brand

K-pop fan labour can therefore be understood as transcultural in that labour transcends cultural barriers to become practices across groups and communities. In the same way Morimoto and Chin (2017) discussed how fan practices can be understood as transcultural in nature in their ability to transcend not only geographical boundaries, but also the rigidity of cultural practices, so too does fan labour in K-pop fandoms exist in the same capacity. But in the same way, so too is fan labour not necessarily premised on the *Korean* aspect of K-pop. This is not to say that fans do not care about the "K" in K-pop--this is not that discussion. Rather, respondents to the survey indicated that their inclination towards South Korea and Korean culture more broadly was not directly tied to their affinity for their idols. As discussed, while K-pop may have been a gateway for some in the past, those more recently indicate that K-pop has not had an influence on their perception of South Korea or desire to learn more about the culture. For some, K-pop has even worsened their view of South Korea, pointing to the apparent mistreatment of K-pop stars as labourers, the patriarchal values of the country, and hyper-conservative nature of Korean politics.

The movements set at the institutional level to utilize K-pop as a means of attracting audiences towards South Korea has been successful, but with it has come a hyperawareness of the country in all capacities. This was not necessarily the goal of such endeavours, indicating that the measures to glamourize and brand the nation as a

place based on the image of its cultural products is no longer salient. As discussed, strategies to capitalize on transnational fandoms through the appropriation of fan practices like dance covers or video contests continue to exist this day, but the question of success is hard to quantify. While tourism is one quantifiable way success has been measured as this will be discussed in the following paragraphs, if we are to look at the qualitative elements of affective attachment, the argument cannot fully be made. This is evidenced through many survey respondents indicating that they had no desire to travel to South Korea, comfortable to separate their own experiences with K-pop from the greater landscape of Korean culture.

As discussed, K-pop has been a key tool in the acquisition of soft power for South Korea, especially within the *Hallyu* 2.0 era. The government has provided support for the cultural industries and even integrated the promotion of K-pop products through diplomacy efforts. Explicit examples of this rest in the sponsoring of K-pop events like KCon or local K-pop dance cover contests, like Vancouver's annual K-pop Contest hosted by the Korean Consulate General (@kpopcontestvan, 2019). The government domestically utilizes K-pop artists in tour campaigns, as elucidated by BTS as Seoul City ambassadors (Yonhap, 2020) or EXO previously being used by the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and the Korea Tourism Organization in a tourism campaign for the state (Adams, 2018). It reveals itself through K-pop specific tour packages hosted by the government, K-pop performances used to celebrate political engagements such as the Korea-France Friendship Concert (Herman, 2018). At every level, place-making of South Korea has been implemented through the projection of K-pop as a national symbol.

The South Korean government has seen the potential for relying on fans to continue this venture, embracing the influx of tourism dollars that fans bring into the country. Tourism has seen a direct impact, with the country capitalizing on the music industry's global success through offering K-pop-themed tourism packages (K-pop & K-drama Tour, n.d.). In a 2019 study, the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) stated that 7.4% of tourism into the country was Hallyu-related (Yonhap, 2020). The KTO also released that K-pop was one of the greatest factors in Hallyu-related tourism to the country. On the official "Visit Seoul" page, there is even an entire tourism section dedicated to K-pop spots, giving step-by-step guides for fans to recreate music videos or photoshoots of their favourite groups (Visit Seoul, n.d.). Fans of BTS can partake in

exclusive BTS-themed tours of the city, going on BTS "pilgrimages", a term used within the fandom to describe visiting sites of significance to the group, such as cafes the members frequent, spots along the Han River that appear in music videos, or even the building of the group's entertainment company (Trazy, n.d.). Though these forms of promotion have been initiated from the top down, much of it relies on the labour of fans to spread the word or construct ideas.

Even the industry itself has seen how fan labour can contribute to furthering the reach of their stars, and how stars can be the link to audiences gaining interest in South Korea. Big Hit Entertainment's[13] subsidiary, Big Hit Edu[14], released their own Korean language course alongside the Korean Language Contents Institute at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) (Chang, 2020). According to reports, this course came as a direct recognition of the value placed on the work of fan translators. Instead of supplying more subtitled content for fans, this endeavour seemed to indicate the company's desire to place the work of understanding on the fans through learning the language, while also capitalizing on the interest in Korean language and culture cultivated through fan translation work on a broader scale.

This was not the last time the company would go on to utilize the fan work already present, though. In August of 2020, Korean gaming company Netmarble finally announced the release of their upcoming game, *BTS Universe Story*, following the success of the *BTS WORLD* game in 2019 (Chavez, 2020; Partleton, 2020; Holden, 2020). This new game was interactive and gave fans the ability to not only interact with other players, but to venture down pre-existing stories or even build their own using the members as characters (Chavez, 2020). The announcement came with a call to preregister for the app, but also an opportunity: fan writers were encouraged to submit their own story ideas before the launch in the chance of having it featured as one of the pre-existing routes for fans to play (BTS Universe Story, 2020; Chavez, 2020; Partleton, 2020; Holden, 2020). Fans who were selected would not be monetarily compensated, but rather were offered early access to the game and the potential of in-game rewards

[13] Company has since changed its name to Hybe Entertainment. However, during the process of writing this thesis, it was still operating under the title of Big Hit Entertainment.

[14] Subsidiary has since changed its name to Hybe Edu.

(BTS Universe Story, n.d)[15]. The incentive was not to earn money, but rather to earn social capital though being acknowledged at the level of the industry.

What was interesting about this case in particular is the way in which the company recognized the potentials of pre-existing fan labour practices and capitalized upon them. Here, we also see what Oh (2018) discussed in terms of the "project" of Korean soft power, seeing the gaming industry partnering with the music industry to utilize the artist's image and global fan community. While this, of course, is nothing new, as this thesis has discussed the partnership of idols alongside other industries like tech and tourism, what is new is the way that fan labour now plays a key role in the efficacy of it. As mentioned previously, in utilizing BTS as Seoul City Ambassadors, the city itself has relied on the labour of fans in order to promote that further. One way this has manifested is through photo "sites" throughout the city, one of which I experienced myself in the Hongdae area where cardboard cut-outs of BTS were displayed in the busking street area. Fans are encouraged to pose and take pictures with the cut-outs and to post them on social media using specific hashtags promoting Seoul. Once this is completed, you are able to receive a free BT21 fan if they verified you posted the photo. Here we see the same rhetoric of utilizing the labour of fans as with the *BTS Universe Story* game, but in relation to promoting South Korea as a tourist destination.

While this endeavour as a stand-alone event may have been successful in the earlier stages of the global attraction of K-pop, these efforts have begun to lessen in their efficacy when compared to fan creation of the same genre. This was evidenced as I sat in the café events across Seoul, drinking far too many iced caramel macchiatos and grapefruit ades amongst the hundreds of other fans just like me. In these instances, the focus was not on *South Korea*, per se, but on BTS and the environment produced at the level of the fans. More specifically, fans congregated around the carefully selected photocards, over the effort the fansite put into designing the cupsleeves or displaying photographs they had taken. Fans were interacting with each other, excited to meet others from overseas as well as from cities nearby, premised on the shared experience of fan creation. And no government could recreate this. The experience, the nuances, the atmosphere—this was fan-led, something a copy could never capture. Sitting in Café

[15] This announcement has since been deleted as the contest ended.

Ten, a coffeeshop merely a few meters from the recently-opened "House of BTS"[16], I realized the stark difference between this fan-led initiative and the City of Seoul display in Hongdae, one that oddly resided their similarities: the creation of place through cardboard cut-outs of all things. Just like at the Hongdae photo zone, Café Ten boasted several cardboard cut-outs of the BTS members for fans to pose with, placed throughout the intimate café in front of different seating areas. But this, I noticed, was where their similarities ended. While the Hongdae space when I had visited only months earlier was empty save for my friend and I, this space was packed wall-to-wall with ARMY, each lining up to take a photo with a different member's cut-out. And it was because fans *knew*. An experience like this, an atmosphere, a *place* like this was not something that could be created by executives or officials in an office. They could plaster BTS over every billboard in the city, hold as many dance cover competitions as they would like, and they would never be able to recreate this. What fans created, here at Café Ten or at any of the 35 total café events I attended, was experience; *shared* experience. And that experience was one I could take home with me, encased in the towering stacks of cupsleeves that would later adorn my sharehouse desk, memories of each café I visited and the fans I shared those experiences with.

Those shared experiences ultimately problematize the notion of soft power being nation-centric and institutionally pursued. As many survey respondents indicated, their attachment to the idols did not transcend into an attachment to South Korea. Rather, their view of South Korea was not dependent upon K-pop or their favourite artist, but rather on their own experiences of the country outside of this context. K-pop may have been a gateway in the same capacity as the 2.0 era, but now perceptions of the nation and whether or not fans were likely to visit relied more on their own research and potential experiences visiting the nation. Surprisingly, these perceptions were not highly favourable. Several respondents explained that their view of South Korea was rather negative, pointing to issues of gender equality, identity, and human rights. This directly contradicts previous understandings of fans viewing South Korea through a positive lens, where the nation was constructed as a type of dream land (Otzamgin & Lyan, 2013). Again, this signals a shift away from our 2.0 understandings of fans establishing

[16] House of BTS was a pop-up shop run by Big Hit Entertainment (now Hybe Entertainment) dedicated to official BTS merchandise that also offered fans a walk-through experience of rooms dedicated to BTS' different album releases. It was open from October 2019 to January 2020, located in Gangnam, Seoul.

an attachment to South Korea through K-pop. Several respondents to the survey even signalled that K-pop itself facilitated these negative perspectives. While few did nod to the issues of trainee life in the K-pop realm as being an indicator of working life in South Korea, the general consensus on perception was based on outside sources or their own experiences living or visiting the country.

The point to be emphasized here is while fan labour in its ability to attract audiences to K-pop and South Korea by proxy may have aided in global recognition for the country, there has been a shift in what we can understand is an emergent 3.0 wave where audiences now are focused on their artist rather than the “K” attached to the music. This is not to say it is necessarily “ordorless” (Iwabuchi, 1998) or that fans are not conscious of the positionality of their artists as Koreans, but rather that the attachment to the country that fanship in the 2.0 era possessed is lacking in efficacy. As previously discussed, fans were eager to adopt practices of the home fan culture, namely cupsleeve events, and have reconfigured them into transcultural practices. As several interviewees suggested, the key in creating fan content is a means of spreading awareness of the *artist*, helping further their career or legacy beyond spatial boundaries, of affection through affective attachment, rather than spreading specifically Korean sentimentalities.

One of the particular issues cited with Nye’s (2004) theory of soft power is how, exactly, it can be measured. It is hard to quantify a power that resides within the realm of culture. In a 2017 study, Bae, Chang, Park, and Kim (2017) found that, like other scholars (Ko, 2012; Lee, 2011), it was difficult to quantify the effect *Hallyu* products like K-pop have had on tourism demand. But in particular, scholars as previously mentioned have brought up how in contemporary times, non-state actors are now more than ever becoming involved in the process of acquiring soft power (Lee, 2011; Kang, 2015). It is no longer governments who are in charge of implementing tactics of cultural diplomacy (which, as noted, have oftentimes failed to be effective) for the sake of soft power acquisition. What arises specifically in the case study of K-pop fan communities is the shift of soft power from the state to a digital public, a progression that may have started at the state level through neoliberalist policies and cultural sharing through diplomacy efforts, but has now been subsumed by the transnational fandom itself. In the *Hallyu* 2.0 era, it could be argued that fans' labour practices and dissemination of K-pop texts aided in South Korea’s pursuit of soft power, as they picked up what the government was

putting down. But somewhere down the line this path diverged. Rather than the state possessing power over their cultural texts, *fans*, both domestic and international, possess the power in a quasi "death of the author" kind of scenario.

Fans' transcultural labour practices have resulted in an acquisition of value that stands as soft power. The labour practices of fans is what makes this possible. The reliance on fans to spread K-pop content through their labour in the 2.0 era (Jin and Yoon, 2016) has now moved beyond a manageable practice into now transferring the power into the hands of the fan creators. In the same way that Percival and Hesmondhalgh (2014) emphasized that unpaid labour is not necessarily exploited labour, so too does there need to be a focus away from a Marxist binary between exploited and exploiter, and towards an understanding of how power (in this case *soft power*) as a form of agency is recontextualized back into the hands of the fan labourers rather than in state power for the Korean government. This is reflected in the literature as well, with the majority of works discussing these "successful" top-down approaches using examples from the 2.0 era. At that time, fan work *did* in fact aid in Korea's ability to market itself abroad. This was the era of "Gangnam Style", of government endorsement of concerts abroad, of K-pop dance competitions, and of Star Avenue in Apgujeong. These were all successful in their endeavours, but there has now been a shift in the power dynamics. Fans are no longer simply consuming and fantasizing about South Korea—they are working through their texts to create awareness of the *artist* but also to cultivate what we all seek: community. As this thesis discussed previously, the pathologizing of fans as "fanatics" (Jenson, 1992) is not an archaic notion, but rather permeates contemporary media depictions of fans, including transnational K-pop fandoms. However, it is the labour networks that fans have constructed that works directly against those assumptions through the construction of a transcultural form.

The issue with syphoning and restricting certain practices to certain locales is the way it erases the transcultural nature of K-pop fan practices and the universality of the role of labour in tying those practices together. Scholars who have set to differentiate practices from each other (Sun, 2020; Han, 2017; Min, Jin, & Han, 2019) fail to recognize how those practices in this era have crossed boundaries and cultural contexts to become widely held rituals. Returning to the idea of hybridity, it is that exact hybrid nature of not only K-pop fan texts themselves, but of the creative labour that is performed that has lent itself to K-pop fan labour as a means of transcultural affinity. In the same way that

fandom scholarship in its entirety is far too Western focused, so too is *Hallyu* scholarship too focused on the locality of fan practices. Like Moriomoto and Chin (2017) call for, we need to be viewing labour through the lens of the transcultural to fully understand its capacity in the realm of power. What this project has revealed through focusing exactly on this, unpacking the subjectivities aligned with fan creators as a transcultural labour network, is how fan labour cannot always equated with exploitation. In fact, I argue that it is the opposite: that labour as a form of affective worth is a form of resistance in the face of globalized political economic forces. The top-down endeavours towards soft power that coloured the 2.0 era have now been shifted in favour of the fans. Through their labour practices, fans now have taken back the reins and reappropriated symbols as a means of affective attachment. The power is no longer within the hands of the Korean government and entertainment industry as it has been prior, but now placed within the fandom network of labour, where influence or reception of South Korea is determined by the fans themselves.

Chapter 4.

A whole new world: K-pop fan labour as transcultural networks and the recontextualization of soft power through resistance

It's December 15th, 2019 and I'm sitting in a chilly Amasbins coffee shop near Ewha Woman's University in Seoul, my friend and I frantically refreshing our Twitter timelines for the release of "SUGA's Interlude", a collaboration track between BTS' Suga and American artist Halsey. The moment it drops, we plug in our earphones, huddled up next to each other as we listen. I keep the app open, refreshing in the vain hope that someone in the vast landscape of the Twitter universe has started the process of translations, even if just a line or a phrase. And then it happens: not 10 minutes after the track has dropped and fan translators in the ARMY community have already translated, formatted, analyzed with cultural annotations, and uploaded the lyrics for all to consume. I was amazed. Even though the rapper's words were extremely difficult to decipher due to SUGA's rap speed and distortion on the track, translators worked at a lightning pace, having the translations uploaded on Twitter and their personal sites before many non-Korean speaking fans could even finish the song itself. What this pointed to was not only the speed of which fan translators work, but their dedication to supplying non-Korean speaking fans with accurate information. It was also not just one individual person behind this effort. Over 10 different translators were frantically working to release their translation for a section of Twitter to have. But even that does not seem like a lot when you compare it to the millions of ARMY who are on Twitter, a significant portion of which rely on translations in order to connect with their fan object.

Fast forward a mere month later to BTS' entertainment company, BigHit Entertainment, releasing the concert DVD for their stop on the Speak Yourself Tour in Sao Paulo. Controversy arose when it was announced that not only would the DVD be unplayable in the South American region due to regional disk codes, but it also would not have Portuguese subtitles. Fans were rightfully outraged; how could a DVD specifically dedicated to their concerts in Brazil *not* be in that country's language? There were several issues at play here; there was a lack of awareness on the part of the company, specifically regarding the playability of the DVD as a marker for who they

believed would actually buy it. Whether this was a simple error or lack of research did not matter; that in and of itself spoke volumes. This only fed into the second issue regarding *who* they believed would be watching, as they had only supplied the DVD with English, Japanese, and Chinese subtitles, evidently not only assuming Brazilian fans spoke English, but also assuming that the main consumers of the product would be in specific markets that spoke Japanese and Chinese.

But there was another issue in the form of an assumption that stemmed from this: the assumption that fans would be actively sharing and supplying subtitles within their own network. This was the issue. This got to the heart of it. This was not just an issue of the company relying on the free labour of fans to translate content (an occurrence that has been happening since the group debuted in 2013), but it also highlighted the boundaries of fans on what is and is not OK regarding fan exploitation. Never before had there been this significant of an outrage regarding the company relying on fans to work, but it has been going on in K-pop fandom spaces as a whole since the first wave of transnational fandoms in the mid-2000s. Where does exploitation cross the line and why is it at paid content? How do fans view the work they do in relation to the company?

4.1. The myth of immateriality and potentials for labour

Out of the 24 interview participants, ten different forms of fan labour were mentioned, the largest of which being fan writing with 8 participants. This category was predominantly individuals who identified as fan fiction writers, apart from one who published think pieces and essays on their personal blog. The second largest was art with 5 participants identifying as fan artists, then fan-run events with 4 individuals, and YouTube videos with 3 creators. Translating, running group orders, and just general music making each had 2 interviewees identify as performing this type of work. Betaing (the act of editing fanfiction), collecting, and doing fansite work all had one individual each. My survey data reflected similar sentiments, with 81 respondents indicating their participation in some form of fan content creation. Again, fan writing received the highest number of responses when asked what type of content they produce, with 40 respondents identifying as a fan writer in some capacity. The runner up, like with the interviews, was fan art, with 32 responses, followed by dance with 14, video creation with 8, and music/singing with 7. Of note here, though, is the overlap. If you've done the

math, you will notice that the total does not add up to 24, but rather 28. This highlights a crucial point in understanding how fanwork operates in a cycle due to the nature of overlap. Fan artists do not just create art but may also dabble in fanfiction writing or betaing. Those who translate may also run group order accounts. Those who make videos may also collect.

Of course, fan content within the variety of K-pop online and offline communities expands beyond this. This is not an exhaustive list; there exist forms such as fan-run support pages, charity work, fan streamers, fanfiction festivals (also known as “fests”), fan-led Korean language classes, fan-published magazines, book clubs, fan-made gifs or edits, and of course much more. Some of these will be touched on in the discussion section, but I need to note here that it would almost be impossible to document all the different types and forms fan creation takes, adopting the different contexts and nuances with each given fan community and their values. My goal here is not to put a blanket statement of what fan labour looks like, but rather to discuss how its form and presence in and of itself occupy the space of soft power. The types of fan labour I mention are common themes throughout different K-pop fan communities, staples if you will. As my methodology discussed, my focus is on the subjective experience of fans as an end to themselves to understand the potentials here and the power fan work, even at its most rudimentary form, operates as a dialectic of value and affect.

As previously mentioned, fan labour can be understood as fan creation. Each task of fan labour acts as a means of creating something, whether it be a creative work such as fiction or art, translations based on the speakers’ own experience and interpretation, or even constructing bridges of access through supplying material goods to fans. This is important to note, as this thesis will utilize the term "fan creator" and "fan labourer" interchangeably. This is simply due to the nature of fan labour and the multiple formats it exists within, alongside the fact that what we are discussing here, as we will get into, is labour rather than work.

The material manifestation of labour here, and the consequences of its prohibition are key to understanding how current frameworks of labour do not work within the capacity of K-pop fandom practices. Taking what this thesis has surveyed so far in the realm of transcultural fandom and the issues of fan labour, it is easy to see how the creation performed in K-pop fandom spaces can be dubbed free labour in all the

same capacities as other work within the online realm. K-pop fan labour acts as both immaterial and material forms, the immaterial manifesting in the knowledge that is produced and circulated through online spaces, while the material emerges in physical creation of goods like slogan towels, cupsleeves, or even photocards. But it even goes beyond this, circling back to many of the critiques of immaterial labour in regard to the physical processes of performing that perceived immateriality (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Within my interviews, several fans discussed at great lengths the work that went into creating not only online content such as fanfiction, fan videos, or fanart, but how those processes also transferred into the physical realm. One fan who identifies as a fan artist discussed how the process of creating art digitally also proceeds into the physical space of creating stickers for fan-led events they were attending, wanting to share their creations for free with other fans in a different space. Others discuss the physical labour involved in constructing online content, such as the mental toll fanfiction writing can take on creators depending on the content of the story. One video creator spends over 20 hours in the physical space of script writing, performing, shooting, and editing their videos. In both cases, the idea of immateriality that is manifest in the final product seems to erase the actual physical labour required in producing those forms.

The key idea to note here is how this work is performed for free. Of all the interviews conducted, not a single fan mentioned receiving a wage for the labour they perform. In this sense, the work these fans conduct fits Terranova's (2004) understanding of free labour in the sense that it is unpaid labour. This correlates with many of the understandings surrounding fan work that have been discussed in the fandom section of this thesis, but what is important here is not necessarily the unwaged aspect, but looking towards the characteristic that Percival and Hesmondlagh (2014) highlight: that it is not necessarily *exploited* labour. It is critical to emphasize this because viewing the manner in which fans perform or, as some may claim, work for their texts puts fans immediately back in that position of pathological and irrational. This is not the case. Several fans interviewed spoke at great lengths about their awareness of the end result of their labour. They know *what* they are doing and also *why* they are doing it. This binary of exploitee and exploiter, as will be discussed in the following sections, is unproductive, especially in regard to thinking through cultural flows at the level of the fandoms. Instead, what is essential is understanding how that labour as it exists functions in relation to the artist, the fandom, and the nation state of South Korea.

4.1.1. Labour as a means of promoting artist

To speak of fan labour we must focus on the *fan* part first and foremost. Fans are fans of something, and that something, ultimately, is the key ingredient as to *why* fans perform the work that they do. As Duffett (2013) claims, fans are motivated by love. In the context of this thesis, though, love and affect will be used somewhat interchangeably due to the affective nature of love. Love produces something, a physical feeling. Love is the motivator for so many of our actions in life, and in the context of fandom, love is the affect. A fan does not just love their text and *not* do something about it. We scream, we cry, we talk, we connect. Fan labourers are simply those that express this love in other ways, but still the basis upon which it resides is affect. It is a response, a feeling to express in whatever capacity the fan is comfortable with or drawn to. For fan artists like one of my interviewees, their love for their idols is the main motivator behind why they initially started to create, stating “I love K-pop. I truly do and I basically wanted a way to salute my favorite idols, songs and videos and also address and remove the stigma that surrounds them” (Interviewee 1).

Whether it was the lyrics, the message, or even just who the artists are themselves, nearly every fan I interviewed mentioned their primary motivation for creating stemming from a love connected to their fan text, i.e. the K-pop group. That is the root; that is the source. This obviously comes as no surprise: fans are *fans*, and being a fan is love (Busse, 2015, cited in Stanfill, 2019). There must be some connection and admiration there for them to identify first and foremost as a fan of an artist, and this evidently extends into their pursuit of creation. Some are artists or creators outside of their fan identity, and the production of content through their fan text represents a perfect outlet to fuse their creative drive with their expression of admiration. One interviewee who writes mentioned this, stating

> Well, I think it's... I mean it's motivated by pure love… and I really feel like they are, for me, definitely muses. I always felt I would be a writer, and connecting with their music and with the energy that they have, it has brought new energy to me. (Interviewee 10)

The why, in this instance, fans create is important because it cannot be disconnected from this source. That establishment of an attachment to the artist through love lends itself to wanting to promote the artists through their work. This falls directly into the

earlier discussion of fan labour as free promotion on part of the artist (Baym & Burnett, 2009; Milner, 2009; Jones, 2014). Several interviewees brought up the idea of fan creators as occupying the position of a spokesperson or mouthpiece for the artist as well as the fandom. The initial connection of love fostered towards the artist motivates fans to leverage that affect towards celebrating them, both within the confines of the fandom space as well as in the mainstream arena. The distinction here often rests on the type of creation that is made, as certain forms such as fanfiction or fanart are not always encouraged as being "the face" of the group, whereas work like videos, events, and music production are viewed through the lens of external promotion.

As we will venture into later, the fan text of the idol(s) or idol group(s) represents the link within the network of fan labour that cannot be ignored or dismissed, and fan creation directly aids in the production and continuation of affective attachment to the artist. Many interviewees indicated this as a means of continuing the fan experience and solidifying those ties to the artist through prolonged enjoyment. One interviewee mentioned that fan creation does the work of "filling in the gaps" between releases of official content like albums or other promotions, a notion that permeates most K-pop fan spaces due to the fluctuating K-pop production schedule. In between 'comebacks'[17], fan labour does the job of supplying content, fostering connection, and ultimately creating the fandom space.

Labour as avenues for access

While fan creation operates from a place of love and connection to the artist, it also produces a value in the ability to obtain new fans and attract new audiences. Fan creation acts as a means to promote and market their idols as a byproduct of affect, in the same way Baym and Burnett (2009) discuss the labour of international fans of Swedish indie bands through their shared love. This manifests in access, both direct and indirect. GOM work is an explicit example of this, becoming a direct link between foreign audiences and K-pop products through supplying albums, DVDs, Seasons Greetings[18],

[17] The term 'comeback' means when a particular group comes back or releases new music. This often involves lead-in promotions called 'teasers', a release party or livestream event, and promotion on Korean music shows.

[18] Seasons Greetings are usually boxes of products packaged together, often sold at the end of the year to celebrate the beginning of a new year. They usually pertain to just a specific group and are sold/distributed by the K-pop group's company. They tend to include a calendar for the

and more directly to fans regardless of their territorial contexts. In the same vein, access is created in a relational sense to the artist themselves through fan content like YouTube video “mashups” or “edits”. These are video compilations of clips or funny moments, either of a group or a specific member, sometimes even about idol “ships”. Several interviewees who were creators themselves mentioned how fan content like video edits were a means through which their fan experience was expanded, prompting the notion of “falling down the rabbit hole”. That idea of “falling down” came up in multiple instances, indicating the importance that fan content like YouTube videos has played in the acquisition of fans. This same sentiment carried into the survey results as well, with those who indicated social media as playing a significant role in their lead into fandom related directly to fan-made videos uploaded on YouTube.

Access is the main outcome of fan labour practices, representing one of the main means through which fans can engage with their fan identity and become a part of the wider community dedicated to their artist. From my survey results, over 74% of respondents claimed that fan content was of high importance to the fandom experience. This was echoed throughout my interviews as well, as fan content was pointed to as a means of keeping the fandom going. As one fan writer claimed, “I feel like we’re… we create bridges. We create ways that people can access the fandom and remain connected to the fandom” (Interviewee 10). It provides a means for fans to access their artists beyond the official content entertainment houses or artists themselves share through social media platforms. Fan content, as one video creator mentioned, “prolong[s] people’s appreciation of certain things” (Interviewee 11), sometimes even in the form of introducing newer fans to older official media texts of the artist. In another interview with a video creator, the interviewee mentioned this exact idea in relation to how BTS’ old YouTube content, particularly their vlog-style short video clips called “Bangtan Bombs”, were not released with subtitles. It was through the work of fan translators and interpreters that fans could access this older content and connect to BTS on a deeper level.

Not only does fan labour facilitate direct access, but it also works for the entertainment companies of groups in reaching global audiences. One form of labour that has been integral to the transnational reach of K-pop is, of course, translation. The

upcoming year, a planner, photocards, stationary sets, etc. All products are usually oriented around a specific theme, and include images of the group in relation to that theme.

importance of translators cannot be understated. As one interviewee mentioned, they are “the foundation of [global] fandom” through which non-Korean speaking fans can connect to not only their idols, but also the fandom through a mutual understanding that transcends language barriers (Interviewee 21). In the same way subbers were integral to the global spread of anime (Ito, 2017; Jenkins, 2006) so too are translators crucial in the spread of K-pop products around the world. From song lyrics, to Vlives[19], to official content, to even TV appearances--fan translators work day and night to get content out for international audiences to keep up with the ebb and flow of their idol group. As an older K-pop fan, I distinctly remember the delay in subbed content being hours if not days back in the 2.0 wave era. Now, it is a matter of minutes.

Translators’ schedules, this project found, vary and depend greatly upon content being posted. As two of my interviewees mentioned, there was no specific timeframe they worked within, depending entirely upon either the random occurrence of a livestream or an entire album being dropped. The process of actually translating the content is another hurdle, a task that takes focus and dedication. As one translator on Twitter showcased through a tutorial on how they translate, different factors such as multiple devices, saving member-specific emojis, and the ability to type fast play a role in their ability to publish content on demand. In this same video the translator even talks about how the urgency of keeping up with Vlives causes her jaw to lock in anxiety, as live audio requires multiple tasks to be completed simultaneously: “listening to the audio and understanding the Korean”, “translating it into English in [their] head”, “rearranging sentences from KOR to ENG grammar”, “speed typing the translations into tweets”, and “doing all of this while listening to their next sentences". Translators are sometimes so focused on the task at hand that their own fan experiences are put on hold, only able to take a moment to appreciate their artists when the idols pause their speech to read fan comments. It is not just in those moments that the translators need to put aside their own personal problems or feelings, but also in the initial stages of planning around translation. As one translator I interviewed claimed,

> For an album release, which is announced about a month before, I do plan things (and my work situation) ahead of time. 6PM KST is 4/5AM my time, so I usually go to bed super early, wake up an hour before the release, and

[19] Vlive is a video streaming platform owned by Naver Corporation that is dedicated to hosting individual live broadcasts for idol groups and celebrities. The term ‘Vlive’, however, has been subsumed by K-pop fandoms to stand in place for the concept of a Vlive livestream.

> basically spend the entire morning to translate the lyrics. If it is a full album, 3-4 additional hours into the afternoon are needed. Then, throughout the next few days, I will continuously edit the translations to have more proper words/expressions or to add notes. (Interviewee 2)

In this instance, the publishing of an album is a pre-planned event, so the translator has set out time in advance. In the other example this was not the case, as it was a spontaneous Vlive from a BTS member. But both cases show how imperative timeliness and accuracy is for translators. Translation practices are not unique to K-pop fandom alone, as has already been discussed, but the ways in which translation acts as a solidifier and connector of non-Korean speaking audiences to K-pop forms is integral. They act as a key link between foreign, non-Korean speaking audiences and K-pop artists. Two interviewees identified as translators for their fandom and spoke about this exact link between translation and accessibility. One, a translator for BTS, commented on how the work of translators is directly tied to the success of the group abroad, stating

> Fan translators, including myself, have undeniably been contributing to BTS' success overseas. There are a handful of people who translate Korean originals into English, but there are dozens, if not hundreds, of people translating the English translations into their native languages. (Interviewee 2)

What is crucial to understand here is how this labour is networked through the foundation of access. Translation often occurs as a series of events, starting with the initial Korean to English translation. Within certain K-pop fandoms, there are a select few who do this preliminary but central work of translating from the source language, and this base text is then translated into dozens of different languages from there to meet the demand. This chain reaction is exactly how we can understand K-pop labour as transnationally networked and reliant, each piece of the puzzle just as significant as the next. The final product that the labour network constructs is access to the cultural text, whether it be BTS or BlackPink or Red Velvet. Access works to keep audiences engaged and connected, but also works in the same capacity as YouTube "edits" in recruiting new fans. The possibility of gaining more knowledge or understanding the jokes that take place during a Vlive that fan labour affords translates (no pun intended) into attracting more people to become fans. Translation *is* the connection.

Fan translators work to not only translate the linguistic properties of content, but also the cultural context and nuances for non-Korean fans to understand. This is the key portion in the fostering of connection, as cultural translation takes the form of transitioning the fandom labour practices from the position of not only transnational, but transcultural. As one translator noted, their cultural background has aided in their ability to not only translate content from Korean to English, but also to offer specific cultural understandings that put the idols' words into context, allowing global audiences to gain a better understanding of the true meaning behind certain sentiments. As they noted, "knowing that there are lots of things I can add based on my personal knowledge and experience, I think I can help people connect with the sentiment or understand the context in addition to just translating the lyrics themselves" (Interviewee 2). This cultural context lends itself to cultivating the transcultural fandom experience as it moves beyond the surface level of linguistic understanding into the realm of cultural connection, a concept that will be touched on in the following paragraphs.

4.1.2. Fan labour as networked labour

Fan work operates in this capacity as a means to connect to the artist of interest, constructing an affective attachment. This attachment, however, is not just to the artist, but extends into the fandom *through* fan labour practices. It is, understandably, a networked connection. In the network that is K-pop fandoms, artists rest as the central node through which labour, in this case, operates. I do not want to take away from that and cannot stress it enough. But as many interviewees pointed out, it was being able to establish an affective attachment to the artist through the depth that fan content provided that ignited the fire for themselves to create as a means of giving back. In the same vein, fan content also plays a role in establishing connections and ties to the fandom space, extending the affinity into the fandom itself. That love towards the artist is, through the networked relations of the K-pop fandom, extended into a love towards the fandom as well. When asked why they performed the work they do, one fan even broke into tears talking about how much they loved their fandom. While they mentioned the artists themselves as a source of inspiration, this affective attachment was extended towards the fandom as well, physically manifesting in the form of tears to express their love towards their fellow fans. This was an extension of the motivation.

We have established already that fan content is what defines fandom, but what was solidified in my interviews was the extent to which fan content acted as a link across time and space. As one writer I interviewed mentioned, fanfiction was a means through which they created connections to others within the fan community online, as well as in the physical space of their city. Fan content allows for a transnational connection as we have established, but also acts as a physical means to bind those within a specific geographical location *through* the transcultural practices. Another echoed this notion, explaining that through fan-run accounts dedicated to their geographical location, they were able to connect with those in their own area. According to this fan,

> It became so much easier for us all to connect [through content], and having different events, like we had dancing events. Yeah, doing fundraisers together, streaming together, things like that. Just like, it makes you not just feel not alone, but also just like, it's a shared experience. (Interviewee 21)

The emphasis on shared experience is quite key here. Fan labour *through* the texts themselves acts as a means of creating community, but also exists as a form of collectivity. As mentioned in the section on translation as linguistic *and* cultural practice, fan labour acts not only as a form through which physical connection takes place, in the case of the above example, but also through which cultural connection can be understood. As Min, Jin, and Han (2019) discuss, affinity spaces like K-pop fandoms act as “contact zones” wherein K-pop is introduced to other cultures. As my survey data relayed, it can be said that K-pop acts as a gateway for fans to expand upon their knowledge and understanding of South Korea and its related culture. Many respondents indicated this, saying that while their cultural connection to South Korea is not entirely informed by their affinity to K-pop, it has acted as an initial connection, a weak tie if you will, that spurred their interest further. But while the fan text itself may act as the central node in the network, it is rather through the global ties of fan labour that the network is expanded.

Thinking in this capacity, fan labour can be seen as constructing a network. This concept will be continued as we move through this findings and discussion section, but thinking through the understandings of labour in the era of globalization, fan labour represents a similar pattern. The artist represents the central node in a sense, wherein the source of affect is centralized (Granovetter, 1973; Castells, 2010). But while affective

attachment maintains the space of a weak tie between artist and fan, fan labour is what strengthens those ties through its production. It, ultimately, is the link across time and space. As one interviewee mentioned, fan creators “literally are the foundation and like the pillars” (Interviewee 21), those upholding and strengthening the relations between artists and fans but also extending the fan experience beyond space and time. The notion of shared experience in the context of localized fandom practices extends itself through the globalized network of fan labour to become a shared experience across cultures.

What can be applied here is the idea of social distribution (Jung & Shim, 2014; Jung, 2013), wherein cultural texts are disseminated and reconstructed through informal and formal networks. Just as the authors acknowledge the history of informal networks in the construction and dissemination of cultural content, so too has this thesis revealed how histories of fandom networks have aided in the transnational reach of globalized media products such as Japanese anime (Ito, 2017; Jenkins, 2006). These bottom-up distribution channels are key in the success of K-pop products as a start, but also represent how fan content apart from official content works as an informal, transcultural network of labour (Jung & Shim, 2014). The online social distribution flows that characterize transnational fandom lend themselves to the transcultural network of fan labour in that they provide the avenues for distribution and connection.

Affinity spaces as labour networks

Fans operate through this shared affinity for the cultural object, but also through themselves. What emerged repeatedly in my interviews was this notion of how attachment was not always solely to their artist, but rather to the fandom by extension. Scholars have understood fan spaces, specifically within the digital age, as affinity spaces, a “social semiotic space” comprised of content as signs, an internal grammar or content design, an external grammar or patterns of interactions, and portals as spaces of interaction (Gee, 2005, cited in Min, Jin, & Han, 2019, p.10). These spaces are where meaning surrounding texts is produced. Scholars have examined how within certain cultural contexts, affinity spaces become the site of shared meaning on an individual level through the connection to the artist, but contrary to this understanding of affinity to a cultural text exclusively, my interviewees brought up their affinity to the fandom alongside the cultural object of K-pop. For many, their artist offered a site through which

affinity could be engaged, but it was extended through the shared experiences of fans and became an affinity for the fan network itself. As one writer I interviewed mentioned, fans often possess more attachment to the *artist* than their discography, claiming "people will be out here [on Twitter] claiming they never listened to 'First Love' but saying 'I would die for Yoongi'" (Interviewee 23).

While this, of course, is an extreme example and most definitely one that is not universal, it is still present and indicative of how shared affinity is not simply to the music. It also extends into the artistry and fan text themselves in terms of message and values. Additionally, though, the affinity becomes one of the fandom as well. Several interviewees discussed at great lengths their desire to give back to their artist through their fan creation because of the messages the artists themselves promote. As Hellekson (2009) discussed, fandom operates through a cyclical gift economy, where the incentive to produce is based on a connection to the fandom and artist. The presence of fan content motivates others to 'give back' in the same capacity, as is showcased within K-pop fandoms as well. Oftentimes this arises in the form of inspiration, where a form of fan content will inspire others to create through their own means or participate in their own way. Because fans labour *through* their texts, not always for them, the incentive often lies within the fandom itself. As one songwriter interviewee commented, "you get inspired by, like, other artists in the community, like everyone's super talented. So I feel like always, I've kind of wanted to do something like that" (Interviewee 18).

Fans thus partake in a redefined understanding of what Baym (2019; 2015) calls "relational labour", or working to maintain connections or relationships. While Baym was discussing this within the context of artists towards their fans in order to foster paid work, the term seems to fit our understanding of how fans work *through* their texts rather than necessarily for them. What I mean here is that the K-pop artist may be the first point of connection for many fans, but it is not the end point. Some fans may simply engage in labour to support their artists, but many operate beyond that to construct the transcultural network of labour practices that is premised on giving back and maintaining friendships. Labour acts as a point of connection, a dialectic between fandom and artist. It functions in a dual capacity through relationality, maintaining and giving back to the artist while simultaneously fostering a connection with the wider fan community.

Cultural connection as a dialectic of value

Thus it is through fan labour like translation practices that the dialectic of shared experience can take shape. The transnational network of fan labour is premised on fostering that relationship between artist and fan, in the same capacity that authors explained was crucial in the construction of identity (Lamerichs, 2018; Jenkins, 2013). Shared experience is a key identifier in how fan creation operates across time and space as a transcultural fan practice. Labour is transcultural in that labour practices transcend cultural barriers to become performed across groups and communities. Practices such as cupsleeve events or creating fanart are shared experiences, a culture that within the Web 2.0 environment are now collectively engaged with by the global fanbase as a whole. There is a transference of culture that occurs here, where practices that originate in the home country of South Korea transfer over to non-Korean contexts through this expansion of the affinity space as a labour network. Through participating in the network, fans can gain access to how Korean fans organize events that become a part of the domestic fan culture. A perfect example of this are cupsleeve events, a practice that has become commonplace within the domestic fandom offline space. It has only been recently that these events in particular have transcended the geographical boundaries and spread into other parts of the world, including North America. As one of event planner I interviewed mentioned, seeing the practice occurring within South Korea made them want to experience it for themselves in their non-Korean context, motivating them to host an event in their own geographical community. Another event planner I interviewed also expressed this desire to incorporate these domestic fan practices to become closer to Korean culture as a whole *through* implementing Korean fan culture. As this interviewee stated,

> This is more like spreading like Korean culture to me. Because like in Korea this is a really big thing, like cupsleeve events. They hold it for like… a week and a half or until they don't have any more cupsleeves. Like, for us, because we have, like, really limited [quantity] so we usually hold it for like one or two days. Also... Yeah, it just gives more fans more exposure to like Korean culture. (Interviewee 19)

Fans who host events abroad such as this have resorted to partnering with domestic Korean fansites who create the cupsleeves initially and distribute them throughout South Korea in order to supply the events abroad with the physical cupsleeves and ‘goodies’. Fan labour, in this way, is transnationally *networked*, with each portion of the labour

process supplementing or relying on one another, but a transcultural *practice*. In my own experience as a group order manager, this was evidenced through the transnational nature of the process of access. I operated out of Vancouver, Canada, but supplied buyers with fan-made goods from all over the world, including South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and more. The creators also relied on me and my position within Vancouver to distribute their creations. Even at an official merchandise level, my position as a Vancouver-based GOM provided avenues of access for merchandise coming from the country of origin, South Korea. However, understanding the transcultural nature of this labour exists in how the practice has now become not necessarily a feature of one specific faction of fan culture, but a globally adopted form of labour.

4.2. "Anyone got a link?": Fan labour and the controversies of free

As part of my participatory observation, I explored and observed the K-pop fan Twittersphere. On one particular day, I stumble upon a tweet that read: "Q[20] is what karl marx thought he was." Being a fan myself, I was familiar with who "Q" was, one of the several K-pop fan streamers who provides access to video content for fans to engage and consume for free. It was a Sunday afternoon when I found this tweet, a few weeks before Korean boy group BTS embarked on their second virtual concert, and the dialogue surrounding the streaming of paid content was at an all-time high. This was normal, as it had been a controversial topic within contemporary K-pop fandom spaces, but the recent increase of online K-pop concerts in light of COVID-19 had brought the discussion further into the main spaces of fandom interaction. The days leading up to BTS' October online concerts were filled with such discussions paralleling this tweet's sentiments, fans praising those who risk being deplatformed by offering free streams of the concert in the name of access, and an overarching need to protect those who provide it.

Or, at least, some fans were. Others, however, were strictly against the practice. It was interesting, seeing this conversation resurface, because it was not novel in its form, but rather an extension of an on-going tangent that arose within the growth of K-pop's online reach. As a K-pop fan myself for over 12 years, in the beginning stages of

[20] Name changed for privacy reasons

transnational online fandom that this thesis has already touched on, streaming was a given as it was the only way international fans who could not afford plane tickets to South Korea to attend in-person concerts could witness them. Long before award shows and concerts were broadcast through company-regulated streaming platforms like YouTube, my 15-year-old self was watching them in 480p on an ad-ridden webpage hosted by some brave fan or fanbase. But with the expansion and acquisition of more and more foreign audiences through these semi-illegal means, there erupted a culture of reporting, namely those who did not agree that everyone should have access, especially if that access was free. Because corporations, unlike before, were actually noticing this under the radar work that had become a standard outside of the Korean peninsula. And they were scared. Because what entertainment companies were selling for profit, certain fans were providing for free. And that just was not OK.

As evidenced in this anecdote, just as fandom is not monolithic in nature nor homogeneous in its values, so too is fan labour a contested terrain. In a general sense, policing within fandom works the same in-group as it does out-group, formulating an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ even within the confines of fan communities. This act of policing and gatekeeping can be understood twofold along the lines of identity maintenance and taste. This is of course not exclusive to K-pop fan communities, but the ways in which policing of fan content occurs particularly within online K-pop fandom spaces are of novel importance. In the same way the fan communities Baym (2018) was studying possessed strong ideals in regards to fan behaviour, so too do certain factions of K-pop fan communities draw the boundaries along morality and power. There is a “right” way to be a fan and a “wrong” way (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012), in this case based on a moral clause and, even deeper than that, a preservation of exclusivity. As one of my interviewees who writes fanfiction mentioned, types of fanfiction are deemed either “good” or “bad”, either uplifting of the artist or a direct defamation. Another writer I interviewed discussed the pressure to portray idols as “good” in a moral sense, to do them justice and showcase their characters as righteous as possible. This highlights what Jenkins (2013) presents in terms of morality and fandom that is based upon uncomfortability. Some fans just find forms of fan work uncomfortable (Duffett, 2013). Morality and exclusivity translate into Othering mechanisms, as Jung (2011) elucidates, that have ties to social issues. In Jung’s study, this took the form of online Net activism that went as far as being nationalistic and even racist in the name of preserving

exclusivity to their artist. In a broader sense, though, this works to create that in-group "us" versus an out-group "them" in an attempt to preserve the image of the in group by constructing the out group (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). This is often the basis upon which 'manager accounts'[21] will "other" fan creators in the pursuit of preserving reputation in the eyes of the mainstream but also the artist's company.

Fanfiction, for instance, is one form of fan content that is often the most heavily policed (with exception of the recent influx of fansite policing in certain fan spaces) along the basis of morality and protecting the artist. Many on Twitter are vocal about their distaste for "RPF" or "real person fiction", claiming that it is uncomfortable for the artists. There is obviously more at stake here than protecting an image, though. Often this policing stems from a deeper-rooted ideology surrounding sexuality and gender representation, as fanfiction is a site where these ideas are explored through the characters of idols. Similarly, K-pop itself has a long history with the idea of "fan service", where idols engage in cute acts or "skinship" with another member (or member*s*) within the group for the enjoyment of the fans. This practice is obviously not exclusive to K-pop, as it has roots in J-pop culture, but it has become a significant part of the performance of idol groups. And it has, for many, inspired or given an avenue through which fan work has explored ideas of sexuality. As one interviewee who actively writes fanfiction put it,

> I feel like the reason that making fanfiction in K-pop isn't something that I think is like... immoral is because, like, some people are like "How can you? That's non-consensual because you didn't ask the people's permission." And I'm like OK? But like a) people have a lot of rules about keeping it away from the [artists] and so they are very self-regulating. And b) literally there's so much, especially like the K-pop community, that really encourages fanfiction. (Interviewee 14)

While this fan in particular was discussing this idea of fan service, they nod to an even bigger understanding of how fan content is both encouraged but demonized within the context of maintaining control. Morality, though, progresses deeper into a form of gatekeeping to maintain economic capital and acquire subcultural capital. These two ideas are, of course, linked just as Bourdieu saw the connection of cultural capital to economic capital, but in a slightly different way. There is an agreement between

[21] A 'manager account' is a term used within certain factions of K-pop fan spaces to describe fans who actively work like a "manager" to protect their idols from defamation and unfair treatment

commercial producers and distributors (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), one that manager' fans are on a mission to preserve. In the case of the anecdote above, sharing content is viewed as a violation of that agreement between the artist (and, evidently, the company) and the fans, where fans should show their support by purchasing virtual concert tickets. Being a "good" fan is not illegally streaming content. Namely, this is seen as maintaining a relationship with the company, staying in their good graces. Fans who are often the loudest in this area are known as "big name accounts" (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012), or in the K-pop context this is simply shortened to "big accounts", ones who have a large following or significant influence in the community. Here, ultimately the act of policing content is based along the lines of also maintaining subcultural capital, wanting to remain a figure in the community as well as in the eyes of the company. This gets to the idea, specifically in domestic K-pop fandom, of what is called "fancom", where certain fans within fandoms operate like an extension of the company to keep their idol's best interests and image (Kim, 2010, cited in Jung, 2011, para. 2.). This notion of the "fancom" extends into the position of the 'manager account' whose goal is to protect their position of authority in the fandom *through* their stance in taking care of the idol, even if from thousands of kilometers away.

Policing is often felt on both sides, as those who are more influential in the community as creators see the bulk of the hate being directed at them, and those that are the loudest in their complaints also possess a big following. On both sides, those who hold the status of "big accounts" are those with the power to disseminate information within the fandom setting (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). This goes against the pre-existing logic that the affinity space of fandom is not hierarchical (Min, Jin, & Han, 2019), but rather exists in much the same way that other fandom spaces operate. This is not to say that there is not a space of equality, but these spaces often rest inside smaller pockets or bubbles of online fandom, predominantly within a specific subcommunity. There will be big accounts that span across communities as recognizable and influential figures, important accounts that may be viewed to individual subcommunities as influential, and then members of subcommunities who interact with themselves. At all of these levels, content creation does exist of course. However, those who are big accounts often produce or disseminate content that is widely consumed. It is, as Zubernis and Larsen (2012) explain, a mode through which authentication can occur, both as a part of the community as the individual's fan identity.

This is not a baseless practice, as companies throughout the Korean cultural industries have actively worked to restrict the power fan creation has over the texts themselves. I have had direct experience with this, having been almost removed from BTS' *Muster 4* fanmeeting due to taking pictures when it was strictly prohibited. This is not a novel idea; it is a narrative that spans across K-pop fandoms and groups. Fan labourers like fansites or those who stream live content are seen as a nuisance who threaten capital through their creation and distribution of free content. Most recently, this has taken shape in the 2021 Golden Disk Awards hosted by Korean broadcaster JTBC, where fan streamers were "called out" on live television. During the award show, fans who were providing streams tweeted about being followed by "random accounts" poorly disguised as fans that they believed were employees of JTBC. At one point, the show even projected a warning on the live broadcast, singling out one "big account" streamer and threatening to take legal action against them. As one tweet read, "JTBC [is] putting more effort into [taking] down i-fan's streams than they are in making sure their award show is actually good". The problem that arose amongst fans was that this was not a paid event: the issue was restriction based on location.

However, while gatekeeping is a prominent issue, it is not the loudest. Due to the gifting nature of K-pop fandom, there are still a large majority of fans who will protect fan workers in order to preserve the fandom space. This contrast gets to the dialectic nature of fan work existing both within a gift economy space as well as the market economy (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2013). Here, policing still exists but in a different capacity: the policing of policing. As one interviewee discussed, the gift economy of K-pop fandom operates under the notion of free but also filtered content. Tagging for NSFW content, both through keywords in tweets but also through the platform of AO3, an open-source platform to host fanfiction (Archive of Our Own, n.d.). This is a common practice in any fandom space, one that is put in place to maintain safeguards on content. One interviewee highlighted this in relation to gatekeeping based on morality, stating

> Like, one of the most amazing things about fandom is how filtered the content is, right? Like, we filter it so much. There's so many barriers you need to go through before accessing something, just to keep everyone in a safe space. Like more so than like television. Right? Even the news doesn't trigger warn when they're about to show, like, murders, right? But here we are tagging, like, every little thing to make sure no one is triggered, no one is hurt. And people still go out and criticize? I'm like no. (Interviewee 23)

The “freeness” of fan content showcases the tension between fan spaces within the K-pop community. Creators are often made to defend themselves against those that send anonymous hate or vicious critique of their work via platforms like Curious Cat or comments on the AO3 page. It is an on-going battle between the “freeness” of fan content as a right, and the creative expression of creators themselves. This speaks to understanding fan content within the context of a gift economy, but the rewards of “kudos” or comments fall short of deflecting unwanted negative criticism based on taste or morality. Gatekeeping is not just limited to those who oppose fan content in a broader sense, but is maintained through policing how that content is produced, in what context, and the rate at which fans upload.

In both cases, though, gatekeeping premises itself on one thing: protection. On the one side, it functions as a protection of the artist’s identity and image, but on the other, its protection of content and fandom itself. Both function as a means of preserving power, both hierarchical and horizontally. Hierarchically, it was the protection of the artist themselves and their public representation. As was mentioned earlier, K-pop fans often utilize the rhetoric of being "the face of the group", and fan created content acts as an extension of that. Fans are careful to represent their artist in a way that is fair, just, and accurate. Several interviewees chimed in that this was one of their motivations for creating their content, wanting to stray away from "inaccurate" and degrading depictions of the artists in works like fanfiction and fanart. As one translator put it,

> Our content creators often set the tone for how the content that we create and who or what we created it in tribute to (for a lack of better words) is received by the general public. It is crucial that we study, respect, fulfill the purpose of and accept the responsibilities of our role(s). (Interviewee 1)

While this differs from the examples above in terms of policing content, it still maintains the same othering logic of creating the dichotomy of an "us" and a "them"; those who create content in the name of accurate representation, and those who simply use the artists characters as tools for their own agenda. Similarly, "solo stans" or those who only support one member of a group, actively work to preserve the integrity of their member. “Solo stans” are those who, for example, will dedicate Twitter accounts to promoting only one member of a specific group, through encouraging streams of that member’s solo songs (even if those songs are on a group album) or will actively tweet their dislike for any members of the group other than their favourite. There have been many cases of

“solo stans” sending billboard trucks[22] to protest things such as unequal line distribution or lack of solo work. In this way, fan activism has worked to police the company themselves as a separate and dominating entity on the territory of the artist. Fans work to maintain their artist's integrity as an artist and labour to make sure they succeed in the capacity that the fans have deemed fit.

On the horizontal side, gatekeeping works in the same capacity of preserving the fandom image as a whole. This goes back to our understanding of the pathologized fan girl (Jenson, 1992; Sandvoss, Gray, & Harrington, 2017; Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs, 1992), a description that fans in this way work directly against. Solo stans again emerge here as a site where the fandom works to maintain its image against solo stan behaviour, discrediting the work of solo stans as not being associated with the fandom itself. Again we see the "us" versus "them" taking shape. The preservation of the “us”, which can be tied to locality in the case of wanting to retain a local fandom image, but also extends into all community spaces of fans, is a necessary means through which the policing of behaviour manifests. As one event organizer mentioned,

> I guess we kind of bring people together. Yeah. And it's not that we're the face of the fandom, the local fandom, but like, we're somehow like representing the local fandom. And we do have, like, an image or responsibility or a duty to upkeep as like, good people. Because we are representing our fandom. (Interviewee 20)

The discourse surrounding fan content and the backlash towards it does not necessarily exist in a binary between good and bad, but manifests as a spectrum with multiple layers of context necessitated. Those who gatekeep along the basis of freeness exist within the realm of being a “good fan” through the economic sense of the term. Here, policing is based on the existence of something that should not be; the presence of free content that does not explicitly translate into economic gain for the artist or their company. This differs from the policing of *how* free content is expressed, which aligns with the understanding that there is a moral obligation to both the artist and the fandom to represent both parties in a “good” way. Here, it is not the existence of fan content that is the issue, but rather the binary between what is “good” and what is “bad” in relation to

[22] A recent example of this was in August of 2020 when solo stans of BTS’ Jin paid for trucks with billboards to be sent to the artist’s company, Hybe Entertainment, claiming the company failed to truly showcase the singer’s talents in the group’s single “Dynamite”.

that free content. While one works to maintain capital, both economic and subcultural, the other works to preserve expressions of identity. Both, though, aid in the preservation of power.

4.2.1. Labour and value as sentiments of resistance

Gatekeeping of content on the part of the company ultimately circles back to the top-down rhetoric of soft power strategies that are not as effective as desired in relation to the country achieving global success. Fan labour operates in the capacity of access, an access that the government and industry still struggle to see as beneficial. Whether it is the example of streaming above, or the prohibition of fansites at official schedules, the policing of content is working directly against the industry's concern with attracting audiences. The value that is produced by the free labour of fans is one that directly translates to new audiences and transnational power, but as fans are faced with more and more resistance at the corporate level, the motivation to produce now rests in the acquisition of power for the fandom itself.

Labour time throughout my interviews varied and for many was something hard to quantify and uploading or production schedules significantly varied depending on the type of labour performed. As all creators I interviewed are doing this as a hobby, they often work in between their normal job or school hours, creating or working during their free time. Much like other creative labour practices, labour time and leisure time seemed to be interspersed with each other. In the survey data, the majority of fan creator respondents said they spend between one to two hours on a given project, with the second highest response being two to four hours on a project. This labour time was, like translation discussed previously, contingent upon environmental factors, inspiration, release of official content, or even fandom-based demand.

But fans in this respect are aware of the power they hold in relation to capital and work. They are aware that the labour performed in fandom contributes to their artists' success and reach, especially in how that promotion through content leads to economic gain. However, so too are they aware that their labour can oftentimes be seen as exploited through the surplus value it creates and the reliance that companies have on said labour practices. As one artist in their interview argued, even the official content released by companies in order to cultivate connection between fans and artists relies

on fans to do the work of translating and disseminating content amongst themselves. Because why would a company pay someone to do something that fans are already doing for free?

Fan creators see themselves in relation to their work in a similar facet. While many claim that the existence of fan creation and production is essential in keeping the fandom going, fans themselves see their work in a similar capacity. Many, however, did not see their work as being of any consequence or any contribution to the artist directly, but when asked about other forms of fan content or production, they were adamant about its essential role in the fandom. This was interesting, as the subjective experience of fan labourers was one of simply wanting to contribute, but not seeing that contribution as significant. Rather, they view themselves as performing what Stanfill (2019) understands as “lovebor”. Unlike Stanfill’s idea, however, fans interviewed in this project pushed back against the implied nature of a labour of love. This goes again into the resistance against stereotypical notions of passive fan consumption and production. Fans are not only active in their production, but they are also active in their awareness of the role this labour plays in relation to the industry. As one event planner and GOM put it, “we're basically trading entertainment and love for our labor. And we see it as a good deal” (Interviewee 20). And for many, it is a good deal.

Questions of value here are important, and while fans through their labour ultimately create surplus labour that is translated into the market economy, specifically generating revenue for the K-pop industry, the soft power that comes as a result of these labour practices is no longer serving the Korean state. Similarly, value as has been discussed works a little differently in the fandom economy. As Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) have discussed, there is a difference between value and worth, with the latter of the two operating in gifting economies. Fans ascribe a worth to their work, and that worth is paid for in recognition such as kudos, likes, retweets, or comments. This translates into a form of fandom-premised capital for creators (Chin, 2017), but again, this is not the soul source of motivation for creators. Many noted this idea of recognition or visibility of publishing fan creation within the fandom as a motivational ingredient, but the pursuit of subcultural capital does not always represent the primary impetus for their work.

Worth is also constructed in the ability to bridge connections, to create community within the network itself, and ultimately in gaining their artists recognition on

the global stage. Viewing this in a traditional economic sense, to fans, sometimes does not make sense. Just in the same way the question of paying for online work has arisen in discussions of knowledge production (Percival & Hesmondhalgh, 2014) so too does the idea of payment strike a difficult chord when considering how the “unpaid” portion of free fan labour can be compensated (De Kosnik, 2013). As one writer put it, “paid by who is the question? Is Big Hit, like, giving me an allowance for every NamKook fic I write?” (Interviewee 23). Rather, the question should instead be turned to how the value produced by fan creation is a “fannish” value of power that indirectly translates into a diminishing of nation-based soft power, while cultivating a nation*less* soft power for the collective identity of K-pop fandoms.

What can be argued here, as was discussed in the chapter previously, is that by directing the focus towards what fan creation can *do* in its existence shifts our understanding of its power. Fan creation acts as both free promotion and free expression, and the idea of compensation for work seems to direct the conversation away from what it is already doing outside of the context of the industry. The features that transcultural fan labour possess offer inventive insights into how power is retained and challenged through affective creation. The affect, as has been stressed so far, is the key, and it is one that spans across cultural contexts to become a transcultural affect. One, ultimately, that is enacted, shaped, defined, and contextualized through the creative efforts of fan communities.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

There's only 10 minutes to go, but I'm already shaking. The girl from Ohio beside me has long since ended our brief but elated conversation about proximity (because, we both realized, we were *close* close. Like, Jimin's hip thrusts right in our face kind of close) and now we both sat in anticipated silence as the sun set behind the north end of Olympic Stadium. On my lap rested the free blanket we had been gifted, thanks in part to BTS' recent Fila sponsorship, and my trusted JamJam[23] slogan towel which had been by my side since 2017. It was my good luck charm, and boy, had it really worked this time around. I smoothed over its holographic text, the wrinkles in the fabric evidence of its long use and imprinted memories of concerts past. Tonight, I was sure Jimin would see it.

Around me, the crowd was alive in conversation. Fans from all over the world blended with domestic Korean ARMY to create a multinational throng of excitement. It was the same every concert, but somehow this was different. Somehow the energy of these 60,000 fans was tinged with something else. It felt like this *meant* something else. For the first time, I found myself on the verge of tears before the concert had even begun. There was a sentimentality to this that extended beyond just the mere notion of the concert and translated into something more. It was *connection*. Within the space of this stadium, we were connected through our love, expressions of affect (whether immaterial or material), and solidarity. It did not matter what language you spoke, fans from all cultures offering snacks or free stickers to the person beside them. The connection was enough; the connection *was* the language we needed. Because we were all experiencing this event together, tied and bound to one another and BTS through an exchange of love.

Call it overly celebratory or call it utopian, it did not matter. The only thing that was important in those mere minutes before the lights dropped, "Dionysus" played, and the members burst onto the stage was our connection to each other. It made everything

[23] A fansite dedicated to BTS member Jimin

make sense. The kind fans from Japan who lent my friend and I a pencil to mark our merch choices on the order sheet earlier in the day; the throngs of fans exchanging photocards with one another in the underbelly of the stadium hours prior; the kind Korean ARMY passing out jellies as we lined up to get in. It was connection. It was the acknowledgement that we, regardless of language, understood one another through our love of the fan object that was BTS. It was fandom. Fandom made everything make sense.

5.1. A global network of affect and prospects of authenticity

The goal of this thesis was to investigate the ways in which labour, specifically fan labour, has the potential to subvert top-down notions of soft power at the state level. It has endeavoured to do so through two streams of thought: analyzing the networked nature of fan labour in varying K-pop fan communities and how through that labour, fannish value can equate to nationless soft power. The focus has been set back on the fandom to recontextualize the narrative textual engagement through fan creation as one where soft power is being reformed and repurposed. In much the same way the above anecdote elucidated how fans operate in a shared affinity for one another, an affinity that may extend by proxy from the fan text, so too has this thesis aimed to reveal how labouring through texts as well as for them has aided in changing the overall narrative of soft power. If anything, fan labour is the means through which fandom can become resistant, especially in the transcultural form that K-pop fan creation occupies. It is decontextualized, decentralized, and deregulated. K-pop fan labour relies on affect in the same way it produces affect—it is rooted, grounded, and manifested through affect as a centre. Whether it is the initial affective attachment to the fan text (which, as this thesis has conveyed, often occurs because of fan creation), the affect that is expressed in the process of creation, or in the same cyclical nature, the affect that is created through consumption of paratexts—it all comes back to affect as the source of power.

Fan labour does not operate in a vacuum, nor is it external to the market economy of capitalist production. It can be understood as exploitative, in the traditional sense, as it does lead back to the cultural object of the fan text; a fan text that is, ultimately, a part of the market economy. Fan labour, like any labour, therefore becomes a commodity. However, K-pop fan labour operates under the mentality of a gift economy,

spawned by a culture of giving to continue the cycle of fandom. Fan creation *is* fandom. It is a means through which affect extends beyond the fan text; it is what creates experience in the fan community. It solidifies, strengthens, and glues each node to one another. It possesses a power to attract and persuade, to create a bond or showcase the fan text in a new way. It allows for expression, for invitation, for exchange. And while it may operate in the same capacity as knowledge labour as this thesis has discussed, the value it produces is as much a value as it is a fannish worth.

What this worth means in the political realm is of great importance. Previous endeavours to entice or attract audiences to South Korea through cultural products such as K-pop were met with great success. This brought about K-pop themed tourism, Star Avenue in Apgujeong, music festivals free for foreigners. These initiatives worked—but they would be nothing without the efforts online and off put in by fans. As discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, moving into what appears to be a new era of K-pop (though I am not one to argue for a 3.0 era, as that is another thesis project entirely), fan labour has now taken the place of institutionalized efforts to attract audiences. In much the same way the aca-fan is a position that fosters trust as discussed in the methodology section of this thesis, fan efforts in the name of both the artist and the fandom are trusted over institutionalized tactics to leverage fandom as a tool in international relations. Perhaps it is exactly because of this historical pathologization fans have experienced that makes it so. Perhaps it is the on-going resistance fans feel towards an industry who has more often than not shown its true intentions towards fans through actions like the Sao Paulo DVD fiasco discussed earlier. But perhaps it is because of those exact nuances this thesis started off discussing—that understanding that is not necessarily based on shared values, but based on the level of connection.

This thesis began by addressing a gap in the literature, one that, from the perspective of fans, is significant. It began by questioning the extent to which existing research on K-pop fandom in conjunction with fan studies approaches has truly employed the methods necessary to understand transcultural fan practices, specifically fan labour. Fan labour is not unique to K-pop fandom, as this thesis has discussed, but the ways in which fan creation operates beyond regional borders and beyond cultural boundaries is significant. More importantly, this thesis has employed the lens of fandom as a method to understand how fans themselves as a baseline view the work they do in relation to not only the fan text, but the global fan community, both online and off. Many

studies have analyzed to how fans participate in disseminating positive images of South Korea into the global sphere, how the South Korean government has leveraged tactics that align with fan practices to attract international audiences, and how global fans will travel to South Korea on their pilgrimage to get closer to their artist on their own soil. But what studies failed to understand was how these were not just merely practices or top-down approaches—these were rooted in affect; these were rooted in *labour*. More importantly, revealing the connection transnational fandom spaces have through labour offers an understanding of how K-pop fan communities function as a transcultural networks, something that individualizing or regionalizing specific pockets of international fandom does not achieve. We have to understand the connection to understand how fandom operates, as practices do not exist in an vacuum but are a part of a larger sphere that shapes fan experience.

Through this research project, I aim to not only contribute to this gap, but to expand it; it is not enough simply to fill in the cracks. What the field necessitates, rather, is how to think through this further and to see how fan labour is the exact thing that is problematizing those top-down approaches. To put it plainly, how fan labour is beating them at their own game. Thinking back to the Hongdae photo zone versus Café Ten's cut-outs, the difference between a replicated practice rather than the "real thing" starkly showcased what fans value more. Yes, fans were coming in to see BTS—this is because the fan text will always be the central node. But what is fostering those ties is not just the efforts put forth by the government, but the practices of the fans, namely the labour of the fans. It would be incorrect to state that industry or the government do not have some say in this as, after all, fans are coming for their artists first and foremost. But this thesis fills the gap that has yet to analyze how fan labour plays a significant, if not the most significant, role in fostering connection, and how that connection through the transcultural network has the potential for resistance of hegemonic forces.

This is not to make the claim that K-pop fan labour is entirely resistant, just as it is not entirely exploited. Rather, the focus is set on how fan creation exists, expands, and challenges understandings of its role in the community. Based on the interviews with the 24 creators in this study, it seems that there is an acknowledgement that their work helps the industry achieve its monetary goals. They know this and are aware of how their labour contributes to the broader ecology of the Korean entertainment sector and even the government. But they also are conscious of how that manifests as a power held

directly by the fandom. It is a power that rests in the nuances of fan labour that paint it as authentic, something that cannot explicitly be replicated without failing to meet its objectives. In the same capacity that the Seoul Tourism board failed to meet the same level of fannish understanding presented at Café Ten, the movements to retain power at the level of industry and government continue to fall short.

This is an area that, ultimately, this thesis did not explore: the realm of the authentic and its relationship to fannish reception. Future studies would benefit from utilizing this framework, not in the ways in which artists themselves present as authentic or are perceived as “real”, but the ways in which soft power is linked to formulations of authenticity at the level of presentation. It is important to remember that fans are active consumers as much as they are active producers, signaling that they are not the pathological dupes of the past. They know when they are being deceived, tricked, manipulated, or whichever verb one could ascribe to the tactics that have been employed in the past. This idea is ultimately not bound to K-pop fandoms, but is complicated even further by the globalized focus put on K-pop as a cultural product. How not only authenticity is cultivated at the level of fan creation, but also how that authenticity transcends boundaries and is recontextualized as labour practices shift cultural contexts. Cupsleeve events, as this thesis has discussed, are not bound to geographical regions, but are now a global form of fan labour performed beyond the originating South Korean fanscape. However, how they are performed, the subtle nuances of photocards, photo stations, and even food are important in solidifying their authenticity in localized spaces.

This thesis took much from my own experiences and participation in a particular fandom space, that of the BTS ARMY. I referenced in the methodology section that this was performed due to my proximity and position as a part of this community. While many interview participants and survey respondents identified as fans of groups outside of BTS, my own position as an ARMY drew from experiences I witnessed in the community. It is also hard *not* to focus on ARMY—the strategies, tactics, and methods of creation within the ARMY community have helped leveraged BTS to the level of global recognition they have achieved. As I write this conclusion, ARMY are hosting hundreds of streaming parties for BTS’ newest release, *Butter*. The community on Twitter has been holding these for days now and, while not a novel practice by any means, the collective effort put forth for this comeback was truly something else. Twitter account

@btschartdata utilized the radio streaming app “Stationhead” to host hourly collective streaming times as fans convened around the hashtag #ListeningButterParty on Twitter, encouraging others to not only join but also start their own streaming parties on the app. At the same time, Columbia Records, the U.S. distributor for BTS’ records, attempted the very same thing, hosting hourly streaming parties daily as well. But while the official streaming party only barely met the 60,000-participant mark, btschartdata’s stream on Stationhead had over 200,000 fans collectively listening.

This is exactly what the anecdote that began this concluding chapter was attempting to convey: that fandom, the labour that constructs fandom, and the fan experience transcends cultural and geographical boundaries to become a universal language. It is poetic, really, that in the same way K-pop artists like RM from BTS have claimed music is universal, so too is fan creation something that becomes a universal. Not in the way that it is universally accepted, as our section on gatekeeping explained, but in the way that it becomes a fabric of the fandom experience regardless of group, geography, or culture. It becomes universal in the way that almost all fans have, in some capacity, interacted with or themselves created content that has added to the fruitfulness of the fan experience. That is a universal; in the same way the friction that goes with it is universal and is a necessity. Music itself is not a universal language, but it is a universal experience, understood at multiple levels. But in the context of K-pop fan culture, that experience becomes universal through the labour of fans like translators or content creators to enrich the interaction with and connection to the artist. The nuances of culture, the localization of events, and the transcendence of experience is what is universal, a universal that rests within the transcultural network of K-pop fan creation.

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