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Novel Applications of Music and Digital Media in Global Health Intervention and Education
Initiatives During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of BTS and ARMY

A Thesis Presented In Partial Fulfillments of the Requirements for a Master of Public Health in
Social and Behavioral Sciences with a Concentration in United States Health Justice

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May 1st, 2022

Advised by Professor Trace Kershaw

With Professor Grace Kao

Yale School of Public Health, Class of 2022

Abstract

The Korean musical group BTS (full name Bangtan Seoyeondan/방탄소년단) is one of the world's most commercially and artistically successful entertainment acts. BTS is primarily known for their domination of both Western and Korean musical markets, impressive digital media presence, major role in supporting the South Korean economy, and highly mobilized 400,000 member fandom known as ARMY. BTS and their parent company HYBE's artistic creation and marketing model has long focused on creating "Music and Artists for Healing," or using music and various forms of primarily digital content to connect with and improve health outcomes for fans. In response, ARMY have developed significant grassroots public health organizing to improve health of other fans and general populations. Both BTS and ARMY's intervention work regularly reaches global audiences of millions through primarily digital media delivery mechanisms.

This interdisciplinary, mixed methods study uses qualitative analysis of BTS' digital content (n = 478) and an introductory exploration of ARMY public health organizations to demonstrate that BTS' music, HYBE's digital content production and dissemination strategies, and ARMY's community grassroots organizing produced one of the largest-reaching public health interventions in response to the early COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020- December 2021). Major intervention strategies included mitigating negative mental health outcomes, distributing health information, modeling safe behaviors, and engaging in both mutual aid and anti-racist health equity work. This exploratory research illuminates new directions in effective, novel public health intervention and education practices and posits that critical, nuanced study of BTS and ARMY's impact on public health may hold important keys to re-imagining digitally delivered health interventions and their subsequent economic profitability.

Acknowledgements

To paraphrase Kim Namjoon, we are only a small percentage of our overall success. While it is yet to be determined whether this thesis is a success or not, I have many, many people to thank for making sure it came to fruition at all. Firstly, to my advisors: Prof. Kershaw, who has been one of my most flexible and insightful mentors since 2019 and only blinked only once when I suggested writing my thesis about a Korean boyband, and to Prof. Kao for her eternal patience with my Jimin-like tardiness and for always reminding me grounding my conclusions in data. Both of you have drastically shaped this project for the better.

Further thanks must be issued to all the faculty and administration at the Yale School of Public Health who have led me through this five-year journey to two degrees. Mary Keefe and Prof. Marney White have both been invaluable every step of the way, and Prof. Ijeoma Opara makes this space affirming and livable. I'm also indebted to my exemplary, kind, and brilliant Yale College mentors: Prof. Carolyn Roberts, whose guidance and light is my backbone, Prof. Gary Okihiro, Prof. Quan Tran, and all the ER&M faculty members. As always, Dr. Simons, Dr. Gupta, and Mr. Foster are my origin story. A huge thanks to all the ARMY organizations I interviewed and the ARMY academics who have "paved the way," especially Dr. Kate Ringland for her academic brilliance and support. 임선생님, 김선생님, 한국어 수업 친구들, 감사합니다! These two semesters of Korean have truly been the best classes I've taken at Yale!

The people are truly the best part of this institution, and I'm so profoundly grateful for all my friends! Biggest appreciation for all the five year mentors who came before me, with special love to the eternally kind and wise Bri Matusovsky. I've been privileged to make my way through this journey with incredible cohort members. Ruiyan, you are inimitable. Mila, the fact that you're literally next to me while I write these words says it all. Shannon, Georgiana, and Jacob will forever be one of best parts of the MPH program. Abby has taught me how to be a better friend every day and literally hauled me over the finish line. I've already written poems about Lillian, Alice, Kayley, & Dean. Karen, Hanah, and Lena are the BEST mentees in the world. Big love to the 20222 Yale Women's Water Polo team #beepbeep and USA Water Polo.

Finally, this piece bears witness to the life-changing and life-saving experience that is loving BTS. I wouldn't have anything to write about, let alone wouldn't have made it through the last two years, without all the incredible ARMY in my life (moots and ARMY Magazine bloggers included!). Kristin Fukushima sent me down the BTS rabbit hole and grabbed a seat alongside me, and has in a million ways shown me the path to a better self and community for almost ten years. My B(L)TS friends: Candice, Kari, Mayta, Yuri, Kat, and Steph have all provided me with an incredibly important connection to HOME when I have often been so far away. Isabelle, I purple you too, more than you know.

And, of course, to the boys. Namjoon unearths the poetry and beauty of this impermanent world. Jin shows me how to be fearless and funny and wholeheartedly self-loving. Hobi demonstrates that working hard to achieve iterative, gentle, and determined excellence in everything I do is a form of love. Taehyung is my comfort on all hard days. Jungkook shows me exactly who I want to be. Yoongi puts everything I've ever lived into words in ways I didn't know were possible. Jimin has taught me how to ask for what I need and how to give and unapologetically receive the love we all deserve, has shown me the power in gentle growth and vulnerability, has made me confront and re-confront every part of myself, and makes me immensely grateful that I am alive to witness and marvel in art. To the end of the rainbow, always: "어쩔 이 밤의 표정이 이토록 또 아름다운 건 저 어둠도 달빛도 아닌 우리 때문일 거야."

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Novel Applications of Music and Digital Media in Global Health Intervention and Education Initiatives During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of BTS and ARMY

Introduction

Comprised of seven male members who specialize in different combinations of singing, dancing, rapping, and acting, the Korean musical group BTS (full name Bangtan Seoyeondan/방탄소년단) is known for their immaculate stage performances, primarily self-written and produced lyrics discussing their personal experiences, and their incredibly dedicated and organized fandom of over 400,000 people across the globe known as ARMY (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth).¹ The group's record-breaking sold-out stadium tours, major awards across Asian and Western markets, and stretches of #1 Hit Songs on major musical charts are quantitatively unprecedented for any musical act. Moreover, BTS frequently breaks language, race, and nationality barriers as the first and only Korean act to accomplish these feats.

BTS emerged from the "K-pop"/"idol" industry, wherein Korean entertainment agencies such as the group's parent company HYBE, scout, train, and "debut" promising young performers on the Korean musical market.² While most successful K-pop groups are produced by large and well-known entertainment agencies, BTS was the first group developed by HYBE (known initially as BigHit Entertainment).³ HYBE's innovative conceptualization, marketing, and development of BTS and subsequent idol groups has made the entertainment conglomerate one of the fastest growing and most profitable companies in the world.⁴

Academics and professionals across a myriad of disciplines have attempted to analyze how and why BTS is so successful. Many have noticed that BTS' reach and popularity, along with HYBE's profits, skyrocketed during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022). The group landed their first five Billboard Hot 100 singles, received their first two Grammy nominations (the only ever awarded to Korean artists), and were named the world's best-selling artists of both 2020 and 2021 by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI).⁵ Meanwhile, HYBE posted an overall revenue of \$1.1 Billion in 2021 after going public on the Korean stock market in 2020.⁶

BTS also seemed to acquire more fans than ever before, increasing their Twitter following by almost 20 million users between December 2019 and December 2021.⁷ As a result, BTS holds the single largest social media engagement footprint on Twitter along with outsized impacts on other digital media sites.⁸ Any public health intervention work conducted by BTS or members of their fandom therefore has some of the largest potential reach of any singular entity in the world (for comparison purposes, BTS recently received 9316.77% more likes than the World Health Organization when both platforms tweeted about the same topic on the same date).⁹ Both the group and its fans have used this shared global platform for years to discuss mental health and critique systemic oppression facing youth around the world.¹⁰ However, little to no research has explored the public health implications of their work and how this level of reach and success might impact population-level health outcomes.

This multidisciplinary study uses a public health lens to explore how BTS' music, HYBE's digital content production and dissemination strategies and ARMY's responsive community grassroots organizing, produced one of the largest-reaching public health interventions in response to the early COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020- December 2021). This research represents important new directions in exploring effective, novel methods and structures for widespread public health education and intervention dissemination with important economic,

socio-cultural, and population health implications. While ascertaining the impact of these intervention strategies is beyond the scope of this study, this introductory exploration demonstrates that a critical, nuanced study of BTS and ARMY's impact on public health may hold important keys to re-imagining effective intervention delivery methods, target audiences, and economic profits.

Background

Music-based public health interventions holistically improve a myriad of mental and physical health outcomes.¹¹ The multi-faceted neural, social-emotional, and physiological impacts of listening to music allow for effective primary and secondary interventions addressing health issues from traumatic injury and cognitive illness to depression and anxiety.¹² On the community level, folk religious songs have been used to teach and retain health education practices across the globe for centuries.¹³ In contemporary practice, public health officials have successfully utilized the accessibility, relatively low cost, and affective appeal of “culturally relevant” songs to spread information about health topics ranging from HIV prevention to proper tooth brushing techniques.¹⁴

Moreover, artists from many oppressed communities have created and performed “protest songs to raise awareness of health issues, advocate for social equity, and promote resilience and hope, with important health implications for marginalized populations.¹⁵ Black American music in particular has been long used to “speak truth to power,” a strategy that historically and contemporarily has had immense success in improving a myriad of health outcomes for marginalized populations.¹⁶ Contemporarily, hip hop has proven effective in fighting for equity “within and beyond national borders with the incredible urgency of now” in a variety of global contexts.¹⁷ More broadly, the commercial music industry mass-produced and disseminated protest, resilience, “feel good,” and empowerment songs.¹⁸ However, very little research has explored commercial music as a strategy for population-wide health interventions, nor the development of music technology in delivering music-based interventions.¹⁹ Additionally, few companies have developed an entire business model based on this premise, with the notable exception of BTS’ parent company, HYBE.

In the mid-late 2000’s, HYBE’s founding CEO Bang Sihyuk theorized that developing increased fan loyalty towards musical artists would counteract the drop in physical album sales that wracked the late 2000’s music market.²⁰ After company focus groups demonstrated that youth felt increasingly isolated and wanted to “connect with” and derive “comfort” from artists, Bang decided that HYBE would focus on releasing music that would “help and inspire” young people through providing sincere and emotionally resonant lyrics that were designed to make fans’ lives better.²¹ This was reflected in HYBE’s original motto: “Music and Artists for Healing,” a marked difference from most Korean and Western record label slogans that center around providing quality “entertainment.”²²

BTS’ subsequent focus on music as a source of health improvement thus represents a cornerstone of a larger company’s entire guiding philosophy and business model rather than the focus of a singular song or artist(s).²³ As HYBE’s first group, the septet initially sought to exemplify this model through “speaking out against the bullets of oppression, stereotypes, and prejudice facing youth (hence their Korean name 방탄소년단, which translates to “Bulletproof Boy Scouts”).²⁴ Thus, BTS’ approach to improving public health through music has *always* been grounded in attention to structural health (in)equities that shape health outcomes (their first three

albums, for example, explored the toxic mental and physical health impacts of standardized education and late-stage capitalism in Korea).²⁵ This is reflected in genre as well; BTS debuted as a hip-hop and rap group, *not* a pop group, and every single full-group BTS song but one has intentionally utilized a genre built to articulate and challenge systemic marginalization experienced by Black Americans into a South Korean context.²⁶

Over the course of their career, BTS has developed multiple health intervention strategies in their music. In addition to the societal commentary discussed above, the group has actively enacted psychotherapeutic methodologies in several songs designed to “comfort” and “heal” fans.²⁷ As a result, a significant body of research has demonstrated BTS’ music has improved listener health outcomes. Studies have noted that pre-2020 BTS songs emphasize Branden’s Six Pillars of Self-Esteem, and that listening to BTS music predicts hope, optimism, self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-forgiveness, perseverance, and happiness in consumers.²⁸ The most comprehensive study conducted to ascertain the impact of listening to BTS music (n = 1,190) showed that BTS music helped the study participants feel “‘safe’ and ‘understood’ during situations that were challenging, frustrating or unfulfilling,” served as a catalyst to release emotions that participants were unable to verbalize, and made listeners “feel more focused, empowered, and persistent, helping them deal with real-life challenges” while still helping them “forget about their troubles or worries. As a result, listeners found certain songs led them to challenge their way of thinking, change their behavior, or “take concrete actions to better their mental health,” including seeking professional treatment.²⁹

Through creating a musical and digital media presence that emphasizes genuine and honest communication of emotions, experiences, and struggles between fans and artists, BTS and ARMY have developed a mutual relationship of love, care, and respect that challenges conceptualizations of one-sided “parasocial” celebrity-fan relationships. BTS frequently credit ARMY with not just their professional success, but with improving the members’ own mental-emotional health, self-esteem, and happiness.³⁰ The result is what Dr. Jiyoung Lee calls a “rhizomatic” fan-artist relationship, in which no study of either is complete without examining both constituent entities.³¹

This relationship is centered in BTS’ creation of music as a source of public health intervention.³² Several BTS “fan songs” remind ARMY of their powerful and affirming impact *on BTS’ lives* to give listeners hope and purpose.³³ In one such song, the members tell ARMY that “you’ve shown me, I have reasons I should love myself...me, who used to be sad, me, who used to be hurt” to remind listeners that community love and support (exemplified by ARMY themselves) can be used to overcome mistakes and insecurities.³⁴ This process is further employed during concerts, where audiences physically sing with both BTS and each other in an experience that actualizes health outcomes. As one fan wrote in 2018:

“The first time hearing Epiphany [a song about self-love] live in concert was LITERALLY life-changing. Somehow, in that stadium, him [the BTS member who sings the song] telling me that I’m the one I should love and me singing that so loudly with a bunch of others, internalized it and made it real and practicable. It was magical.”³⁵

As this tweet demonstrates, concert spaces can be powerful sites of community health intervention work that deeply impact individual attendees, though further research would be needed to ascertain impact and efficacy.

However, BTS’ public health impact isn’t limited to producing and performing music. A long attributed major factor in BTS’ meteoric rise to success is the scaffolding and integration of their value-based music with innovative and accessible digital media content production,

particularly their utilization of social media to interact with fans and promote their work.³⁶ This social media-focused strategy was in part borne simply as a result of BTS and HYBE's relatively marginalized position in both the Korean and Western music markets, but was also an incredibly intentional part of HYBE's "horizontal" leadership model wherein artists are marketed as "relatable" rather than being "placed on a pedestal."³⁷ Increasing artist social media presence and developing a wide variety of "intellectual property" related to the "message and personality" of their artists, e.g. graphic novels, video games, brand deals, has significantly increased fan engagement and overall profit for the company.³⁸

Examples of BTS' diverse digital media content production abound. Beyond the auditory tracks for each of their songs, BTS has been heralded for developing "dance moves, strong visual language in music videos and...additional content," creating an "immersive world" of "transmedia storytelling" that is "dense with intertextual citations" and cross-media connections to a wide variety of current events, literary and artistic works, and psychological practices.³⁹ This complex, cross-platform content production underscores the lyrical health-centric themes discussed in the previous section, and pre-pandemic music videos have tackled themes from domestic violence to mental illness and suicide.⁴⁰ Additionally, BTS members and their management are routinely active on a variety of social media platforms and consistently deliver video, picture, and text content to ARMY.⁴¹

As a result, BTS fans are a highly engaged and digitally activated fandom driven by shared values of world betterment. Both researchers and public media outlets frequently examine how ARMY uses digital media to promote BTS' work and increase the group's power and influence globally.⁴² In addition to streaming, viewing, and voting for BTS to support their musical work, ARMY engage in transformative practices of "remixing" and "re-imagining" BTS' media content to communicate with and increase "affective bonds" with both BTS members and other fans.⁴³

"Fandoms," or "communities built around a shared enjoyment of an aspect of popular culture," can be generative strategies of public health interventions and campaigns.⁴⁴ Previous research has posited that K-pop fandoms can be considered "communities of practice," or "group[s] of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfill both individual and group goals."⁴⁵ Communities of practice, including digital communities, are well-demonstrated important and useful public health intervention sites.⁴⁶ Because "fan engagement" can be "a site of renewal and optimism," the "experience of joy leads to further investments that transform one's life and others, including the possibility of struggling and resisting...oppressive power structures."⁴⁷ This is evident in studies of several other fandoms.

Successful fandom-based public health campaign models include artist-driven campaigns to support causes such as queer rights or autonomous, fan-driven fundraising campaigns inspired by the fandom's subject of interest.⁴⁸ Brough and Shrestha have classified some of these practices as "fan-activism," or "fan-driven efforts to address civic or political issues through engagement with and strategic deployment of popular culture content" and transformative, participatory campaign engagement.⁴⁹ However, most fandom efforts are temporally limited campaigns surrounding specific causes (e.g. natural disaster relief, existing fundraisers) rather than a primary, sustained aspect of fandom involvement.

In recent years, fandom participation has been marked with high levels of media engagement and mobilization. This is particularly prevalent in "K-pop" (Korean language pop music) fandoms, where digital media is a primary source of artist exposure and engagement for

global audiences.⁵⁰ Despite sometimes toxic online fan environments, this primarily digital participation in K-pop fandom has been shown to be a “significant predictor of... psychosocial outcomes” including “happiness, self-esteem, and social connectedness, pointing to positive psychosocial benefits to fandom participation.”⁵¹ Moreover, K-pop fandom inherently challenges the privileged position of Anglophone pop stars by creating a counter-hegemonic culture focused on non-English, non-Western musical and artist content.⁵²

The rise of digital media and communication has also allowed for faster and more expansive real-time public health organizing across national and organizational borders. The lack of in-person health services during COVID-19 has made these digitally delivered public health campaigns and healthcare services essential to strengthening the contemporary public health landscape.⁵³ With regards to mental health specifically, quarantine and isolation protocols have “disrupted the delivery of... services globally” during a time of heightened “psychological and mental health responses including the spread of fear, stress, and anxiety, which also impact the spread and containment of infectious diseases.”⁵⁴ Research studies have unanimously demonstrated significant mental health burdens in regions affected by COVID-19 outbreaks as a result of the pandemic, particularly in adolescents and youth.⁵⁵

Several technologically-based preventive and rehabilitative interventions have been shown to alleviate pandemic-associated anxiety and depression and improve quality of life.⁵⁶ Additionally, providing “reliable COVID-19 information sources “may assist in alleviating... anxiety and fear” surrounding the pandemic, as pandemic-specific “health literacy” is associated with decreased depression and increased health-related quality of life.⁵⁷ Only one digital intervention model reported the successful integration of music in promoting “COVID-19 prevention and control as well as hope,” though many original and re-written popular songs were digitally disseminated to provide information about COVID-19 prevention in the early days of the pandemic.⁵⁸

BTS’ digital media-focused content dissemination structures and value-driven musical output thus represent a nexus of technology, art, and health that are uniquely suited to addressing new challenges presented in delivering effective public health interventions in response to COVID-19. Given that ARMY has one of the biggest digital media presences of all time, any exploration of BTS and ARMY’s health intervention work also represents an important and understudied exploration of alternative pathways to increase global health intervention scalability.⁵⁹

Methods

To illustrate the processes by which BTS, HYBE, and ARMY sought to improve health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic, a health intervention model was designed to illustrate the complex, multi-dimensional system of intervention delivery methods and sites developed over the course of BTS’ nine-year career. This model was then applied to BTS and ARMY’s digital content released between March 11, 2020-November 21, 2021, the period when BTS was unable to perform for or meet their fans in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative parent-child iterative coding was used to ascertain COVID-19-specific intervention approaches and methods found in digital media content, including songs, livestreamed and pre-recorded video content, and interviews, produced by BTS and HYBE (n =478). Video content was obtained using the “BTS Road Map” online database produced by ARMY digital creator Landon

Mark.⁶⁰ Lyric translations, when needed, were obtained from the ARMY website “doolset lyrics” that provides both direct lyric translations and relevant Korean socio-cultural context.

Print content was limited to materials produced directly by HYBE and a small sample of major magazine covers (*TIME*, *Vogue*, *Variety*, and *Esquire* magazines). Short social media posts on Twitter, Weverse, TikTok, along with shorter behind the scenes and Korean culture YouTube video series, were excluded due to volume and overall relevance. Shorter interviews conducted by third parties and print, video, and audio advertisements aired on non-BTS or HYBE platforms were also excluded from primary analysis due to volume and theme saturation, as most short interviews involved answering similar questions about music releases.

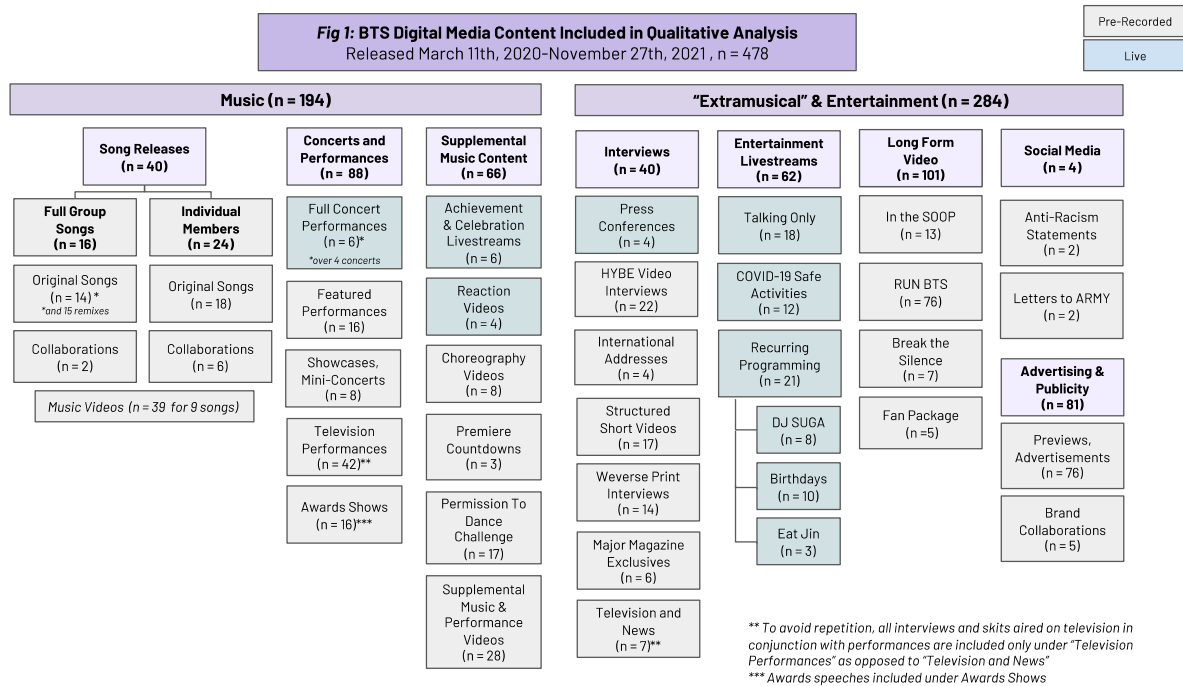


Figure 1: BTS Digital Media Content Included in Qualitative Analysis

Additionally, demographic, informational, and quantitative data was solicited from three major ARMY public health-oriented organizations that operate using primarily Twitter-based platforms. Organizations were selected through conducting Twitter searches for the key words “BTS” and “ARMY” combined with “health,” “public health,” “medicine,” and “global health,” and via previously published articles in both academic and popular media. ARMY organizations were then chosen for inclusion based on relevance of mission statement to public health intervention work. Each organization was contacted by either Twitter direct message or email, after which interested administrators provided information about the organization’s purpose, reach, and strategies via email correspondence. Given the frequency with which ARMY organization statements and testimonies are manipulated by academic researchers and popular media, Zoom calls were also held to further explain study purpose, develop trust between organization and researcher, and gain clarity regarding organizational purpose and history.⁶¹ All community organizations were given the opportunity to review this study before publication to ensure that they were appropriately represented in the final work.

Results

From March 2020-December 2021, BTS and ARMY synergistically developed one of the largest digitally delivered public health interventions in the world in response to COVID-19, focusing primarily on mitigating negative mental health outcomes, health information distribution, safe behavior modeling, mutual aid, and anti-racist health equity work. The following analysis first provides readers with an overall model of BTS and ARMY's health intervention work that has been developed over the course of the group's career, which serves as the foundation for the pandemic-time analysis that comprises the greater part of this project. "Section 2: Music and Artists for Healing" then discusses how BTS, to great commercial and financial success, openly discussed mental health struggles, employed psychological techniques such as reframing and temporal distancing, and increased accessibility in their original discography during this time. The third section, "Seven Billion Lights: Multi-Media Connectivity and Public Health Education," discusses how BTS and ARMY used music and digital media to form and maintain community and model best health practices during periods of intense physical isolation. The final two sections outline how ARMY, inspired by BTS, have built community health organizations that provide mental health assistance services, fundraising, health advocacy and education resources, and health-based activism efforts to both fans and the public.

As will be demonstrated across these five sections, BTS and ARMY's synergistic relationship drives digital media-driven health intervention efforts across languages, nationalities, and identities, fundamentally restructuring the contemporary public health landscape at a remarkably broad scale. This has a myriad of important implications in public and global health, including potential solutions and strategies for subverting hegemonic power imbalances (West/non-West, provider/recipient), economic gains, and intervention strategies that resonate with large numbers of people.

Section 1- A Rhizomatic Intervention Model

Unlike many organizations, movements, and communities, BTS and ARMY's digitally-driven model of digitally delivered health intervention and education work was well-established before the advent of COVID-19. In fact, HYBE, BTS, and ARMY developed an iterative, rhizomatic model of "healing" based on reinforcing and reflexive digital engagement and advocacy work over the course of 2013-2020 that provided an unusually strong springboard upon which all three parties transitioned to the "digital only" era of early COVID-19. Previous mixed methods systems thinking and information studies have also used modeling to understand and conceptualize BTS' overwhelming success; this model draws upon these studies but provides new connections between existing variables through connecting them via a public health lens.⁶²

The model below illustrates the interdisciplinary structural, economic, and creative factors that shaped the development of both BTS and ARMY as public health interventionists, much of which were discussed in the Background section. Highlighted purple sections represent elements of the model that gained and/or maintained significant importance in intervention content and delivery during COVID-19. Of particularly important note is the reinforcing feedback loop created by BTS and ARMY wherein each party is inspired by the other to continue improving public health.

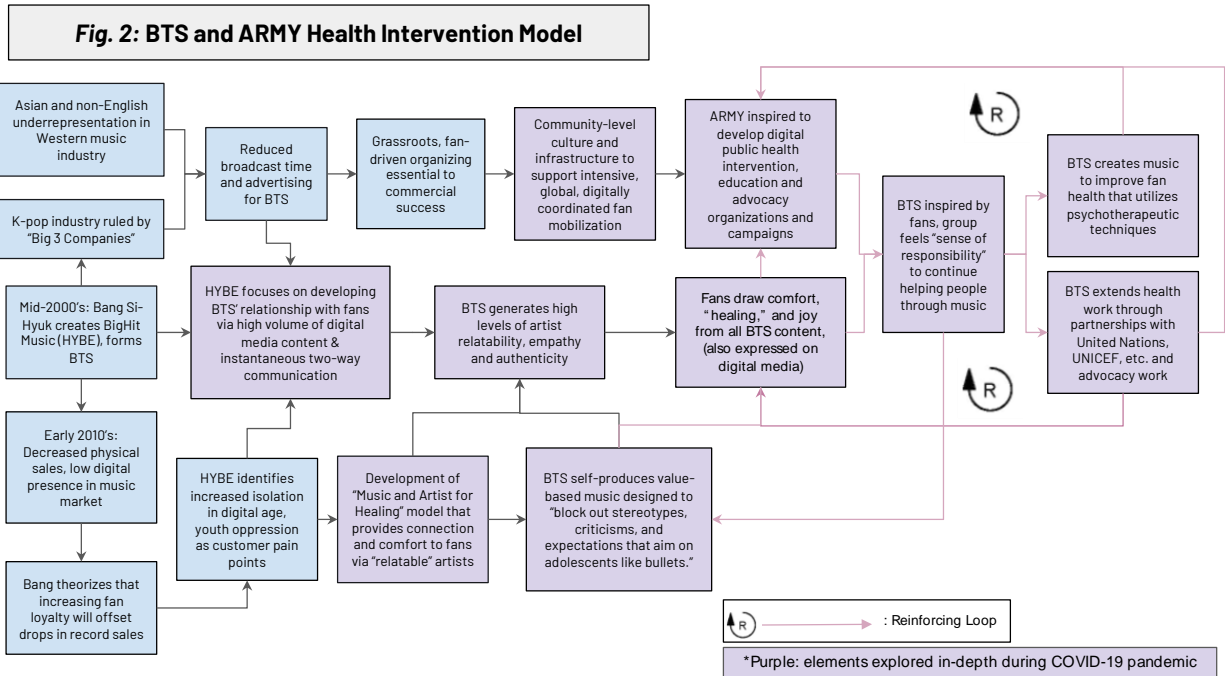


Figure 2: BTS and ARMY Health Intervention Model

As demonstrated, BTS and ARMY engage in three major modalities of public health interventions across music, digital media content, and social media interaction: (1) awareness of mental health issues driven by personal experience-sharing, (2) actual health-based interventions through music, and (3) societal commentary and critique of systemic injustice. In addition, ARMY have developed both lasting public health-focused organizations and campaign efforts aligning with these three themes. As the following sections will demonstrate, several elements of this model were particularly useful and effective when applied to addressing health outcomes of COVID-19 pandemic during forced isolation.

Section 2- Music and Artists for Healing

While artists of all mediums and styles generated creative work to process the COVID-19 pandemic, HYBE maintained a distinctly unique approach at the production company level that led to impressive and unprecedented commercial results.⁶³ Prior to the pandemic, BTS primarily released music using the “album cycle” strategy, releasing clusters of thematically interrelated works over the course of multiple months or years. During the pandemic, however, HYBE and BTS shifted their focus to releasing two types of songs in smaller, more frequent installments that directly addressed the health effects of the pandemic: “emotionally honest songs” that reckoned frankly with the impacts COVID-19 and “songs to give the hope and comfort needed to overcome this moment together.”⁶⁴ The former were predominantly found on the group’s LP *BE*, and the latter produced in the form of predominantly English language singles.⁶⁵

In addition to being novel intervention techniques and delivery modalities in and of themselves, BTS’ pandemic-time discography demonstrates the unprecedented commercial power and potential of this model. All six lead singles BTS released during the pandemic have premiered at #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart for a total of 16 weeks at #1.⁶⁶ Despite being almost entirely in Korean with a November release date, *BE* was still the fifth best-selling album

in the United States and topped South Korean sales at almost 3 million copies in four months (for context, South Korea only has around 52 million people).⁶⁷ A myriad of less public health-focused factors, including ARMY's comprehensive buying and streaming strategies and HYBE's well-thought out marketing plan, contributed to the group's overwhelming success; regardless, the fact remains that this health-based musical model has been the key to breaking open a notoriously xenophobic Western musical market and continuing to reign on Korean charts.

The following section discusses how BTS used their music to normalize negative health impacts of the pandemic and incorporated joy and comfort, cognitive reframing, and temporal distancing into lyrics and performance as helpful coping and processing mechanisms for their audience. Additionally, BTS expanded the accessibility of their music and performance by incorporating sign language into their single "Permission to Dance." These themes were underscored in BTS' public addresses to the United Nations and UNICEF, interviews, and other public-facing statements, and ultimately represent an unprecedented and unrecognized scale of multi-layer COVID-19 mental health intervention delivery.

1.1 "Our Rock Bottom:" Songs About Pandemic Health Struggles

Throughout the pandemic, BTS released both group and individual songs that explicitly, often painfully, discussed the negative impacts of the pandemic on the members' mental health and overall well-being. The group's critical, reflexive articulation of ongoing, evolving, pandemic-induced depression and anxiety provide important contributions to the normalization of mental health struggles, with potentially important impacts on improving population health outcomes among fans.

A large body of literature demonstrates that increased awareness and normalization of mental health issues is crucial in reducing negative mental health outcomes, particularly among youth.⁶⁸ Notably, "pop music artists who open up about mental health difficulties may have potential as novel message sources in communication campaigns designed to improve mental health outcomes among college students."⁶⁹ In particular, songs discussing *artists'* "mental health difficulties" are "associated with increased mental health empathy [and] mediate outcomes including reduced mental health stigma, increased support for public mental health resources, and increased willingness to support others struggling with their mental health."⁷⁰ This is supported by BTS-specific research; one study examining BTS music listeners in 2020 found that the group's pre-COVID-19 lyrical messages pertaining to mental health were strengthened through the perceived authenticity of the artists' experiences.⁷¹ These study results have been echoed in public statements made about BTS by several mental health professionals.⁷²

BTS was well-known for explicitly discussing personal mental health in their music far before the pandemic, writing about lived experiences of depression, anxiety, and OCD.⁷³ In these songs, powerful lyrics are underscored through "sonic vulnerabilities," a composition technique that invokes and expresses these feelings through specific key choices, tonal centers, and melodic progression.⁷⁴ The members have explained that these songs are designed to comfort and console fans by demonstrating that mental health challenges are "not things that need to be hidden."⁷⁵ By creating an environment where people "can ask for help" when they are "suffering and lonely," BTS has "innovated a major paradigm shift in mental health discourse" wherein personal authenticity and vulnerability enhances public health messaging about help-seeking.⁷⁶

BTS continued to normalize the discussion of mental health and well-being during the pandemic, frequently talking and singing about the difficulties they experienced as artists whose vocation and livelihood is primarily dependent on large-scale in-person performances. A handful

of songs explicitly address broad depression and anxiety brought upon by the pandemic, with the goal of “making it obvious...everyone was having a hard time.”⁷⁷ Most of these songs rely heavily on metaphor; rapper and group member SUGA references being “deserted on an island” without escape throughout his songs and speeches, vocalist Jin compares depression to a “deep sea” in the song *Abyss*, and all of the group members compare depression and anxiety to the colors “blue and grey” in the song of the same name.⁷⁸ These songs are supported with sonic choices that convey these emotions to the listener. HYBE’s official magazine explained, for example, that the song *Blue & Grey* uses “long melodies [with] no clear ending...distant rapping delivered through left and right on stereo” and vocal echoes to trigger “an image of a lonely winter night” for listeners.⁷⁹ Similarly, some of the vocals in *Abyss* sound almost muted to give the listener the sensation of listening to the song underwater, as the song’s narrator compares depression to being “submerged” in “my ocean,” unable to surface.⁸⁰

BTS further discussed these themes in their public-facing interviews and speeches, often mentioning that they felt “hopeless,” “bewildered,” and “frustrated” about the “current situation.”⁸¹ During these speeches, members also acknowledged that they “were not the only ones feeling like this,” acknowledging that the entire world needed “time to mourn for the things that COVID-19 took away from us.”⁸² Through sharing these feelings on global platforms, such as in addresses to the UN and UNICEF, BTS served as an important ambassador for youth mental health concerns on prominent global stages that far extend beyond the normal realm of pop music.

1.2 Cognitive Reframing

BTS also used several clinically identified psychological techniques to re-frame feelings of “entrapment,” helplessness, depression, and anxiety during the pandemic through re-imagining physical space.⁸³ Throughout much of BTS’ pandemic-time discography, geographic isolation is represented by the word “room,” an all-encompassing term that is understood to represent a variety of quarantine situations. Songs, music videos, and online concerts then reframe and reconceptualize one’s room as a communal place of exploration, adventure, and connectivity for both fans and artists, creating an “imagined space” grounded in physical reality where listeners and artists can process the pandemic together.⁸⁴

Clinical psychologist David A. Clark writes that cognitive reframing (referred to cognitive restructuring in clinical settings) consists of multiple “structured, goal-directed, and collaborative intervention strategies that focus on the exploration, evaluation, and substitution of...maladaptive thoughts.” Through “reframing... inflexible, closed, impermeable, and relatively concrete” thought patterns such as “everything is hopeless” or “I am a failure” into more balanced “schema” (e.g., “I am a person who recently experienced failure, but also has had many successes”), patients increase coping and resilience in the face of adverse circumstances.⁸⁵

The most prominent example of cognitive re-imagination can be found in “Fly to My Room,” the second track from *BE*. The song’s first verse begins with the previously discussed normalization of pandemic-induced negative mental health outcomes, specifically widely-experienced feeling being trapped in one’s home (“this room is all I have”).⁸⁶ In order to cope, the song’s narrator then “generate[s] alternative[s]” and decides “well then, I’ll change this room into my world” in order to “get me outta my blues” so that “I’m feelin’ brand new.”⁸⁷ Through actively telling listeners that “you can change the way you think” (an example of “positivity reorientation”), BTS encourages cognitive reframing of physical space and isolation.⁸⁸

The members then offer listeners several imaginative reframing strategies. One member personifies the “room” as a figurative rather than purely literal support structure that can “hug you” and “hold...happiness and sadness, all emotions.”⁸⁹ Another reimagines physical elements of being trapped in one’s room as aspects of a trip or vacation (i.e., “the toys in my room greet me again like people, the TV bustles like I’m out in the city”). This development of a “secure base” relies heavily on “directed, intentional imagination,” which “is pivotal for self-regulation in the form of escapism.”⁹⁰ Interestingly, music as the mode of intervention may also enhance the effectiveness of this imagination-driven cognitive reframing, as “musical auditory stimuli...induce higher vividness ratings” in directed interventions designed to alleviate anxiety and depression.⁹¹

These strategies were also demonstrated and amplified through the production of digital multimedia content accompanying *BE*. The music videos for *Dynamite* and *Life Goes On*, for example, demonstrate the members modeling these techniques through example: members literally perform the lyrics in both songs that talk about using daily activities to ground oneself in the pandemic.⁹² Another particularly novel approach was the “Curated By BTS” project, a participatory multi-media digital installation wherein the members collaboratively created a bedroom filled with items to “comfort ARMY.”⁹³ Released over the course of several days in February 2021, the project began with a simple drawing of a bedroom that could be found on BTS’ official blog. Every day, a new member-designed “special object” was added to the room,¹ accompanied by an explanatory voice recording.⁹⁴ Users could then manually move the objects around the “room” to create unique design configurations (which, perhaps unintentionally, resulted in a plethora of humorously unrealistic room designs shared on Twitter).⁹⁵

Lastly, BTS’ online concerts focused on re-imagining one’s room as a concert space. Instead of the group’s normal pre-concert announcements about safety and proper decorum, a similarly designed animated text series tells viewers to “get comfortable” and reminds them that “all food and drinks are allowed!” to emphasize the perks to having an at-home concert experience.⁹⁶ During multiple concerts, the members reminded the audience members that they were connected to the artists through “each of your own rooms,” often joking that audience members should “make some noise in your room.”⁹⁷ At the end of 2021’s *Sowozoo*, members encouraged the audience to turn on their phone flashlights and hold the light by their windows to see if any other ARMY were watching nearby “from their own rooms,” and many ARMY reported their success via social media.⁹⁸ Thus, BTS engages in communal cognitive reframing that encourages both singer and listener to re-imagine the enclosed physical space of a “room” into a space of community. Through these techniques, and many other content production strategies, BTS co-creates and re-negotiates the new boundaries of the physical space wrought by the pandemic as a real-time coping strategy.

1.3 Temporal Distancing

BTS prominently employed temporal distancing in song lyrics, speeches, performances, and interviews, jointly encouraging both themselves and their audience that “life goes on” to cope with the negative effects of the pandemic. The pandemic’s abrupt cessation of human activity created a sensation for many that the “world stopped” or was “frozen in time,” which the

¹ For example, one member added a clock to the room because “listening to the ticking of the clock when everything is silent can...bring some calm to your mind.” The clock was set to 6:13 to represent the date of BTS’ first public appearance (6/13/2013) so that “every time you see it, you’ll think of BTS.”

members discussed in multiple songs and interviews.⁹⁹ BTS knowingly and deliberately draws heavily on “temporal distancing” in lyrics and speeches to increase psychological resilience.

Previous research has demonstrated that temporal distancing, a behavioral technique focused on “imagining oneself in one’s future” that “can play an important role in emotional coping with negative events” by “directing individuals’ attention to the impermanent aspects of these events.”¹⁰⁰ Actively distancing through language specifically has been shown to help improve emotional regulation.¹⁰¹ Notably, some interventions featuring temporal distancing have “decrease[d]...negative affect” driven by the COVID-19 pandemic specifically.¹⁰² RM, BTS’ leader and one of the group’s main songwriters, learned about this technique from a “psychological counselor” as early as 2016, and applied this technique in the lyrics in both individual and group songs around this time.¹⁰³ This strategy is heavily utilized in BTS’ pandemic-time music.

A key phrase through which the group enacted temporal distancing through music appears to be “Life Goes On,” the title of the lead single for *BE* and the theme of their Fall 2020 UN address.¹⁰⁴ In addition to constant refrains of the phrase itself, the chorus of “Life Goes On” points out that everyday activity markers such as eating, sleeping, and watching the seasons pass demonstrate that “time goes by on its own” even though it “feels like there is no end in sight.”¹⁰⁵ Another song entitled “A Moment” in Korean was written to remind ARMY that “we’ll be able to meet each other after a moment,” another attempt to linguistically reframe the pandemic’s temporality as passing rather than permanent.¹⁰⁶ Lyrics in the single “My Universe,” released almost a year later, similarly remind listeners that “these hardships are just temporary.”¹⁰⁷ The pre-chorus of “Life Goes On” actually prompts the audience to partake in temporal distancing with the singing artists, inviting the listener to “hold my hand [and] run away” to a “future [where] the day will come back around as if nothing has happened.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the group’s 2020 UN General Assembly address ended with the members calling the audience to “dream of a better future” and “re-imagine the world.”¹⁰⁹

This temporal distancing was visualized in several performances of “Life Goes On,” most notably the Melon Music Awards 2020 performance that featured masked dancers frozen and painted in all white who transform in a burst of color and perform everyday activities joyfully (but still masked) at the end of the song.¹¹⁰ Similarly, the song’s music video shows a transition from the BTS members at home in pajamas to the group in concert (though sans audience).¹¹¹

Lastly, BTS members engaged in mutual temporal distancing directed towards themselves and their fans, primarily, during concerts and speeches, by frequently envisioning a future in which “we will all be able to meet again.” In fact, some of the lyrics for “My Universe” were written “while picturing the day we reunite with ARMY.”¹¹² Members connected this reminder of delayed gratification to engaging in “more careful” health practices and continued motivation to “practice” and “get better” even without immediate upcoming concerts.¹¹³ The members also encouraged ARMY to “wait” and “stay healthy” to actualize this future reunion.¹¹⁴ These statements provide important implications for the use of temporal distancing to encourage health-positive and COVID-19-risk decreasing behavior.

1.4 Joy and Comfort

Though many of the group’s lyrics were oriented towards processing and addressing the painful and difficult health impacts of COVID-19, BTS’ most commercially successful singles were upbeat, cheerful songs designed to combat these health issues through providing “comfort and joy” to listeners. Sung in English to increase international accessibility, “Dynamite”

(released September 2020), “Butter” (released May 2021), and “Permission To Dance” (released July 2021) are all upbeat, pop singles released as standalone “comebacks,” the K-pop industry’s term for new release. The simple and peppy English lyrics combined with brightly colored high-energy performances might seem like substance-light “bubble gum” pop at first listen; however, this attention to joy and happiness is an intentional, calculated public health intervention designed to deliver “hope” and “strength” to those struggling in the face of the pandemic.¹¹⁵

In interviews and public appearances, BTS frequently discusses that the “bright and refreshing energy” of “Dynamite” was cultivated intentionally to “shake off the low spirits” of summer 2020. Rather than writing a “serious and difficult song,” HYBE and BTS sought to “cheer ARMY up as soon as possible” and provide “real, substantial hope” through a brighter, more upbeat disco-pop track.¹¹⁶ While “Butter” can be described as a more “cheeky, self-aware tribute” to the group’s own “irresistibility” (see lyrics such as “When I look in the mirror / I’ll melt your heart into two / I got that superstar glow”), the group’s general philosophy about producing a “fun song” that “reach[es] out to as many people as possible” remains a consistent theme throughout their press releases.¹¹⁷

While it would be difficult to ascertain the efficacy of this strategy without more in-depth study of song listeners, these three singles were BTS’ most wide-reaching and record-breaking pieces of music. “Dynamite” earned the group their first solo Hot 100 #1 song, followed by both “Butter” and “Permission to Dance,” which reigned at the top the charts for a combined eight weeks in May-July 2021. “Butter” holds records for largest YouTube video premiere (3.9 million viewers) and most watched video on YouTube in 24 hours (108,200,000 views), both of which were previously held by “Dynamite”. “Dynamite” and “Butter” earned the group (and Korean artists at large) their first two Grammy nominations and performances, along with sweeping most major Korean and U.S.-based awards shows.¹¹⁸ Spotify reported a 300% spike in new listeners after “Dynamite” was released.¹¹⁹ That these songs are historic is generally noteworthy, but that each was developed as a pandemic-specific health intervention makes each and every award intimately connected to advancements in and the prominence of public health as a field.

Lastly, BTS expressed at length that online concerts were designed to “be healing for ARMY,” and that the members “hope[d] we could comfort and make you happy through... online concerts.”¹²⁰ While the members expressed their continued frustration about a lack of in-person concerts, they also acknowledged how lucky they were to continue performing thanks to technology and felt that “we were comforted by this, it really feels like there is hope.”¹²¹ BTS’ four online concerts hold worldwide records for number of attendees and virtual concert profits that only increased over time. One showing of BangBangCon in June 2020 generated \$20 million in tickets from around 756,600 viewers, “Map of the Soul: ONE” generated at least \$43 million over two performances. 2021 MUSTER: Sowoozoo earned an estimated \$71 million over two performances thanks to 1.33 million viewers from 195 different countries, which means that BTS attracted least one viewer from every country in the world. These metrics demonstrate once again the unparalleled size, scope, and profitability of BTS’ health-based approach to making and performing music.

1.5 Diversity and Accessibility

In addition to discussing and responding to health issues through their musical career, BTS also uses their platform to actively create a more inclusive space for marginalized populations.¹²² This trend continued during the pandemic with the group’s use of sign language and disability-inclusive imagery in their English language single “Permission To Dance.” BTS

has a reputation for intricate, complex, and show-stopping dance moves; however, “Permission to Dance” instead incorporates American and International Sign Language words for “dance” and “enjoy” into the “beautifully simple” chorus choreography, designed so that “people of all ages with a full range of (dis)abilities” can “learn...and participate” in the dance.¹²³

Deaf and disabled ARMY responded with overwhelming, but thoughtful and critical positivity, and the entire fandom trended #DeafARMY on Twitter to commemorate the occasion.¹²⁴ Popular media articles across multiple countries discussed the importance of BTS’ inclusivity, and the director of the WHO commended the group for their actions on Twitter, linking the use of sign language directly to large-scale accessibility in an audio-driven field that can be uniquely inaccessible for deaf and hard of hearing individuals.¹²⁵ HYBE and BTS also premiered an online dance challenge that quickly accrued thousands of submissions, some of which were included in both a YouTube compilation video and onscreen at their Los Angeles concerts.¹²⁶ Lastly, the group performed the song at the United Nations General Assembly in New York when the group addressed the Sustainable Development Goals Summit in October 2021.¹²⁷ Through targeting a population often excluded by the hearing-centric music market, BTS proactively centers marginalized identities in their music making to ensure that their health-based interventions can encompass a larger and more diverse audience.

Section 2- “Seven Billion Lights:” Multi-Media Connectivity and Public Health Education

BTS, like the rest of humanity, quickly and drastically ceased person-to-person interactions in March 2020 due to COVID-19. As BTS are performers whose livelihood, well-being, and financial success is greatly dependent on large-scale live performance, the members, ARMY, and HYBE rapidly developed alternative forms of fan-artist engagement to counteract the socio-emotional and financial impacts of this newfound separation. BTS and ARMY utilized song lyrics, cutting-edge online concerts, and non-musical video and social media content to ameliorate the negative physical and mental health effects of increased isolation during COVID-19.¹²⁸ Given evidence that social isolation during the early pandemic was robustly linked with a variety of negative physical, mental, and emotional outcomes and that “online contacts seemed crucial in protecting mental health...when offline contacts were limited” during this time, BTS and ARMY’s innovative uses of music and digital media to build community represent a unique, large-scale intervention combatting social isolation.¹²⁹

2.1 “Still With You” Through Songs for ARMY

BTS unquestionably struggled with their extended separation from their fans. Lyrics in songs such as *My Universe*, *Still With You*, *Telepathy*, and *Stay* compare their pre-COVID-19 experiences with ARMY to a “dream” that evaporates “when I open my eyes,” underscoring the ways in which isolation challenged conceptualizations of lived reality.¹³⁰ Perhaps the most obvious example of these sentiments was the group’s cover of *I’ll Be Missing You*. In this re-imagining of Puff Daddy’s tribute to the late Tupac, the titular refrain is dedicated to BTS’ fans, and the members changed the lyrics to COVID-19-specific sentiments such as “give anything to see half your face.”¹³¹ The members also frequently mentioned how much they missed and wanted to perform for ARMY in concert speeches, with one member even breaking down in tears at the end of the Map of the Soul ON:E online concert.¹³²

As a result, BTS sought to affirm connections with ARMY through their music and digital media presence. Throughout their pandemic-time discography, BTS constantly assured

ARMY that “even when you’re not next to me, even when I’m not next to you, we all know we’re together.”¹³³ Songs such as “Stay” and “Still With You” need little explanation beyond their titles, while “Your Eyes Tell” promises the audience that “wherever you are I’ll find you.” The bridge of “Butter” reminds not only the group’s fans, but the entire world, that BTS “got ARMY right behind us when we say so,” a line accompanied by YMCA-style choreography that spells out the letters “A-R-M-Y” with the members’ bodies.¹³⁴

One of BTS’ self-stated main themes in creating pandemic-time music was “telepathy,” or the concept that two parties can understand, empathize, and communicate with each other without interacting face-to-face.¹³⁵ While telepathy in modern media often falls into the realm of supernatural or magically ordained, BTS instead deliberately constructs this form of “togetherness” through intentional acts of emotional vulnerability, empathy, and community care across multiple digital platforms.

One such instance of vulnerability can be found in how BTS used their music to explicitly affirm ARMY’s positive health impacts on the members’ own well-being during the pandemic. The actual song “Telepathy” opens with the lines “In the days that feel the same, I’m the happiest when I meet you...you are the most special person to me.”¹³⁶ The lyrics of “Snow Flower” inform listeners that “your warmth will melt my blue and grey away,” implying that the anxiety and depression that the members experienced during COVID-19 can be and were alleviated through ARMY’s support.¹³⁷ Pandemic-time lyrics frequently call upon the group’s long-used comparison of ARMY to stars in the night sky (i.e. “My night is adorned with stars of love made of you”), with the group extending this metaphor by referring to ARMY as “my universe” in their song of the same name.¹³⁸

Online concerts expanded the platform through which BTS and ARMY could facilitate pandemic-safe “togetherness” through constantly evolving real-time communication pathways. In their first online concert in June 2020, the members were able to read live comments from viewers, though it was difficult for the software platform to keep up in real-time. At *Map of the Soul: One* in October 2020, fans entered a lottery to have their faces displayed in real time during a portion of the concert, and live fan cheers were piped into the stadium. June 2021’s *Sowozoo* represented the pinnacle of digital audience participation: fans were placed onscreen where the audience would normally sit for the entire duration of the show, allowing BTS members to interact with specific audience members. ARMY could submit recordings of “fan chants” (company-designed audience call and response cheers that accompany most K-pop songs) that were played in real time during performance, and applause and cheering were piped in throughout.¹³⁹

Additionally, BTS and HYBE used social media to interact with ARMY in live-streamed concert spaces, engaging in cross-media communication to demonstrate artist engagement in fan-created digital content. During *Sowozoo*, a concert catered specifically to fans, the members noted that “since we haven’t met in a while, we may feel like we’re further apart. But in order to get to you...we’re continuously seeking and following your signals.”¹⁴⁰ The “signals” in question were ARMY’s various hashtag events, where the fans trend a particular hashtag on Twitter and/or Weverse for mass impact. A particularly moving example was the group’s discussion of #SkyforNamjoon, which trended #1 worldwide on Twitter for around a day in July 2020.¹⁴¹ On July 15, 2020, BTS’ leader Namjoon, stage name RM, commented on a fan’s Weverse post of a sunset that “sky always gives us the reasons to live.”¹⁴² Moved by the sentiment, ARMY mass-posted pictures of skies around the world to share with RM. During *Sowozoo*, RM thanked ARMY for their participation and warmly stated that “I was so happy to

see so many beautiful skies.”¹⁴³ He then showed the audience his in-ear microphone monitors, which were newly painted sky blue with clouds and his name in tribute. These cyclic, reciprocal interactions merged digital communication with embodied reality to produce stronger bonds of connection between BTS and ARMY both during the hashtag event and during BTS’ online concert.

Lastly, BTS reframes COVID-19 as an event that will bring the members and ARMY closer to each other throughout their concerts, songs, and interviews. “In a world of uncertainty, we must cherish the importance of ‘me,’ ‘you’ and ‘us,’” because the “reason we can endure this situation is that we are in this together,” remarked several members.¹⁴⁴ The members reflected several times that the pandemic showed the group that ARMY was what was “really important,” and frequently emphasized that they will never be able to take concerts and in-person interactions “for granted” again.¹⁴⁵ In these ways, the group suggests instead that “someday the sadness will wind us together” instead of merely keeping the artists and their fans apart.¹⁴⁶ Thus, “even the darkness we see is so beautiful” because “[I’m] looking straight ahead, only at you.”¹⁴⁷ Through this reframing of separation, BTS helps listeners re-imagine and cope with separation while still acknowledging the painful, difficult reality of isolation.

2.2 “Extramusical” Content Beyond the Scene

In addition to connecting with fans via music and online concerts, some of BTS’ most novel sites of digital media-delivered health interventions can be found via what I dub the group’s “extramusical” digital content, or that which is not explicitly produced to create, promote, or perform the group’s discography. BTS’ extramusical content spans many formats and platforms, from the group’s self-produced weekly variety game show that premiered in 2015 and livestreamed videos to engaging with fan posts on Twitter and HYBE’s social media platform Weverse. During the early days of the pandemic, BTS and HYBE “gave a lot of thoughts on how we could keep communicating with ARMYs and share emotions even though we cannot meet in a close distance so that we can give more energy to all of you.”¹⁴⁸ Their solution: developing regular, pandemic-specific extramusical content to connect to, comfort, and communicate with ARMY during the early days of the pandemic in hopes of improving the health of both artists and fans.

It is important to note that this content strategy did not emerge in March 2020, and is rather the product of ten years’ worth of development courtesy of HYBE, ARMY, and BTS. Beginning with vlogs (video logs) that expressed the members’ fears, hopes, and dreams for their careers before the group even released their first single in 2013, HYBE and BTS have used digital media platforms to increase artist relatability through giving ARMY structured insights into the members’ complex internal thoughts and feelings.¹⁴⁹ ARMY in turn have taken to various social media platforms to share their stories (life experiences, worries, struggles) through posts, pictures, and videos, often expressing their gratitude to BTS for improving their lives and overall health. BTS members then directly respond with words of encouragement, advice, and affirmation; they have also discussed in both interviews and music that reading these posts gives the members themselves comfort, happiness, and inspiration to continue making value-based music.¹⁵⁰

BTS and HYBE also create entertainment rather than musical content, including full-length variety show episodes and documentary series that are designed to bring joy and happiness to viewers through showing fans a “different side” of BTS.¹⁵¹ Variety show episodes, for example, regularly feature the members playing all age-appropriate board and card games,

learning new sports, and completing challenges. Some members also maintain regular individual content series, such as the food-focused “Eat Jin” mukbang show.¹⁵² ARMY often meme, parody, and amplify this content, which BTS members often directly respond or refer to in subsequent posts and videos, resulting in what Ringland et. al refers to as a reciprocal “culture of play” in digital spaces.¹⁵³ As Ringland et. al discusses, “play has real world impact and consequences—not the least of which is to support coping, meaning-making, and sense of connectedness, thus improving quality of life and well-being for ARMY.”¹⁵⁴ Moreover, multiple public health scholars have observed that play is vital for a culture of health for both adults and children and that play enhances physical and mental well-being.¹⁵⁵ Both playful and emotional “bi-directional interaction” between BTS and ARMY also regularly occurs in real time via video streaming platforms when ARMYs leave comments for BTS via live text chat.¹⁵⁶

BTS, HYBE, and ARMY have clearly worked together to “construct safe and enjoyable online places” for humor, empathy-building, and community support.¹⁵⁷ As a result, BTS exert a “profound, intimate influence at... a massive and diverse scope” through social media interactions with ARMY that increase perceived relatability, accessibility, and vulnerability while also improving the members’ own mental health.¹⁵⁸ These spaces became an invaluable lifeline for both BTS and ARMY during the pandemic and provided a wide-scale platform for developing artist-fan interpersonal connections and deploying innovative pandemic-specific public health education strategies.

Throughout the course of 2020-2021 BTS members maintained regular livestreamed video sessions where members talked directly to fans, celebrated birthdays and major professional milestones, engaged in leisurely everyday activities (e.g., bracelet making and cooking), and showed glimpses of their work on the *BE* album. This content production was particularly prolific during the complete global shutdown that marked the earliest days of the pandemic (March 2020-August 2020), where members would host multiple livestreams per week that were often serial in nature. For example, Rapper SUGA maintained a weekly fake radio show dedicated to “ARMYs who must have felt bored,” where he gave life advice and invited other members to read children’s stories.¹⁵⁹

In SUGA’s episodes, and in most livestreams, the members expressed their gratitude that they could remain connected to ARMY through these forms of technology. “The distance has widened between people, but we are getting closer to each other, too,” reflected SUGA in one episode.¹⁶⁰ The group’s most active Weverse user, V, similarly remarked in several interviews that reading and responding to fan posts helped reassure them that ARMY were real, living people (particularly as critics argued that ARMY were electronic “bots” rather than real humans to justify BTS’ dominating streaming successes during the pandemic).¹⁶¹ As he reflected:

*“Somehow, I feel better when I hear their stories. When I end up reading things about how ARMY are living...I can’t help but write a response, and because of that ARMY respond...I want to be ARMY’s partner, their best friend, the friend who’s always by their side when we’re not on stage.... It’s been a long time since I could see my friend, ARMY. Usually when friends can’t see each other they keep in touch all the time.”*¹⁶²

As can be seen from V’s quote, V conceptualizes social media as an avenue for a diverse array of global communication for both the members and fans to communicate feelings and experiences. In response to pandemic-induced separation, both BTS and ARMY drew mutual support from sharing stories and experiences.

Additionally, BTS both modeled and encouraged pandemic-safe behavioral practices, including masking, social distancing, safe at-home activities, and vaccinations primarily through

pre-recorded and livestreamed video content. Pre-recorded content was often adjusted to showcase safe behaviors to a large audience; for example, BTS replaced their travel documentary show “Bon Voyage” with a new show entitled “In the Soop” that featured the members traveling into the forest and engaging in “everyday activities between life and leisure.” Throughout the show, the members demonstrated isolated, safe outdoor activities (i.e., hiking, bike riding, fishing).¹⁶³ Similarly, the group’s weekly variety show “RUN BTS” included a two-episode series released in early 2021 that focused specifically on easy “games you can play at home” because “people still can’t go outside.” In addition to also showcasing safe activities in their livestreamed content during early 2020, BTS members went a step further and encouraged ARMY to participate in said activities alongside the members.

Livestreams also provided opportunities for BTS members to directly deliver COVID-19 health advice to ARMY in real-time. “You need to wear a mask. Even though the weather is nice, the pandemic has not ended yet. Please make sure to wear a mask,” one member stated emphatically in May 2020.¹⁶⁴ When the group appeared in front of the United Nations in October 2021, member Jin emphatically confirmed that “all seven of us, of course, have received vaccinations.”¹⁶⁵ Given evidence that the general public are conditioned to react positively to celebrity advice, and that celebrities can heavily influence health-related knowledge, these strategies were likely helpful in encouraging mask adherence and physical activity during the pandemic.¹⁶⁶

The WHO certainly capitalized on BTS’ social media impact when Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus took to Twitter to share BTS content with the hashtag #WearAMask after the release of “Dynamite” and again after the group’s United Nations General Assembly Speech in the fall of 2020. One study demonstrated that not only did ARMY’s interactions with Dr. Tedros both greatly increased the overall virality of the #WearAMask hashtag, but that specifically increased the depth of viral diffusion “toward more diverse and traditionally underserved areas both globally and domestically.”¹⁶⁷ Specifically, these tweets “elicited heavy responses from countries in Southeast Asia and South/Central America, as compared to messages that did not. Within the US, we found increased K-pop-related responses in densely metropolitan States that are highly susceptible to disease transmission, and rural states that are often neglected...by mainstream social media campaigns and news.” Thus, BTS and ARMY’s social media presence can be used to engage with vulnerable populations that are difficult to reach via traditional information dissemination methods.

In providing accurate, safe health advice and incorporating appropriate behavior into their programming, BTS served as a uniquely wide-reaching ambassador for COVID-19 safety procedures. While the impact of their words and actions is difficult to ascertain without further research, the delivery of this information from a “trusted messenger” to the millions of viewers around the globe that consistently watch BTS’ content represents an important and understudied audience for mass intervention deployment.

Section 3- Fan to Fan Interventions: Grassroots ARMY Health Organizations

BTS’ public health work has an iterative impact far beyond their primary targeted audience of music listeners due to the efforts of their fanbase, ARMY. This is in large part because ARMY conceptualizes their identity as “more than...fans of BTS...we want to become a fandom that cares for the people...just like BTS who wish to bring hope for everyone through their music.” Thus, the “participatory culture” of BTS and ARMY “gives the fandom and their messages [a] bigger effect on social media beyond the idol’s commercially-crafted public

image.”¹⁶⁸ ARMY in particular excels at developing a wide variety of digital spaces through which individuals can interact with and support both BTS and other fans. Like many other fandoms, ARMY curates a multitude of social media accounts, websites, and in-person celebratory events dedicated to BTS’ music, performances, streaming and buying goals, fashion, linguistic translation, and creation of fan-driven content such as fan art and fan fiction. The primary audience for these accounts is normally other fans who appreciate and support BTS, rather than the public.

Where ARMY diverges from other fandoms, however, is in the prolific number of cross-disciplinary professional, cultural, and social platforms for fans that are not directly related to BTS’ music, but are related to BTS and HYBE’s public health-oriented approach of creating music to better the world. This “larger ecosystem...includes expertise- and culture-based accounts” with thousands of followers that provide access to employment opportunities, free legal education, recipes and Zoom cooking lessons, free tutoring, hobby and interest groups, and geographic, identity, and cultural affinity spaces.¹⁶⁹ The fandom maintains a peer-reviewed academic journal and an annual interdisciplinary conference, a quarterly magazine, and regional/national accounts that organize in-person events for thousands of local constituents.¹⁷⁰ The over 2,000 member “Bangtan Academy” Discord teaches a variety of BTS-themed Korean language classes for fans around the globe.¹⁷¹ Notably, all of these organizations offer their services and products free of charge, and are run primarily by volunteers.

The following section will examine three ARMY organizations devoted to fan-to-fan public health intervention, education, and advocacy work. This in-depth discussion of each organization’s inception, structure, and intervention methodologies will demonstrate how BTS’ public health-oriented musical platform produces sustained, global grassroots public health organizing and intervention work among fans. As discussed by Min et. al, ARMY affinity spaces are “learning environments where differences of age, class, race, gender, and education level are relatively unimportant” in the dissemination of information and content.¹⁷² Therefore, models facilitated by each organization also represent important disruptions in practitioner-patient/recipient hierarchies that challenge the borders of both national and international health infrastructure to produce more wide-reaching and inclusive public health interventions.

3.1 ARMY Help Center

Multiple ARMY organizations focus specifically on public health and healthcare, with three main platforms focusing on mental health advocacy programs, disability advocacy, and health education for the general ARMY population. One of the largest ARMY public health organizations is the ARMY Help Center, a network of over 200 trained volunteer mental health advocates that span across 15 Twitter accounts operating in multiple languages.¹⁷³ Those seeking mental health assistance can direct message one of these accounts, where an advocate will “provide our users with a listening ear.”¹⁷⁴ Though the Center volunteers are not a substitute for professional help, advocates are also trained by full-time mental health professionals using a standardized curriculum to assist with in-the-moment crises and connect help-seekers to appropriate professional mental health resources.¹⁷⁵ The Center’s accounts also host events and campaigns providing mental health advice and resources to a combined following of over 100,000 across both Twitter and Instagram.

As of 2022, the Center engages with around 1,000 unique Twitter users over a three month period, according to internal reports. While the group prioritizes anonymity and privacy over robust user data collection, the Center’s lead U.S. moderator noted anecdotally that many

messages in 2020-2021 were written by Twitter users struggling with the mental health effects of the pandemic. The moderator also noted that, internally, volunteers used the space as a coping mechanism for their own pandemic-related stresses, in addition to the often difficult or draining experience of communicating with users. This moderator, who is academically trained in psychology, noted that BTS' discussions of "stress, depression [and] anger" during the pandemic "solidified...their sincerity" and uniqueness as artists and public figures in a way that affirmed the Help Center's overall purpose.¹⁷⁶

The existence and success of the AHC demonstrates that BTS' model of both delivering and encouraging mental health interventions through music has created tangible, actionable international public health infrastructure. This level of actionability is highly unusual and unprecedented, and merits further study and examination.

3.2 BTS ARMY Medical Union

Another large health-focused organization is the BTS ARMY Medical Union (BAMU), which provides community support systems for healthcare workers and cross-disciplinary health education to a primary audience of over 30,000 followers via Twitter.¹⁷⁷ Around 30 "admins" (account administrators) are subdivided into teams by field (e.g., dentistry, nursing, sciences), and each team produces healthcare-centric content within the team's wheelhouse. Educational topics are often inspired by BTS members themselves, from breaking down the muscle activation needed for specific choreography moves or highlighting the health benefits of cooking in celebration of the members who prepare the most food on camera.¹⁷⁸

Interestingly, the account itself was created during the pandemic to provide support to healthcare students and workers within the fandom. The organization's founder explicitly connected BTS' public health-based musical model to BAMU's creation, writing that:

*"BTS has always been my source of comfort whenever I started to doubt myself... I wanted to spread that kind of positivity and so I created BAMU with the intention to be a haven for all the medical student ARMYs who need a bit of a boost from other ARMYs who relate to what they're going through."*¹⁷⁹

The anecdotes of several account administrators echo these words. Some chose to be involved in BAMU because BTS inspired them to give back to ARMY at large, and almost every single testimony found on the group's administrator directory mentioned that BTS' music and message had a positive impact on their lives and world outlook. Professionally, several administrators attributed BTS' work to increasing their motivation and performance in healthcare spaces. "Compassion fatigue did hit hard for me, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic, and these boys help me to relearn the real reason why I become a nurse, to help others," noted one administrator in the nursing department.¹⁸⁰ These testimonies demonstrate that BTS has a large perceived impact on the development of both resilience and overall well-being for individual healthcare workers, as well as the development of widely consumed health information resources.

Given the level of misinformation surrounding COVID-19 masking, transmissions, and vaccines and the high levels of healthcare worker burnout during the early pandemic, the BAMU served as an important space that addressed both issues. The account regularly provided scientifically accurate, easily accessible information about COVID-19 safety protocols during 2020-21. Additionally, the group launched Jimin's Promise Campaign in October 2021, which was a "a COVID-19 vaccination campaign to address vaccine hesitancy, misinformation, and inequity" created to celebrate vocalist Jimin Park's birthday.¹⁸¹ This four-pronged campaign

featured educational content, a vaccine donation fundraiser that raised money for 660 vaccine doses for vulnerable populations, a forum through which over 270 ARMYs shared vaccination stories and asked questions, and the #ARMYpromise challenge, which called upon ARMY to commit to raising awareness of vaccine efficacy and getting vaccinated.¹⁸²

Jimin's Promise Campaign illustrates the sheer scope of audience reach in ARMY-to-ARMY initiatives, as seen by the 435,000 views obtained by the initial campaign promotion tweet.¹⁸³ Additionally, the #ARMYpromise hashtag trended on Twitter under the topic of "Music" for several hours shortly after the campaign launched, demonstrating both ARMY's collective investment in improving public health and ARMY's ability to spread health information and awareness to broader media spaces.¹⁸⁴ These developments represent significant strides in digital communication avenues and demonstrate the potential for community-driven social media-based public health awareness campaigns operating through fandoms rather than traditional sites of public health information dissemination.

3.3 Disabled Army Advocacy & Support Network

The Disabled Army Advocacy & Support Network Twitter account combines the AHC and BAMU's models to provide both resources and support for disabled ARMY and disability education information for the larger fandom. While slightly smaller than the BAMU and AHC in both follower numbers (almost 5,000) and moderators (a single academic and lived experience expert as opposed to a larger team), the account provides a myriad of digitally-delivered services, which have had important real-life impacts during BTS' return concerts in the winter of 2021.

The Network originally began in April 2021 due to a lack of disability-focused affinity spaces within the fandom, though it was preceded by the Deaf ARMY Education account.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, the moderator noted that the group's work always felt disability-friendly even though BTS did not explicitly address disability in their music until July 2021. "I put mental health under the same umbrella as disability...I really read a lot of their mental health campaigns and all the comments they've made around those things...as also including disability," the moderator recalled.¹⁸⁶

In addition to providing comprehensive Twitter threads around a variety of disability-centric topics (like the BAMU), the Network also reflects the AHC's model in that the account moderator frequently answers personal questions about disability status, diagnosis, and navigation via direct message. Additionally, the account crowdsourced a "Comfort Songs for BTS" playlist for ARMY "who need a tool to calm down and/or come out of a meltdown," providing more intentional intervention services directly centered in BTS' music.¹⁸⁷

Lastly, the account performed a significant amount of advocacy and community organizing work around BTS' first in-person concerts after the start of the pandemic. This began during ticketing, as Ticketmaster (the concert's third party ticket purchasing site) employed several ableist practices in ticketing that led for decreased accessibility and equity for disabled fans. The most prominent example was the site's failure to clearly mark and reserve Wheelchair Accessible and ADA seating, allowing many abled ARMYs to buy seats that should have been protected under federal law. Additionally, dynamic Ticketmaster fees that automatically doubled and tripled resale prices made site-mediated ticket transferring of ADA seating financially and logistically infeasible. Moreover, the site neglected to include screen reader-friendly programming for those buying or selling tickets, making site navigation broadly inaccessible for many disabled ARMYs.

In response, the Network facilitated fan-to-fan resales and ticket trades. The Network conducted ticket trades through individual private Twitter messages and by re-tweeting trade and sell requests from both abled and disabled ARMY. Ultimately, the account ensured that hundreds of disabled fans were able to obtain accessible seating accommodations for BTS' four Los Angeles concerts in 2021. The Network also posted detailed explanations of the concert venue's accommodation policies and resources, and provided live updates from the concerts about the (very poor) actualization of these policies.

Unlike the AHC and the BAMU, the Network intentionally focused on re-imagining a health-focused digital space that exists outside the bounds of medicalization. As the Network's moderator observed, "A lot of disabled people face mostly medicalized experiences in their lives...I'm the account that fills in the gap of the non-medical and talks about the social aspects in a very disability-centered space rather than medical." As many disability advocates have discussed, "medicine and the health-related professions have contributed to the oppression of people with disabilities, including the maintenance of a 'medical/knowledge power differential,' reinforcement of the 'sick role,' and objectification of people with disabilities."¹⁸⁸ Thus, the Network demonstrates that intra-fandom ARMY health organizing not only improves accessibility and health education but also dismantles and challenges oppressive hierarchies within the fields of public health and medicine. Like the Network, all three ARMY health organizations participate in re-imagining sites, sources, and structures of healthcare information and service delivery to increase the bounds of both access and provision.

Section 4- For a Better World

In addition to fan interventions targeted towards other fans, both ARMY and BTS engage in extensive organizing to improve broader population health. The lines between "internal" and "external" interventions enacted by BTS and ARMY are not particularly clear-cut; after all, anyone can listen to a singular BTS song or receive health information from an ARMY health organization if they come across one on the Internet. However, "deep and horizontal comradeship" between BTS and fans has been "actualized via transnational social media in seeking various values, including social justice" through wider public health organizing designed to impact broader populations.¹⁸⁹

As previously discussed, BTS' purpose has always been to criticize and challenge oppression facing youth and marginalized groups around the world. In the United States, simply being a fan of BTS has generated counter-hegemonic "tactics and practices...in the realm of civic and political engagement...given that most BTS fan activities ...have been designed to empower the status of the non-English speaking, small-agency-affiliated, K-pop group in the advanced pop industry."¹⁹⁰ That being said, ARMY across the entire globe have long dedicated themselves to actively engaging in social justice work, from supporting pro-democracy protests in Indonesia to speaking out against Japanese imperialism in Korea.¹⁹¹

During the COVID-19 pandemic, BTS and ARMY continued to engage in anti-prejudice work through increasing sign language and disability inclusion in their choreography, directly addressing the racialization of COVID-19 and subsequent anti-Asian violence, and financially supporting Black Lives Matter. In addition to supporting BTS, ARMY have also engaged in digitally organized anti-policing, protest, and pro-democracy efforts. All of these actions seek to address the negative impacts of systems of oppression such as racism and disability on health equity, with important implications for marginalized populations.¹⁹² The two interconnected methods of public-facing interventions utilized by BTS and ARMY (both individually and in

tandem) are 1) enormous, conceptually driven, and ongoing fundraising efforts to improve global, community, and individual health, and 2) developing “cyber power against social injustice and youth struggle[s]” through enacting digital media-based campaigns in response to prejudice and oppression.¹⁹³

4.1 One (In An ARMY) For the Money: Mutual Aid and Global Fundraising

ARMY and BTS consistently make popular media headlines for their consistent, large-scale charity and mutual aid work.¹⁹⁴ As a group, BTS explicitly began building long-term health fundraising infrastructure in 2017, reaching out to UNICEF to develop the “Love Yourself” campaign “against violence toward children and teens around the world, with the hope of making the world a better place through music.”¹⁹⁵ As of August 2021, the Love Yourself campaign has raised approximately \$3,724,580 through merchandise sales and donations from BTS, HYBE, corporate sponsors, and individuals (including ARMY). Proceeds from the campaign go to UNICEF’s global #EndViolence initiative, which works with community partners to develop risk-informed child-protection systems in response to violence.¹⁹⁶ Notably, ARMY is not the main population that benefits from Love Yourself campaign donations. Instead, BTS re-directs profits and resources towards improving health outcomes for broader vulnerable populations, and moreover calls upon individuals and communities in the world to “speak yourself” through discovering individually meaningful avenues to improve the world.¹⁹⁷

This emphasis on “empowerment rather than direction,” particularly in comparison to other financially-based “celebrity activism” initiatives contribute to the ARMY culture of consistently “actualizing donations” to support BTS’ message.¹⁹⁸ ARMYs regularly organize short-term fundraisers that contribute to bettering health outcomes across the globe, from helping individuals recover from surgery to replanting an entire coral reef to funding supplies for an entire hospital. Often, these campaigns are centered around important events in the fandom such as member birthdays.¹⁹⁹ Additionally, ARMYs who are unable to attend concerts also regularly donate the cost of their tickets towards an important cause, i.e., COVID-19 relief efforts or supporting Ukrainian refugees in 2022.²⁰⁰

In addition to this practice, which can be found across multiple fandoms, BTS also maintains a global organization whose sole purpose is to regularly engage the fandom in charitable fundraising. Started by one fan who was inspired by the Love Yourself campaign to send medical supplies to Syria, “One In an ARMY” organizers partner with mainly smaller “non-profit organizations worldwide and harness the power of ARMY into giving micro-donations over a one month period.”²⁰¹ Like other ARMY health intervention organizations, OIAA maintains a complex internal structure: over 40 participants from various countries participate in teams including research, social media/graphic design, and translation. OIAA chooses organizations by polling ARMY interest, and its first poll in 2017 narrowed focus to four main categories: human needs, human rights, health, and nature. Money is sent to organizations directly from individual fans, and OIAA keeps track of donations through an external submission process that verifies unique user identity and amount donated and provides submission instructions for each non-profit.²⁰² According to OIAA’s official interactive map, OIAA, BTS, and various independent campaigns combined for a total of 1,275 donation projects across all seven continents between 2015-2022.²⁰³ In the first year of operation (2018-2019), “One in an ARMY” raised around \$46,000 for a variety of health-related causes (i.e. cleft palate care, meals for LGBTQ+ refugees, etc.).²⁰⁴

During COVID-19, One in an ARMY (OIAA), along with many other ARMY accounts, shifted their focus to COVID-19 relief efforts. For the month of April 2020, OIAA wrote that they “followed a different format than our usual campaigns,” donating to nonprofits “we worked with before” because “groups of people that were already in precarious situations are extremely vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 and are more likely to be hit harder with the economic fallout,” and thus these non-profits “were in dire need of donations.”²⁰⁵ According to OIAA’s official summary, “690 ARMY from 44+ countries were able to raise \$11,559.10 USD for COVID-19 relief efforts!”²⁰⁶ Additionally, OIAA teamed up with a Tunisian fanbase account to host #ARMYCharityCon, an event that rewarded ARMY who engaged in charitable activities using the app FreeRice with opportunities to win BTS merchandise.²⁰⁷

According to OIAA’s official interactive map, OIAA, BTS, donated up with a Tunisian fanbase account to host #ARMYCharityCon, an event that rewarded ARMY who engaged in charitable activities using the app FreeRice with opportunities to win BTS merchandise.²⁰⁸ These efforts were mirrored by BTS and HYBE, who donated \$1 million to Crew Nation, a campaign to support live-entertainment personnel impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.²⁰⁹ Additionally, Korean media reported several members making personal donations to COVID-19 relief efforts to celebrate their birthdays.²¹⁰

4.2 Equity and Activism

Recent studies and media coverage have explored ARMY as a site of political and social activism as the increasingly large fandom has used its media presence and economic power to advocate for social justice.²¹¹ BTS’ larger stance against prejudice has played a significant role in *why* ARMY spaces are such rich spaces for advocacy and activism work. However, some of these campaigns have originated via necessity, as BTS has faced a significant amount of interpersonal and structural racism and xenophobia throughout their career.²¹² ARMYs have also been stereotyped and dismissed by popular Western media and other social media users as “hysterical teenage girls” or, more recently, “AI/bots” used to boost BTS’ streaming numbers.²¹³ As a result, ARMY has a long history of general and BTS-specific advocacy and activism campaign work; a particularly large body of research has examined the fandom’s actions supporting Black Lives Matter and various democracy movements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, BTS has worked to make their music more accessible to the hard of hearing community through incorporating sign language and disability-inclusive language into their choreography and lyrics.

#StopAsianHate

While some of BTS’ diversity and inclusion work was proactive, the group also responded to active racial discrimination on multiple fronts during 2020-21. The racialization of COVID-19 as the “Chinese flu” or “China virus” by prominent Western leaders and media has resulted in a steep increase of hate crimes and violence against Asian people, particularly in the United States and other Western countries.²¹⁴ In response, Asian American organizers and anti-racist allies have fought back under the broad campaign umbrella of #StopAsianHate. BTS has long been a victim of interpersonal and structural racism at the hands of the Western music industry and global media, including well-publicized incidents over the course of 2020-21, including media outlets comparing BTS’ increased success to the virus itself or publishing brutalized caricatures of the members.²¹⁵

In response, BTS condemned anti-Asian racism and publicly re-affirmed the members' commitment to explicitly creating anti-racist music, culminating in the creation of the song "My Universe." During March 2021, BTS faced a significant wave of racism after performing their first Grammy-nominated song at the awards show, and the world grappled with the Atlanta shooting of eight Asian women.²¹⁶ On March 29, the group released a statement on Twitter expressing their "grief and anger" over anti-Asian violence, sharing some "moments where we faced discrimination as Asians" and asserting that "what is happening right now cannot be disassociated from our identity as Asians."²¹⁷ This statement was the most shared tweet of the entire year and trended for several days, demonstrating the group's outsized ability to amplify and bring awareness to issues of discrimination.²¹⁸

BTS' strategy to combat oppression has always been to produce music directly responding to these issues. The group's work prior to the pandemic has addressed issues ranging from governmental corruption and political polarization to homophobia and body shaming.²¹⁹ The group continued this approach during the pandemic, stating in a November 2021 press conference that "when we talk about Asian hate, our path, all the words, our music—I just hope that this could truly help every Asian in the world, especially those who live in countries abroad."²²⁰ One such piece of music was the late 2021 single "My Universe," a collaboration with the band Coldplay that reached #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart.²²¹

As "My Universe" was developed in large part because a German DJ made racist comments about BTS and mentioned Coldplay in the same segment, HYBE officially stated that "social awareness found its way into the final product."²²² In a short behind-the-scenes documentary released on BTS' YouTube channel, Coldplay's Chris Martin states that "the song is about how the power of love transcends all things, borders and rules and genders and race and every sexuality. If you look at people right now who are divided by a border or can't be together, that's what the song is about."²²³ Thus, "My Universe" not only addresses anti-Asian racism through promoting love, solidarity, and community-building, but actively links this issue to both LGBTQIA+ equity and border and immigration policing.

Black Lives Matter

BTS' anti-racism work was not limited to communities with whom they directly identify. As previously discussed, BTS' core focus on rap and hip-hop has given the group long-standing ties with the Black diaspora, particularly in the United States, and both BTS and ARMY have long focused on "organizing flexible solidarity" even as both groups have had to reckon with internal anti-Blackness.²²⁴ After police officers and white supremacists murdered George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery during May-June 2020—adding to the long history of discriminatory structural and interpersonal violence against Black people via law enforcement—BTS and ARMY engaged in significant political support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement through monetary contributions to Black organizing efforts, politically disrupting police surveillance, and "hashtag hijacking" several white supremacist publicity campaigns and events on Twitter. Additionally, Korean ARMY trended the hashtag #WeLoveYouBlackArmy to show support for Black ARMYs around the world.²²⁵ In doing so, both BTS and ARMY utilized digital media-organized protest work to advocate for increased health equity and safety outcomes for Black people around the world. Importantly, many ARMIES connected Black American struggles against prejudice directly to BTS' musical content, as seen through their use of specific songs and "fan cams" in disruptive tactics.

On June 6, 2021, *Variety* broke the news that BTS and HYBE (then still known as BigHit Music) had donated \$1 million to the Black Lives Matter organization. Like many other artists and public figures in both the K-pop and Western industry that made donations around this time, the company released an accompanying statement recognizing that “Black people all over the world are in pain at this moment from the trauma of centuries of oppression. We are moved by the generosity of BTS and allies all over the world who stand in solidarity in the fight for Black lives.”²²⁶ In addition, “One In An ARMY” quickly led a response fundraiser entitled #MatchAMillion, where ARMY raised an additional \$1 million for the same cause.²²⁷

Where BTS perhaps diverges from other pop musicians is in their recognition that Black Lives Matter related intimately to their personal experiences and broader platform, as well as in their acknowledgement that their actions represented a larger, synergistic effort to stand against oppression with their fans. As the group discussed when interviewed,

*“When we’re abroad or in other situations, we’ve also been subjected to prejudice. We feel that prejudice should not be tolerated; it really has no place. We started to discuss what we could do to help... We were aware of the fans, the hashtags, and their participation. It was a decision we thought about very carefully: what could we do, as part of our overall message of speaking out against prejudice and violence? We discussed it very carefully with the company and that’s how this came about.”*²²⁸

These statements illustrate BTS’ recognition of personal anti-racist solidarity, fan activism efforts, and the group’s larger, inherently anti-racist platform in supporting the Black community. In a survey about the #MatchAMillion fundraiser (n = 216), 49% of ARMY similarly credited “shared values and compassion” as bringing the group and the fandom together in fundraising efforts, also citing “BTS’s explicit stance” against racism and the fandom’s “well-established infrastructure” for mass organization as key factors behind participation and success.²²⁹ 67% of responses mentioned that this success would encourage them to participate further,” demonstrating again the success of BTS and ARMY’s iterative approach to social justice work that centers self-driven participation over direction.

ARMY also participated in several more radical digital organizing efforts that were successful in disrupting anti-Black surveillance and white supremacist rallies. One common method ARMY utilized was “hashtag jacking” or “meme warfare,” wherein fans spammed hashtags such as #WhiteLivesMatter and #MillionMAGAMarch with “fancams”—fan-made videos of K-pop idols singing and dancing.²³⁰ By flooding white supremacist hashtags generated by the organizations such as Q-Anon and the Trump campaign, with unrelated and/or disruptive content, ARMY and other K-pop fans effectively neutralized the power of these hashtags to amplify harmful and racist content.²³¹ Fans also employed this strategy to crash the Dallas Police Department’s iWatch civilian crime reporting app after the department requested that citizens upload “illegal activity from the protests” in Dallas surrounding George Floyd’s murder.²³²

Lastly, ARMY joined a large coalition of youth organizers on TikTok to falsely register for Donald Trump’s June 2020 rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, contributing to a significant gap in expected versus actual seat count. As one protester observed, “K-pop Twitter and Alt TikTok have a good alliance where they spread information amongst each other very quickly. They all know the algorithms and how they can boost videos to get where they want.”²³³ Information about how to sign up for the rally, including instructions on how to successfully register using fake names and phone numbers, was quickly mass disseminated and then deleted to keep the Trump campaign from discovering ARMYs’ efforts. The subsequent lack of attendance resulted in significant media coverage across the nation.²³⁴

All these efforts were large-scale coalitional campaigns that relied upon a wider K-pop fanbase; the Twitter instigator of the Dallas Police iWatch intervention, for example, is a fan of several K-pop groups but posts little to nothing about BTS. However, one study of ARMY fancams directly linked BTS' pro-equity messaging to fancam content. In May 2020, BTS rapper SUGA released a music video for an individual single entitled "Daechitwa" that depicted a peasant killing a tyrannical king in the style of a Korean historical drama.²³⁵ This footage was frequently repeated in BTS police-disrupting fancams, explicitly "adapting Daechwita's commercialized images of populist, youth rebellion into the repertoire of contemporary protest techniques."²³⁶ BTS' anti-discrimination musical content was linked to cross-national and cross-racial struggles against oppressive governments, demonstrating global solidarity in response to Black Lives Matter.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

BTS and ARMY have maintained a complex, multi-layered model of health intervention through the channels of music and digital media. The synergistic infrastructure built between the group and its ever-increasing fan base was uniquely suited for the "digital age" of COVID-19, during which HYBE, BTS, and ARMY continued to innovate and developed pandemic-specific interventions. BTS created music that openly discussed mental health challenges, engaged in cognitive reframing and temporal distancing, provided joy and comfort, and increased accessibility for deaf and hard of hearing listeners. ARMY and BTS also utilized a variety of digital mediums to maintain connection and community during global isolation, encourage pandemic-safe behaviors, and perform anti-prejudice health equity work. Additionally, ARMY created and expanded grassroots community health organizations to further improve the health of other fans. The resulting size and commercial success of this model has important implications in the fields of health economics, healthcare delivery, and global health at large.

Limitations

The most obvious methodological limitation to this study is an inability to rigorously ascertain the impact of BTS and ARMY's intervention work on target audiences. Though many published testimonies discuss how BTS' music positively facilitated coping during the pandemic and ARMY health organizations can provide both engagement metrics and observational evidence of effect, further directed study is needed to reach substantial and evidence-based conclusions about intervention efficacy. Other limitations include limited Korean language proficiency and subsequent lack of access to non-English language secondary and primary sources, particularly academic papers written in Korean and ARMY Twitter accounts and organizations operating in non-English languages. Additionally, not all BTS-produced content was coded for the purpose of this study, as discussed above. Finally, not all ARMY organizations had the same level of data management and archival capability, resulting in differing levels of information provided by each organization.

Conclusions & Implications

BTS and ARMY's "music for healing" model maintains multiple intercessions within several fields including health economics, accessibility studies, and intervention design, all of which maintain rich avenues for future study. From a healthcare economics standpoint, any "intimate link between artists and fans...is forged within the terrain of capital," from the affective and creative labor of the artists to the consumption of creative products and merchandise by fans.²³⁷ If BTS and HYBE's work is viewed through a healthcare/public health-based model, this in and of itself lends important dimensions to understanding new avenues for healthcare consumerism and the economic "market" of health.

As previously stated, BTS is the one of most profitable musical acts in the world, and HYBE one of the fastest growing multi-billion dollar companies. Importantly, their economic impact extends far beyond the artists and their company's shareholders: a 2020 Harvard Business Review case study estimated that BTS generates about "\$4.9 billion of South Korea's GDP," and the Korean tourism industry estimated that BTS topping Billboard Charts with "Dynamite" generated roughly \$1.5 billion to the country's economy during one of the toughest years for tourism in recent memory.²³⁸ Just four 2021 concerts in Los Angeles may have injected upwards of \$100 million into an urban economy struggling to recover from the pandemic.²³⁹ BTS also regularly sells out a variety of consumer goods via official corporate sponsorships; even products casually mentioned, worn, or used by BTS members are often sold out for months thereafter.²⁴⁰

HYBE has continued to provide a variety of virtual options for fans even as BTS has transitioned to in-person concerts. The group's three day run in Seoul during March 2022 grossed over \$90 million in ticket sales from a combination of in-person attendance and global online streaming, and hybrid movie theater screening tickets sold to 2.46 million fans worldwide. Their success has important implications for the profitability of increased concert and performance accessibility for disabled and other marginalized fans.

This is but one example of how BTS and ARMY complicate the dichotomization of healthcare as a consumer product and community-based, not-for-profit grassroots initiatives. High-profit healthcare corporations have often been justly accused of enacting and furthering existing health(care) disparities and structural inequities including racism and socio-economic disparities.²⁴¹ However, even though BTS' "affective labor falls within the mechanisms of capital" and HYBE is a multi-billion dollar corporation, both "produce collective subjectivities and sociality...which can possibly be liberating and empowering" through "challenging the hegemonic cultures and views in the western world" that negatively impact health equity.²⁴²

ARMY grassroots organizing demonstrates a model of sustained, large-scale intervention and education that thrives because, rather than despite, a "reported lack of a central hierarchical structure."²⁴³ These interventions have reached not only thousands of other fans, but have had important implications for even larger vulnerable populations. Future research to ascertain intervention efficacy, more robust associations between BTS' public health approach and economic impact, and deliberately engaging BTS and ARMY to scale up existing interventions are but a few directions of potentially important further inquiry.

Placing BTS, ARMY, and HYBE's health intervention work into a public and global health context makes it clear that all three entities have collaboratively re-shaped the field at large across several planes and platforms, disrupting structural and international hegemonies of power, language, and access. The nexus of these three entities marks an exciting and understudied site of both current and future mass interventions that can be easily and cohesively implemented at a global scale.

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Notes

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² Significant debate persists around the usage of the term “K-pop” as both a genre and an industry, particularly within the Anglophone musical market. Genre-wise, framing all commercial music exported by Koreans as “Korean” pop has been used to sideline and dismiss artists such as BTS on the Western musical scene, as seen by the development of a separate “K-pop” category at the VMAs in 2018. Moreover, it should be noted that despite the association of idol groups with “pop” specifically, many idol groups often hybridize and re-imagine Western categories of genre within their discographies. That being said, Korea as a nation-state has claimed the idol industry as a cultural export used to increase the country’s soft power through emphasizing rather than downplaying the “Korean-ness” of K-pop in appealing to a global market. Therefore, BTS’ member SUGA’s definition of K-pop is likely the most helpful in providing broader context about the industry. As he discussed in a 2018 interview, “K-pop includes not just the music, but the clothes, the makeup, the choreography...all these elements I think sort of amalgamate together in a visual and auditory content package, that I think sets it apart from other music or maybe other genres so again, as I said, rather than approach K-pop as its own genre I think approaching it as this integration of different content would be better.” See Aja Romano, “MTV Added a K-Pop Award to the VMAs. BTS Fans Think It’s a Way of Excluding the Band.,” Vox, July 24, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/7/24/20707906/vmas-awards-k-pop-category-bts-fans-backlash-racist>; Bangtan Seoyeondan, BTS Grammy Museum Full Conversation, October 23, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=498570413954851>; Ioana Raluca Băjenaru, “Bangtan Boys (BTS)- Part of South Korea’s Cultural Diplomacy Strategy,” *SOUTH KOREA*, n.d., 26; Youna Kim, ed., *The Soft Power of the Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and Drama*, accessed April 29, 2022, <https://www.routledge.com/The-Soft-Power-of-the-Korean-Wave-Parasite-BTS-and-Drama/Kim/p/book/9780367609115>.

³ Korea’s idol industry is known for its unique intensive training system, wherein companies train teenage recruits in singing, dancing, performance, and acting sometimes for years before top candidates are selected to join idol groups. Most major idol companies retain significant control over the professional and personal lives of both trainees and idols when under contract. In recent years, a rise in idol suicides has prompted investigations into the industry’s often non-existent handling of idol mental health. For more, see Christopher Zysik, “K-Pop and Suicide: Marginalization and Resistance in the Korean Pop Industry,” *German Society for Popular Music Studies* 19 (September 2021): 18; Crystal Tai, “Exploding the Myths behind K-Pop,” *The Observer*, March 29, 2020, sec. Music, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2020/mar/29/behind-k-pops-perfect-smiles-and-dance-routines-are-ales-of-sexism-and-abuse>; A. L. Roggen, “Globalization of Popular Culture: Kpop in an American Dominated World.,” June 15, 2015, <https://theses.uhn.nl/handle/123456789/774>.

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⁸ Jonathan Hicap, “Twitter Says BTS Most Tweeted Person in the World, Sets Most Retweeted Tweet in 2021,” Manila Bulletin, December 10, 2021, <https://mb.com.ph/2021/12/10/twitter-says-bts-most-tweeted-person-in-the-world-sets-most-retweeted-tweet-in-2021/>; World Music Awards [@WORLDMUSICAWARD], “#BTS’s #Jungkook Has the Most Liked Artist Tweet of 2021 with 2.8 MILLION Likes!,” Tweet, *Twitter*, January 30, 2021, <https://twitter.com/WORLDMUSICAWARD/status/1355550405774737409>.

⁹ Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus [@DrTedros], “Great Meeting with @MOPHQatar’s Hanan Mohamed Al Kuwari, @FIFACom’s Gianni Infantino, Hassan Al-Thawadi, and @WHOEMRO’s Ahmed Al-Mandhari about the Sport & Health Project & Our Joint Commitment to Leverage the @FIFAWorldCup 2022 as a Global Platform for Promoting #HealthForAll. <https://t.co/CzIabyCY9I>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, April 1, 2022,

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