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“They’re Worth My Investment”: Cultivating Intimacy through Fan-lead Financial and Support Initiatives among BTS Fans

Tvine Donabedian*

This research outlines the motivations behind the fan-lead marketing and promotional endeavours undertaken by musical group BTS’s fan community, also known as ARMY. In highlighting the reciprocity in intimacy between the group and their fans, I argue that ARMY’s desire to elevate BTS is embedded within structures of affect, despite the financial nature of the benefits the group and their company may reap. These fan-lead initiatives represent efforts towards a common goal, where success, whether it comes in the form of money or not, is a gift of gratitude and a show of mutual understanding from fans to BTS. Based on data from 22 interviews with fans, this research explores the motivations behind fan-lead marketing by looking at the affective properties of music consumption, the parasocial relationship, fan community dynamics, and the purchase of intimacy. Within these contexts, the promotion surrounding BTS’s music, as organized by the fans, mimics profit-oriented behaviours but is ultimately a gesture towards the exchange of intimacy between fans and artist.

Keywords: music, intimacy, parasocial, fandom, affect

I. Statement of Intended Contribution

The purpose of this research is to understand the motivations behind fan-lead marketing and promotional behaviours among BTS fans,

also known as ARMY. The latter often engage in highly organized and effective marketing endeavours as a fan community, surrounding BTS’s musical releases. This paper seeks to understand why fans participate in these behaviours that generate profit for the group and the company, but not for them. What do

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fans gain from this labour? More so, what is it about the group and their art that drives fan labour in the context of promoting and marketing music? This research aims to answer these questions through the application of existing literature and theory on the data accumulated from twenty-two interviews with BTS fans from various backgrounds. It approaches fan-lead marketing initiatives through the perspectives and intentions of the fans themselves to better underline the motivations behind these behaviours. When it comes to the music and the artist, it is pertinent to outline the elements that incentivize fans to go to these lengths to celebrate their favourite idols. In subverting formulaic understandings of the music industry, approaching fan behaviour as an affective structure allows for a better grasp of their intentions as music consumers.

II. Introduction

In the realm of music fandom, global superstars BTS and their fans, better known as ARMY, are notorious for their streaming and buying power. With every musical comeback, BTS and ARMY have consistently broken multiple records and taken over the headlines and stages of the international music scene. It is no secret that this is in part due to the fact that the fanbase boasts increasingly large numbers across

the globe, but the group's enormous success is also the partial result of constant efforts in fan-lead marketing and promotional initiatives. ARMY are not only big, they are organized, informed, and selective in their participation in the fandom, especially when it comes to guaranteeing BTS any form of success they can. The numbers, after all, speak for themselves. Just in the past few months, ARMY secured BTS two No. 1 positions on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, first with their single *Dynamite* and then again, with their song *Life Goes On* from BE, the group's most recent album.

Despite the inevitability of profit on the side of BTS and their company Big Hit Entertainment, the lengths to which ARMY go to promote and support BTS's work cannot be measured away by financial motivation alone. In fact, while examining ARMY's relationship to BTS and the reasons behind their level of commitment and devotion, money never really appeared as a factor, or at the very least, not as a conscious ambition. That is to say, the goal is not simply to put money in a favourite member's pocket, the reality of it is far more complex and is embedded in various social and affective structures. The research presented in this paper does not seek to describe and analyze the marketing and promotional initiatives themselves. More so, the purpose of this research is first, to outline the overlapping contexts in which ARMY's motivation to participate in such initiatives exists and second, define the incentives behind

this motivation. In doing so, this research contributes to existing literature surrounding fan-marketing in two ways. First, it put into question general understandings of the fan-artist relationship, also known as the parasocial relationship. This paper highlights the blurring of the social limitations between BTS and their fans and how the resulting intimacy incentivizes fan-marketing behaviours. Second, it argues for the importance of authenticity in the industry when it comes to achieving organic marketing efforts on the part of fans. This is especially relevant as the rise of BTS has prompted many claims out of the music industry in terms of producing “the next BTS” or a group “bigger than BTS.” This research underlines the necessity for relatability as a motivation for fan-marketing to occur and relatability cannot be established without authenticity. Marketing musical groups using a promise of future success not only implies a manufactured image, but widens the gap between the artists and their potential fans.

The data presented in this essay derives from 22 interviews with ARMY from various backgrounds and different identities and observations drawn from participation in fan activities, both online and in-person. From those interviews, there are four main contexts in which participants framed their fandom identities and explained their involvement in the fandom. These are the concepts and ideas that contextualize this research, which include (1) music as a medium of communication, (2)

the parasocial relationship, more specifically, the directionalities of the fan-artist relationship, (3) the purchase of intimacy, and (4) responsibility in community membership. It is important to note that the marketing and promotional activities themselves are not a part of the context in their own right, but instead, remain present across the moving parts listed here. As stated by most informants in this research, contributing to the fan community, and by association to BTS, is an important aspect of the fan identity. There exists a prevailing mentality of “giving back” to the group among active BTS fans when it comes to their fan membership. This paper situates itself within this exchange of intimacy, with a narrowed focus on fan responses to artists’ relational labour. In doing so, this paper highlights the importance of intimacy in the fan-artist relationship and how this intimacy, when returned to the artist on the part of the fan, can be expressed through financial channels, despite its purely affective intentions.

III. Methodology

The data for this research was gathered using a mixed methods approach that combines participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation took place online, specifically on Twitter during the weeks following album releases, in order to outline

various types of fan-lead promotional activities and contribute to some of them. The data gathered from participant observation acts to support fan accounts from twenty-two interviews with ARMY from various different backgrounds. Interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling methods on Twitter and interviews took place in person in both Seoul, South Korea and Vancouver, Canada. In complement to the participant observation, the goal of the interviews was to map out how fans perceive their relationship to BTS and how their roles in the fan community reflect or reinforce that relationship. The interviews consisted of eleven open-ended questions that asked fans how they were introduced to BTS, how they became a fan, how they define their fan membership, and finally, what benefits being a fan of BTS brings to their lives. When linked together, the purpose of these questions is to allow interviewees to define the intentions of their fan participation and understand the structures of their relationship to BTS that validate their endeavours.

The data analysis took place within an insider ethnography framework, since I used my status as a fan to participate in fan activities and access informants for interviews. For this reason, it was imperative to acknowledge both my bias as an active member of the fan community, as well as exercise reflexivity when interpreting data. As a fan studying other fans, my analysis of the data provided by participants is a contextualization of their experiences, which

means reflecting on my role as both fan and researcher is necessary (Lamerichs, 2018). Thus, reliability and validation of data are mutually achieved through the combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, as well as through the application of my own knowledge as a fan. In this way, I participated in streaming efforts during album releases while following Twitter accounts dedicated to monitoring the numbers and chart placements. I also took note of tweets and posts from fans encouraging streaming and providing advice on proper streaming techniques. As for the interviews, the recorded individual interviews were first anonymized and then transcribed. My coding schema was designed to identify instances of fan behaviour surrounding album releases and how each interviewee described their participation. Upon outlining these behaviours, I then applied a different coding schema to identify the reasoning and contexts that fans provided to explain the motivations behind their participation.

IV. On Communicating Intimacy

4.1 Music, a Medium of Communication

The properties of music, as a form of artistic expression, define its marketability to audiences and thus, establish the foundation of my

argument. Assuming the audience perspective, the experiential duality of music is what grants it great cultural value. That is to say, music can be a deeply personal experience, while also favouring collective participation. An individual can consume music on their own and feel an intimate connection to a piece, but music is also consumed in large groups, as a social activity. The latter may include live performances, concerts, club events, and even playing music at friendly gatherings or car rides. Such activities surrounding music are what Christopher Small (1998) refers to as “musicking,” the social act of participating in the musical process in any form, ranging from the actual production of music to the person working at a concert venue. Musical performance and its enjoyment encourage sociality and group engagement, but do so whilst also maintaining intimacy on individual levels. Many people feel personal connections to the music they like and by extension, to the artist that created that music. Essentially, while an artist performs for a crowd, each individual in that crowd experiences the music on a deeply personal level. Music, as an embodiment of emotion, then becomes a holistic affective phenomenon made up of many shared, but distinctly unique affective experiences. It is in the duality of music’s public and private potential that fan communities emerge and collectivity is fostered. In this way, we can argue that fan behaviours, even those outside the music production, represent instances of “musicking”

and therefore, must be understood as part of the musical process and not a response to it.

As a vehicle for affective communication, music enriches lives through the feelings and emotions it produces in people (Hesmondhalgh 2013). Music makes us feel something and we often establish intimate connections with the music we listen to. Somehow, even in its most abstract form, music becomes about our lives (Nussbaum, 2001) and its affective influence reaches us in many different ways. Musical affect is a topic that has been discussed extensively in philosophy, cultural theory, and psychology. In his book *Why Music Matters*, Hesmondhalgh outlines these various perspectives and draws two important points. First, that musical affect can be an aesthetic experience, but can also include affective experiences that exist outside of aesthetic. For example, a person can find a song beautiful or listen to music for its artistic value, but a person may also listen to music in search of other emotions. Second, Hesmondhalgh emphasizes the value of musical affect in its influence on people’s lives and emotions. There is great social power associated with musical experience, which must also be considered. Once again, we observe a convergence between the private and the public. In applying Hesmondhalgh’s approach to fans, we understand the individual intimacy musical affect creates, while also placing this intimacy within the greater range of collective musical experiences which possess important social implication. To simplify, fans

experience and feel through music individually, but share a collective social response to what the music makes them feel.

That being sad, the affective response to music is incredibly difficult to describe by its lonesome. This is due in part to the fact that music is semiotic in nature, meaning it communicates affect through symbols. Music on its own is not descriptive, but abstract. Nussbaum (2001) argues that, unlike linguistic forms of communication like stories, music merely represents or embodies emotion with an obvious lack in specificity. Stevenson (2006) points out that this makes it easier for the audience to “anchor themselves into the narrative”, but harder for them to detail the experience without context (quotes in Hills 2014, p. 183). For this reason, it is difficult to explain exactly how and why intimacy comes to exist through musical experiences. Without any explicit narrative, music as semiotic communication allows the audience to mold the message to their emotions and experiences, even if they don’t align perfectly with those of the artist (Hesmondhalgh 2013). The abstraction of emotion in music was also brought forth in the interviews I conducted with fans. The following quote from an ARMY about BTS’s song *Singularity* illustrates the concept well.

“I was crying when I was listening to the song. You know when you connect to the song like... such a deep level where you’re like what is going

on? I can’t believe this is a real thing I’m listening to. That is how I felt.”

In this way, it becomes clear that experiences in music cannot be studied solely through the channel of music itself, but must be first contextualized in the complexities of affect and meaning that surround music (Hesmondhalgh 2013). Addressing the implicit emotional narrative communicated through music is especially relevant for BTS, who communicate their music in Korean and have an international fanbase, a large portion of which is not fluent in Korean. This language barrier establishes yet another layer of ambiguity, at least for non-Korean speaking fans. The existence of such an international and wildly diverse fandom is further indicative of music’s embodiment of emotion, as discussed by Hesmondhalgh. Therefore, to understand music’s power and give larger meaning to what fans such as the one quoted above experience, we must also turn towards what frames music, what gives it the meaning it often blurs. In this case, that is BTS themselves.

4.2 Relational Labour and Intimacy

Music is the initial point of communication between the artist and their audience, but as a medium of affective exchange, it is not unique. The fan-artist relationship persists outside the context of musical performances,

meaning the connection fans feel towards their favourite artists still exists when they are not listening to their music. This is indicative of an overarching exchange between artists and their fans, one that scholarship has traditionally referred to as the parasocial relationship. A term originally coined by Horton & Wohl (1956), a parasocial relationship describes the relationship between an individual and a media figure (i.e. celebrity), often characterized by the one-sided nature of the relationship. The argument posed here is that audience members don't have personal access to their favourite artist and therefore, their dedication cannot be reciprocated, creating a unilateral relationship. Yet, this does not prevent fans and audiences from expressing admiration and adoration for their favourite media figures. As Stever (2017) notes, many fans talk about their favourite celebrities like they would about a friend. Koenig and Lessan (1985) even found that people rated their favourite TV characters as closer than acquaintances, but not as close as friends. Horton & Wohl attribute these aspects of parasocial relationships to the result of "illusions of face-to-face conversation" and deceptions of intimacy (1956). Here, I seek to challenge the elements of deception and unilaterality that Horton & Wohl attribute to intimacy in parasocial relationships by highlighting the authenticity BTS cultivate on their end of the fan-artist relationship.

Through their music alone, BTS are experts

at fostering the parasocial relationship. With songs dedicated solely to their fans and the overall relatability of their lyrics and messages, BTS have been able to connect with a large number of fans all around the world through the authenticity of their art. Songs such as *2!3!* and *Mikrokosmos* were explicitly written about the fans and for the fans, moving a step further from a simple dedication. Even in terms of subject matter, many fans have expressed their appreciation for the relatable messaging and themes in BTS's music. One fan especially enjoyed the way BTS did not glamorize youth and explore its negative sides as well, mainly the anxiety and instability of youth she also experiences. Similarly, three other interviewees mentioned the abundance of songs about romantic love in mainstream music and how, in contrast, a lot of BTS's music offers a more realistic and relatable option for them. Referring to the subject of love songs, one fan shared her thoughts with me: "I'm so over it! So, it's really nice to see the way they make music and about things that are common for us." Already, BTS disturb the unilateral structure of the parasocial relationship, or at least, they do so through the eyes of their fans. Fan dedication is easy to observe, but it is clear that fans enjoy a level of dedication on the part of the group as well. In their participation in the fandom, fans not only expressed a desire to support BTS, but felt that they were "giving back" and identified BTS as the ones to give them something first.

In her interview, one ARMY really highlighted this sense of reciprocity:

“What they give me, as I told you, it’s a rewarding feeling to have them in my life. It’s good to be a fan of them because you know they’re so - they seem like such genuine people, like such giving people and you know, it’s kind of a mutual kind of care. I wouldn’t say love, but care. You know, even if it’s not 100% mutual, I don’t care much about it. It just feels really genuine and mutual. Like, they care for us as much as we care for them. So that relationship, it’s pretty good. I think that’s what makes most people be into them. What they can give, the way they communicate. Not like social media stuff, like raw. But you know, the way they do it. Always releasing music and always trying to keep up with us. That’s… that’s a good thing.”

While it is still difficult to entirely write off the unilaterality of the fan-artist relationship, it is clear that fans not only feel reciprocation on the part of BTS, but feel that BTS’s gestures outweigh those of the fans, maybe through their music alone. While not all interviewees were as explicit as this one, the language of “giving” was prominent across most of the interviews. Even more interesting was that when fans described what BTS was giving them, many referred to affective experiences. The fan quoted above mentioned being cared for, while another expressed that BTS gave them motivation to get through hardship. This act of “giving” does not occur through music alone. The digital age has now allowed many artists to

disturb the traditional structure of the parasocial relationship even further outside music, specifically its supposed unilateral nature.

In the digital age, the previously discussed social act of “musicking” proves more laborious than ever for the musicians and, for the most part, does not involve the production or performance of music at all, but the production and performance of the musician’s self. With easy access to a vast array of music online, fans no longer need to rely on the music or a handful of interviews to “get to know” their favourite artists. Musicians are expected, both by fans and the industry, to hold a constant online presence by interacting with their audience on social media platforms. This is where we see the parasocial relationship develop. Relatability is no longer an implicit element of the music, but an ongoing task. Nancy Baym (2018) argues that musicians are expected to consciously and strategically reach an audience themselves, making a successful career in music a precarious and convoluted feat, more so than it ever was. Baym refers to this type of work as “relational labour,” a form of emotional labour artists must maintain in order to establish an intimate connection with their audiences. She goes on to define the intricacies of relational labour as “the ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work” (Baym 2018, p. 13). As discussed, while music remains a dual space

between the personal and the collective, it is inherently an intimate interaction between an artist and the members of their audience. Thus, the online relational labour of artists must reflect the same intimacy, it must reassure the audience of the reality of this intimacy. In aligning their relational labour to the relatability of their message, artists cultivate authenticity in both art and person.

BTS participate in an enormous amount of relational labour, quantified through various avenues of content they put out between interviews, livestreams, web series, social media, and more. It is through BTS's multimedia presence that fans get to know the members and where they fill in the affective gaps left by their music. The BTS members are constantly communicating with their fans across various platforms and levels of intimacy. On platforms like Weverse, we can even observe one on one interactions between group members and the fans. However, the key point to note here is that BTS uphold and elaborate on the messages of their music through their relational labour on these platforms. A recent example comes from the title track of their newest album, BE, called *Life Goes On*. The message "life goes on" resonated with fans, not only because of the promise of a new song in the midst of a global pandemic, but because this message also made an appearance in their recent UN speech. The speech covered similar themes to the song and even ended with a collective message from all

the group members: "Life goes on. Let's live on." Some fans even connected it to similar messages the members left on Weverse and went as far as the song *everythinggoes* from RM's mixtape mono, which also talks about passing hardships. In this sense, BTS not only maintain the pre-existing intimacy, they reinforce it, they validate it. They make their fans feel seen by reconfiguring the unidirectionality of the parasocial relationship and instead building a reciprocal relationship that is as authentic as possible. Most importantly, they make fans want to return it, which is where the fan-marketing and promotions come into play. Thus, we situate ourselves within this exchange of intimacy, with a narrowed focus on fan responses to artists' relational labour.

V. On Purchasing Intimacy

5.1 The Purchase of Intimacy

In understanding the combined influence of music and relational labour, we highlight the importance of intimacy in the fan-artist relationship and how this intimacy, when returned to the artist on the part of the fan, can be expressed through financial channels, despite its purely affective intentions. In fact, the purchase of intimacy is a very common occurrence in society. The term, coined by Viviana Zelizer (2005),

approaches intimacy as a good, something that can be purchased. Money and intimacy are often perceived as conflicting concepts, but Zelizer argues that economic transactions always intersect intimate relations people create. In daily life, we can think of institutional structures that intervene in intimate relationships and their associated economic structures and transactions, such as getting engaged or planning a funeral. An even more simple example would be buying someone you love a gift. Parasocial relationships are not exempt from such transactions and, more so, favour them immensely.

ARMY represent a fierce example of intimacy in the form of purchase. Transactional intimacy is especially common in fandom and ARMY engage in the purchase of intimacy in a conscious and organized manner. These include fan-lead marketing initiatives, mass streaming and buying of songs, albums, and music videos, and fan voting for popularity awards. These are normal expressions of intimacy that are often stigmatized, but many fail to acknowledge that for a lot of fans, this is the only way to return intimacy, to express support. A recent example of such an exchange is one I mentioned earlier, when fans got Dynamite a No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. This was a community effort that spanned various social media platforms. On Twitter, fans posted streaming links and instructions to stream the song as efficiently as possible. Other community accounts organized to collect funds and buy the song in large

quantities through fans who could not afford to do so themselves. Immediately after the achievement was announced, the members rushed to multiple platforms to express their gratitude through many emotional posts addressing ARMY. Point being, their fans spent a lot of time and money on this achievement for this exact purpose, to elicit this exact reaction. The goal was to make BTS happy by bringing them success; this is the labour through which fans return that intimacy. To further illustrate the intersection between purchase and intimacy, I want to provide two quotes from a fan that showcase different ways these two concepts can interact with each other.

"I streamed Boy With Luv... I skipped class in college for the comeback. I skipped class to buy tickets. I'd say that they are a very high priority for me in my lifestyle today. Which I would never imagine doing for anyone else. I want to specify that this is not something I did literally for anyone else or any other group."

The mentions of lifestyle and the differentiation made between "anyone else" and "any other group" speak to the intimacy that surrounds this fans actions. BTS are not only part of her life, but play a role of utmost importance, which is reflected in her choice to prioritize them over other aspects of her life. Additionally, she emphasizes how unique BTS are, not only in terms of a musical group, but as people in her life. Her actions are reserved for BTS and for

no one else, whether that be a musical group or any other person. This quote demonstrates this fan's level of dedication, the significance of her purchase, and the intimacy with which she views BTS. The quote below is a response to a question pertaining to the shortcomings of being a BTS fan and her answer brings to light BTS's half of the relationship.

"So the con there I guess would like not being able to provide everything or give the world to BTS. And the last thing I would say is I've had a few times where I've experienced doubt about - is this a good idea dedicating my life to this? Am I crazy? Is this a good idea? What am I going to do without - what am I going to do when this stops? Have I just grossly misinterpreted these translations and things. But in times where that's happened, the members have put out stuff that's turned that on its head. And they continue to prove that they're worth my investment. And by investment I don't just mean money, but time and love."

As mentioned, fans hold a desire to give back to BTS in whatever way they can, but this fan proves that this desire does not stem from delusion. When I introduced this research, I mentioned that ARMY are selective. Their choice to continuously show these intense levels of support is not unfounded, but is a result of BTS's consistency and authenticity in their relational labour. As vocalized by this fan, the purchase of intimacy then becomes an investment. Even in moments of doubt, BTS return fan support with their own.

5.2 Intimacy Through Fan Community

The fan efforts outlined above are a response to BTS's relational labour. In turn, fan labour is a complex mode of production, as it produces a broad range of capital for which fans are compensated in abstract ways. Helleckson argues that fan labour is mutually beneficial for fans through its cycle of giving, receiving, and reciprocating (2009). In a broader sense, many scholars refer to Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital" to describe fan production. While fans do not receive monetary compensation for their labour, they are rewarded with deeper cultural knowledge of the fan object and social status among their peers within the fandom (Hills 2002). For this reason, fan labour is often likened to a "labour of love," as it returns no monetary gain.

When it comes to BTS's music consumption, streaming music and music videos is a favoured form of fan labour, as it produces capital that is quantifiable and profitable. By displaying view counts or stream counts for songs and videos, streaming platforms such as Youtube, Spotify, or Apple Music become competitive online spaces where fans can monitor the product of their labour through real numbers. High streaming rates grant the music exposure, especially if it ends up trending or breaking streaming records on these platforms. In terms of voluntary labour, streaming is a low-investment practice, as it requires little effort

and spending on the part of the fans. The Internet and these free streaming platforms make it easy for fans to contribute in large numbers through their own online networks, independent from industry support (Baym & Burnett, 2009). Streaming requires little commitment, but this form of fan labour is inarguably profitable for both the artist and the industry, more so than other forms of fan labour. Streaming has bridged a gap. Fans have the power and resources to do the work that industry professionals had no choice but to do previously (Galuzska, 2015). This labour is quantifiable, in terms of statistics, but also revenue, allowing fans to literally measure their success through that of the artist.

Almost every interviewee emphasized a desire to support BTS by engaging in these practices within the fandom, especially when it came to streaming. This relates to Greer and Minar's (2007) concept of the "common goal," that defines communities as groups of people working towards a shared goal. One fan outlined their participation both as an individual fan and a member of a large community

"How I participate is pretty much if there's albums coming out, I love buying new albums, supporting them that way. If there's songs that need to be streamed, I love doing that as well. Streaming on Spotify. It's easy enough, I have the app. And pretty much radio play [...] Seeing everyone trying to support them in that way, I don't mind going to that length to listen to them."

Looking into the community approach, we can also understand fandom as an individual experience. Fan scholar Matt Hills approaches fan culture on this individual level, identifying fans as researchers of their own communities. He argues that the relationship between fans is far more relevant, as the community is simply the whole that shapes their individual identities (2002). Being a fan is an act of reflexive work. Fans are "intellectuals" and can consciously study themselves by acknowledging the societal implications imbued in their fan community membership (Hills 2002). ARMY are a fan community built around the music group BTS, but consider BTS part of the community as well, as is indicated by the reciprocity at play between fans and artists. It is unclear if we can include BTS in the fan community only because they participate in the gift-giving structures present in fandom. These communities come together based on a shared enjoyment of a media object and to argue that BTS are fans of themselves is nonsensical. By creating music and content, BTS give to their fan community and in turn, fans engage with their work as a community. The separation between fan and artist continues to exist, but it is the reciprocity in support that transcends the limitations of their dynamic and subverts the parameters of the parasocial relationship.

VI. Conclusion

I was to reiterate that such practices are not the product of delusion: these efforts are meant to support BTS in the way fans feel they have supported them through their acts of relational labour. While the fan-artist relationship is parasocial in nature, it remains a mutually beneficial relationship like any other and should be treated as such (De Backer, 2012). Whether it be through the mass purchase of songs and albums, coordinated online streaming parties, or requesting spins on local radio, these efforts are all directed towards marketing the group and guaranteeing their success. Despite the monetary benefits the group may reap, these practices are meant to further cultivate the intimate relationship between BTS and their fans, they represent instances of affective exchange and describe the desire to give and receive intimacy embedded within fan engagement. BTS's immense talents as a group explains their organic rise to international fame, but it is crucial to acknowledge how their authentic messages and interactions encourage the mass marketing and promotional strategies inherent in their fans' devotion. While this expression of participatory culture has adopted the avenue of marketing ventures, it becomes clear that fans do not explicitly define their practices as a form of marketing, but rather view them a way of giving back to a group that has given

them so much through their music.

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