"To be that one other brick in the pillar": Online Communities, Platforms, and Collective Action in the BTS Industrial Complex

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become integral to everyday life and serve as the foundation for online communities. These platforms not only enable communication but also shape the ways in which online communities are formed and maintained. In this paper, we examine an online community, the BTS fandom ARMY, using Durkheim's concept of solidarity, we show how ARMY's symbolic commitments, collective labor, and boundary negotiations are simultaneously community practices and infrastructural labor that generate cultural and economic value. Using an online survey and ethnographic observations of BTS ARMY, we present the BTS Industrial Complex, an ecosystem of communities all related to BTS that rely on digital platforms to influence and interact with each other. Our contributions are threefold: (1) a conceptualization of the BTS Industrial Complex as a sociotechnical ecosystem, (2) empirical insights into how platforms shape collective action, and (3) implications for HCI in designing for and critically examining large-scale cultural economies.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → *Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing*; **Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms**.



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1 Introduction

Online communities are central to contemporary social life, offering spaces for connection, play, and solidarity, especially for those marginalized or isolated in physical contexts [13, 36, 78, 85]. Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research has long examined these digital communities as sites of support, creativity, and activism, from Minecraft servers for autistic children [78] to fan collectives that organize charitable campaigns [62]. Yet, as these communities scale, they become deeply entangled with the infrastructures of digital platforms and the demands of global capitalism. Online communities today are not only cultural spaces but also engines of circulation, labor, and profit.

This paper takes BTS ARMY as a case study for interrogating these dynamics. ARMY[1] is the official fandom of BTS, a South Korean pop group that has achieved unprecedented global recognition since their debut in 2013. What began as a fan community organized around music has evolved into a vast transnational network

[1] Grammatically, the use of ARMY is unorthodox in English. ARMY can be a collective noun or a singular noun depending on the context (*e.g.,* "ARMY are a community," "I am an ARMY," or "These ARMYs love BTS.")

with its own infrastructures of care, activism, and labor. Through platforms such as Twitter/X, TikTok, and Weverse, ARMY members coordinate streaming campaigns, fundraising efforts, political interventions, and reputational defenses, transforming collective affect into measurable circulation and economic value[2] [62, 74]. These practices illustrate how contemporary fandoms operate simultaneously as affective communities and as infrastructural actors embedded within platformized cultural economies.

We conceptualize these dynamics through the framework of the *BTS Industrial Complex* (BTS-IC). By "industrial complex," we refer to a socio-technical and cultural-economic formation composed of interdependent institutions, infrastructures, and labor systems that collectively produce and circulate BTS's symbolic and economic value [24, 35, 59, 68, 69, 92]. Drawing from scholarship on cultural-industrial systems and the broader lineage of industrial-complex theory, we use the term not to necessarily imply coercion, but to highlight how fandom participation becomes embedded within networks of state-supported cultural policy, entertainment industry infrastructures, global media systems, platform architectures, and community labor [42, 42, 50, 52, 54, 57, 60, 82]. The BTS-IC encompasses not only BTS and HYBE (*i.e.,* BTS's parent company), but also digital platforms, transnational media, merchandising and cottage industries[3], recommendation algorithms, paparazzi economies, anti-fandom groups, and the ARMY fandom itself. Within this ecosystem, ARMY does not merely consume, but generates symbolic, affective, and economic value that is captured, circulated, and operationalized by the broader system [43, 74, 83, 84, 88]. This paper asks:

> *How do digital platforms mediate the practices of BTS ARMY, and how do ARMY members strategically leverage and manipulate these platforms to sustain and shape the BTS Industrial Complex?*

To answer this, we combine survey data with online ethnographic observations of ARMY activity across multiple platforms. Our analysis shows how ARMY's practices—from symbolic commitments, to coordinated labor, to boundary policing[4]—anchor, circulate, and regulate the BTS-IC [14, 59, 70, 74]. We also examine how these dynamics illuminate broader sociotechnical questions: how digital platforms transform affect into infrastructure, how solidarity practices shift as communities scale, and how industrial complexes scale through user labor.

The contributions of this paper are threefold. First, we coin the term *BTS Industrial Complex* to describe the sociotechnical ecosystem that sustains BTS and ARMY, offering a framework for analyzing fandoms beyond community-centered lenses. Second, we provide an empirical account of how digital platforms both constrain and enable collective fan practices, showing how ARMY not only adapts to but strategicallyleverages platform logics to generate cultural and economic value. Finally, we consider the broader implications of the BTS-IC for HCI, particularly further blur the boundaries between community, culture, and capital.

[2]Please see Appendix A for a list of terminology related to K-pop used in this paper.
[3]A cottage industry is "carried on in the home as a part-time occupation primarily by members of one family using human or animal power. The products are for the household or local village use and have little commercial importance" [41].
[4]Boundary policing can also be considered the gate-keeping that is done by a community [74].

2 Related Work

We situate our study of the BTS Industrial Complex (BTS-IC) within three intersecting areas of scholarship. First, HCI and CSCW research on online fandoms examines how digital communities form identities, generate culture, and mobilize for activism, providing a foundation for understanding fandom as a sociotechnical phenomenon. Second, scholarship on technologically-mediated communication highlights how platform affordances—such as anonymity, network-building, and collaboration—structure the possibilities of digital community life, enabling both safety and large-scale coordination. Finally, we turn to sociological theory, particularly Durkheim's work on solidarity, to understand how rituals, norms, and boundary-making scale within fandoms and extend into industrial logics. Together, this work provides the foundation for conceptualizing BTS-IC not just as a fan community but as an industrial system where affective investments, platform infrastructures, and economic value are deeply intertwined.

2.1 Online Fandoms in HCI and CSCW

Online fandoms are among the largest and most active digital communities, yet they remain comparatively underexplored in HCI and CSCW literature [21]. Prior work has shown that fandoms function as sociotechnical systems, shaping identities, norms, and collective action across digital platforms. This paper builds on this literature by examining BTS ARMY as part of a broader *BTS Industrial Complex*, foregrounding the role of digital infrastructures in sustaining fandom economies and cultural power.

Historically, fandoms engaged in practices such as producing zines, newsletters, and merchandise, which were critical to the success of musicians, movies, and television shows [9, 26, 30, 45]. Digital platforms extend these practices by transcending geographic boundaries and enabling new forms of collective identity that often operate outside mainstream expectations [60]. Pearce's study of diasporic game communities introduced the concept of *fictive ethnicity* to describe how online communities produce new identities detached from offline markers [66], a theme echoed in HCI work showing how fandom spaces can serve as safe havens for marginalized groups, including queer and disabled communities [38, 77, 91].

A key thread in HCI research highlights the role of platforms in shaping fandom cultures. Different platforms afford distinct cultural norms, forms of content, and modes of engagement [37, 74–76]. Platform migration further demonstrates the resilience of fandom identities. When communities move across sites, they carry their histories, values, and cultural practices with them [27, 65]. These dynamics situate fandoms as constantly evolving sociotechnical cultures, shaped simultaneously by their objects of interest, collective identities, and platform infrastructures.

Finally, recent work has highlighted fandoms' increasing role in activism and collective mobilization. Digital fandoms leverage their scale and organization to spread awareness of political causes [98], engage in philanthropic fundraising [96], and hold themselves accountable to shared ethical and political commitments [14, 44, 55, 62]. These examples demonstrate how fandom identities and infrastructures extend beyond cultural consumption into civic and political arenas.

Together, this scholarship suggests that fandoms represent critical sites for studying the life cycle of digital cultures. They show how collective identities can challenge mainstream norms, mobilize around shared values, and enact change across both digital and offline spaces. Our work extends this line of research by analyzing ARMY not only as a fandom community but as a subsystem of the BTS Industrial Complex. This perspective foregrounds how digital platforms mediate fandom labor, boundary-making, and industrial entanglements, offering broader implications for understanding platform capitalism and collective life in the age of large-scale digital infrastructures.

2.2 Technologically Mediated Communication in Online Communities

Fandoms are not only social formations but also structures deeply shaped by the affordances of the platforms where they take place. The design of digital platforms—through features such as anonymity, visibility metrics, or tools for coordination—structures how fans connect, communicate, and scale their practices. In other words, fandom culture is inseparable from the sociotechnical infrastructures that mediate it. Taken together, prior research shows that platform affordances do not merely support community practices but actively structure how power, identity, and coordination unfold within digitally mediated publics. Building on prior HCI and CSCW research, we highlight three key affordances that underpin fandom communities: *(1) safety, (2) network building, and (3) collaboration.*

2.2.1 Safety and Presentation. Digital platforms allow individuals to control how they present themselves and what aspects of identity they reveal. Features such as anonymity and pseudonymity enable disclosure around sensitive topics, from trauma [3, 4] to sexuality [86]. Platforms such as Reddit normalize anonymity, while avatars and digital artifacts (*e.g.,* Carrds) provide users with tools to construct alternative forms of self-representation [6, 91].

For marginalized groups, these affordances translate into safety and legitimacy. For example, Tumblr has long been a crucial safe space for LGBTQIA users [39, 40]. In fandoms, safety affordances allow members to participate without fear of offline stigma, experiment with identity expression, and negotiate shared rules of etiquette. Yet, these affordances do not inherently guarantee safety [22, 23]. Rather, safety is co-constructed by community norms and enforcement practices layered on top of technical affordances [23, 77]. Work from the Global South further shows how anonymity, linguistic hybridity, and mobile-first participation enable marginalized users to negotiate cultural and political expression online under conditions of infrastructural or state constraint [2, 16, 17, 71]. In other words, anonymity may provide cover, but it is the shared expectations of respect, privacy, and care that sustain safety as a lived experience.

2.2.2 Network Building. Platform design also shapes how communities find one another and build durable ties. Research has shown how affordances support the creation of *"cultural niches"* organized around race [46, 47], disability [75, 78], and sexuality [39]. Studies in geographical contexts, such as South Asia, likewise demonstrate that platform infrastructures simultaneously enable solidarity and reproduce structural inequities, shaping how communities forge connections under uneven conditions of access, labor, and visibility [17, 71]. Fandoms extend these dynamics by forming networks around shared interests rather than shared demographics [23, 73, 74].

These networks often evolve into kinship and mutual aid systems [5, 62, 70, 76, 78]. For ARMY, social media affordances such as hashtags, retweets, and fan accounts allow individuals to locate one another, build sustained connections, and align their activities around BTS. Network-building affordances therefore transform dispersed individual fans into collective formations with the power to influence both digital discourse and mainstream culture [62].

2.2.3 Collaboration. Finally, digital platforms afford large-scale collaboration. Prior work has documented how online spaces coordinate disinformation campaigns [64], misogynistic mobilizations [12], and political movements [25]. At the same time, these affordances enable positive forms of mutual aid, such as crowdfunding for medical bills [67, 95] or emotional support networks [78].

In fandoms, collaboration manifests through joint content creation (*e.g.,* fan translations, edits, fanart), coordinated campaigns, and philanthropic projects [73, 74, 96]. ARMY leverages these affordances to mount highly organized efforts—from streaming campaigns to fundraising for social causes—demonstrating how digital infrastructures scale both symbolic and material practices [14, 62, 74]. These collaborative practices occur within the broader political economy of platforms, where user activity is funneled into systems of data extraction and monetization, echoing critiques that digital participation is inseparable from capitalist logics of value production [93].

Across safety, network building, and collaboration, digital affordances enable fandoms to become resilient, large-scale collectives. These affordances are not neutral: they shape how fandoms organize, enforce norms, and translate affect into collective action. In the BTS-IC, they function as the infrastructural substrate that allows ARMY's solidarity to scale, while simultaneously generating the metrics and visibility that platforms and industries monetize. In this way, technologically mediated communication is both the condition of possibility for ARMY's cohesion and the mechanism through which its labor is absorbed into platform capitalism. These dynamics highlight how the same affordances that support creativity, safety, and coordination also integrate fan activity into larger sociotechnical systems, laying the groundwork for formations such as the BTS Industrial Complex.

2.3 Industrial Complexes, Solidarity, and Discipline in Digital Fandoms

As large digital fandoms grow in scale and infrastructural complexity, they function not only as affective communities but as organized systems embedded within broader cultural and economic networks. Building on HCI research on ritual and coordination, we integrate work on industrial complexes, Durkheimian solidarity, and punishment and boundary enforcement to conceptualize fandoms such as ARMY as hybrid formations shaped by solidarity, differentiated

labor, and distributed governance. This framing grounds our analysis of how collective life is produced and regulated within digitally mediated cultural ecosystems.

2.3.1 K-pop Fandoms as Industrial Complexes. The term *industrial complex*, first articulated in analyses of the U.S. military-industrial nexus [24, 59], has since been used to describe systems where institutional actors, economic interests, and infrastructural dependencies become interlinked [35, 68, 69, 92]. While often applied critically, the term can also serve as a structural descriptor for socio-technical formations sustained through differentiated labor, organizational coordination, and multi-institutional alignment [92].

South Korea's cultural industries exemplify such a formation. Since the late 1990s, the Korean government has strategically positioned K-pop and media production as national export industries, investing in training systems, cultural policy, and digital infrastructures that fuel the Korean Wave [42, 52, 54, 60, 82]. Entertainment agencies, state ministries, broadcasters, and global platforms form a tightly connected cultural-industrial ecosystem [42, 50, 57].

K-pop fandoms operate within—and materially extend—this system. Research shows that fans perform specialized and continuous labor, including translation, data tracking, archiving, streaming coordination, and misinformation management [83, 84, 88]. Such differentiated roles mirror the division of labor typical of industrial complexes, while platform infrastructures—YouTube, TikTok, Twitter/X, Weverse—further integrate fan contributions into visibility metrics and industry outcomes [43]. Studies of ARMY highlight how transnational teams coordinate charitable work, educational outreach, and community management, operating as a distributed infrastructure alongside entertainment and platform actors [74].

Understanding K-pop fandoms as digital-industrial complexes provides a structural frame for analyzing how labor, identity, and governance are intertwined in large-scale fandom systems and sets the stage for examining how solidarity and discipline operate within them.

2.3.2 Durkheimian Solidarity in Digital and Fandom Communities. Durkheim's distinction between *mechanical* and *organic* solidarity offers a valuable lens for analyzing how digital communities cohere. Mechanical solidarity emerges from pre-industrial societies focused on shared values, rituals, and collective conscience. Whereas organic solidarity arises from an industrial society, with a heterogeneous population that highlights differentiated roles and interdependence within complex systems [20, 90].

HCI research has applied Durkheim's framework to understand how digital rituals—synchronous participation, affective expression, shared symbols—generate collective effervescence across streaming platforms, online religious communities, and diasporic networks [49, 58, 72]. Scholars of virtual cultures further argue that digital spaces enable forms of neo-mechanical solidarity, where ritual resemblance unites heterogeneous participants [80].

At the same time, digital fandoms demonstrate features of organic solidarity: role specialization, distributed expertise, and ongoing coordination that sustain large-scale collective action. Prior HCI work on fandoms underscores how ritual, shared identity, and affective bonds coexist with differentiated labor and governance roles [76]. This dual structure positions fandom as a hybrid social formation where both forms of solidarity operate simultaneously.

2.3.3 Punishment, Discipline, and the Digital-Industrial Turn. Durkheim viewed punishment as a mechanism for reaffirming collective morality and repairing breaches in the social order [20]. In contexts characterized by mechanical solidarity, punishment is expressive and ritualized. In more differentiated societies, punishment becomes institutionalized and bureaucratic [29, 31]. Later analyses of prison, military, and education-industrial complexes show how disciplinary power becomes distributed across organizations, infrastructures, and labor systems [18, 35, 79].

Digital communities exhibit analogous forms of distributed governance. Online groups use call-outs, mass blocking, reporting, and exclusion to enforce norms and maintain boundaries [10, 81]. These practices serve both expressive and functional purposes: they signal shared values while distributing the work of monitoring and discipline across participants [33, 48].

Fandoms, including K-pop fandoms, often operate with quasi-institutional governance structures. Research documents coordinated responses to misinformation, harassment, or norm violations, demonstrating how fans collectively regulate behavior and sustain community coherence [94]. Such practices align with Durkheim's account: punishment both expresses moral solidarity and maintains order within complex, differentiated systems.

We build on this trajectory by theorizing the *BTS Industrial Complex* as a digital-industrial system in which fandom solidarity, ritual practices, and boundary policing are entangled with platform economies and entertainment industries. In this context, ARMY's use of symbolic punishments (e.g., blocking, calling out, excluding) mirrors Durkheim's account of solidarity through punishment (with post-industrial societies enabling punishments that reduce freedoms and liberties), but also reflects atomized work structures enabling organic solidarity and the capitalist entanglements of industrial complexes. Studying fandom through this lens allows us to see not only how collective consciousness is transformed, but also how enforcement practices feed directly into broader systems of visibility, profit, and industrial power.

3 Methods

In this paper, we report on a qualitative study of the BTS ARMY community as a case study that combines an online survey with long-term participant observation. We use "case study" in the qualitative sensean in-depth, contextual investigation of a bounded sociotechnical phenomenon, rather than a comparative or statistical sample [97]. The survey served as our primary data source and was the focus of our qualitative analysis, while participant observation was used to triangulate, corroborate, and add nuance to the survey findings. This mixed approach enabled us to capture both articulated perspectives from community members and lived practices observed in situ. The first author conducted all data collection and primary analysis. As a member of ARMY, the first author's embedded position provided insight into emergent phenomena while also raising important reflexive considerations. Following Charmaz, we "stand *within* our research process rather than above, before, or outside it" [11], and our methodological choices were made with the intent to elevate community voices while protecting them from harm. In this section, we detail data collection and analysis, as well as researcher positionality, ethics, and limitations.

3.1 Data Collection

Our data collection consisted of two primary components: an online survey and participant observation.

3.1.1 Survey. The survey was the central component of this study, designed to capture ARMY members' perspectives on community values, practices, and their relationship with BTS.

Recruitment. Participants were recruited through ARMY-affiliated researcher social media accounts on Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok. The survey was open to self-identified ARMY members aged 18 or older. Participation was anonymous. The survey was opened April 2022 and concluded March 2023.

The survey received 616 responses; after filtering for consent, age, and fandom membership, 598 valid responses remained.

Survey Format. Administered via Qualtrics, the survey included open-ended questions that invited participants to reflect on their ARMY membership and community engagement. Key prompts included:

- What does being ARMY mean to you?
- Being ARMY is about
- The relationship between BTS and ARMY is
- In your opinion, what are the virtues and values of being in the ARMY community? How do you contribute to these?

3.1.2 Survey Demographics. The age of survey respondents ranged from 18 to 70 years old, with the mean age being 37.34 (STD 13.64), with 173 respondents choosing to not disclose their age. The vast majority or 94.64% of respondents identified as female (N=406), followed by 2.33% identifying as non-binary (N=10) and 1.4% male (N=6), 0.93% of respondents provided their own identification (N=4) and 0.7% preferred not to say (N=3), with 169 respondents not disclosing any information.

3.1.3 Participant Observation. To contextualize and extend the survey, the first author conducted participant observation between January 2021 and June 2024, primarily on Twitter/X. As per best practices for ethnographic work, the first author focused their research within the community context [7, 11, 74]. This platform was chosen due to it being the predominant platform for ARMY to publicly socialize online, and thus provided a wealth of data. Following digital ethnography scholarship, we conceptualize "fieldsite" not as a single location but as a networked set of online publics where ARMY activity unfolds [7]. . The first author was observing the interactions on Twitter/X approximately 40 hours per week and 5-8 hours per week on other platforms (including TikTok and Weverse), but would change depending on the activity of the community. Data included field notes, reflexive writings, screenshots, photographs, and blog posts created by the first author, supplemented by public posts from other ARMY members, recorded daily, or as appropriate based on the observed behavior. Taken together, the records of these engagements provided thick description of fandom practices and allowed us to situate survey responses within broader patterns of community life. Over 3.5 years, the first author generated hundreds of pages of field notes and reflexive writings documenting everyday interactions, conflicts, campaigns, and ritual practices across ARMY spaces. Our aim was not enumerative sampling but sustained immersion capable of producing thick description characteristic of ethnographic practice [11, 32]. The first author's dual role as researcher and ARMY member was integral to interpreting phenomena from within the community [11, 32].

3.2 Data Analysis

3.2.1 Survey. The survey was the primary site of qualitative analysis. Responses were cleaned to remove any personal identifiers and then coded using an iterative, inductive approach [11, 15]. Emergent themes were identified and refined through multiple rounds of coding. Three overarching themes were identified: (1) BTS as cultural symbols, (2) ARMY's platform-mediated collectivities and labor, and (3) boundary negotiations within the BTS Industrial Complex.

3.2.2 Participant Observation. Observational data were analyzed alongside survey themes to corroborate, challenge, and deepen interpretations. This included identifying consistencies across datasets as well as cases where observed practices complicated participants' articulated perspectives.

Throughout analysis, other authors and members of the first author's ARMY sub-community engaged in member-checking to validate interpretations and ensure resonance with lived experiences. This iterative process continued until theoretical saturation was reached [11].

3.3 Positionality, Ethical Approach, & Limitations

A subset of members of the research team, including the first author, identify as members of the BTS ARMY community. This insider perspective provided valuable access and contextual understanding, while other team members who do not identify as ARMY offered critical distance and helped balance interpretation. As a group, we approached the study reflexively, acknowledging how our positions shaped both the data we collected and the analyses we produced.

The first author of this work, who conducted the primary ethnographic data collection and analysis, identifies as a member of the BTS ARMY community. As a white, primarily English-speaking, disabled queer woman, the first author brings a particular perspective to the research. Additionally, social media feeds are algorithmically personalized according to user identity, language, and prior interactions [8, 34, 61]. Therefore, Western and English-speaking users are disproportionately represented in the content surfaced to the researcher.

Our engagement adhered to best practices for research with online communities broadly [22], and fandom communities specifically [74]. We prioritized ethical practices such as anonymization, member-checking, and care for community wellbeing [56]. The study was reviewed and approved by the authors' institutional IRB.

As with most ethnographic work, our findings are not universally generalizable. The perspectives presented reflect a subset of ARMY members, primarily within Western and English-speaking contexts. Given ARMY's vast and multifaceted nature, this work should be understood as an account of particular experiences situated within the broader BTS Industrial Complex.

4 Findings

Our findings reveal how ARMY's practices, values, and boundaries operate within what we call the BTS Industrial Complex (BTS-IC).

Building on traditions such as the military-industrial complex and prison-industrial complex, we use the term to describe a socio-technical and socio-economic system in which corporate, cultural, digital, and fan-based actors co-produce BTS's symbolic, affective, and economic circulation. The BTS-IC is not reducible to ARMY alone. Rather, it encompasses a wide array of actors, including, but not limited to, BTS themselves, entertainment industry bodies such as Hybe/BigHit, mainstream and social media, merchandise industries, paparazzi, antis, and other fan subgroups.

Within this ecosystem, ARMY plays a critical but partial role. As a highly organized global fan community, ARMY's symbolic commitments, digital labor, and governance practices help sustain and amplify BTS's presence across platforms and markets. At the same time, ARMY is internally heterogeneous. Its global membership brings diverse cultural expectations, norms, and interpretations of what fandom participation should entail. This heterogeneity contributes to the increasingly atomized labor expectations within the community, as fans take on differentiated roles in translation, data management, promotion, education, and boundary enforcement. These practices also intersect with, and are exploited by, other actors in the BTS-IC, including, including media industries that profit from BTS-related attention, commercial partners who rely on fan-driven amplification, and antagonistic groups who seek to capitalize on or disrupt the group's visibility.

We present three interlocking dynamics that illustrate how the BTS-IC operates through ARMY's participation: (1) entrenchment of BTS as cultural symbols, (2) platform-mediated collectivities and labor, and (3) boundary negotiations within the BTS-IC. Together, these dynamics show how ARMY sustains and is sustained by the BTS-IC, exemplifying how digital platforms mediate cultural labor, capitalist economies, and collective meaning-making.

4.1 Entrenchment of BTS as Cultural Symbols

The BTS-IC relies on BTS being more than entertainers—they are cultural symbols whose meaning and value circulate across fan communities, media industries, and markets. Cultural symbols are figures, objects, or practices that condense shared meanings and values, serving as orienting anchors for both individual experience and collective practice [32]. Within this larger ecology, ARMY plays a critical role by orienting itself around BTS as moral figures, sources of healing, and symbols of resilience. Participants described how BTS's music and values became deeply woven into their everyday lives, often at moments of personal vulnerability. These orientations position BTS as more than idols—they are anchors around which individual and collective practices can be organized. Yet these symbolic attachments did not remain confined within ARMY. They also fueled the broader BTS-IC, shaping how other actors, from media to merchandise industries, capitalized on BTS's cultural resonance.

4.1.1 Self-Orientation and Healing. While most members of the ARMY community would agree that the label of "ARMY" is self-applied—one must align themselves as ARMY to be an ARMY—there is much disagreement about whether anyone who labels themselves as ARMY should "count" as ARMY. Providing a definition what it means to "be" an ARMY is a near impossible task. The community's sheer size, its numerous sub-communities and global cultural composition alone ensure the complexity of such an undertaking. These variations shape how fans interpret BTS as cultural symbols and how they understand the community's expected code of conduct, ritual practices, and labor roles. In effect, ARMY brings together a heterogeneous population around a shared cultural object while also enabling a set of emergent, increasingly systematized expectations. This dynamic reflects a broader transition from primarily mechanical forms of solidarity—organized around shared values and collective rituals—to more organic forms, characterized by differentiated roles and individualized responsibilities within the fandom's expanding sociotechnical ecosystem [20]. As this shift unfolds, additional nuance arises in how the community collectively defines itself, who it counts among its members and, even within the community itself, what constitutes "ARMY." This often manifests in larger discourse and debate on social media timeline about who "counts" as being "in" or "out."

For many ARMY members, alignment with BTS began with a deeply personal turning point. This aligns with previous work showing the importance of BTS's music and messaging to members of the ARMY community [53]. One participant explained,

> *"As an ARMY, it is very important to know and realise why and how you are an ARMY. It's an inner calling, is not something someone has to validate for you. You know when you are an ARMY."* [Participant 529]

These individualized interpretations of BTS are notable because many ARMY members first gravitated to digital fandom spaces through perceived affinities with the group's values and narratives—sometimes elevating BTS to deeply symbolic, even spiritually resonant figures. Participants often located this attachment in experiences of alienation or anomie [20], describing BTS as a stabilizing presence during periods when broader social life felt disordered or isolating.

This "inner calling" was often articulated through narratives of crisis and recovery, reinforcing an altruistic interpretation of BTS and shaping an internal moral compass for the fandom. For some, BTS functioned as a symbolic resource for creating a conscious collective with perceived shared expectations—a pattern reminiscent of the ritual coherence observed in pre-industrial communities [20, 51], where group symbols provided meaning and social anchoring. As another participant recalled,

> *"I had been in a bad relationship with, of all things, a musician. I had always been a huge lover of music, and after that relationship was over and I finally got the courage to leave, I couldn't seem to connect to music anymore. I was hurt and lost something of myself. [...] They gave me my music back. I can never ever repay them."* [Participant 596]

Notably, this feeling of BTS's impact on the respondents life also corresponded with feelings of being indebted or a need to "repay" BTS. Many described entering ARMY spaces specifically in search of collective meaning and identity, reflecting how encountering BTS at pivotal life moments can intensify commitment to the community's perceived guidelines and norms. This mirrors patterns of mechanical solidarity, in which shared experience and moral alignment foster strong expectations of cohesion and duty [20].

This is also echoed in feelings of "finding BTS when they were most needed," usually when an individual was experiencing hardship in their life.

> *"I found BTS at a hard time. Like most other ARMY, I will tell you they came into my life exactly when I needed them. I never wanted to die, but I would self harm. Listening to a group that openly spoke of depression was eye opening. They weren't telling me just to get over it, but that I could survive and live well, even with a brain that told me I shouldn't be here or I didn't deserve happiness."* [Participant 221]

Participants framed these experiences not as private matters alone but as part of a shared affective infrastructure that connected them with others. These early encounters fostered a strong sense of collective consciousness grounded in perceived universal experiences, creating relatively homogeneous expectations about what it means to care for BTS and for each other—further resonating with Durkheim's account of mechanical solidarity.

> *"the reason ARMYs are so strong together is because they know that among the millions, there are those of us who are still breathing because we heard BTS sing of or speak of our pain, and told us it was ok to hurt and we weren't unwanted and unloved or as worthless as we felt, we weren't alone. For many of us, being ARMY, silent or no, well this is the least we can do to give back to 7 beautiful souls, angels, who kept is living and breathing for one more day"* [Participant 405]

This sense of wanting to pay forward what ARMY feel BTS has gifted them, as well as passing on the messages that BTS conveys through their music and content is a strong component of many ARMY's individual alignment with the fandom. Within the BTS-IC, these narratives of healing become cultural capital—stories circulating across digital platforms, reinforcing BTS's symbolic role.

4.1.2 Other BTS Fans vs. ARMY as Depth of Symbolic Engagement. Within the broader BTS-IC ecosystem, fandoms are far from homogeneous and do not share universal codes of conduct or engagement. Those who identify as ARMY, however, often understand themselves as part of a more tightly knit moral community, one grounded in what they perceive as shared values, obligations, and affective commitments. This perception of internal cohesion is frequently reinforced through contrast with other fan groups, which are framed as fundamentally different or unable to meet ARMY's expectations for care, labor, or devotion. Such "us versus them" distinctions echo dynamics associated with mechanical solidarity, where group identity is strengthened through boundary making and differentiation from outsiders [20].

When asked in the survey, participants emphasized a distinction between being a casual fan and being ARMY. This distinction was not only about knowledge or consumption, but about the depth of symbolic engagement with BTS. As one participant described,

> *"Being an ARMY means that your investment in BTS and your knowledge of them and their music is markedly more in-depth that by being a mere fan of BTS. Unlike other fandoms, in BTS's case being a fan of BTS implies a casual appreciation of their art and them as a group, whereas being an ARMY means being invested in getting to know BTS's music, becoming familiar with and understanding their journey as a group and as individuals, getting to know who the members are as individuals, understanding their group dynamics, engaging with their various fan content like livestreams, variety shows, interviews, movies and documentaries etc."* [Participant 528]

Casual fans were seen as appreciating BTS at the surface level, while ARMY engaged in forms of labor—streaming and promoting—that made BTS visible within global platforms and markets. As P36 responded, *"ARMY is more dedicated and supportive towards BTS, in terms of buying album and [merchandise], streaming, voting, etc."* These practices demonstrate how symbolic depth translates into infrastructural contributions to the BTS-IC. As P543 put it,

> *"ARMY, at some level, feels some amount of pride, connection, and responsibility to see BTS rewarded and represented and treated well. There's a level of 'responsibility' that ARMY takes on in their full and honest engagement with BTS's content."* [Participant 543]

What ARMY frames as responsibility is also labor that drives circulation, visibility, and profit for platforms, media outlets, and the entertainment industry. In this way, ARMY's differentiation from casual fans is simultaneously a community distinction and a functional role within the larger industrial complex. At the same time, many ARMY members do not initially interpret their contributions as "labor" but as a meaningful purpose within the community. This is a way of giving back to BTS and supporting a collective they see as morally or emotionally significant. This orientation mirrors Durkheim's description of collective solidarity in pre-industrial societies, where shared purpose and communal obligation rendered work an extension of moral life rather than a discrete, instrumental task [20].

Further, ARMY engages in activities that differentiate themselves from other fandoms within the BTS-IC. As P368 explains,

> *"ARMY is an extension of the thoughts, care & beliefs of BTS, it is an entire additional community created on mutual care, social structures & online fun based on but proceeding the support BTS can give. BTS is a sort of frontmen but ARMY picks up & extends. Due to the enormity of the fandom & cosplaying haters/anti's and solo there are also ongoing fights on what is or isn't suited as ARMY, and online communication is easily misinterpreted so there are sometimes quite big disagreements, but this might also be because ARMY crosses so many borders and [addresses] the hard topics on gender, sexuality, racism, [misogyny] etc. ARMY is a community but not a monolith. BTS gives some guidance especially [through] lyrics and action, and most ARMYs get inspired to follow, but also spread the message."* [Participant 368]

This account highlights two critical dynamics within the BTS-IC. First, ARMY defines itself as an extension of BTS's values, framing its activities as an amplification of BTS's messages rather than a separate agenda. This framing establishes legitimacy within the

industrial complex. ARMY is not only supporting BTS but acting as a moral and symbolic custodian of their cultural project.

Second, this legitimacy is maintained through the differentiation from other fan subgroups, which are frequently recast as illegitimate or even antagonistic. Participants often described "solos" (fans who support only one member of BTS) and "shippers" (fans who speculate on or promote imagined relationships between members) not as alternative fandom expressions but as forms of betrayal or harm. These subgroups, alongside sasaengs (stalkers) and media detractors, are often collapsed into the category of "antis"—actors framed as undermining BTS or the ARMY community.

By lumping diverse practices under the label of "antis," ARMY not only polices internal cohesion but also positions itself against perceived threats within the BTS-IC. This move reflects a broader industrial logic: to maintain its reliability as a subsystem, ARMY draws sharp boundaries that designate which forms of engagement sustain BTS's symbolic and economic value and which disrupt it. Importantly, this re-framing turns boundary disputes into industrial work. Differentiating "true ARMY" from "antis" ensures that the community channels its labor, visibility, and resources toward BTS in ways that align with both ARMY's ethos of care and the profit-driven logics of the broader complex.

4.1.3 Protecting Humanity, Producing Symbols. Another recurring theme was the insistence on treating BTS as human beings rather than objects of consumption. Participants described a shared responsibility to uphold BTS's dignity, aligning their own practices with the values BTS espouses. For example, P547 explained,

> *"First of all, to treat the boys like humans, and take good care of their privacy, their honesty, as well as their music. Never to use their emotional videos for memes (it's a given, that would be so insensitive). To be a better person with each passing day. Give the world something good by being good. not give attention to haters. To implement their messages."* [Participant 547]

This emphasis on humanity extended to community norms around privacy, such as not sharing paparazzi photos or approaching members in non-public settings. As P409 put it,

> *"we should be aware of their past, their present. Respect is necessary towards our boys . We love and cherish them and if we see them in their private time, we do not see them. We also care about their well being and are happy for their success"* [Participant 409]

Participants also linked this protective stance to the distinction between casual fans and ARMY, framing ARMY as committed not just to enjoying BTS but to actively working on their behalf. As P39 explained,

> *"Being ARMY is like a full-time job keeping up with the Tannies [BTS], interacting with other ARMY (colleagues at this job, if you will), and putting in actual work to bring BTS to new heights and new audiences. This includes streaming, writing, editing videos, art – all pleasant activities, but done with a greater purpose beyond just enjoyment. Being part of the ARMY also means following 'unofficial' rules that the fandom has set up to protect BTS and other ARMYs".* [Participant 39]

Here, recognizing BTS's humanity is inseparable from labor and responsibility. Casual fans may consume content intermittently, but ARMY members frame their engagement as sustained work oriented toward both protecting BTS and elevating them. This distinction not only reinforces internal cohesion but also legitimizes ARMY within the BTS-IC: casual fans come and go, while ARMY maintains the symbolic and affective infrastructure that sustains BTS's visibility and market value.

Paradoxically, however, this protective stance also reinforces BTS's symbolic role within the BTS-IC. By embodying BTS's messages of self-love and care, ARMY positions the group simultaneously as human and transcendent cultural figures—an ambivalence that sustains both community solidarity and the industrial machine that profits from BTS's image. Norms around privacy and care distinguish ARMY from outsiders and antagonistic subgroups, but they also generate symbolic value that the entertainment industry and media can circulate and monetize. Thus, the recognition of BTS's humanity simultaneously protects the group and feeds the industrial machinery built around them.

4.1.4 Summary. These findings illustrate how ARMY contributes to the entrenchment of BTS as cultural symbols within the BTS-IC. In doing so, they produce a form of collective consciousness that enables forms of mechanical solidarity within ARMY, especially at an earlier stage of joining the fandom where participants felt personal benefits to joining this community and embracing BTS. Through narratives of healing, distinctions between casual fans and ARMY, and norms of protection and respect, participants positioned BTS as infrastructural anchors that organize both community practice and industrial circulation. Importantly, this symbolic work is not unique to ARMY. Media industries amplify these narratives, merchandise industries commodify them, and antagonistic groups exploit or contest them. ARMY's contribution, however, shows how deeply personal orientations are converted into cultural and economic infrastructure, sustaining the broader industrial complex in which multiple actors are entangled.

4.2 Platform-mediated Collectivities and Labor

If BTS are the symbolic anchors of the BTS-IC, ARMY's collective practices are the engine that circulates those symbols across digital platforms and into cultural and economic value. While participants often described these practices as love, responsibility, or solidarity, they are also structured by the infrastructures of social media, streaming platforms, and the entertainment industry. These infrastructures function as sites where ARMY enacts ritualized forms of participation grounded in mechanical solidarity, helping ensure that BTS's symbolic significance remains culturally salient. Coordinated activities such as trending hashtags, streaming campaigns, or fundraising projects become ritual practices through which ARMY's affective investments are translated into measurable circulation—visibility, engagement, and profit—that sustain the broader industrial complex.

4.2.1 Community Belonging and Care. Many respondents emphasized that being ARMY meant belonging to a supportive and interconnected community. As P423 explained, 'Yes, being a fan is individual thing, being army is a community thing." This ethos of belonging extended to practices of care, both online and offline. P47 described how, at concerts,

> *"ARMY has a dedication to each other. Seen clearly at the concerts with ARMY handing out freebies, taking care of each other, checking in on solo folks, etc."* [Participant 47]

As one ARMY community member told the first author in a private communication, *"I came for BTS, but I stayed for ARMY."* Similarly, P456 described how relationships formed through BTS often extend into long-term friendships.

> *"In my experience, they naturally find other ARMY on social media or at the concerts to connect with and have conversations about the boys. It goes further than that though. These connections that start with a love for the boys turn into lasting friendships. There is real support within ARMY."* [Participant 456]

Within the BTS-IC, this ethos of care functions as more than social glue. It creates the conditions for collective coordination. Community members look after one another while simultaneously aligning their efforts toward shared goals. This dual function—supporting each other and supporting BTS—demonstrates how the affective fabric of ARMY enables the industrial machine to scale.

4.2.2 Collective Activities and Support. Respondents frequently described coordinated activities such as fundraising, birthday projects, comeback[5] preparations, and streaming campaigns. As P261 put it,

> *"Being part of ARMY is about being part of a community. Engaging in ARMY activities such as: fundraising, birthday projects, comeback preparation, etc. Whereas being a fan of BTS is more casual, you just like their music. Every ARMY is a fan of BTS, but not every BTS fan is an army."* [Participant 261]

Voting campaigns for Korean and international award shows further illustrate the industrial nature of ARMY's collective practices. Dedicated websites and social media hubs circulate detailed instructions for how to participate in each award system, often including tutorials for downloading apps, creating accounts, and collecting or purchasing digital "hearts" that can be exchanged for votes (See Figure 1). As one voting guide for SBS Inkigayo explains, "1 vote = 30 hearts," with strict daily limits and expiration periods for earned or purchased credits.

For international fans, these practices require significant additional effort, such as navigating untranslated Korean apps and overcoming geographic restrictions. Coordinated through Twitter, Discord servers, and fan-run sites, these voting drives mobilize ARMY as a distributed labor force whose activity is directly converted into measurable outcomes—streaming counts, votes, and sales—that factor into industry rankings and awards. Participants described doing this repeatedly—logging in multiple times per day, using more than one device or account when possible—to ensure as many votes as possible are counted. Existing studies have documented this type of labor. Sun (2020) shows how fan labor transforms K-pop into a creative industry by mobilizing fans into sustained work, not just passive consumption [84].

This labor is performed by a highly heterogeneous international fandom whose diverse nationalities and cultural contexts converge around a shared set of itemized tasks. As the fandom has grown, voting and streaming participation increasingly resemble forms of organic solidarity: differentiated, specialized contributions that sustain the community's broader goals. The BTS-IC leverages international fans' efforts—framed as support or devotion—to maintain BTS's visibility, even as the scale of these activities necessitates increasingly atomized roles. In this context, the rhetoric of mechanical solidarity around love and communal care becomes a motivating frame through which fans engage in more individuated, task-oriented labor characteristic of organic solidarity.

For respondents, these activities were often framed as acts of love or responsibility but also functioned as infrastructural labor within the BTS-IC. P433 explained,

> *"Being ARMY makes me want to support BTS and ARMY any way I possibly can, including supporting their [appearances], their CB, watching content, paying for content, commenting on ARMY going [through] difficult times, sharing my experiences"* [Participant 433]

What appears here as diffuse individual effort is in fact platform-mediated coordination that drives streams, views, and purchases—metrics that are directly monetized by both Hybe and other actors within the music industry (*e.g.*, Billboard). The collective intensity of these practices has even prompted accusations of chart manipulation. In response to such critiques, RM, the leader of BTS, noted in a 2021 interview [19],

> *"But if there is a conversation inside Billboard about what being No. 1 should represent, then it's up to them to change the rules and make streaming weigh more on the ranking. Slamming us or our fans for getting to No. 1 with physical sales and downloads, I don't know if that's right ... It just feels like we're easy targets because we're a boy band, a K-pop act, and we have this high fan loyalty."*

This tension between affective framing and industry metrics is not unique to ARMY. Western fandoms have also been scrutinized for coordinated streaming loops, bulk purchasing of tracks, and mass-voting campaigns, practices that are sometimes labeled "gaming the system" or "streaming fraud." Recent reporting has shown that streaming manipulation is a widespread issue across the global music industry, affecting independent and mainstream artists alike, often through bot farms, multi-device streaming, or coordinated fan labor [28, 89]. Essays reflecting on K-pop fandoms further argue that accusations of manipulation often reveal biases in how legitimacy is assigned: when Western fans mobilize en masse, it is framed as enthusiasm or "fan dedication," but when ARMY engages in similar strategies, it is cast as artificial or illegitimate [1].

These comparisons underscore that what counts as authentic labor or manipulative practice is not defined by the actions themselves but by how industries, platforms, and media frame them. In the BTS-IC, ARMY's affective labor is simultaneously celebrated

[5]The release of a music single or album.



Figure 1: A screen shot from an ARMY website with information on how to participate in voting for BTS on award shows. (c) US BTS ARMY, https://www.usbtsarmy.com/tutorials/inkigayo

as evidence of fan devotion, leveraged by platforms and corporations for profit, and pathologized as distortion of cultural metrics. This ambiguity highlights how ARMY's infrastructural labor is both indispensable to and contested within the broader industrial machinery.

These forms of labor highlight how ARMY's love and solidarity are inseparable from the economic operations of the BTS-IC. Fans do not just consume—they circulate and amplify, turning personal affect into measurable data that sustains the industrial machine. As P210 summarized,

> *"Yes. A fan is a more casual level and do not always have the same code as Army: respect for BTS and each other. Army also participate in driving numbers: streams, sales, etc in a [concerted] effort"* [Participant 210]

Similarly, P554 distilled this role into a succinct observation, *"Army actively battles for BTS, ie voting, streaming, buying."* Together, these practices show that what is often framed as voluntary support is also highly labor-intensive. Streaming, voting, and content promotion become daily routines, with fans investing considerable time, attention, and sometimes money. Fans without the economic means to contribute often lean heavier into their time and attention investments. Within the BTS-IC, these behaviors translate into measurable outcomes like chart rankings, award wins, and visibility—values that platforms, media companies, and the entertainment industry directly monetize.

4.2.3 Protecting and Representing BTS. Beyond individual commitments to treat BTS with respect, participants emphasized ARMY's collective role in protecting the group's image and ensuring their positive reputation. Here, protection was not simply about personal choices but about coordinated practices enacted at scale. P529 described this responsibility as a pledge shared across generations of ARMY.

> *"Being an ARMY, I feel responsible. The older ARMYs who have been with BTS since the beginning, they were able to protect and nurture the relationship between BTS and ARMYs. Being [ARMY], it's like a pledge to always be there for them when they need. For public figures, it becomes very challenging to live a normal life. But we ARMYs have always been able to interact with them like friends and this is a value that I want to live. Also, even with such busy schedules, when they make themselves available and accessible to us, it brings us closer. I understand that unwavering support is what will keep our relationship stronger and longer. So, when I call myself an ARMY, to me, it means to be that one other brick in the pillar that holds them high and helps them stand against all the craziness of the world. To preserve and respect this relationship that we have."* [Participant 529]

This sense of collective duty was often tied to ARMY's role as BTS's representatives in digital and physical public spaces. P550 explained how this entailed carefully managing online behaviors to maintain BTS's reputation.

> *"We represent [BTS] and I honestly would never want to disappoint them. All of the ARMY I know feel the same way. To that end, I try to support other ARMY both in public and private spaces as much as possible. I only share positive things publicly and keep any worries or grievances in my private space. I try to boost things that I hope will make my friends smile. I stay well away from drama and encourage others to do the same."* [Participant 550]

Protective responsibility was enacted through specific platform tactics: mass-reporting antis, blocking hostile accounts, writing threads[6] to educate other fans, and flooding hashtags with positive content or fancams[7] to drown out negativity. These practices blurred the line between affective solidarity and organized labor. What participants framed as loyalty also functioned as collective brand management. Protection thus required ongoing vigilance—made possible by the fandom's global nature with ARMYs in many timezones where different parts of the community can be "on shift" during their waking hours—managing not only external threats from antis, solos, or the press, but also internal disagreements that risked fracturing solidarity.

Alongside these everyday tactics, ARMY has also developed formalized initiatives aimed at safeguarding BTS's reputation. One such example is the *"White Paper Project"* [87], a fan-led collective that publishes detailed reports addressing widespread misinformation about BTS and ARMY. Originating in response to xenophobic and dismissive portrayals of BTS in Western media, the project mobilized fans with expertise in writing, translation, and research to produce professionalized documents designed for external audiences such as journalists, policymakers, and new fans. These reports compile evidence of BTS's cultural and philanthropic contributions, debunk misrepresentations, and situate BTS within broader global cultural contexts.

The White Paper Project exemplifies how ARMY's protective labor extends beyond reactive tactics into proactive cultural production. Unlike individual acts of blocking or hashtag flooding, the White Paper Project is an organized, transnational initiative that positions ARMY as curators of BTS's legitimacy. By producing polished, citationally grounded documents, ARMY not only defends BTS from harm but also reframes them as legitimate cultural and political actors.

These practices reveal how ARMY operates as a reputational shield at multiple scales. At the micro-level, members curate their own online behaviors and intervene in platform discourse; at the macro-level, organized initiatives like the White Paper Project mobilize ARMY as a transnational collective acting in the service of BTS's legitimacy. While participants framed these efforts as care and loyalty, they also perform critical industrial functions: stabilizing BTS's symbolic capital, countering threats to their brand, and ensuring their sustained profitability within the BTS-IC. In this way, ARMY's efforts to protect BTS from harm simultaneously nurture community solidarity and feed the industrial machinery that depends on BTS's visibility and reputation.

4.2.4 Summary. ARMY's collective practices reveal how affective commitments become organized, disciplined, and ultimately infrastructural within the BTS-IC. While members describe streaming, voting, and promotional work as expressions of love, care, or solidarity, these individualized, effort-intensive tasks increasingly function as differentiated labor roles, aligning the fandom more closely with organic than mechanical solidarity. Those who do not or cannot participate may at times be perceived as falling short of community expectations, as labor has become intertwined with belonging and with maintaining ARMY's carefully curated "positive" public identity. Such moments illustrate how mechanical-solidarity rhetoric—emphasizing unity, collective care, and shared purpose—can motivate and normalize labor-based norms within an industrial-complex context. Together, these dynamics show how ARMY operates not only as an affective community but also as a distributed labor force whose coordinated actions—streaming campaigns, voting drives, trending initiatives, and protective interventions—translate symbolic commitments into measurable circulation, reputational capital, and economic value for the broader BTS-IC.

4.3 Boundary Negotiations with the BTS-IC

If ARMY's symbolic commitments anchor the BTS-IC and their collective labor circulates its value, then boundary negotiations define ARMY's role within the broader industrial ecology. Participants frequently emphasized that learning to "be ARMY" was not a matter of simply claiming the label, but of navigating a diffuse and often contested code of conduct across different platforms. As ARMY's identity is absorbed across different social media environments, regional contexts, and cultural traditions, maintaining a universal sense of what "ARMY" means becomes increasingly difficult. Our data suggests that ARMY's growth has shifted the fandom from early mechanical-solidarity dynamics, anchored in shared narratives and communal expectations, to a far more heterogeneous formation in which members hold diverging definitions of ARMY identity and the obligations that accompany it. As one participant described,

> *"I was Facebook ARMY for a couple of years & that wasn't very effective in learning ARMY ethics & etiquette. Once I found Twitter ARMY, I tried to follow accounts that were OT7 & weren't unkind to new people. I asked questions, and was given advice & some reading material. I paid attention when ARMYs wrote about rude behavior & listened to what BTS asked ARMY to do and not do. Since all ARMYs find BTS in different ways & use different [social media] platforms, it's difficult to come up with a code & rules. It would be great if we could do some YT vids & had a central place where new ARMY could learn how to be good ARMY without it being less of a process of osmosis."* [Participant 8]

[6] A thread is a sequence of posts or replies that are contained together on social media apps. These are used especially on social media where word or character count is limited per post.

[7] A fancam is a video captured by a fan that focuses on a particular artist or performer. This originated in K-pop fandoms where the fancam was usually of a single artist in an idol group [99].

This reflection underscores both the necessity and the difficulty of boundary work within ARMY. While specific subcommunities, such as TikTok ARMY or Twitter ARMY, may still exhibit strong mechanical-solidarity practices, the fandom as a whole increasingly engages in organic solidarity patterns characteristic of large, differentiated systems. One way to observe this shift is through the mechanisms of boundary creation across ARMY spaces, where norms differ by platform, region, and subgroup. Etiquette is learned through observation, correction, and platform-specific practices rather than through a centralized authority. Yet these diffuse negotiations are precisely what allow ARMY to maintain cohesion within the BTS-IC, distinguishing itself from other subgroups—such as solos, stalkers, antis, and mainstream media—that also engage with BTS but in ways ARMY views as illegitimate or harmful. These practices of distinction serve to protect the integrity of ARMY but also highlight its partial position: one cog in a much larger industrial machine where multiple groups compete, cooperate, and collide.

4.3.1 Differentiating from Subgroups. To participate effectively within the broader BTS-IC, ARMY often relies on forms of mechanical solidarity to coordinate around shared, universalized goals, such as protecting BTS's reputation or promoting new releases. Achieving these goals frequently requires collaboration with heterogeneous groups whose values or practices may not fully align with ARMY's own. In these moments, ARMY mobilizes cross-group participation toward specific, itemized tasks, such as trending campaigns or streaming pushes, that serve the larger aims of the BTS-IC. This dynamic echoes Durkheim's account of shifting solidarities. While the rhetoric centers on collective unity, the actual coordination reflects more differentiated, task-oriented forms of participation associated with organic solidarity.

As discussed previously in the findings, participants drew sharp boundaries between ARMY and other fan identities, particularly "solos," who support only one BTS member, and "sasaengs," who stalk or invade BTS's privacy. As P526 explained,

> *"My only issues with some fans are solo Stans putting 1 member above the others or putting others down, or the [sasaeng] who stalk them relentlessly. I block the negativity and focus on the positive which is the majority of true ARMY."* [Participant 526]

Interestingly, several respondents conflated "being a fan" of BTS with other types of individuals with an interest in BTS, such as stalkers.

> *"fan is simply enjoying the music, while ARMY digs further into the lyrics. Being an ARMY also means seeing BTS as normal human beings while being a fan most of the time doesn't see why it's wrong to invade their privacy because they see BTS merely as objects of fascination, and don't understand why the 'celebrity culture' is unhealthy."* [Participant 402]

Boundary disputes often emerged around the question of who or what practices "counted" as ARMY. These disputes were especially pronounced in relation to solos—fans who support one member more than the group. While solos were sometimes recognized as powerful voting or streaming blocks, participants also described them as a source of tension that risked fragmenting the community. P209 recounted one such experience,

> *"A few ARMYs are upset that I follow solo accounts I've explained that in particular PJMs are a HUGE voting block for BTS and I want to keep the line of communication opened ⋯ I am a JimIn bias ARMY but would not tolerate any disrespect of any members hence would not follow these accounts. But some are upset with me and unfollowed and some blocked me. My response was tempered and did not block in return It's important as mentioned above to try and keep line of communication opened."* [Participant 209]

This account illustrates how boundary policing operates not only as discourse but as infrastructure: unfollowing, blocking, and DM exchanges enact inclusion and exclusion in real time. It also underscores the ambivalence of ARMY's boundary work. On one hand, distinguishing ARMY from solos preserves cohesion and legitimacy within the BTS-IC. On the other, these practices risk splintering the community and generating affective fallout that undermines the very solidarity they aim to protect.

This pointed differentiation between ARMY and not-ARMY helps in negotiating the boundaries of the community [74]. This differentiation also reflects more than community boundary negotiation. It situates ARMY as the subgroup most aligned with BTS's collective ethos. Within the BTS-IC, such alignment is a claim to legitimacy. ARMY positions itself as the true custodian of BTS's symbolic and moral value, distinguishing its practices from others who might exploit or fragment it.

4.3.2 Codifying Boundaries: The ARMY Underground Project. Boundary disputes were not only enacted through everyday practices of blocking, muting, or correction, but also scaled into collective infrastructures that codified ARMY's rules and adversaries. One striking example was the *ARMY Underground Project*, a short-lived but ambitious website whose stated mission was to *"protect BTS & ARMY and keep our activities silent."* The site positioned itself as an underground educational resource, urging members to *"Report, Block & Move in Silence."*

The site provided a wide range of resources designed to regulate ARMY's engagements across digital platforms. These included:

- **Etiquette guides**: Adapted from official Weverse rules, outlining expectations for how ARMY should behave online, what counted as "rude" behavior, and how to align one's practices with BTS's stated preferences.
- **Photo & video etiquette**: Instructions for spotting photoshopped or AI-generated content and discouraging circulation of paparazzi or invasive images.
- **Blacklists**: Long lists of fansite and sasaeng accounts, as well as "problematic" reporters, media outlets, blogs, and even charts (including Billboard and major Korean broadcasters), flagged as unreliable or harmful.
- **Identifying "antis"**: Infographics outlining how to recognize and avoid antagonistic subgroups such as solos, diet solos, multis, shippers, boycotters, and mantis. Each infographic provided detailed heuristics for recognition. For example, solos were described as fans who prioritize one BTS

member above the group, defend solo fanbases, harass other members, or demand disbandment if their preferred member was mistreated (see Figure 2).

By compiling and publishing these resources, the ARMY Underground Project transformed informal vigilance into quasi-institutional infrastructure. What might otherwise remain diffuse practices of boundary enforcement—blocking, muting, or subtweeting—was consolidated into a centralized hub of "rules" and adversary identification. The project did not just reflect ARMY's ethos of care; it codified ARMY as a regulatory subsystem of the BTS-IC, actively categorizing and disciplining the field of actors around BTS.

From an industrial perspective, the ARMY Underground Project exemplifies how ARMY's boundary work performs critical functions for the BTS-IC. By instructing members how to identify "real" ARMY versus "antis," the site stabilized BTS's symbolic capital, minimized reputational threats, and ensured the community's cohesion as a reliable labor force. At the same time, the rhetoric of "moving in silence" reveals an awareness of ARMY's industrial power. To act effectively within the BTS-IC, ARMY must be both invisible as an infrastructure and omnipresent as a regulatory force.

4.3.3 Policing and Code of Conduct. Boundary-making also unfolded through active policing of behavior within ARMY spaces. Durkheim's account of punishment helps contextualize these practices: in societies characterized by mechanical solidarity, sanctions often take expressive, collective, and sometimes severe forms aimed at reaffirming group morality. In more differentiated industrial societies, punishment becomes individualized and oriented toward restricting specific actions or freedoms rather than condemning entire groups [20]. P546 observed,

> *"ARMY has a very deep set of rules and will destroy people for saying something they perceive as any kind of slight. It is not a space for free speech or opinions, ARMY Twitter exists solely to celebrate BTS. I've even seen people state that they will unfollow anyone who posts anything that isn't BTS related."* [Participant 546]

Within ARMY, the implicit codes of conduct that vary across subgroups often produce both expectations and threats of sanction, echoing the expressive forms of correction associated with mechanical solidarity. Yet participants also described more individualized mechanisms of correction and exclusion, aligned with the industrial-era shift toward sanctioning specific behaviors through the curtailing of individual freedoms:

> *"An ARMY sharing something that is not factually correct/does not line up with what the members have told us, and that is usually resolved by another ARMY explaining in a very calm manner why this is not the sort of thing to share, which usually leads to communications about why people shared what they did, and an understanding not to do it again. If that doesn't work, it might not be a non-army in our space, who does not want to become one, so no amount of communication is going to help, in which case the resolution is usually via the block button"* [Participant 513]

Such policing ensures cohesion but also reveals how ARMY's shifting solidarity practices are maintained by constant vigilance. Within the BTS-IC, this vigilance is not incidental—it ensures that ARMY functions as a reliable subsystem, channeling attention and labor toward BTS while suppressing discourse that could undermine the brand, reputation, or economic value of the group.

At the same time, policing has consequences. Participants described how enforcement could spill over into public humiliation and personal anxiety, akin to public punishments observed in pre-industrial societies within mechanical solidarity expectations of justice. P504 recounted,

> *"I was a little thoughtless in expressing concern about the song Danger in a reply tweet to a BTS song vs BTS song poll done by a big account (thoughtless in that i didnt think about the place where i was commenting, or clearly explain my thinking). My comment was qRTed with insulting commentary about my presumed intentions and lack of understanding. No one tried to hear me out or engage directly at all. I deleted the comment but also tried to explain my concern in a few replies. The account holder told me to 'get out of [their] mentions.' So I unfollowed and muted and tried not to hang onto the negative feelings and anxiety."* [Participant 504]

Others described a more cautious approach, deliberately avoiding conflict to protect themselves from the toxicity of policing.

> *"I was very apprehensive about getting on [Twitter] because I was afraid it would be horribly toxic, so I've been widening my circle only bit by bit. The upside is that I get whiffs of drama but I don't see it myself, so I haven't had direct experience of disagreeing with someone's behavior and figuring out how I was going to engage."* [Participant 506]

While P506 frames their avoidance as an individual strategy, this experience also reflects the indirect benefits of collective policing. Their ability to curate a relatively peaceful space depends on the boundary work done by others. Unfollowing, blocking, and public correction limit the spread of conflict into their timeline. In this way, even members who do not actively participate in enforcement practices nonetheless rely on them to maintain a sense of safety and cohesion. Policing thus produces a shared infrastructure of order, one that distributes benefits unevenly but widely across ARMY's digital spaces.

These accounts illustrate how enforcement, while intended to preserve solidarity, can also feel like a dysregulation of ARMY's ethos of care. What one participant experiences as protection of BTS may feel to another like surveillance or silencing. In the BTS-IC, such tensions highlight the double edge of boundary work. It enables ARMY to function as a cohesive subsystem, but it also risks alienating members and reproducing the very toxicity the community claims to resist.

4.3.4 Negotiating Inclusivity and Growth. Participants also expressed ambivalence about ARMY's size and inclusivity. Some emphasized the lack of centralized structures for orienting newcomers, thus creating heterogeneous populations within ARMY. As P552 noted, *"Army is so huge now - there isn't one central hub of information or even one ultimate 'way of being'."* Without clear onboarding

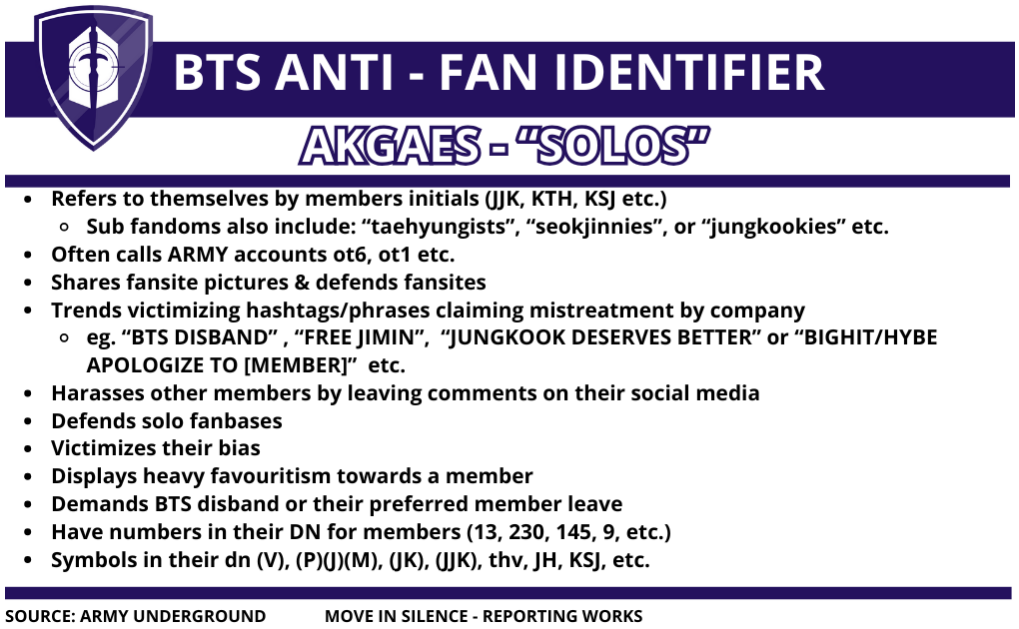


Figure 2: A screen shot from the ARMY Underground Project identifying the key identifiers for a "solo." (c) The ARMY Underground Project

pathways, newcomers were often left to learn norms through observation, correction, or trial and error. This decentralized approach reinforced the idea that ARMY identity is cultivated through participation rather than simply claimed.

Others highlighted the ways experienced ARMY took on informal mentorship roles.

> *"I was able to curate my Twitter timeline to follow kind and established accounts who were quite generous in explaining the ins and outs of the fandom, and also in providing historical background. I also found a very warm and welcoming sub on Reddit, not the larger Bangtan sub, but a smaller spin-off group that has been a lifeline."* [Participant 551]

In this account, inclusion was facilitated not through official channels but through smaller, community-driven structures that acted as onboarding spaces. These smaller factions under the broader ARMY umbrella are often where more grounded forms of mechanical solidarity emerge, as members develop allegiance through close ties with informal mentors and shared interpretations of BTS as cultural symbols.

At the same time, many respondents worried about alienating potential fans who might otherwise transition into ARMY. Some described tensions over policing behaviors that could discourage new entrants. For example, one participant recounted being warned not to overwhelm casual listeners on social media with jargon or expectations, in order to avoid "scaring them off" before they could deepen their engagement. Others, however, stressed the importance of gatekeeping to preserve community integrity, arguing that lax boundaries would dilute the ethos of care and responsibility that defined ARMY.

This tension between exclusivity and expansion underscores ARMY's dual role within the BTS-IC. Expansion supports BTS's visibility, chart performance, and profitability—outcomes that benefit entertainment companies, digital platforms, and ARMY itself as a cultural force. Yet unchecked inclusivity risks weakening ARMY's reliability as a subsystem. Without strong norms, the community may fracture, undermining its capacity to mobilize labor and protect BTS's symbolic value.

By regulating who "counts" and how newcomers are educated, ARMY attempts to balance these competing demands. In practice, this often took the form of public correction, mentorship from established accounts, or shared resources for "newbies." As one participant summarized,

> *"Reading and listening to the discussions in Facebook and Twitter groups was my education. I'm not sure there are more nuanced ways to support new players in a systematic way, but perhaps more groups within the community being encouraged to create newbie resources would help. Army is so huge now - there isn't one central hub of information or even one ultimate 'way of being'."* [Participant 552]

Such practices sustain ARMY's cohesion while also fueling its growth across diverse cultures and demographics. Ultimately, negotiations over inclusivity reveal ARMY's recognition of its industrial role: protecting the integrity of BTS's symbolic core while ensuring the community continues to scale in ways that sustain the broader BTS-IC.

4.3.5 Summary. Boundary negotiations reveal how ARMY positions itself as both custodian and subsystem within the BTS-IC.

Through differentiation from solos, sasaengs, antis, and other subgroups, ARMY asserts its legitimacy as the community most aligned with BTS's collective ethos. These distinctions were not only discursive but also infrastructural, exemplified by initiatives like the *ARMY Underground Project*, which codified etiquette, blacklists, and adversary categories into quasi-institutional resources. Such infrastructures highlight ARMY's role as a regulatory subsystem, tasked with stabilizing BTS's symbolic capital and ensuring community reliability.

Policing and enforcement practices, enacted through platform affordances like unfollowing, blocking, and public correction, ensured cohesion but also produced moments of silencing and exclusion that complicated ARMY's ethos of care. Importantly, even those who avoided direct participation in policing (*e.g.,* by curating peaceful timelines) benefitted from others' vigilance, underscoring how boundary work functions as a shared—if unevenly distributed—form of labor. What some experienced as toxic or repressive, others experienced as safety and order, revealing the ambivalence of ARMY's regulatory practices.

Meanwhile, ambivalence over inclusivity reflected a constant tension between exclusivity—necessary for maintaining ARMY's reliability as a subsystem—and expansion, which fuels the visibility and profitability of BTS within global markets. Mentorship networks and informal onboarding supported growth, while gatekeeping protected cohesion, producing a dynamic balance between openness and regulation.

These negotiations demonstrate that ARMY is not simply protecting its community boundaries. It is also defining its functional role within the BTS-IC. By codifying rules, enforcing norms, and calibrating growth, ARMY sustains the industrial complex's circulation of symbolic, affective, and economic value. Yet these practices also expose the costs of industrial participation, where solidarity is achieved through vigilance, growth is tempered by fragmentation, and platforms provide the infrastructure through which inclusion and exclusion are continually enacted. In this sense, projects like *ARMY Underground* exemplify the industrial logics of digitization itself. Infographics, blacklists, and rules circulate as platform-native content, making boundary policing not only a cultural practice but also a contribution to the broader economies of visibility and engagement that sustain the BTS-IC.

5 Discussion

Our findings traced how ARMY sustains the BTS Industrial Complex through three interlocking dynamics: (1) the symbolic anchoring of BTS as cultural figures whose humanity and transcendence are mediated through digital platforms, (2) collective practices of labor and protection that translate affect into circulation and visibility, and (3) boundary negotiations that distinguish ARMY from other actors within the broader industrial ecology. Together, these dynamics show how ARMY's practices are inseparable from the infrastructures of digital platforms and the capitalist logics they embed.

In this discussion, we build on these insights to situate the BTS-IC within broader sociotechnical contexts. First, we examine how platforms mediate and monetize symbolic, collective, and boundary-making practices, highlighting their role as infrastructures of cultural production. Second, we zoom out from BTS to argue that the BTS-IC is exemplary of broader cultural economies, offering a lens into how communities, platforms, and industries co-produce meaning, solidarity, and profit in the digital age.

5.1 Sociotechnical Infrastructures of the BTS-IC

The BTS Industrial Complex is sustained not only by fan affect and corporate strategy but also by the sociotechnical infrastructures of digital platforms. Platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Weverse mediate how BTS is encountered, how ARMY organizes, and how community boundaries are enforced. At the same time, ARMY members do not simply adapt to these infrastructures—they actively manipulate, reverse-engineer, and strategically deploy platform affordances to protect BTS and amplify their visibility. In this section, we examine how the BTS-IC is co-constructed through this mutual shaping of platform logics and fan practices, focusing on symbolic anchoring, collective coordination, and boundary-making.

5.1.1 Platforms and Symbolic Anchoring. The symbolic role of BTS is inseparable from the digital platforms through which ARMY encounter and circulate their content. Participants' accounts of healing, recognition, and commitment were not based solely on music consumption but on the mediated intimacy afforded by infrastructures such as YouTube, Twitter, and Weverse. Through livestreams, variety shows, behind-the-scenes clips, and algorithmically surfaced fan edits, BTS became accessible in ways that reinforced both their humanity and their symbolic transcendence. Prior work similarly frames BTS fandom as a transnational affective public whose shared experiences are co-produced through digital infrastructures [75]. This perspective helps situate the BTS-IC not only as an economic formation but as an affective and infrastructural one—where mediated encounters, distributed embodiment, and shared emotional resonance become central to how BTS's symbolic significance is collectively produced. This aligns with scholars' observations that ARMY's emotional and symbolic ties to BTS are mediated through digital infrastructures that enable intimacy, recognition, and care [74, 76]. This previous work shows how platform-mediated encounters become central to how fans experience belonging and meaning, reinforcing our argument that symbolic anchoring is inseparable from the sociotechnical systems that deliver BTS to ARMY.

Platforms also shaped how participants deepened their commitment from "casual fan" to ARMY. Algorithms recommended videos, fan accounts provided translations and context, and trending hashtags sustained visibility. For many, stumbling across a performance on YouTube or encountering fan debates on Twitter prompted deeper exploration of BTS's history and ethos, transforming a passing interest into a durable symbolic attachment. In this way, platforms acted as infrastructures that translated individual affect into sustained collective orientation, binding personal recognition to community membership and, ultimately, to the BTS-IC.

At the same time, ARMY learned to leverage these very infrastructures. Reverse-engineering streaming algorithms and analyzing chart metrics, ARMYs developed sophisticated guides for streaming, purchasing, and voting. These efforts required technical

literacy (*e.g.,* statistical analysis, server-based experiments) and resource mobilization (*e.g.,* multiple devices, pooled funds) to maximize BTS's visibility on platforms such as Billboard or Spotify. Such practices not only contest perceived industry bias but also reveal ARMY as infrastructural actors with advanced technical skill. Yet, as RM noted in response to accusations of "chart manipulation," these actions simply reflect playing by rules that continually shift against BTS [19]. Thus, symbolic anchoring is simultaneously personal, communal, and infrastructural—enabled by platforms, but also strategically leveraged against them.

Importantly, these same "manipulations" highlight how platform affordances become sites of power struggle within the BTS-IC. Streaming and chart-based practices illustrate how ARMY "fights back" against perceived inequitiessuch as opaque award criteria, algorithmic demotions, or hostile media narrativesby leveraging the exact technical affordances that platforms provide [74]. These actions complicate assumptions about who controls visibility, and therefore, power. Platforms and industry bodies set the rules, but ARMY strategically exploits those rules to challenge interpretations ARMY view as unfair. Through practices such as "angry streaming," fans attempt to assert symbolic and moral authority, even as such actions paradoxically generate additional revenue for the very infrastructures they contest. Taken together, these practices reveal how ARMY's engagement with platform affordances both challenges and reproduces the infrastructural conditions of the BTS-IC, ensuring its ongoing cultural and economic continuity. Thus, symbolic anchoring is simultaneously personal, communal, and infrastructural—enabled by platforms, but also strategically leveraged against them. These entanglements echo broader critiques that digital publics operate within capitalist infrastructures that convert participation into data, visibility, and economic value [93]. ARMY's practices, while grounded in care and solidarity, therefore unfold through systems that algorithmically monetize their activity and integrate it into the wider political economy of platforms.

5.1.2 Platforms and Collective Coordination. Protective practices within ARMY were likewise inseparable from the affordances of digital platforms. Participants described using tools such as blocking, reporting, or hashtag flooding to counter antis and negative narratives. These interventions were structurally enabled by platform mechanics that reward visibility and trending activity, but they were also strategically mobilized. ARMY weaponized engagement metrics to suppress harmful discourse and amplify positive representation.

Platform logics also shaped the scale of this work. The very metrics ARMY sought to influence—trending hashtags, video views, award votes—are monetized by both platforms and entertainment industries. Fans' protective labor therefore doubles as infrastructural labor, feeding the same systems they resist. Projects like the White Paper Project exemplify how ARMY extends platform work into professionalized knowledge production, developing reports that counter misinformation and protect BTS's reputation. Yet these too depend on the circulation infrastructures of platforms for legitimacy and reach. In this sense, collective coordination is a dual act. It expresses community solidarity while simultaneously reinforcing the industrial machinery of the BTS-IC.

Chart "manipulation" and streaming coordination make this duality especially clear. These practices show how ARMY mobilizes platform affordances, through repeat play, playlist configuration, algorithm-gaming strategies, to contest decisions by award bodies, media outlets, or entertainment infrastructures that they view as unjust or misrepresentative. By collectively optimizing streaming workflows or launching mass chart pushes, ARMY asserts a form of counter-power within the BTS-IC, using platforms as leverage against other actors in the system. Yet these tactics also reinforce the very infrastructures that disenfranchise them. Attempts to "prove" fairness or superiority through streaming inherently convert fan frustration into measurable profit for platforms such as Spotify and YouTube. These contradictions foreground how platforms are not passive intermediaries but active sites where ARMY's contestation, coordination, and cultural work are both enabled and monetized.

While the industrial logics of the BTS-IC monetize ARMY's collective practices, it is important to recognize that fans themselves do not experience these actions as mechanized or transactional. As Portas argues, ARMY's bond with BTS is grounded in affective reciprocity rather than robotic or programmable labor [63], which helps explain why tasks like streaming or chart coordination are framed as love, duty, or care rather than work, as shown in our findings.

5.1.3 Platforms and Boundary-Making. The policing and boundary work described by participants were equally conditioned by platform infrastructures. Twitter in particular facilitated norm enforcement through blocking, muting, subtweeting, and public quote-tweeting—mechanisms that allowed ARMY to curate digital spaces while also escalating conflicts into large-scale callouts. These practices enacted inclusion and exclusion in real time, leveraging platform affordances to draw lines around who "counts" as ARMY.

Platforms also shaped how newcomers learned (or failed to learn) community norms. Without a centralized onboarding hub, education happened through timelines, Facebook groups, or Reddit subcommunities—each filtered by algorithms that determined what surfaced first. New ARMYs were socialized through observation, correction, and circulation, often encountering boundary disputes before community norms. Importantly, even members who avoided direct policing benefited from the quieter digital spaces produced by others' boundary work. In this way, boundary-making is not merely cultural but infrastructural. Platform design conditions visibility, voice, and legitimacy, and ARMY strategically harnesses these mechanisms to preserve cohesion while fending off fragmentation.

5.1.4 Summary. These dynamics illustrate that the BTS-IC is neither a purely fan-driven community nor a top-down industry machine, but a sociotechnical formation sustained through the interplay of platforms and practices. Platforms provide the infrastructures that anchor BTS symbolically, enable collective coordination, and structure boundary-making. ARMY, in turn, strategically leverages and manipulates these infrastructures to assert legitimacy, protect BTS, and maximize visibility. Yet this very interdependence highlights the fragility of the system. As platforms evolve and introduce new technological capacities—from algorithmic shifts to generative AI—both the symbolic and economic foundations of the BTS-IC may be destabilized.

5.2 From BTS-IC to Broader Cultural Economies

The BTS Industrial Complex is not unique, but exemplary of broader dynamics that characterize digital cultural economies. While BTS and ARMY provide a particularly vivid case, the underlying logics of platform entanglement, fan labor, and symbolic circulation are observable across many domains of contemporary culture. K-pop fandoms more broadly, gaming communities, and even political movements such as Black Lives Matter, climate activism, or pro-Palestine mobilizations, operate through similar sociotechnical infrastructures. Each involves tightly networked publics who leverage platform affordances to amplify visibility, coordinate action, and defend symbolic boundaries, while simultaneously generating data and value for corporate stakeholders. These findings resonate with past HCI research showing that BTS fandoms constitute sociotechnical spaces where affect, identity, and community are actively mediated by platforms [74, 76]. This prior work positions ARMY as a paradigmatic case of platform-mediated relationality, which our BTS-IC framework extends by examining how these relations become infrastructurally operationalized. As recent HCI scholarship has argued, digital participation is inseparable from the capitalist political economy that structures platform labor, visibility, and extraction [93]. The BTS-IC exemplifies this dynamic. Fan affect becomes infrastructural input, and collective practice becomes an engine of value circulation across intertwined corporate, state, and platform systems.

In this sense, the BTS-IC serves as a case study that illuminates the entanglement of affective investment, collective coordination, and capitalist extraction. ARMY's practices—streaming campaigns, reputational defense, boundary policing—reveal how cultural commitment is simultaneously a form of labor, how solidarity is mediated by algorithmic infrastructures, and how community norms are always vulnerable to commodification. The dynamics that appear as unique features of fandom are in fact continuous with platform-mediated cultural economies more broadly.

At the same time, BTS-IC highlights the ambivalence of these formations. For participants, practices of care and protection are meaningful expressions of love and belonging. For platforms and entertainment industries, they are also measurable units of circulation and profit. This duality is not accidental but constitutive of digital cultural economies, in which affect and capital are co-produced. Recognizing this ambivalence allows us to see fandoms not as exceptional but as laboratories for understanding how digital publics are organized, mobilized, and monetized.

Finally, the emergence of generative AI signals that these dynamics are not static but evolving. As idols, symbols, and even community discourse become subject to automation, the tensions observed in the BTS-IC may foreshadow the future of digital cultural economies more broadly. If cultural symbols can be infinitely simulated, the stakes of solidarity, authenticity, and protection extend well beyond fandom. The BTS-IC thus offers a lens onto the broader question of how communities will sustain meaning, negotiate boundaries, and contest exploitation in a digital economy where platforms and algorithms increasingly mediate not just circulation, but cultural production itself.

For HCI, this case underscores the importance of examining fandoms not as marginal curiosities but as central sites of sociotechnical innovation and struggle. The BTS-IC illustrates how communities creatively leverage platform affordances, develop infrastructures of coordination and protection, and confront emergent challenges such as AI-generated media. By analyzing these practices, HCI can better understand how large-scale digital publics organize themselves, how platform logics shape collective action, and how new technologies reconfigure the boundaries between community, culture, and capital. In this sense, the BTS-IC is not only a fandom phenomenon but a case of what HCI scholars describe as "designing within capitalism" [93], where communities negotiate agency within systems that simultaneously depend on and profit from their labor. Attending to these tensions allows HCI to better theorize how cultural economies are co-produced by users, platforms, and industries.

6 Conclusion

This paper has examined the BTS Industrial Complex (BTS-IC) as a case study of how digital platforms, fan labor, and industrial logics intersect to produce contemporary cultural economies. Through qualitative analysis of ARMY practices, we have shown how BTS is entrenched as a cultural symbol, how ARMY's collective labor circulates and protects that symbolism, and how boundary negotiations sustain the community's legitimacy within the wider industrial ecology. Across these dynamics, digital platforms are not simply neutral intermediaries but active infrastructures that both enable community solidarity and monetize affective investments. These dynamics also unfold unevenly across the global fan base, shaped by linguistic, regional, and infrastructural inequalities that condition how solidarity and participation are experienced and enacted.

By coining the concept of the BTS-IC, we highlight fandom as a site where care, creativity, and commitment are inseparable from platformized and capitalist logics. ARMY's practices—streaming campaigns, reputational defense, charting strategies, and boundary policing—demonstrate how platform affordances are leveraged, reverse-engineered, and resisted, transforming symbolic commitments into infrastructural labor. At the same time, these practices reveal the ambivalence of digital cultural economies: what fans experience as love and solidarity also sustains the industrial machine that profits from their devotion. These dynamics further illustrate how mechanical and organic forms of solidarity are mediated through platform architectures, circulating through a heterogeneous global community navigating varied cultural expectations and access conditions.

In situating the BTS-IC within broader cultural economies, this study underscores that fandoms are not marginal curiosities but central laboratories of sociotechnical life. They reveal how publics organize at scale, how platform infrastructures shape collective action, and how cultural symbols are mobilized as both human and machinic capital. For HCI, this work emphasizes the need to attend to fandoms as sites of innovation, contestation, and exploitation, offering insights into how communities create meaning and solidarity under conditions of pervasive platformization and automation.

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A Glossary of Key K-Pop/ARMY Terms

- **Antis**: A general term for individuals or groups hostile to BTS or ARMY. Antis may include fans of rival groups, disgruntled former fans, or online trolls.
- **Award Shows**: Annual Korean and international award ceremonies (e.g., Melon Music Awards, Mnet Asian Music Awards, Golden Disc Awards, American Music Awards, Grammys) where fan votes, sales, and streaming data contribute to wins.
- **Bias**: A fan's favorite member of BTS. Fans often identify as "[member name] bias" (e.g., "Jimin bias").
- **Bias wrecker**: A member who challenges or temporarily "disrupts" a fan's established bias.
- **Billboard**: A U.S.-based music industry publication and charting authority. Billboard's Hot 100 and other charts are seen as highly prestigious measures of success.
- **CB / Comeback**: The release of a new music single, album, or promotional cycle by BTS. These events are major moments of collective labor for ARMY.
- **Fanbase**: Organized ARMY groups, often decentralized but highly coordinated, that take on specific responsibilities within the fandom. Fanbases typically run Twitter accounts, websites, or Discord servers, and act as hubs for distributing information, coordinating labor, and educating newer fans. They are often transnational and multilingual.
- **Fan chant**: Coordinated chants performed by ARMY during live performances, often scripted and standardized.
- **Fancam**: A fan-recorded video of a BTS member or performance, often widely circulated on platforms like Twitter and YouTube.
- **Fansite**: Dedicated accounts, often run by individuals or small groups, that follow BTS closely and distribute photos, videos, or information. Some are considered legitimate. Others are criticized for sasaeng-like behavior.
- **HYBE / BigHit**: HYBE Corporation (formerly BigHit Entertainment) is BTS's management company and one of South Korea's largest entertainment conglomerates. Beyond managing BTS, HYBE oversees multiple K-pop groups, owns fan platform Weverse, and has invested heavily in generative AI technologies.
- **K-pop Music Shows**: Weekly televised programs in South Korea (e.g., SBS *Inkigayo*, Mnet *M Countdown*, KBS *Music Bank*, MBC *Show! Music Core*, *Show Champion*) that feature live performances and award weekly wins. Wins are determined by complex scoring systems incorporating streaming, album sales, broadcast points, and fan voting.
- **OT7**: Short for "One True 7," referring to ARMYs who support all seven BTS members equally.
- **Paparazzi / Tabloid Media**: Outlets and individuals that publish unauthorized photos, rumors, or sensationalized stories about BTS. ARMY often positions itself in opposition to these actors, actively suppressing or reporting paparazzi content to protect BTS's privacy.
- **Sasaeng**: A fan who invades idols' privacy through stalking, harassment, or other extreme behaviors. Generally viewed as illegitimate or harmful within fandom.
- **Solo / Solo stan**: Fans who focus their support exclusively on one member of BTS rather than the group as a whole. Sometimes considered useful voting blocs, but often framed as divisive or "anti-ARMY."
- **Streaming**: Coordinated fan practice of playing BTS's music on digital platforms (e.g., Spotify, YouTube) in ways designed to maximize chart performance.
- **Subtweet / QRT**: On social media (deriving from Twitter's reference to posts as "tweets"), indirect references to another user (subtweet) or the practice of quoting a tweet to amplify or critique it (QRT = quote retweet). Common mechanisms of policing and boundary enforcement.
- **Weverse**: An official fan community platform operated by HYBE, used for artist-fan communication and content distribution.
- **Voting**: Coordinated participation in award show or music program voting, often requiring fans to navigate complex app-based systems and token economies.

B ARMY Underground

Following are the descriptions of other ARMY "antis" provided by the ARMY Underground website, meant to be a resource for spotting these groups of people.

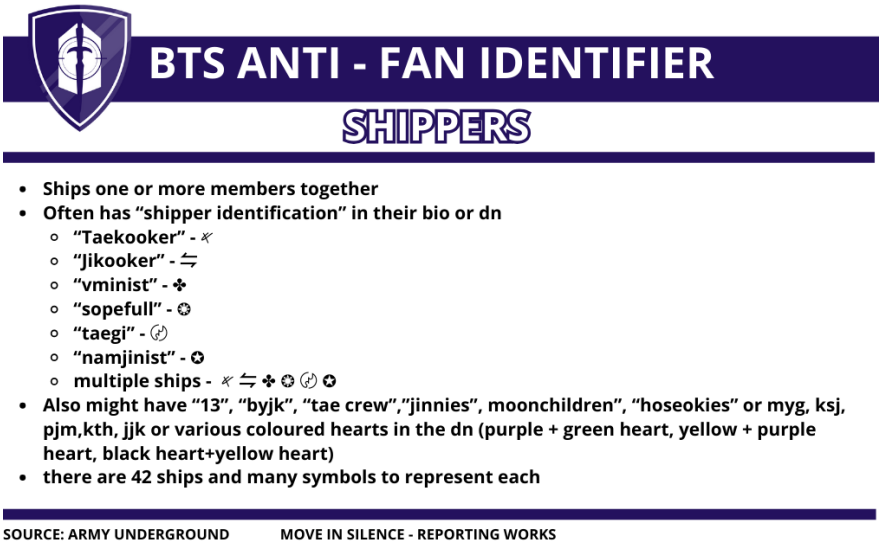


Figure 3: An infographic describing "shippers."

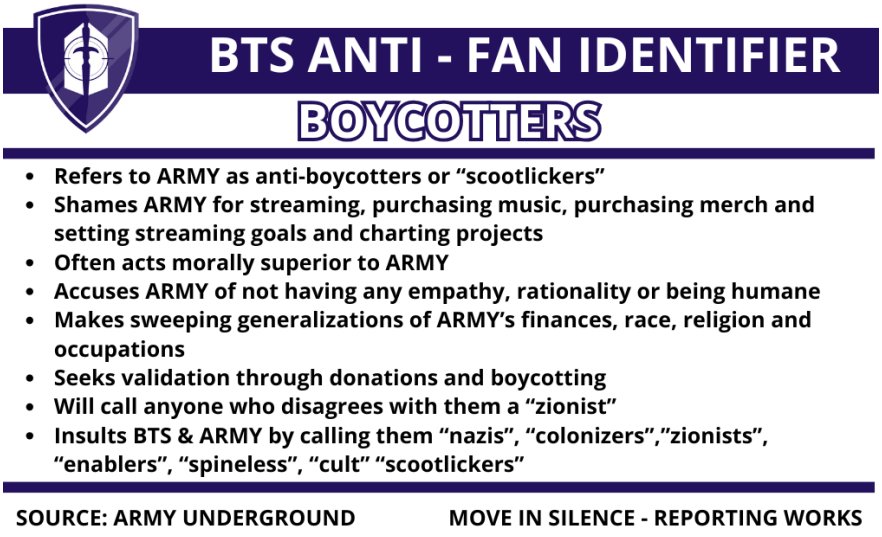


Figure 4: An infographic outlining "boycotters."

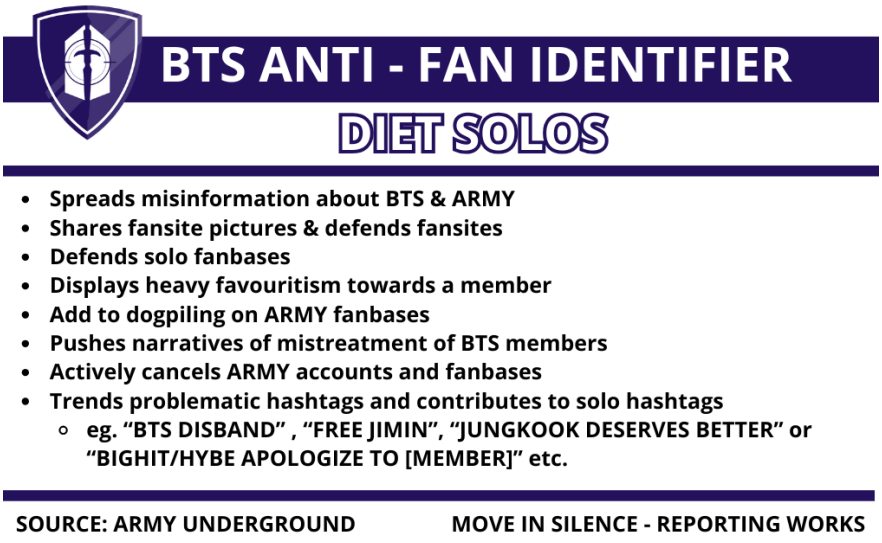


Figure 5: An infographic defining "diet solos."

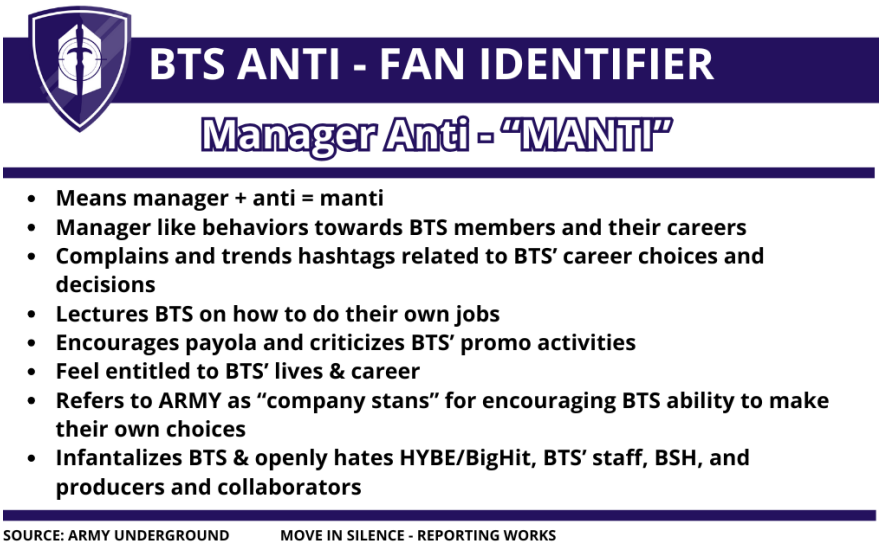


Figure 6: An infographic explaining "mantis."

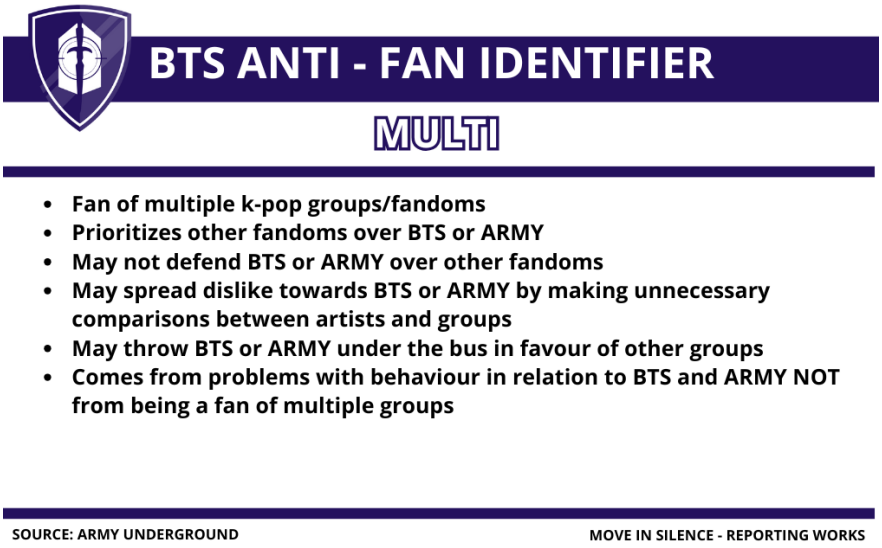


Figure 7: An infographic describing "multis."