

The Operational Mechanisms of K-pop Fan Organizations in the Entertainment Industry

Zihan Zhang

New York University, New York, USA
zz4679@nyu.edu

Abstract. This paper examines how K-pop fan organizations by using BTS's ARMY as a case study, function as informal labor systems embedded within the entertainment industry. Rather than simply reproducing the familiar narrative of exploitation, this research focuses on the emotional, social, and strategic dimensions of fan work—streaming, data management, bulk purchasing, and reputation defense—that are both unpaid and deeply organized. Based on interviews with fans and existing scholarship, the study argues that fan labor is not purely coerced but often voluntary, driven by love, peer dynamics, and a sense of shared identity with idols. Yet this labor exists within a structural imbalance: companies benefit financially and reputationally while fans are left emotionally invested but materially uncompensated. This paper also highlights fans' ambivalence toward entertainment companies, revealing moments of both complicity and resistance, such as silent boycotts or protest campaigns. In doing so, the research reframes K-pop fandom not simply as a cultural curiosity or marketing asset, but as a form of digital labor that complicates easy binaries of agency and exploitation. The aim is to situate fan organizations within broader conversations on participatory culture, emotional capitalism, and the platform economy.

Keywords: Fan labor, digital platforms, culture, fandom, media

1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital entertainment landscape, fan culture has taken on a new form of intensity and structure, especially in the world of K-pop. Fans do not merely consume content but actively participate in promoting their idols through a wide range of organized activities. These activities, from data streaming to bulk album buying and narrative defense, resemble informal labor systems to sustain and expand the commercial range of entertainment companies. This labor is usually unpaid, emotionally charged, and deeply intertwined with fans' identity. This paper investigates how K-pop fan organizations function as informal labor networks in the entertainment industry, with a special focus on the case of BTS. While several scholars have pointed out the exploitative dynamics of fan labor, this research seeks to go beyond this framework by examining what fans themselves perceive they gain from this relationship [1].

2. Background

A powerful example of fan labor's influence is the global success of BTS, undoubtedly the most famous K-pop group to date. Their 2020 single Dynamite marked a historic moment as they became the first Korean group to top the Billboard Hot 100. The importance of this achievement cannot be overstated. The Hot 100, which ranks songs based on a combination of digital sales, radio airplay, and online streaming, has historically been dominated by English-language songs and Western artists. In that particular week, BTS was competing against globally recognized pop acts like Drake, The Weeknd, and Ariana Grande—artists whose domestic reach in the U.S. vastly outweighed that of BTS.

Yet BTS reached No.1. This was not merely the result of musical quality or organic popularity. It was the product of meticulous and strategic fan activity—what many scholars have termed fan labor [1,2]. The fandom, known as ARMY, launched global streaming parties, coordinated mass album purchases, and shared streaming tutorials to ensure Dynamite's visibility on the charts. Their labor extended across multiple platforms: Spotify, YouTube, iTunes, and even radio request lines. As Proctor notes, the ARMY fandom represents a decentralized but highly organized collective that performs unpaid work traditionally done by marketing departments or PR agencies [3]. This leads to a striking image: fans are working tirelessly—tracking, boosting, defending—while the entertainment company like BigHit (now HYBE), benefits enormously from chart success, global media exposure, and brand equity, all without direct participation in these grassroots campaigns. As ARMY on X (formerly Twitter) claims, they were “entering combat mode,” not for pay or recognition, but for love. This dynamic reflects what Yin calls “emotional capitalism,” where fans invest emotionally in idols, and that emotion is converted into measurable commercial outcomes [4]. In the case of BTS, this emotional investment translated into real-world results: Billboard No.1s, Grammy nominations, and global recognition—not just for the group, but also for the company that owns them. The fans, however, remained largely unpaid, anonymous, and exhausted. As De Kosnik & Scholz argue, fans are often the best workers: unpaid, passionate, tireless, and self-organizing [1].

While BTS's rise to global prominence cannot be fully understood without acknowledging their musical talent and visual aesthetics, what truly sets them apart is the active and sustained involvement of their fandom. Rather than functioning as passive consumers, ARMY has emerged as a highly organized collective, deeply embedded in the mechanics of the group's global success. As Proctor observes, “This fan work represents a type of labour within the digital gift economy of fandom that translates into soft power for South Korea as a nation state through networked affinities premised on affect” [3]. Their actions are not symbolic displays of affection, but forms of cultural labor that yield tangible, quantifiable outcomes. From chart rankings to commercial sales, these fans have transformed emotional attachment into measurable economic value. The following section outlines the concrete domains in which this unpaid fan labor translates into visible results—results that overwhelmingly benefit the entertainment companies that capitalize on this voluntary work.

3. Phenomenon

3.1. Data metrics and visibility

K-pop fandom has become synonymous with data obsession. Fans closely monitor real-time updates of YouTube views, Spotify streams, social media engagement, and even Google search trends. According to Zhang & Negus, this is the essence of data fandom, a phenomenon where fans use statistical performance as a proxy for success and legitimacy in the global music market [2]. One

striking example is BTS member V's fan-cam, which reached over 144 million views, rivaling official music videos in its reach and engagement. Similarly, Lisa from BLACKPINK consistently receives more than 10 million likes per Instagram post, sometimes exceeding the digital engagement of global superstars like Taylor Swift. As noted by Derbaix et al., "data has become a battlefield where fans fight for their idols' visibility," and these digital battles carry commercial implications—such as more lucrative endorsements or concert bookings [5].

3.2. Sales: albums and merchandise

The labor of fans extends to aggressive consumption behavior. K-pop companies frequently release multiple versions of an album, each with different photo cards or packaging, encouraging fans to bulk-buy in the name of support. According to Proctor, this commodification of emotional labor results in "overconsumption driven by affective ties rather than aesthetic or musical differentiation [3]." Top K-pop groups regularly see album sales surpass 2 million copies, and this is not necessarily indicative of a 2 million-strong listener base, but rather a smaller core of hyper-consuming fans. One standout case is Aespa's Karina, whose magazine cover sold out within 24 hours. It is a reflection not of magazine readership, but of fan mobilization. This behavior illustrates the dual identity of fans as both cultural participants and economic agents [5].

3.3. Chart rankings and mobilization

As seen in the BTS case, chart performance is a primary arena where fan labor directly manipulates the outcome. Platforms such as Billboard Hot 100, Mnet M Countdown, and Melon often rely on public votes or streaming data, both of which can be shaped by fan-led initiatives. Organized streaming tutorials, voting guides, and coordinated attack strategies are commonly circulated within fan communities. As Edlom & Karlsson emphasize, these superfans assume roles that resemble that of marketing teams: analyzing algorithms, time zones, and vote-weighting systems to maximize impact [6]. In effect, fans become "platform strategists," bending rules to ensure their idol's dominance, while companies reap the rewards without direct operational input.

3.4. Narrative control and reputation management

When controversies arise, fans often step in to protect their idols' public image. This involves mass-reporting negative content, flooding comment sections with positive messages, and reframing narratives through hashtags and edits. Yin identifies this as a key form of emotional labor, where fans feel responsible for the psychological and reputational well-being of their idols [4]. For instance, during G-Dragon's drug use allegations, fans mobilized across Weibo and other platforms to assert his innocence. As Wei notes in the Chinese context, fans often "perform unpaid PR work," especially in moments of crisis [7]. Their emotional investment translates into unpaid brand management—again reinforcing the idea that fan labor fills corporate functions, particularly in moments where silence from the company itself would otherwise lead to reputational damage.

4. Reason analysis



Figure 1. Key words from interviewee's answers

What motivates fans to voluntarily perform unpaid labor for entertainment companies? To address this, we analyzed interview data with six representative fan personas and interpreted their responses in light of existing scholarship (Figure 1). Contrary to traditional exploitation frameworks, our analysis finds a more complex set of motivations rooted in affect, identity, and community dynamics.

4.1. Love, pressure, and belonging

The most frequent word that emerged from our word cloud was “love”. Love, in this context, is not romantic, but emotional devotion to idols who are perceived as inspirational, vulnerable, and deserving of protection. According to Yin, this form of emotional capitalism is central to digital fandoms in China, where “the emotional investments of fans become monetized through repetitive labor practices [4].” The affective bond gives fans a sense of meaning and purpose, making their actions feel worthwhile even in the absence of formal rewards. As Zhai and Wang note, these “data fans” operate in highly hierarchical online structures, where labor is coordinated and disciplined through technical skill and social status, mirroring the values of a formal workplace [8]. In addition to love, fans frequently mentioned peer pressure and a desire to “keep the vibe”. Participating in fan labor becomes a norm within tightly organized fandoms, especially for members of fan clubs who hold titles like “streaming leader,” “design volunteer,” or “album pooling coordinator.” As Edlom & Karlsson observe, superfans often operate within micro-hierarchies, where social recognition is earned through dedication and productivity [6]. Within this system, fan-leaders or “fentou” become de facto managers, organizing and disciplining lower-tier members through role-based mobilization [8]. Not contributing can lead to shame or exclusion, reinforcing the cycle of unpaid work.

4.2. Identity and self-worth

Another recurring theme in our interviews was the use of fan labor as a form of self-identification and personal affirmation. Some fans mentioned that fandom provided them with a stable identity during confusing life stages—particularly adolescence or early adulthood. This aligns with De Kosnik & Scholz’s argument that “participatory cultures offer fans a site for self-formation and public visibility [1].” It also mirrors Julia Lee’s observation that fan productivity is often racialized in Western contexts as mechanical or inorganic, a view that devalues Asian cultural labor as overly

systematic or “devoid of artistry” [9]. One interviewee, who had been in the fandom for over a decade, called her spreadsheet for tracking album purchases her “proudest achievement.” In this sense, fan labor becomes archival, performative, and productive, deeply entwined with one’s evolving self-image.

Beyond individual pride, many fans describe a strong emotional identification with their idols. They don’t just support idols—they see themselves in them. Fans often empathize deeply, believing that their idol’s struggles, growth, and success mirror their own. This sense of emotional resonance generates a perception of shared destiny: fans and idols rise and fall together. As one participant described, “When my idol wins an award, I feel like I won something too.” This mutual identification drives the idea that fans and idols form a shared interest community. The idol’s success brings fans social validation—“When her album tops the charts, I feel proud showing it off to classmates,” another fan said. In such cases, emotional labor becomes symbolic capital, giving fans face, prestige, and belonging. This mirrors Proctor’s observation that fans “treat their labor as a contribution to a collective dream,” which reinforces loyalty not just to the idol, but to the fan community and to oneself [3].

4.3. Ambivalence toward companies

Another striking feature of our interviews was the ambivalence fans expressed toward entertainment companies. On one hand, they were critical of the companies’ profit-driven strategies—especially the exploitation of emotional ties for commercial gain. On the other hand, they saw the companies as necessary gatekeepers for idol survival. As one interviewee put it, “Even if I hate them, I have to support them, or my idol will suffer.” Wei identifies this duality as affective tension, where fans constantly navigate between devotion and critique [7]. According to Jennifer Kang, this duality is also evident in fans’ collective protest behavior [10]. In Korea, fans have mobilized hashtag campaigns like “#Cancel_Japan_Concert,” challenging entertainment agencies’ decisions by invoking national sentiment and fan morality. The labor is not blindly given—it is negotiated, strategized, and occasionally resisted. For example, fan-led boycotts or silent protests have emerged in response to unfair treatment of idols, showing that fans are not entirely passive but capable of mobilizing strategic disengagement. Furthermore, the protest-oriented fan—especially in Korea—is not merely antagonistic. Kang shows how domestic fans engage in “affective negotiations” between nationalism and capitalism, oscillating between global K-pop promotion and critique of transnational decisions that conflict with local values [10]. These practices point toward an evolving model of fan activism that is both context-dependent and emotionally strategic.

5. Discussion

At first glance, the relationship between fans and entertainment companies seems distinctly exploitative. Fans pour hours into streaming campaigns, data tracking, and purchasing merchandise—often unpaid and unacknowledged—while companies enjoy skyrocketing sales, global recognition, and media visibility. As one fan in our interview noted, “It feels like we built the engine, and they just sit in the car and drive.” This observation reflects a common frustration, echoed in much of the literature, where fan labor is framed as a source of free value extraction [1].

However, the research introduces a more nuanced perspective. Instead of relying solely on the exploitation framework, it suggests the possibility of a mutually beneficial or “win-win” model, where both sides gain—albeit asymmetrically. Companies benefit materially and reputationally, but fans are not mere victims; they too derive emotional, social, and even symbolic rewards from their

labor. As Derbaix et al. argue, fan work is often motivated by a "labour of love," not just obligation or manipulation [5]. The interview data supports this interpretation. Several respondents reported that participating in fan labor gave them a sense of purpose, routine, and belonging. One described feeling "fulfilled" by seeing their idol succeed, while another said fan work offered a "shared mission" with people they'd never otherwise meet. These findings align with Yin, who explains that Chinese digital fandoms often engage in what she terms "emotional capitalism," in which emotional investments become sources of personal meaning and collective action [4]. This doesn't erase the power imbalance. Companies still control the idols, own the platforms, and monetize fan engagement. Yet by emphasizing only corporate gains, prior literature often overlooks how fandom can serve as a form of agency for fans—allowing them to shape narratives, form communities, and feel socially empowered through affective labor. As Proctor notes in his study of BTS ARMY, "Fans actively imagine themselves as co-authors of their idols' success [3]." Therefore, the fan-company dynamic, while undeniably asymmetrical, cannot be reduced to a simple story of exploitation. It is a complex symbiosis, where unpaid labor and unspoken rewards coexist. Our project calls for a reframing—from moral panic to structural analysis—recognizing both the risks of manipulation and the possibilities of mutual construction in K-pop's affective economy.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the dynamics of K-pop fan labor, using BTS and its fandom ARMY as a representative case. The research reveals that fan-driven practices, ranging from streaming parties to coordinated purchasing campaigns, have demonstrable commercial outcomes, including chart performance, media visibility, and corporate revenue. These outcomes are not incidental but are the result of collectively organized, unpaid, and emotionally motivated labor that mimics the functions of traditional marketing departments. The findings contribute to broader conversations on digital labor, affective economies, and participatory culture, particularly highlighting the blurred boundaries between voluntary fan activity and systemic exploitation. This labor is often rationalized through love, identity, and loyalty to idols, but in practice, it enriches entertainment companies while leaving fans uncompensated and often emotionally drained. By framing such work through the lens of "emotional capitalism," this study emphasizes the need to reconsider how value is produced and who benefits in contemporary media economies.

Looking forward, future research should delve deeper into three directions: The intersection of fan labor with structural inequalities such as gender and class, especially regarding who performs this labor and under what conditions. The evolving role of algorithms and AI in both enabling and replacing forms of fan engagement. Comparative perspectives on how fan labor operates across different cultural and national contexts, offering a more global understanding of participatory exploitation.

Ultimately, this research contributes to reframing fan communities not just as audiences, but as informal labor forces shaping today's entertainment landscape.

References

- [1] De Kosnik, A. and Scholz, T. (2013) Fandom as Free Labor. In *Digital Labor* (1st ed., pp. 98–111). Routledge.
- [2] Zhang, Q. and Negus, K. (2020) East Asian pop music idol production and the emergence of data fandom in China. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 493–511.
- [3] Proctor, J. (2021a) Labour of love: Fan labour, BTS, and South Korean Soft Power. *Asia Marketing Journal*, 22(4).
- [4] Yin, Y. (2021) "My baby should feel no wronged!": Digital fandoms and emotional capitalism in China. *Global Media and China*, 6(4), 460–475.

- [5] Derbaix, M., Korchia, M. and Padiou, M. (2023) Fans as prosumers: Labour of love. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 25(2), 4–15.
- [6] Edlom, J. and Karlsson, J. (2021) Keep the fire burning: Exploring the hierarchies of music fandom and the motivations of superfans. *Media and Communication*, 9(3), 123–132.
- [7] Wei, Y. (2023) Emotional complexity of fan-controlled comments: Affective labor of fans of high-popularity Chinese stars. *Frontiers in Communication*, 8
- [8] Zhai, H. and Wang, W. (2023) Fans’ practice of reporting: A study of the structure of data fan labor on Chinese social media. *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 22.
- [9] Lee, J.H. (2024) BTS and the labor of techno-orientalism. *Lateral*, 13(2), 1–32.
- [10] Kang, J. (2023) The politics of being a K-pop fan: Korean fandom and the “Cancel the Japan Tour” protest. *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 19.