

# Fandom and Voluntary “ARMY”: Case Study on BTS Fans in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

BTS is one of idol boyband from South Korea. They are now known as a global idol after receiving their first Billboard Music Awards in 2017. BTS has a fandom named ARMY, which stands for Adorable Representative M.C for Youth. BTS fans are one of the influential fandoms among other K-Pop fandoms. Their ARMY is one of the reasons that BTS can climb to the international world. BTS fans in Indonesia or known as Indonesia ARMY, also supported BTS from the beginning. This research shows how BTS fans voluntarily create various forms of support for their idols. This research uses descriptive qualitative methods with in-depth interviews and observation fields as collect method data. With fandom theory as a framework, this study tries to understand how Indonesia ARMY has devoted to their idol with their various creative events in Indonesia. They have a variety of projects and events which aim to support BTS. For example, projects related to the environment and society, and then activities, donations, exhibitions, gatherings, and other projects represented by the name of BTS and Indonesia ARMY. They aim to be introducing BTS to others and demonstrating relentless support for them and helping BTS dreams to accomplish higher achievement.

**Keywords:** *Pop Culture, Fandom, BTS, Fandom Culture, K-Pop*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Popular culture has long been a part of people's lives, especially after the globalization era. According to McQuail [1], the term popular culture itself shows what most people like or who are popular in the community, especially among young people. The characteristics of this popular culture include, among others, (1) Becoming a Trend, a trending culture, and being followed or liked by many people, can become popular culture. (2) Uniformity of Forms, a human creation that became a trend finally followed by many plagiarists. The work can be a pioneer for other actions of the same character. (3) Adaptability, the public quickly enjoyed and adopted popular culture; this leads to trends. (4) Durability, popular culture will be seen based on the longevity of facing time, the pioneers of popular culture who can defend themselves if competitors who later appear unable to rival their uniqueness, will survive. (5) Profitability, from an economic standpoint, popular culture has the potential to generate significant profits for industries that support it [2-3].

Geographical problems no longer limit popular culture that is circulating and deliberately distributed to the public at this time. The development of communication and information technology accelerates the flow of distribution and consumption of popular culture today, making it borderless. With the widespread circulation of popular culture to all corners of the world, the characteristics of local popular culture no longer belong to local community

groups but can be known by the global community and adopted into global cultural products.

The most exciting thing from the emergence of popular culture is the existence of connoisseurs of popular culture. In layman's terms, connoisseurs of popular culture often referred to as fans. Henry Jenkins [4] calls the fans as devotees or worshipers. Jenkins also describes fans as a specific type of audience, which distinguished from the majority of consumers of media texts [5]. This opinion is also reinforced by Fiske [6], who asserted that the real difference between fans and 'regulars readers' is 'excess elements,' namely that fans are excessive readers of popular culture, beyond those who enjoy popular culture as usual.

Fiske also added that fans are not passive, but rather are an ideal example of an active audience because of the strong attachment between fans and idols. Besides consuming, they also interpret and respond to media texts [7]. A fan is someone who likes or is very enthusiastic about something. They usually show enthusiasm for 'promoting' and giving 'attention' to the subjects they idolize. Fans typically have a great interest and can even adjust their lifestyle to show loyalty to the subject they are worshipping. Also, fans have a desire to be involved externally, i.e., they are always motivated to confirm their participation related to their idols through various means. They also always want to collect things related to their favorite [8].

From a single fan, fans can develop into a fan group or commonly refer to as fandom in the context of fans. Fandom appears as a reaction to the phenomenon of cultural consumption activities used as objects of pleasure.

When an individual likes cultural products and finds similarities with others, fandom formed. In this fandom, they increasingly established themselves as fans. By identifying themselves as part of fandom, fans often get strength and encouragement from fanfandoms who share the same pleasures and face the same problems [9-10].

Jenkins also revealed that: "Fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, audiences who also participate" [11]. Fandom has become a culture of participation that transforms media consumption experiences into new text production, even new cultures and new communities [12-13]. One of the main characters of fandom is changing persona reactions into social interactions and spectatorial cultures into participatory cultures [14].

• **K-Pop Fandom in Indonesia**

When talking about the spread of popular culture throughout the world, it cannot be separated from popular culture originating from South Korea. Korean pop culture is currently one of the trending pop cultures, especially among young pop culture fans. That happened because the South Korean government itself strongly supports the production and dissemination of their pop culture. They have goals as an exporter of popular culture countries around the world.

Conversely, Indonesia is known as a country that can easily accept and consume popular culture from outside Indonesia. Ariel Heryanto [15] states that the arrival of popular culture originating from outside Indonesia, such as Malaysia, is easy to gain the sympathy and acceptance of the Indonesian people. Singers and music groups from Malaysia are familiar to the media consumer community in Indonesia at the time. The same thing happened with the consumption of Thai films by Indonesian viewers. There are similarities or similarities between Thai pop film culture production with Indonesian production. Some research also shows the similarities that occur in Indonesian people towards their acceptance of Korean pop culture, which is very open to the arrival of popular culture. In other words, the entry of global culture outside Indonesia is not something new. Even the response to the presence of culture from outside tends to be positively accepted rather than negatively rejected.

This acceptance also applies to the recognition of K-Pop as one of the products of Korean pop culture that circulates very quickly and widely in Indonesia. K-pop fans are increasing every year in Indonesia, so many K-Pop idols come to Indonesia to greet their fans through concerts and fan meetings.

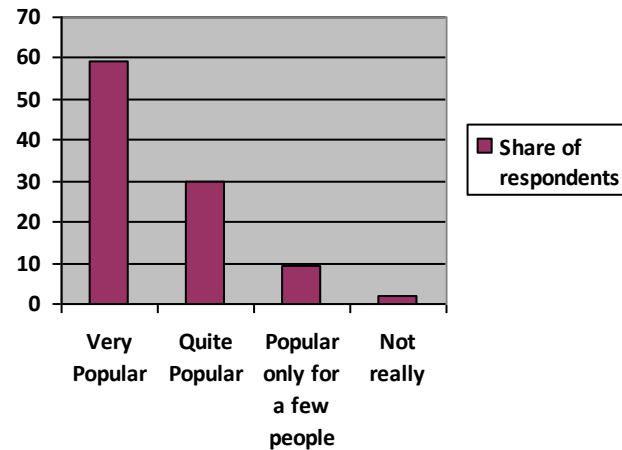


Figure 1 Statistic of K-Pop popularity in Indonesia in 2019

The survey in figure 1 was conducted by statista.com in October 2019 and released in February 2020. The number of respondents included in this survey was 500 respondents in the age group 15-59 years, with characteristics as subjects who had experience with the cultural content of South Korea. Through these statistics show that 59% of respondents reported that K-Pop is very popular in Indonesia [16].



Figure 2 Indonesia as the second most K-Pop streaming on Spotify

Figure 2 is data from Spotify, which shows Indonesia as the number two countries that stream the most K-pop songs in the Spotify application [17]. That indicates the number of K-Pop fans in Indonesia who actively listen to K-Pop songs through various online forms, including Spotify.

Aside from these two statistics, the number of K-Pop fans in Indonesia is also increasingly recognized by business people in Indonesia. Shopee and Tokopedia, as large e-commerce in Indonesia, began collaborating with K-Pop musicians to attract the K-Pop fan market. Shopee first worked with YG Entertainment by opening the YG Official Shop's sale in the Shopee Indonesia application in

2018 and continued by releasing advertisements with BLACKPINK.

Then in 2019, Tokopedia also took BTS as their company's Brand Ambassador and, at the same time, opened the BTS Merchandise Store officially in October 2019. Besides, SM Entertainment, one of the entertainment agencies originating from South Korea, has been aware of many fans and enthusiasts in Indonesia. So they opened an official representative office in Jakarta in 2019.

• **BTS Popularity in Indonesia**

BTS is an idol group from South Korea today that is on the rise and famous as a global idol, especially since receiving an award from the Billboard Music Awards in 2017. Since then, BTS has continued to break world records and achieve global achievements. The BTS album always gets top ranking on the Billboard 200 album chart, the main Billboard chart, which is very rarely made by singers from Asia, in this case, South Korea. Also, stadium concert tour tickets that they do throughout 2018 until 2019 are also always sold out. BTS also invited as one of the speakers in the United Nations General Assembly (Generation Unlimited) with the theme "Speak Yourself" in September 2018.

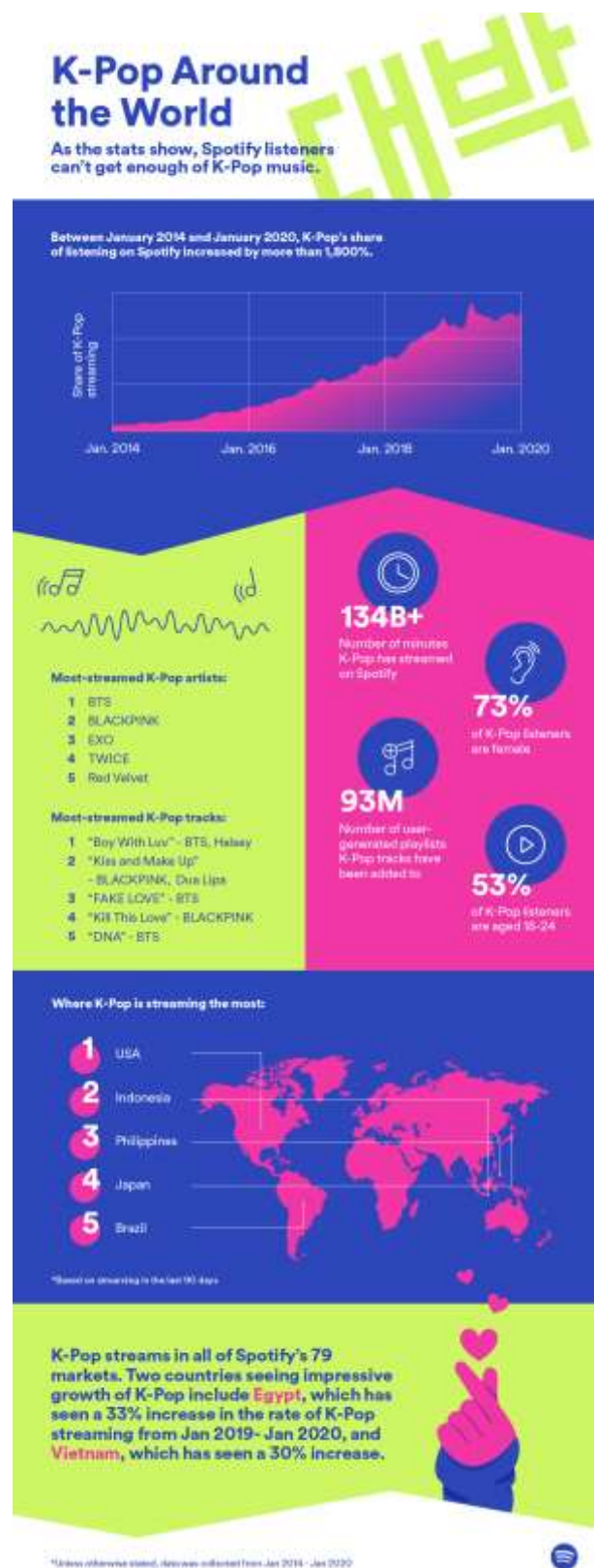


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**Figure 3** BTS at the United Nations with UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta H. Fore and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Lilly Singh [18]

BTS fans often referred to as ARMY, which stands for Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth. BTS fans are one of the influential fandoms among other K-Pop fandoms. Their ARMY is one of the reasons that BTS can climb to the international world. BTS fans in Indonesia or known as Indonesia ARMY, also supported BTS from the beginning.

BTS has a strong fandom in Indonesia. That seen from Indonesia ARMY's contribution to improving the achievements and BTS record in Indonesia and throughout the world.



**Figure 4** BTS as most-streamed K-Pop artists and tracks on Spotify

Figure 4 is data from Spotify, which shows that BTS is a K-Pop artist whose song is played the most in the Spotify application [19]. Indonesia itself is among the top 5 countries that stream the most BTS songs, and this has become one of the contributions of BTS fans in Indonesia.

In addition to Spotify, Indonesia ARMY also contributed a lot to the number of BTS video views on YouTube. As released by statista.com [20], as of March 2020, the BTS video on YouTube is one of the most-watched K-Pop videos on YouTube. American Viewers ranks first as the most BTS video viewers with 59.2 million times, followed by Indonesian viewers with 54.5 million times, and 47.4 million times from Brazilian viewers.

Not infrequently also hashtags related to BTS become trending on Twitter Indonesia Trends. That is especially true when there are BTS special events or special moments that discuss BTS. Indonesia ARMY is also known to be very active in raising the popularity of BTS on social media.

Research done previously shows that Indonesia ARMY, through fanbase twitter accounts, socializes mainly with people who have the same hobbies or interests, especially about BTS. They share and share experiences on the same favorite text. And through this research, we will try to understand how BTS fans voluntarily create various support forms for their idols. This research uses descriptive qualitative methods with in-depth interviews and observation fields as collect method data. With fandom theory as a framework, this study tries to understand how Indonesia ARMY devoted to their idols with their various creative events in Indonesia.

## 2. RESULT & DISCUSSION

- ***Fandom Culture***

BTS debuted in 2013, after the rapid development of new media. One of the most frequently cited success factors is the active use of social media to greet fans. From the beginning of their debut, they tried to communicate using various social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter, where fans got to know them [21]. Through social media, fans increasingly develop and form fandoms so that a fandom culture is born.

Fiske [22] asserts that fandom culture builds group identity, articulates community ideals, and defines its relationship with the outside world. Fandom culture exists independently of formal social, cultural, and political institutions; the institution itself is extralegal and informal with voluntary and spontaneous participation. Fans see this community as a contradiction of the 'ordinary' world inhabited by non-fans, trying to build social structures that are more receptive to individual differences, more accommodating to their interests, also more democratic and communal [23].

As the statement stated, several informants who were members of the Indonesia ARMY revealed that they naturally aimed to support BTS as musicians fully through this fandom. And as a fandom, they want to be a group that is not only rah-rah but also groups who care about the social environment and being a fan who can help each other voluntarily, especially in supporting BTS. Finally, they also want to give positive awareness to people outside of the fandom about BTS and K-Pop itself.

- ***Fandom Activity as PR Activity for BTS***

Jenkins [24] defines fandom activity as forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within the fan culture itself. In response to fans' shared interests, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture. As a fandom, Indonesia ARMY volunteered to do PR activity for BTS.

As for some fandom activities carried out by Indonesia ARMY through data obtained from informants, among others (1) Since 2014 has supported BTS activities by holding a fan gathering event that in that year was the first Indonesia ARMY fandom event. BTS was not too well known in Indonesia, so that the activities held at the beginning of the year BTS debut was aimed at introducing BTS. Fan gathering events are usually filled with games with BTS merchandise prizes and watching BTS videos together. Increasingly, more and more fan gathering events held by fandom. (2) Social project activities such as blood donation and social environment care include planting trees or adopting animals on behalf of BTS. There are also other social activities such as fundraising whose purpose is to give donations to people in need and held in BTS special moments such as Anniversary. (3) Photo Exhibition for BTS or one of the BTS members. This activity is like other photo exhibitions, only the photos on display are photos of BTS members and usually held in collaboration with a fansite. Fansite itself is a term to refer to "professional" photographers who also come from among fans but like to take photos of their idols. Usually, this activity can also be a gathering place for Indonesian ARMY. (4) Cup Sleeve event is generally held in the context of BTS anniversary or celebrates a BTS member's birthday. As for this activity, fans who organize usually collaborate with the café as a place to buy drinks that will reward the cup sleeve. This event is quite lively to be held today because fans can get freebies related to BTS. (5) Concert projects are usually held as a form of fan support from Indonesia ARMY to BTS while performing concerts in Indonesia. That usually done by raising funds to make a hand banner distributed to all of Indonesia ARMY who attended the concert. This hand banner will be shown to BTS at certain moments during the concert. There are also food fans support given to BTS and staff involved in the concert. (6) Watch BTS movie together in theaters. Of course, the activity is watching together with Indonesia



ARMY, who has bought cinema tickets that are assisted by the organizing fans. Besides getting cinema tickets, ARMY, who took part in the event, also got snacks and freebies related to BTS. BTS has released three movies that aired in theaters, namely *Born To Be* (2018), *Love Yourself in Seoul* (2019) and *Bring The Soul: The Movie* (2019).



**Figure 5** Social project activities by Indonesia ARMY in collaboration with WWF



**Figure 6** Hand banner for BTS concert project in Indonesia and noticed by J-Hope (BTS member)



**Figure 7** BTS photo exhibition event



**Figure 8** Indonesia ARMY gathering event

Figure 5 – 8 are the documentation by all informants.

All activities organized by fans are done voluntarily and do not benefit financially at all. That was also confirmed by the informants from this research, that their purpose in carrying out activities like this was for BTS and ARMY themselves, so it was not the economic benefits sought. As for some of the objectives identified include: (1) sharing happiness with fellow fans, ARMY, (2) Can do social activities on behalf of the BTS so that they have a positive image and can build awareness of ARMY to do activities that are useful for others, (3) As a form of gratitude and proof of appreciation as a fan of BTS. According to one informant, the relationship between BTS and ARMY is like a never-ending loop. BTS did the work, and the ARMY appreciated the work in various ways. BTS returned to making the work as a form of gratitude. ARMY likewise felt grateful for BTS's appreciation, then thanked even more, and so on.

Fans' love for their idols can manifest in various forms of support. In this case, fans appreciate their work and even voluntarily show it by doing fan activities that are part of their fandom culture. The goal is simple so that the idol can see their fans' great support in real life.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Indonesia ARMY devoted to their idols with their various creative events in Indonesia, or we can call it fans activism. They have a variety of projects and events which

aim to support BTS. For example, projects related to the environment and society, and then activities, donations, exhibitions, gatherings, and other projects represented by the name of BTS and Indonesia ARMY. They aim to be introducing BTS to others and demonstrating relentless support for them and helping BTS dreams to accomplish higher achievement. Fandom culture strengthens fans' identity, and through fandom activity, fans can not only contribute to their idols but also to each other both fans of popular culture and those who are not.

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