

Makale Gönderim Tarihi: 13/04/2023
Son Revizyon Tarihi: 05/06/2023

Makale Kabul Tarihi: 06/06/2023
DOI: 10.59114/dasad.1282671

Fandom as New Transnational Political Actor: Evidence From BTS Army Fandom

Chaewon KİM*

Abstract: This article examines the possibility of fandom as a transnational political actor by analyzing the two cases of BTS fandom ARMY's fan activism on a global scale with political orientation. The first case is fan activism related to the BLM movements. The second case is the One-In-An-ARMY platform, a consistent grass-root charity project that deals with various human rights issues. Analyzing two ARMY fan activism cases revealed that fandom could effectively mobilize its members to achieve a goal. Social media and identity among fandom have played key roles in organizing political fan activism. The transnational fandom members have actively discussed global issues without time-space limits by using social media effectively. The ARMY fan activism reflects the present characteristic of political participation, which blurs the line between politics and culture and beyond borderlines.

Keywords: *Fandom Politics, BTS, ARMY, Political Participation, Globalization.*

Yeni Ulusötesi Siyasi Aktör Olarak FANDOM: BTS Army Fandom'dan Kanıt

Öz: Bu makale, BTS fandomu ARMY'nin fan aktivizminin küresel ölçekte siyasi yönelimli iki örneğini analiz ederek fandomun ulusötesi bir siyasi aktör olarak olasılığını inceliyor. İlk vaka, BLM hareketleriyle ilgili fan aktivizmidir. İkinci örnek, çeşitli insan hakları konularını ele

* Varşova Üniversitesi, ORCID: 0000-0003-4634-4469; Makale Gönderim Tarihi: 13 Nisan 2023; Makale Kabul Tarihi: 6 Haziran 2023.

Önerilen Atf: Kim, C., (2023). Fandom as New Transnational Political Actor: Evidence from BTS ARMY Fandom, *Doğu Asya Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 6(12), s.80-91.

alan tutarlı bir halk tabanlı yardım projesi olan One-In-An-ARMY platformudur. İki ARMY fan aktivizm vakasının analizi, fandomun bir hedefe ulaşmak için üyelerini etkili bir şekilde harekete geçirebileceğini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Fandom arasında sosyal medya ve kimlik, siyasi fan aktivizmini organize etmede kilit roller oynamıştır. Ulusötesi fandom üyeleri, sosyal medyayı etkin bir şekilde kullanarak küresel sorunları zaman-mekân sınırlaması olmadan aktif bir şekilde tartışmışlardır. ARMY fan aktivizmi, siyaset ve kültür arasındaki çizgiyi bulanıklaştıran ve sınırların ötesine geçen siyasi katılımın mevcut özelliğini yansıtıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Fandom Siyaseti, BTS, ARMY, Siyasi Katılım, Küreselleşme.*

Introduction

2020 was rife with various challenges; however, it is difficult to reflect on the year without acknowledging the significance of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. This movement transcended the borders of the United States and evolved into a global phenomenon, raising awareness about systemic racial injustice. One particularly intriguing aspect of this movement was the fandom-driven donation project initiated by ARMY, a global fanbase dedicated to supporting the Korean boy group known as BTS. Remarkably, this endeavor amassed over a million US dollars within a week. While this substantial donation demonstrated the potential influence of fandoms on a global scale, the question of whether fandoms can be regarded as transnational political actors remains unresolved.

A fandom represents a community of individuals who share a common interest, such as a celebrity, sports team, or movie. It functions as a subculture that emerges through interactions and communication among fans, allowing them to enthusiastically appreciate and express their support. It is widely recognized that fandoms can be significant and influential groups, particularly in terms of mobilization and the development of shared identities within consumer-driven societies. However, the political implications of fandoms have received relatively limited research attention. Therefore, there is value in exploring how fandoms mobilize their members and resources to achieve political objectives.

This study aims to explore the political influence of fandom through an examination of the BTS fandom known as ARMY. ARMY was selected as the subject of analysis due to its global reach,

substantial membership, diverse range of activities, and accessible platforms. Among the numerous politically-oriented actions undertaken by ARMY, two areas of focus have been chosen for analysis.

First, this paper will illustrate the activities carried out in support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, including: (1) the utilization of spamming tactics on the Dallas police app, (2) the hijacking of anti-BLM hashtags, (3) ticket trolling during the Tulsa rally, and (4) the Match-A-Million donation campaign. These actions were notable for their success and their innovative and humorous approaches in combating racism.

Second, the study will delve into the One-In-An-ARMY platform, a permanent initiative aimed at facilitating several grassroots charity projects. This platform addresses a range of human rights issues, including the Syrian refugee crisis, LGBTQ rights, disability rights, and educational rights. By examining these cases, the research aims to shed light on the political power wielded by fandoms, particularly in the context of the ARMY fandom.

Analyzing the fan activism of ARMY provides insights into the potential for fandoms to organize and engage in transnational politics with a political agenda. This study aims to comprehend not only the strategies employed in each activity but also the roles played by social media and the shared identity of being part of the 'fandom ARMY'. The findings of this research can be beneficial in understanding political movements led by other global fandoms and contribute to a broader understanding of fandom politics.

This study holds significant value in illustrating both the current practices and future possibilities of fandom, contextualized within the realms of globalization and evolving political participation culture. Consequently, this paper contributes not only to examining the role of fandom in politics but also to elucidating the present climate of political communication. The activities carried out by ARMY serve as evidence that political communication among citizens has become transnational, issue-oriented, and culturally driven.

Literature Review

Duffet (2015, p.28) defines fandom as a sociocultural phenomenon associated with capitalist societies, digital media, mass

culture, and public performance. However, this rather complex and even vague definition of fandom can be understood better by looking a brief history of fan studies.

The public image of fandom is not always considered positive, but instead it often associated with disempowered, subordinated, obsessive, and manipulated consumers. This shows that the fans culture and community are often stigmatized (Bailey, 2005, Tulloch and Jenkins 1995¹). Many early articles describe fans to be manipulative and pathological individuals (Joli Jenson, Jay Goulding², Dwight MacDonald). Thus, the early 1990s fan studies was focused to switch the negative image of fandom to resistant, productive and creative community, known as 'fandom is beautiful' paradigm (John Fiske, 1992). Many scholar concerns this paradigm based studies as the starting point of researching fandoms, and classified them as the first wave of fan studies (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, 2017).

One of first wave scholars, Henry Jenkins (1992) has provided insights of understanding the forementioned activeness and creativeness of fandom culture by introducing the concept of participatory culture. The concept of participatory culture well-illustrated that the activities of audience not only bounded in consuming, rather fans often produce and share the product-related creations with the other members of fans. This participatory culture has resulted blurring line between production and consumption. Furthermore, it also blurs the line of popular culture itself, the culture does not remained in a ways of one-directional communication, instead fandom became both consumers and producers.

Second wave scholars tried to analyze the socio-economic context of fandom culture so that fandom would not be perceived as an extraordinary space but within a social context. The third wave of fan studies tried to focus on individuals' motivation, interests, and pleasures. With the rising importance of fandom in the media culture industry, now fandom is not a marginalized identity and community but a central actor in the global culture.

¹ J. Tulloch, H. Jenkins, *Science Fiction Audiences. Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek*, London–New York 1995, p. 14–15.

² J. Jenson, *Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization*, [in:] *Adoring Audience...*, p. 10–16.

Third wave is considered to start from the work of Henry Jenkins (2006) study of third wave since it is considered as the mainstream stage.

However, Jenkins rephrased the concept as “convergence culture” (id., p. 16) suggesting that these technological innovations have wide-ranging cultural implications. He describes convergence culture as a landscape in which “old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (id., p. 2). Media convergence is upheld by the industry’s participatory culture in which producers and consumers increasingly interact.

While the first and second waves of fan studies mainly researched fandom identities and community, this new wave of fan studies started to reflect the shifted communication style of modern fandom culture. New digital technologies, including social media, have contributed to the easier participatory culture, such as make faster and broader fan-made productions distribution possible using online social network. Lee (2011) effectively outlined that the fans spread the voluntary un-paid, decentralized fanworks such as copying, translating, editing, encoding, distributing, and managing, to other fans who are closely connected in online. Then this easier access to participatory culture has contributed to the new wave of globalization of fandom. It can be shown in the study by McLaren and Jin (2020), which analyzed the global popularity of K-POP. The paper found that both the K-POP industry and fans’ digital platforms were essential in K-POP’s successful expansion. While the K-POP industry was able to reach and target audiences via digital platforms, fans was able to utilize social media platforms to circulate, consume, and redistribute their create fanworks.

Despite the growing influences of fandom in global culture and increasing blurring boundaries between culture and political concerns, participatory fandom culture and civic participation relationship have been explored by few scholars. Fandom can organize around real-world issues by civic engagement. Brough and Shresthova (2012) have defined fan activism as a fan-driven effort to address civic or political issues. According to Jenkins (2012) that fan activism may include the various purpose of mobilizations; 1) to promote the interests of the fan community, 2) to issue the representation of minority in media, and 3) to involve commenting

on public policy. However, in this paper, fan activism can be defined as a part of civic participation by mobilization of existing fandom infrastructure, relations, and shared cultures.

The early fan studies scholar John Fiske (1992) noted that there is a relation between the sense of solidarity and shared resistance that might empower individuals to take collective actions for real-world issues. However, Jenkins (2012) found the case of the Harry Potter Alliance that went further and became the fandom organization working with NGOs to act to real-world issues collectively. Fan activism shows the transitioning character of political participation. Traditional political participation has been typically linked to governmental, electoral institutions, and structures. However, as Bennett (2008) pointed out, the rising figure of political participation has shifted to informal, cultural engagement.

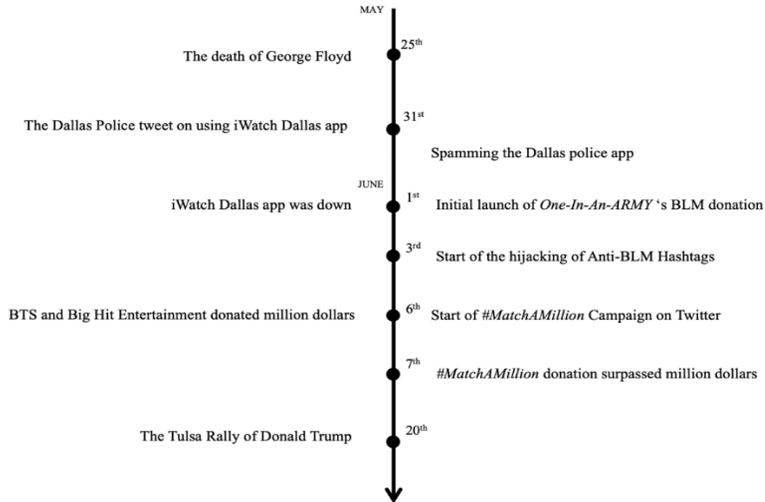
Kanhe, Lee, and Feezell (2013) described the characteristic of current changing political participation as in the forms of informal, non-institutionalized, non-hierarchical online networks.

The findings from these scholars can be applied in analyzing the cases of ARMY fandom's political participation.

Fan Activism related to the BLM Movement

The death of George Floyd on May 25th at the hands of Minneapolis police sparked the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which gained momentum not only in the United States but also worldwide. While police brutality against black individuals has long been a prevalent issue in the US, this particular incident garnered significant attention due to the viral video footage capturing the brutal act, which was widely shared on social media platforms. The global community showed solidarity in response to this incident, and among those actively involved were the members of ARMY, a fandom dedicated to the Korean boy group BTS. Notably, ARMY gained substantial media coverage due to its successful fan activism in support of BLM. This section aims to focus on the most impactful activities undertaken by ARMY and analyze the factors that contributed to their effective political action against racism and in support of the BLM movement. Thus, four actions have been selected for examination: spamming the Dallas police app, hijacking the Anti-BLM hashtag, ticket trolling during the Tulsa rally, and the MatchAMillion donation campaign. Figure 1 presents a concise timeline of these activities.

Figure 1. Timeline of ARMY's political movements related to supporting the BLM



Source: Author.

First, Spamming the Dallas police app was organized on Twitter among ARMY fandom and spread to other K-POP fandoms. On May 31, the Dallas police department put a post on Twitter encouraging people to report 'illegal activity from the protests' of BLM via the iWatch Dallas app. It was immediately noticed by a BTS fan (@7soulsmap)³. Since the moment, the anti-BLM app was noticed by other fans. Later the fan also uploaded another post saying, "The only reason to post fancams in 2020 is to protect the identities of BLM protestors Go do your thing"⁴. Other BTS fans, such as @lolithazine, got motivated by these posts⁵. The tactic of spamming the iWatch Dallas app was spread among BTS fandom globally. Fans follow the protocol as 'Install the app, use a VPN, and spam with fancams.'

Additionally, they also rated the app one star, leave comments criticizing Dallas police, and support BLM and Flag as inappropriate

³@7soulsmap (now telepathyfor7) (2020, May 31). "THATS WHY YALL NEED TO COVER THEIR FACES PLEASE COVER THEIR FACES F*** PIGS WILL USE ANYTHING" [Tweet]. Retrieved from <<https://twitter.com/telepathyfor7/status/1266971462864437250>>

⁴@7soulsmap (now telepathyfor7) (2020, June 1). "The only reason to post fancams in 2020 is to protect the identities of BLM protestors Go do your thing" [Tweet]. Retrieved from <<https://twitter.com/telepathyfor7/status/1267179134364651520>>

⁵@lolithazine (2020, May 31). "If u have fancams upload it to their servers just make their job as hard as possible" [Tweet]. Retrieved from <<https://twitter.com/lolithazine/status/1267045279691350016>>

in iOS and Google Play app store. These actions were spread to other K-POP fans too. The next day, Dallas Police uploaded a post that says,

“Due to technical difficulties, iWatch Dallas app will be down temporarily.”⁶

A fan’s single tweet organized such action, which even led to the malfunction of the app. It is due to their highly organized online social network on Twitter. The case shows that in fan activism, members are skilled in using the existing fandom network in mobilization to organize civic participation. Besides, as it can be assumed from the tactic mentioning VPN, a location shifting tool, the participated fans were not only from Dallas or US citizens but multinational ones. Additionally, the tactic is so unorthodox, creative, playful, and humorous that it shifted the logic from anger to joy.

Second, the hijacking of Anti-BLM Hashtags was also taking place on Twitter by ARMY fandom and other K-POP fans. The hijacking is assumed to be motivated by spamming activity from the Dallas app by sending fancams. Since around June 3, K-POP fans have used the anti-BLM hashtag such as #WhiteLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter⁷, #AllLivesMatter, #whitelivesmattertoo. However, the tactic was using the hashtags to upload fan photos, memes, fancams, and other fan-related media with Anti-racist messages. For instance, Twitter @ktyoongz wrote,

“#WhiteLivesMatter oH? were you here to be racist? no thanks, anyways, good try.”⁸

with a picture of BTS members. The goal of such action was to block the rise of anti-BLM posts and hashtags on Twitter. It was successful in overtaking hashtags among racists and block its social impacts.

Furthermore, a significant event worth examining is the Tulsa Rally held by Donald Trump on June 20, which turned out to be a disastrous failure. Despite the venue having a seating capacity of 19,000, only an estimated 6,200 attendees were present (Monica, Kristen, and Carol. E 2020, NBC News, June 22). Initially, the

⁶ @DallasPD (2020, Jun 1) “Due to technical difficulties iWatch Dallas app will be down temporarily” [Tweet]. Retrieved from < <https://twitter.com/DallasPD/status/1267236088755695618> >

⁷ Blue in the hashtag represents police, so that aims to raise the awareness of ‘violence of BLM protesters’ and burdens of police. However, it is successfully used by fans to upload their beloved idols’ blue hairs.

⁸ @ktyoongz (2020, Jun 4) “#WhiteLivesMatter oH? were you here to be racist? no thanks, anyways, good try”. [Tweet]. Retrieved from < <https://twitter.com/ktyoongz/status/1268374465060225029> >

campaign office attributed the low turnout to supporters' fears related to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it was later revealed that K-pop fans, including ARMY, orchestrated a guerilla-style action known as "ticket trolling" primarily through platforms such as TikTok and Twitter. Brad Parscale, the campaign chairman for the Trump camp, announced that over a million people had requested tickets for the rally through Trump's campaign website (Oliver, 2020, *The Independent*, June 15). Due to the covert nature of this mobilization, it is challenging to ascertain the exact processes involved. However, it is evident that ARMY and other K-pop fandoms effectively mobilized to reserve tickets for the rally without any intention of attending.

Fourth and last, ARMY organized a donation project called #MatchAMillion to support the BLM movement. It is vital to note that the initial donation was started on June 1 via the One-In-An-ARMY platform (OIAA). On June 6, BTS and BigHit Entertainment⁹ donated \$1,000,000 USD to Black Lives Matter. It provokes ARMY to start using the slogan #MatchAMillion on Twitter to encourage ARMY to match BTS's donation. On June 7, the donation surpassed the amount of \$1,000,000 USD. It is true that BTS's donation encouraged more ARMY to participate in the donation. However, ARMY launched the donation even before BTS, which means that the ARMY was interested in participating from the beginning. To sum up, ARMY organized four online political activities simultaneously within a month since the beginning of the BLM movement. However, ARMY fan activism has touched not only BLM but also lots of human rights issues shown in the OIAA charity project case.

One-In-An-ARMY Platform

One-In-An-ARMY (OIAA) is a permanent platform for fan activism run by few organizers. The history of the platform began on March 9, 2018, a fan (@rwapmon) posted on Twitter if any ARMY is interested in doing something about the ongoing crisis of Syrian refugees.¹⁰ The fan questioned that maybe as a fandom, 'we' could do something about it. It went viral, and a group of volunteers from around the world came together within hours and created the OIAA. Thus, the OIAA is a grass-root online fan activism platform that tries

⁹ BigHit Entertainment is the South Korean music entertainment company managing BTS

¹⁰ @rwapmon (now @mickeyhoseok) (2018, Mar 9) personal communication [Tweet].

to solve real-world issues. The OIAA webpage describes the character below:

One In An ARMY is a fan collective of volunteers around the globe. Driven by our shared interest in global superstars, BTS, and the idea of using our collective power for global good, we seek out non-profit organizations worldwide and harness the power of ARMY into giving micro-donations over a one month period.

(One In AN AMRY, About Us)

On a monthly basis, the OIAA (One-In-An-ARMY) campaigner organizes and presents micro-donation projects addressing various global issues. One of the most well-known instances of such a project was the aforementioned BLM donation initiative. Interestingly, rather than collecting funds themselves, the campaigners facilitated direct donations to non-profit organizations. This approach demonstrates their clear intention of avoiding any financial gain from these endeavors. Instead, their primary motivation lies in striving to create a positive impact on the world. The campaign's webpage emphasizes the significance of their motto, "I am ONE in an ARMY," which conveys the idea that the ARMY community can exert a positive influence on the world by collectively directing attention towards global issues. The finished and ongoing projects by OIAA are also reported from April 2018 to December 2020.¹¹

Conclusion

This article has examined the political fan activism of the ARMY and explored the potential for fandoms to function as transnational political actors. The cases discussed, including the BLM fan activism and the OIAA platform, have demonstrated that the ARMY fandom actively engages with real-world issues such as the BLM movement and various human rights concerns. They have showcased their ability to organize participatory movements by leveraging the existing fan network and a shared identity on a global scale. These examples highlight the significance of fandoms as platforms for political mobilization and illustrate their potential to address and influence critical social and political matters.

Social media has played a crucial role in facilitating the fan activities discussed in this article, as the majority of these actions

¹¹ To see more ongoing and finished projects by OIAA, ARMY and BTS, check the charity projects map (One In AN AMRY, AMRY Charity Projects, google map link)

were organized and mobilized through various social media platforms. Twitter, in particular, has emerged as a prominent platform that enhances the possibilities of organizing political fan activities, even without physical contact between participants. Furthermore, the shared identity as members of the ARMY fandom has been a key motivating factor for engagement. A significant number of fans actively participate in political actions under the collective identity of ARMY, whether it be in supporting the BLM movement or advocating for other human rights issues. This phenomenon demonstrates that fandom has transcended its traditional perception as a mere consumer or supporter group, evolving into an entity that shares a collective identity. As highlighted on the OIAA platform webpage, members of the ARMY are cognizant of the power inherent in fandom and are motivated to utilize this power for political purposes that extend beyond conventional national politics, encompassing global-scale human rights issues.

The findings of this paper align with the core characteristics of fan activism proposed by scholars in the field of fan studies and political participation. In conclusion, the ARMY fandom has demonstrated that fandom can indeed function as a transnational political actor. The emergence of fandom as a new participant in transnational politics reflects a shift in political participation towards a global perspective that is non-hierarchical and unorthodox. This blurring of boundaries between the cultural and political realms signifies a transformation in the nature of political engagement.

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