

BTS's Pandemic Hits and Their Implications: Discursive Re-vitalization of Neoliberal Hegemony in K-pop Industry

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This study critically examines whether BTS poses counterhegemony to the dominant Western popular culture as the literature claims. Investigating its recent hit music videos during the COVID-19 pandemic, I claim that BTS resuscitates the neoliberal hegemony in its seemingly empowering, positive messages and helps revive narratives of neoliberal biopolitics. Reviewing how hegemony becomes naturalized by cultural and psychological measures in broader political economic contexts, I reveal how BTS's positive messages in bright audio-visibility re-legitimize neoliberal mantras that help manage the crisis.

Keywords: BTS, neoliberal culture industry, cultural hegemony, governmentality, socially conscious marketing

Reminded that “[c]elebrities are developed to make money” (Turner, 2004, p. 34), I examine whether BTS achieved unprecedented successes by posing a counterhegemony to the dominant Western popular culture. Noting the contra-flows of global popular culture do not necessarily equate with the emergence of an alternative one (Thussu, 2006), I reassess the current, celebratory literature about BTS's global popularity. As the apex of neoliberal culture industry, BTS needs to be understood as a result of innovative marketing strategies along with various factors like avid fandom. To understand how BTS clenched its biggest accomplishments during the COVID-19 pandemic, I analyze its promotion schemes and the content's “affective and psychic registers as a central means of governing and producing people's desires, attachments, and modes of ‘getting by’” in the current political economic contexts (Gill & Kanai, 2018, p. 319).

I appreciate the literature that examines BTS's successes for its production qualities, performative prowess, and fan engagements (Chang & Park, 2019; Hong, 2020; J. Lee, 2019; McLaren & Jin, 2020; Proctor, 2021). However, it is confined to either explaining how BTS made achievements in tandem with its dedicated fandom or describing the fans' commitments to BTS's successes, which falls into the fallacy of circular reasoning. In line with the contemporary communication and media scholarship that prioritizes content consumption, it neglects the political economy of BTS's successes, idolizing audiences' “freewheeling popular interpretation and creative use of cultural products” (McGuigan, 2012, p. 429). Like late capitalism enthrones consumers as sovereign subjects, the literature

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adulates the audiences' contingent agency to the extent that they realize what J. Lee (2019) declares "rhizomatic revolution" with BTS's avid fanbase, ARMY.

Furthermore, some scholars exalt BTS constructed counterhegemonic culture as "non-western/peripheral subject's empowerment in challenging the cultural forms of the western/core society" (J.O. Kim, 2021, p. 1065). I argue this kind of glamorization impedes understanding the topic accurately within the material reality of the hegemony that legitimates and reproduces itself through cultural and biological terms. Ironically, her arguments confirm that BTS replicates the hegemonic practices like a deployment of online social media for user engagement, the members' ceaseless affective labor, and a full utilization of established production practices including a systematic incorporation of fans' free labor. Ju Oak Kim's (2021) claim that "fan participatory culture of BTS has renewed the notion and value of pop celebrity fandom" as a "practice of cultural resistance" is problematic (p. 1070): Other than limited, sporadic engagements like the Black Lives Matter movement, fan activities are confined to individualistic labors of love for the group's commercial promotion. Surely, exercises of fans' agency are worth commending; however, if their activities are still within the hegemonic realm of commercial popular culture, she should have articulated them in a different term. Furthermore, her uses of ambiguous concepts are controversial. For example, not defining what local subjectivities are, she repeats the logical fallacy of the literature that "romanticizes and fetishizes the place of [cultural] production" (Kim, 2017, p. 2374). It should be more than just BTS's sticking to VLine, an online platform created by local capital, which is global for its scope of operation. Practically, creating a local fan site would make sense from business perspectives, since it does not require a significant amount of investment but boosts BTS's brand identity in the market.

Likewise, citing its background in hip-hop, Judy Suh (2022) acclaims BTS's "contrast to Anglo-American cultural hegemony" as the key factor for its global successes (p. 300). However, she neglects how "authentic" rap music was long coopted by the mainstream culture industry and lost its original, transformative potentials (Johnson, 2008; Neal, 1997). Furthermore, she glorifies American audiences' consumption of BTS as a challenge to the hegemony of Western popular culture. However, cultural consumption itself does not pose any threat to the status quo but tends to stay as mere personal amusement. In reality, no matter how much audiences believe they exert free agency, the fundamental asymmetry of access, power, and resources exists in favor of the industry, which indicates a *contingent* nature of their engagements (Stanfill, 2019).

For a balanced take on the topic, I examine the supply/structural dimension of the phenomenon by reconsidering BTS's business strategy as a fundamental condition of the audiences' empowerment and pleasure. Reviewing its social implications, I analyze how BTS may influence audiences' actions, feelings, and thoughts as neoliberal governmentality. To better examine whether or not BTS exercises counterhegemonic culture, I investigate textual and contextual elements of its biggest, latest hit songs, "Dynamite" (BTS, 2020), "Butter" (BTS, 2021a), and "Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021b) released during the pandemic. To reveal how BTS provides "key 'narrative' in the intimacies [fans] make, and in the stories [they] tell and share" in their daily lives (Marshall & Redmond, 2016, p. 9), I indicate how BTS exploits "transnational proximity" (Jin, 2023). Although Jin (2023) states that BTS addresses common dire experiences audiences go through as a basis of its global successes, he does not examine how it markets

the widespread problems in a guise of offering consolation, hope, and solidarity to the desperate, which engenders a strong fannish motivation and passion. Rather, I reveal how BTS commodifies the audiences' grueling experiences in the twin crises of COVID-19 and neoliberal inequalities to recapture their discontents and indignations for its commercial success, which is neoliberal marketization *par excellence*.

Pandemic Hit Songs: Hegemonic Appropriation of Crises

BTS seized the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to consummate its brand identity of comforting idols for its commercial success. Fans and critics alike praised the pandemic songs as a much-needed tune that provides hope for a better future or at least something to help forget about the dire reality. Written and produced by David Stewart and Jessica Agombar in London, "Dynamite" (BTS, 2020) delivers an encouraging message for the audiences to get over a sense of helplessness by recreating an unrealistic, audio-visual landscape of the carefree past full of happiness and fun. Written by various non-Korean professionals including Robert Grimaldi, Stephen Kirk, and Ron Petty who are coproducers, "Butter" (BTS, 2021a) comforts individuals' pandemic fatigue by offering sweet, buttery tenderness. "Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021b) is the final English-language installment written by Ed Sheeran, Johnny McDaid, Steve Mac, and Jenna Andrews and produced by Steve Mac, Jenna Andrews, and Stephen Kirk. It motivates individuals to get ready for the post-pandemic world with few international sign languages for happiness, dancing, and peace.

As much as BTS's career has evolved through its strategic market positionings, its biggest pandemic successes were possible by its calculated reenactment of the hegemonic American popular culture canons. They revive the spatio-temporal conditions of hegemonic lifestyles by having the music videos located in typical capitalist everyday life settings like a shopping mall, a laundry shop, a car wash, or restaurants. Repurposing the iconic gestures of Michael Jackson like the moonwalk, crotch grab, the shuffle, and the kick, BTS resecures them in K-pop's high-production values, which exemplifies American pop music's formulative effect in shaping BTS's performative ideals. A ubiquitous visual presence of the mainstream Western musicians like David Bowie, The Beatles, Queen, AC/DC, Guns N' Roses, and Wham! discloses BTS's endeavors to appeal to Western audiences and to be associated with the cultural hegemons.

Although BTS indicates its pandemic songs aim to energize audiences under distress, I reveal its seemingly "benevolent" intention serves the hegemonic moral and ethical stipulation of the idealized population by examining how they propagate a common reference of neoliberal value systems. In an endless feedback loop of cultural re-presentation and ideological reiteration, which reentangles audiences by messages of positivity and self-love, the songs preach governmentalities of self-accountability, improvement, and responsibility over structural conditions/possibilities of public well-being. Focusing on how BTS promotes certain meaning and feelings that help construct subjectivities during cultural production, circulation, and consumption (Lemke, 2012), I examine how its music conditions audiences to embrace hegemonic attitudes, emotions, mindsets, and social actions. Consequently, I contend BTS relegitimizes neoliberal discursive regime or governmentality as the hegemonic crisis-coping mechanism.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Revealing Discursive Revitalization of Neoliberal Hegemony

During the epistemic process of hegemonic domination (van Dijk, 2015), popular culture helps sustain the existing power relations by its phantasmagoric reconstruction of reality (Fairclough, 1995). Analyzing how the pandemic songs “shape social realities extra- or supra-textually” (Carvalho, 2008, p. 165), I argue BTS *discursively revitalizes* the decreasing legitimacy of the neoliberal hegemony. Textually, I examine how realities are reconstructed with specific props, color tones, and such discursive strategies as framing the reality, identity construction, and legitimation in the music videos. Contextually, I resituate the videos within structural conditions of neoliberal cultural production and marketing practices. By doing so, I reveal how BTS plays a popular biopolitical agent that helps produce self-responsible, autocorrecting neoliberal subjects with the seemingly empowering messages that reencapsulate audiences into the status quo.

Apex of Neoliberal Culture Industry

Neoliberalism strives to transform society into a massive marketplace and re-constitute individuals' subjectivities by the logic of late capitalism. *Homo oeconomicus* is the central goal of neoliberal biopolitics that prioritizes accountability, cost-effectiveness calculation, self-responsibilization, and self-improvement (Foucault, 2008). More than any professionals, cultural workers are “paradigms of entrepreneurial selfhood” (Ross, 2008, p. 32), embodying the hegemonic imperative of artistic self-realization, psychological self-optimization, market competitiveness, and financial profitability (Dyer, 2004; Rojek, 2001).

K-pop idols are hyper-real human capital that is simulated to best realize the cultural logic of neoliberalism (Kim, 2019). As a fashionable personification of neoliberal discourse, they play a popular apparatus of governmentality that effectively configures hegemonic subjectivities, consciousness, and imageries (Gamson, 2011). Per Illouz's (2007) notion of emotional capitalism and Braudy's (1997) resonant emotional proximities, K-pop's feel-good properties imbue the audience with hegemonic codes of conduct. BTS has perfected such hegemonic practices by an incessant commodification of affective labor, a commercialization of intimacy, a monetization of fans' engagement, and a promotion of neoliberal mantras of hard work, resilience, and positive psychology among others (G. Kim, 2021).

As an embodiment of neoliberal self-commodification and self-branding to market audiences' fleeting tastes (Gledhill, 1991), BTS transforms its personae in its trajectories of pliable identities. As a hip-hop idol group at its debut, BTS tried to conform the genre's hegemonic norms in its gestures, visuals, sounds, messages, and outfits. Along with *2 Cool 4 Skool* (BTS, 2013), *School Luv Affair* (BTS, 2014b), and *Dark & Wild* (BTS, 2014a), *BTS American Hustle Life* (BigHit Entertainment, 2014) explicates how BTS tried hard to market the “authentic” gangster rap. However, as seen in Rain's failure (Shin, 2009), BTS's initial marketing strategy was doomed to misfire. Soon afterward, transforming to flowery, positive, vibrant, and upbeat images/messages/styles that scored a favorable reception at the 2014 KCON USA and a success at the 2016 KCON USA, BTS modified its brand identity entirely. Themes of happiness, hope, resilience, and self-love have become its signature brand identity since *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Part One* (BTS, 2015). With these changes, BTS (2016) began making a streak of unprecedented successes since “Blood, Sweat and Tears.”

Marketing Authenticity

As an “unmediated, spontaneous, affective, beyond one’s control” manifestation of the self (Dubrofsky, 2022, p. 8), authenticity is the core of normative subjectivity in late capitalist society (Banet-Weiser, 2012). While all of its manifestations are calculated performances for visibility and credibility (Dubrofsky, 2016), it commands a legitimacy for individuals’ ethical behaviors (Banet-Weiser, 2021). Likewise, a celebrity’s authenticity is a sought-after marketing component in the culture industry’s standardized star-making practices. As a result, the industry’s venture to exploit a “genuine” personality is hegemonic (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016) and exerts a discursive power that conditions audiences to accept what the media present something authentic as such.

An obliteration of private/public boundaries is a representative neoliberal practice to market authenticity: BTS’s incessant fan engagement online is effective in commodifying its authenticity (King-O’Riain, 2021). Providing “unmediated,” emotionally transparent access to intimate details of the idols’ mundane activities, BTS executes a performed intimacy by offering an illusion of up-close, personal encounters (Marwick & boyd, 2011) or sincere images as “a way of touting reputed virtues” (Boorstin, 1992, p. 188). The ever-expanding points of contact with celebrities online increase the audiences’ demand for “hopes/fantasies/expectations of a dialogic connectivity, a proliferation in communities of celebrity consumption, and a greater role for celebrities in the circulation and modulation of social affect” (Leonard & Negra, 2018, p. 219). This hyper-connectivity intensifies celebrities’ affective labor in a sphere that was not commercialized previously (ElIcessor, 2012). Thus, BTS not only commodifies the “private” selves and “authentic” lives (Hearn, 2014) but also feeds the audience’s fantasy of being together with them (Berlant, 2008), which further facilitates a “metonymic encapsulation of the broader unconscious social process of *working through* the collective longing for” authentic experiences and existence (O’Connor, 2021, p. 477; emphasis in original). BTS members’ attractive appearances and amicable characters function as a strong predictor of the “one-and-a-half-way” parasocial relationships (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). However, as witnessed in BTS’s unanticipated announcement of “pausing” its career, this practice is never sustainable.

Consumer-Centric, Relational Marketing

BTS has perfected what Vargo and Lusch (2004) indicate customer-centric, relational marketing that requires “collaborating with and learning from customers and being adaptive to their individual and dynamic needs” (p. 6). In this iterative and symbiotic relationship, fans have made BTS’s successes possible when they realize “value in use” in consuming BTS to satisfy their needs. In this regard, BTS has successfully engaged with its fans as the epicenter of its market research and development (R&D), where they become sources of its creative inspiration and a forefront of its strategic marketing. BTS has appropriated fannish commitments as an integral part of its performative endeavors (Turri, Smith, & Kemp, 2013), by consolidating comments and suggestions on its behind-the-scenes videos (trajectories of their artistic developments by telling how they felt before, during, and after their stage performances). As consumer-oriented entertainers (Parc & Kim, 2020), BTS members push an envelope to the extent that they become “fans of their fans” (Kaudel, 2020, para. 9). For example, “Butter” (BTS, 2021a) is a premediated package to feed the fans’ sense of ownership and entitlement for BTS’s success, which in turn entices them into an

endless loop between fans' affective investment and the group's commercial viability. With eyebrow raises, winks, and nudges, the song commends and commands the fandom's indispensable support for its success, by declaring "Got ARMY right behind us when we say so" (BTS, 2021a, 02:08).

By rigorous market analyses on its identity and values, customers' needs and wishes, and key competitors (Grönroos, 1997), BTS adopted a market identity of a symbolic salve and appealed to the marginalized in the deteriorating neoliberal society. As Schickel (2000) suggests that the fan uses celebrities as a vessel of social capital they lack and appreciates their fame and power vicariously, BTS provides vulnerable audiences with psychosocial resources as a coping mechanism (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Then, BTS becomes a "resource-and-competencies" for fans to develop desired effects of empowerment, self-love, solidarity, and so on. Sharing personal issues that a celebrity would not tell and then offering caring messages, BTS earned the fans' hearts and recognition. Actually, fans indicate that they "formed identities with and around BTS based on affinities of lived experiences of hardship, mental health, and political, economic, and social uncertainty" (McLaren & Jin, 2020, p. 123). Incorporating a tendency that audiences discuss intimate matters like mental health on a fan-club website (de Wit, van der Kraan, & Theeuwes, 2020), BTS has taken full advantage of relational marketing.

BTS feeds the fans' desire to be recognized and appreciated. Along with the incessant self-disclosure and interactions with fans, which facilitates their attainment/maintenance of perceived authenticity, it provides them with a powerful visceral immediacy of pleasure, fantasy, and mutual supports. BTS's public recognition and appreciation of ARMY at any award ceremonies elevate reciprocity for the fans to further advocate its endeavor, which in turn engenders a heightened sense of vicarious achievements that compels them to increase their consumptions and supports. Jimin's tweet message, "For us, please be happy" (tonni7 RM DAY, 2021) embodies how the group feeds its fandom an endless sense of helping each other as a psychological empowerment with BTS. BTS's winning *Billboard's* Top Social Artist award since 2017 proves an impact of fans' commitments. However, these kinds of reciprocity end up facilitating neoliberal "expansion into untapped markets, utilization of hitherto marginal labor pools and the exploitation of neglected sources of value" (Ross, 2008, p. 33). Likewise, investors obtain shares of BigHit Entertainment for not BTS or the company per se, but a vast financial potential of its fandom (Dooley & Lee, 2021).

Considering fans' loyalty mainly manifests itself by purchasing merchandises the celebrity endorses (Horton & Wohl, 1956), the size of dedicated fans gets translated into their purchasing power (Lueck, 2015). Actually, ARMY's fervent support activities center around merchandise purchases, which amassed approximately USD 3.5 billion a year to the South Korean economy (W. Lee, 2019). Typical ARMY members spend an average of over USD 1,422 on merchandizes (\$545), concert tickets (\$541), and music (\$336) annually (Park, 2020). In this respect, BTS's inspiring, "sincere" messages for (female) fans solidify McRobbie's (2007) postfeminist social contract, which furthers the hegemonic façade of gender equality that can only be possible by their incessant commercial transactions.

Socially Conscious Marketing: Addressing the Marginalized

Since its debut in June 2013 as a latecomer to the industry through a financially deprived agency, BTS marketed ghetto experience or sentiment in its first three albums. Emulating successes of black popular

music that markets the racial minority's stigmatization and grinding experiences, BTS proves the commercial viability of commodifying the Korean ghetto experiences, fervent education zealot, and its accompanying problems. As market stylization, BTS addresses some issues and problems that the vulnerable go through, while claiming to lend a comforting shoulder to them. This strategy has succeeded for a correspondence between messages from the members' own experiences, the youth's growing dissatisfaction with the hegemonic political economic conditions, and the fans' approvals of BTS's authenticity. Affective affinity (Devereux & Hidalgo, 2015), which is similar to "transnational proximity" rendered by neoliberal crises, plays a key role in BTS's global fandom. As used by Seo Taiji and Boys decades ago, BTS practices socially conscious marketing (SCM) by conflating an awareness of sociopolitical issues and consumers' marketing transactions (de Oca, Mason, & Ahn, 2022). As a classic example of SCM, BTS is hyped for its sporadic philanthropic activities and conscious messages for the less fortunate by its fans and the media.

However, BTS's identification as socially conscious idol confirms a hegemonic marketing strategy of celebrity wokeness that regards a celebrity's limited expression of selected issues as a sign of progressiveness or egalitarianism. As reported (Patnaik, 2009), an incorporation of care, empathy, or ethical agendas is a hegemonic marketing practice, which turns exploitative capitalist adventures into benevolence (Hardt & Negri, 2000). Ever since Coca-Cola's 1971 advertisement, "Buy the World a Coke" (Gabor, 1971), SCM makes a brand look desirable, ethical, and progressive at a time of crisis. However, replacing audiences' genuine benevolence with a market transaction, SCM is detrimental to the issues and problems it appropriates (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004). As a new "brand identity" that increases market value (Kapoor, 2012), SCM exerts a debilitating impact on a sustained, transformative movement by turning material, sociopolitical efforts to a mere sign value of *cool capitalism* (Frank, 1998). Cool capitalism works through the "incorporation of disaffection into capitalism itself" (McGuigan, 2012, p. 431; emphasis in original), or commodifying dissent (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018; Heath & Potter, 2005). In so doing, it diverts people's attention from structural problems to a hip commodity branding to the extent that any problem caused by system is magically solved by "stylisation of success that combines capitalism with a rebellious attitude" (McGuigan, 2009, p. 95). It is a neoliberal myth that individuals exercise the freedom of "political" expression by consumption in the market (Schmookler, 1993), which enthrones personal initiative as a "panacea for structural problems" (Kapoor, 2012, p. 33). Neglecting any necessity of collective action, this myth dismantles a foundation of any transformative action that is anchored around the material interactions between social institutions, political procedures, and citizens' collective, transformative commitment. Furthermore, SCM reifies sociopolitical problems by incorporating the poor into the market (Pralhad, 2005). Likewise, BTS's SCM has integrated the marginalized into the market as shown in the phenomenal increase of sales its members endorse (Allkpop, 2023b). Thus, BTS's seemingly empowering, positive messages like "love yourself, be yourself," or "be positive," work best as a hegemonic self-serving commercial act, which manipulates individuals' perceptions that their market transactions lead to a better world and relegitimizes the hegemony of the market inevitability.

BTS's SCM is a double-edged sword as "socially conscious and politically outspoken fans nudge the K-pop world to become more political" (Jin, 2021, p. 44). Since K-pop's industry distances itself from any political factions to maintain its profitability, BTS had to manage the fans' demands for being politically outspoken. For example, timidly addressing the fans' commotion in the face of Black Lives Matter movement, BTS made some monetary donation with a tepid statement that does not address any crux of the problem.

Since audiences search for genuine feelings of doing good, not to be manipulated by celebrities' desires for a quick cash (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020), BTS did not have much choice, since it must take a nonalienating stance for fans who expect its practice matches its "authentic" brand identity. Thus, BTS's reaction is hegemonic, since it does not challenge the modus operandi of the establishment but enhances its brand image, which steers fans' activities into pleasurable forms of the existing power structures (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2017).

For example, "Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021b) music video is praised for its incorporation of international sign languages for raising awareness of hearing impairment. However, neither does it help the impaired cope with systematic problems, nor does it show respect for their struggles. Although "the best way to end suffering is to give not money but voice to those who suffer" (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009, p. 984), it merely exploits the impairment without a due representation. Rather, the sign language was consumed as a mere prop for BTS's SCM. Thus, it proves Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) thesis on the culture industry that "refuses to utilize [its capacities and resources] when it is a question of abolishing" structural problems (p. 111).

BTS is a commercial entertainer whose brand identity is an outcome of a hegemonic business strategy that provides the marginalized with a fashionable, imagined feeling of being heard and understood. Fully integrated into neoliberal consumerism, BTS is a ubiquitous fixture in advertisements, especially high-end brands like Louis Vuitton. Sending out an encouraging, positive message in an expensive, high-end fashion brand manifests its bare face of woke marketing. No matter how much BTS is sincere and genuine in its intent for a social cause, its ontological embeddedness into the neoliberal culture industry limits the idols as the media spectacle, which perpetuates the hegemony of neoliberal consumerism.

Positive Psychology as Governmentality

As a neoliberal structure of feeling (Kim, 2018), BTS revitalizes psychological positivity as a hegemonic condition of today's subjectivities, delivered in common neoliberal tropes of dreams, happiness, hard work, self-love, and self-realization. To achieve and maintain the maximum productivity, neoliberalism promotes and capitalizes on individuals' positive psychological conditions. As a requirement for "the survival and development of the state" (Foucault, 1988, p. 158), psychological positivity that accompanies personal volition, effectiveness, optimism, and resilience becomes the most important ethical qualification (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Illouz, 2019). For that reason, various strategic communication campaigns have exploited its suasive power, such as McDonald's "I'm lovin' it" (Light, n.d.) and Obama's presidential campaign with "Yes, We Can" (Obama, 2008) slogan to name a few. Likewise, embedded in Korea's rampant neoliberalization, K-pop has been perpetuating positive psychology and helping to produce happy, responsible, and obedient labor force (Kim, 2019).

BTS's pandemic songs are the latest rendition of the promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010) as a neoliberal principle of world-making that preaches individuals' positive disposition calls for good things in life. As an example of the positivity imperative, "Dynamite" (BTS, 2020) is filled with flash, retro disco-themed sound, props, and melodies for an unrealistic feeling of hipness and happiness. Bright pastel palates and uplifting rhythm guitar sounds with joyful synth accents boost the positive atmosphere of the music

video where there is a lot of humorous camaraderie between the members. Inscripting positivity as the most important social value (Rottenberg, 2014) and a mandatory personal disposition (Binkley, 2011), BTS glosses individual characteristics over structural conditions. Perpetuating a fantasy of overcoming the structural impediments by personal volitions and self-affirmative in the therapeutic narrative of survivor discourse (Orgad, 2009), BTS's soundbites of positivity help relegitimate the very societal structure that put the audience into everyday struggles. Consequently, privatizing people's failure (Salecl, 2010), BTS's goodwill messages lead to a disavowal of structural inequalities and injustices as the root cause of all the neoliberal crises.

Therefore, as contrived Pollyannas by the financial imperatives of neoliberal culture industry, BTS vindicates cruel optimism that keeps renewing individuals' wishful "attachment to the compromised conditions of possibility" (Berlant, 2011, p. 24). As a commercial ploy to conflate authenticity, reciprocity, and positive psychology, BTS's messages for self-love and self-acceptance are nothing more than a discursive revitalization of deceptive neoliberal self-help mantras (Gill & Orgad, 2015). In so doing, BTS feeds audiences with a fantasy of being competent to achieve what they want, "covering up a diametrically opposed reality of ever increasing ill-being" under the twin crises (Reber, 2012, p. 85). Although BTS's music incorporates what audiences need or want in their everyday struggles, its speedy melodies and beats are a sonic episteme of neoliberalism that feeds fantasized optimism only.

"Permission to Dance": Neoliberal Hegemony at Its Highest

"Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021b) aims to not only uplift the audiences' morale but also condition their codes of conduct for the post-pandemic society. Put together by Western industry insiders, the song sports bubbly, funky, and radio-slop tunes: It asks the audience to "*just walk the walk*" (BTS, 2021b, 01:15) and dance to the beat in their own ways as if nothing happened. The music video opens with graffiti that mandate "JUST KEEP THE RIGHT VIBE" (BTS, 2021b, 00:21) and "LIVE JUST LIKE WE'RE GOLDEN" (BTS, 2021b, 00:25), which preach that everything will be OK eventually. With a ubiquitous presence of purple balloons as "harbingers of hope" that makes people become blissful in dancing and singing when they see them in the sky, the video aims to condition audience's psychologic states.

Its music video is a hodgepodge of various Western popular culture references. Using a similar location setting to One Direction's (2014) "Steal My Girl" music video that sports balloons to create an uplifting atmosphere in the desert, it is a K-pop rendition of Justin Timberlake's (2016) "Can't Stop the Feeling" and Pharrell Williams's (2013) "Happy" that evangelize a magical power of positivity and dancing. In an ambitious dream of bringing the desert-like barren reality into life, BTS members practice high vocal notes in neon-colored hair and cowboy-inspired denim and leather (especially leather chaps) with knee-high boots, which imbues a pandering sense of upbeat energy. Its manufactured atmosphere of the Wild West markets the cowboy aesthetics as the most iconic American sentiment. The music video is sanitized and looks like an anti-depressant advertisement. It becomes lackluster with a hackneyed inclusion of diversity in terms of age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, and race. Most saliently, along with the members' outlandishly playful gestures and dance moves, Jimin's auto-tuned, overprocessed vocals symbolize a folly quality of its worldviews in the face of the ongoing crises. Without any practical outlook on how to get self-empowered, the song that states, "We don't have to worry, cause when we fall we

know how to land" (BTS, 2021b, 01:09) in a patronizing, fake-fun, overenthusiased self-help mantra for the desperate to survive the crises.

BTS commodifies the everyday struggles of disposable service workers. The music video deceptively celebrates precarious workers like waitresses and janitors (and teachers, office workers, and mail carriers) as being happy and resilient, which legitimates hegemonic imperatives of consistent, positive self-maintenance as "the portfolio of conducts" (Feher, 2009, p. 25). In the superficial, exaggerated, and naïve incorporation of the "essential" workers whose demand for reasonable compensation and labor conditions is long dismissed, BTS repeats a hegemonic lip-service to "appreciate" their services. Rather, BTS consumes their "heroic" labor as a prop and unapologetically reinscribes their dire living conditions as the "norm." BTS preaches it is not the objective, structural supports but rather individual, upbeat, and positive attitude that determines one's well-being and success. Whereas its previous work, "Spring Day" (BTS, 2017) metaphorically laments the internment of the damned as an allusion of ordinary people's complicity, "Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021b) unapologetically commodifies the debilitating precarity of service workers who are visible yet still exploited simultaneously. Although the song ostensibly recognizes their important works and contributions that keep the society running, BTS legitimizes their unsustainable living conditions in its anthem of fantasized positivity and false happiness. Reducing material struggles into dazzling spectacles, the video wipes out a need for structural transformation. Evidenced in Ju Oak Kim's (2021) claim on an "irreducible modality, autonomy, and independence of cultural resistance from other social and political formations" (p. 1071), BTS's fantastical resolutions or fantasized spectacles defy the materiality of reality, which requires no need to worry about institutional conditions of marginalization and oppression (Kuehn, 2017).

The pandemic songs reify positivity to capitalize on individuals' psychological distress, rather than providing a moment of critical reflection for transformative yearning. BTS commodifies individuals' desire to alleviate COVID-related psychological tensions, declaring "the wait is over" (BTS, 2021b, 00:52). This strategy worked on young people who get vulnerable to emotional and financial tolls during the crises (Varma, Junge, Meaklim, & Jackson, 2021). Capitalizing on an everlasting legacy of Michael Jackson, "Dynamite" (BTS, 2020) transpires audiences' longing for having a good time on a dance floor and conjures up a sense of melancholic nostalgia for a "good, old days." Whereas disco is a genre of emotional utopia where various desires can be embodied and existing norms can be negotiated (Lawrence, 2006), BTS appropriates the music's emancipatory potential to captivate the audience's pent-up frustrations and longings. With disco's corporeal display of unfolding meanings in its not-yet-present power of subversion (Massumi, 2002), the song could have provided a moment of critical reflection on the crises and envision a constructive future (Muñoz, 2019). However, BTS grants an ephemeral moment of suspension or a fantasized escape in its sanitized, feel-good sounds, and spectacles.

BTS relegitimizes the neoliberal technology of the self, a boundless optimism as the postpandemic "regime of living" and "moral reasoning" (Collier & Lakoff, 2005, p. 23). It demands individuals disavow the existing structural problems and move on to become confident, celebratory, inspiring, and positive. "Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021b) asks the audiences to get over the emotional tolls of the pandemic and get ready for the "normal" life. Distracting the audience from the structural problems by powerful sensory stimulations of its catchy, addictive sounds, BTS effectively refurbishes

audiences with fictitious relief and empowerment so that they could endure the crises. Being happy and optimistic may be a good personal coping mechanism; however, perpetuated by the industry, it helps keep the problem continuing by delivering “the best hopes along with the worst tendencies” in glossy visuals with rich emotional resonances (Gaines, 2000, p. 108). Therefore, BTS exerts *utopianizing* effect that flaunts a phantasmal life and helps the establishment get away with a burden of being inflictor of people’s deteriorating living conditions.

Ultimately, self-confirmed by enormous fan supports in the everyday regime of neoliberalism, BTS declared today’s audiences as “Welcome Generation” (*UN News*, 2021) at the United Nation’s General Assembly. Defining the generational consciousness, BTS interpellates them to embrace ever-deteriorating conditions under the twin crises. As a beloved merchant of neoliberal fantasy that feeds the audience’s imaginary sense of being understood and making a difference, BTS proves the critical theory’s lament on popular music’s reactionary ramification, which implements a “liquidation of art—instead of utopia becoming reality it disappears from the picture” (Adorno, 1981, p. 132).

Concluding Remarks: Commercial Concoctions of Neoliberal Hegemonies

As a stylish embodiment of the neoliberal myth that the disadvantaged can magically become successful, BTS fulfills “beautifying mirror” that reflects “how the ruling class wishes the wishes of the weak to be” in its high, affective positivity (Bloch, 1959/1995, p. 13). With its constant appropriation and misappropriation of the dominant American cultural references (K. H. Kim, 2021), BTS’s pandemic songs exemplify reactionary, “unhappy effects of happiness, teaching us how happiness is used to redescribe [predatory] social norms as [ideal] social goods” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 2). The real toll of BTS’s fantasized, discursive relegitimization of the hegemony falls upon audiences who “are haunted, not by reality, but by those images [the pandemic songs] have put in place of reality” (Boorstin, 1992, p. 6).

“Permission to Dance” (BTS, 2021b) is an epitome of K-pop’s SCM that commodifies individuals’ needs of being consoled, sugar-coated with the neoliberal fantasy of being “self-sufficient under conditions that undermine all prospects of self-sufficiency” (Butler, 2015, p. 14). It transposes the audiences’ increasing stress levels from the twin crises of neoliberal injustices and COVID-19 pandemic into a false sense of positivity and wishful half-truth. Shunning off individuals’ vulnerabilities and struggles in the crises, BTS sports irrational exuberance that perpetuates illusory autonomy (Davies, 2005), or heightened narcissism that “oscillates between fantasies of omnipotent self-sufficiency and fantasies that one need do nothing to be taken care of” (Layton, 2010, p. 313). With this shallow optimism, the song deceives the audience by its superficial and naïve handling of grave, systematic problems the audiences suffer (Lekakis, 2013).

There are divergent realities of the crises based on individuals’ disparate conditions of existence. It requires a lot of careful systematic efforts to reimagine what the reality should be, which in turn necessitates a new set of imaginaries, intelligibilities, subjectivities, and actions. To overcome the crises, the humanity needs a radically different worldview, similar to Marcuse’s (1969) calling for great refusal.

However, BTS induces *the cruelest optimism* by resuscitating the neoliberal hegemony that suffers its ontological crises in the cascade of catastrophes. Its pandemic songs are not reflective or critical about the neoliberal assaults on the marginalized, but a pure fantasy that is void of "the last remaining thought of resistance" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1989, p. 144). The songs do not raise an awareness of structural conditions of suffering but tout an importance of personal, positive attitude, and determination to deal with issues caused by broader systematic conditions. Boosting the affective life of neoliberalism that mandates self-management and self-care (Scharff, 2016), they fulfill a reactionary "pro-capitalist, therapeutic device" (McRobbie, 2007, p. 63), which hinders collective demands and actions for structural changes. BTS commodifies its ostensible sensitivity to social issues to accumulate financial and cultural capital (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012; Sobande, 2020).

Although there are disparate accounts for AMRY's fannish engagements in some sociopolitical issues (Yoon, 2023), researchers need to carefully assess their implications. Despite unprecedented potentials to create, interact, influence, and practice politics online (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019), fannish engagement is limited to the regime of communicative capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Duffy, 2017). However, researchers tend to ignore the neoliberal hegemony that individuals are "nudged away from state-based responses to social ills and toward more individualized free market or quasi-market forms of charity and philanthropy" (Mitchell, 2016, p. 302). Although there are spontaneous sociopolitical engagements like BLM, they are not sustainable, coherent, and/or committed. The fans' engagement in BLM could have come from an alignment between fans' personal interests, high-profile protests that receive a lot of media attention, and a perceived sense of doing good. Considered as a kind of SCM public relations stunt, BTS's donation created more buzz around the group than a deliberation to address the root cause of the movement. Since "K-pop fandom [activism] is a personal choice rather than a moral imperative" (Kang, 2023, p. 1026), the literature has limitation in analyzing fandom's multifaceted, precarious sociopolitical implications. Rather, it is more productive to examine how core fans set an agenda and the general fandom reacts to it since the successes of K-pop have been attributed to the core fans' magnitude of support (Allkpop, 2023a).

In conclusion, repackaging dominant Western cultural conventions, BTS revitalizes the discursive hegemony of neoliberalism. As the neoliberal marketization of difference, BTS has satisfied the mainstream Western curiosities on its own adaptive hegemonies and Koreans' desire for their sanguine self-images and successes. Although reality-based creative volatility has been the driving force behind Hip-hop's appeal and successes, BTS's pandemic songs are tepid and hackneyed without genuine experiences, sensibilities, and outlooks derived from the material reality of the crises. Despite benevolent intentions to help audiences alleviate depression, frustration, and other negativities, BTS would end up mobilizing them in the service of predatory neoliberal establishments. Propagating the neoliberal regime of living and imaginaries, BTS renaturalizes the dominant hegemony as an effective component of the unconscious processes (Layton, 2006) that maintain the status quo by its shallow, pandering, and regressive idea of "progressivism." Therefore, BTS's pandemic songs succeeded by repurposing various artifacts of the dwindling neoliberal hegemonies and culminating the K-pop industry's hegemonic practice of market diversification and expansion.

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