

# The phenomenon of fandom consumption in k-pop commodity through the army community (Bangtan Sonyeondan Fandom)

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## ABSTRACT

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The appearance of ARMY as a loyal fans is a response to what BTS has to offer as a K-Pop idols. Aside being a fan, their consumption behavior is inevitable. Along with the development of media technology and as a result of pop culture commodities, fans create its own meaning and culture as an active actor of consumption. This research provides an overview of the way consumption culture is formed in ARMY fandom and how it affects most significant aspects in their life. The researcher also wants to examine related to the concept of free fan labor that fans holds such an important role at maintaining the fan production culture in the web and benefit the K-Pop industry to broaden their market globally. This research uses a qualitative method. Then the researcher collects data by interviewing six informants who have consume BTS merchandise continuously with purposive sampling technique. The result of this research showed that fans consistently interpret the goods they consumed, the value they generate from their sense of closeness to BTS members. This research also demonstrated regarding fans becoming “free” fan labor with their own eagerness, along with the fan production culture results to the personalize customization into their own interest as an active and loyal costumer, with the exchange of pleasure they got from actively interact and exchanging feedback with another fans in the cyberspace.

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## 1. Introduction

In this globalization era, the Korean Wave phenomena have developed and spread to various countries in Asia, America and Europe. Korean wave itself is a term used to describe South Korean pop culture products that have been successfully exported to other countries in Asia, America and Europe. Korean wave, through films, music, and entertainment industry products such as television dramas, is in practice able to introduce various sides of South Korean culture. Not only from a cultural perspective, South Korea's commercial and tourism products are well marketed and able to reach the public in various countries. The Korean Wave no longer symbolizes the development of the entertainment industry or the transfer of culture that occurs across countries, but has become one of the strengths for South Korea to gain economic benefits (Jin & Yoon, 2017).

Quoting from Kumparan.com, initially the Chinese market was the main target for spreading this culture. The term K-Wave was later adopted by the Chinese media with the term Hallyu (한류), which means the flow of Korean culture. After the K-Wave was successfully recognized in China, the second wave followed in the mid-2000s where Korean films, dramas, and music were very

popular, which then expanded to various countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia. And in the third wave in the 2010s, finally K-Wave began to reach other parts of the world such as America, Europe, Australia, to Africa (Hisham, Ahmad, & Kee, 2019).

One of the most important factors of the South Korean entertainment industry is its music, or better known as Korean Pop (K-Pop). The Korean music industry presents music genres ranging from Pop, Hiphop, R&B, Electro Pop to Electric Music which is a combination of sing and dance. The music that attracts interest is also synchronized with the dance choreography that is performed, making the popularity of South Korean boybands and girlbands able to make success in various countries, not forgetting to be supported by the visuals and abilities of Korean artists who have various talents.

Bangtan Seonyondan (방탄소년단), or commonly known as 'BTS', is a boy band formed by Big Hit Entertainment on June 12, 2013 and consists of seven youths from South Korea, Kim Namjoon or known as the stage name 'RM' leader, along with Min Yoongi 'Suga' and Jung Hoseok 'J-Hope' hold the rapper (rapline) position in the group. The position of the vocal line itself is held by Kim Seokjin, Park Jimin, Jeon Jungkook and Kim Taehyung 'V'. BTS is one of the South Korean celebrities who have achieved various achievements, and even though they have different languages, they have not succeeded in extinguishing their enthusiasm for music (Khair & Adhani, 2021).

Quoting from Bbc.co.uk, despite its popularity status, BTS consistently continues to make music that lovers of their music want to hear. BTS bravely continues to deliver messages about bullying, elitism, to mental health as well as positive messages about life through the music they make. And in response to their status as celebrities, BTS has a large, loyal and dedicated fan base with 24.6 million followers on Twitter and 23.9 million on Instagram. Fans who are members of a community, are also known as fandom. The name for the BTS fandom is known as ARMY, which stands for 'Adorable Representative MC for Youth' and was inaugurated as the name of BTS's fanclub on July 9, 2013. ARMY itself has spread to various parts of the world, and is currently one of the fandoms that have a network that wide and come from various countries and not only from South Korea (Hong & Jin, 2021).

Fans and fandom as one of the popular domains in audience studies are a study that deserves to be analyzed in critical studies when in their development, the existence of fans itself is influenced by media and technology. Wibi in Arga (2017) said that fans are the greatest strength for an art worker when on stage. Along with the development of media technology, fandom representation, as the plural form of the fan community, has undergone changes, Jenkins in "Urban Media Studies| Practicing Urban Media Studies: An Interview With Will Straw," (2019) describes that fandom is something that is empowering, as well as positive. Fandom is a way in which an audience can actively participate in the interpretation of the meaning of a text in the media.

In fact, fandom is the most visible aspect of pop culture practice. The consumption habits of fans that can be said to be very high make them ideal consumers, so that they are easy to read and can easily be predicted by the cultural industry and are often stable (Potts, 2019). Pop culture itself is closely related to the world of consumption in which fandom can express itself. Consumption behavior that takes place continuously in the end can lead to a fanaticism syndrome as a result of pop culture commodities. Fangirling (derived from the word fangirl, while male fans are called fanboys) is a term used to describe excessive excitement towards a particular fandom. For most people, the internet has become an alternative source of entertainment and information, at a level of a more "established" form of media than print and television (Jandevi & Zareen, 2020).

For most people, K-pop fandoms are better known for the stereotypes that stick with themselves. K-pop Fans are considered to have always had an excessive, obsessive, addictive and consumptive attitude, where they really like to spend money on buying all kinds of merchandise related to their idols or chasing their idols to any part of the world. The consumption activity carried out by the K-pop fandom is a motive that is realized by the satisfaction motive. Their consumption is based on the desire for a feeling of satisfaction that comes afterward. According to Sumartono (in Brenner & Igamberdiev, 2021), this consumptive behavior becomes a behavior that is no longer based on rational considerations, but because there is a desire that has reached an irrational level. Their consumptive behavior are done out of the necessity except their desire factor. Their love for idols

costs a lot of time and money. Consumption is carried out talks about the enjoyment that is achieved as an outlet for the pent up affection for the idol.

Baudrillard (in Jin & Yoon, 2017) states that the consumption ability of each individual is different. This is based on the material and status that the individual has. Individuals who have more material will generally consume a greater extent than individuals who have less material. To fulfill their wish in terms of buying K-popstuff, Kpop fans can save in advance to buy K-pop stuff. Purchasing K-pop goods is based on material availability. For the fulfillment of basic needs, based on research results, K-pop fans prioritize needs first followed by fulfillment of desires. Fulfillment of wants or desires will be carried out when the basic needs have been met. Because basic needs are the main and must be met immediately.

In this study, researcher also applied several boundaries in conducting limitation research, the subject of this study are ARMY aged 17 years and over who consume official and unofficial BTS merchandise. Furthermore, this research focuses on how the culture of consumption is formed in the ARMY fandom. The motives behind, their social status as an active actors of consumption, how ARMY perceive the goods they consume and those who purchase unofficial merchandise and listen to BTS song illegally. Based on the identification of problems, the researcher limits the problem at how fans became a labor for the dissemination of K-Pop and how fans became a significant marketing in the K-Pop industry.

Researcher found several studies already discussed related to how fans became a free fan labor for the entertainment industry. The first, research journal entitled Interrogating “Free” Fan Labor by (S. M. Kim & Park, 2020). This study discusses how fans hold the biggest role in the of digital economy through fan production. And the second, a research journal entitled Consumption as a Marker of Prosperity and Social Stratification (in Lee & Zhang, 2021). This research examines consumption is no longer merely fulfilling individual needs and as a freedom of expression, but individuals engage in consumption activities because there are certain "value" that influence them in carrying out consumption activities.

The researcher wants to analyzes further how K-Pop BTS commodities can be included in the sidelines of the culture adopted in everyday life by each individual so as to produce decisions for individuals to show acceptance through the consumption activities carried out.

## 2. Theorotocal Framework

### *a. Consumption*

In the most general sense, consumption means behavior with the aim of satisfying a need. Therefore, the concept of need must be defined. Dolu (in Jeong, Lee, & Lee, 2017) states that the “need” seem obligatory to have as a marker of existence because when a need is met, it gives pleasure, and on the contrary it gives pain. According to Camacho-Otero, Boks, & Pettersen (2018) consumption is all types of social activities that humans do so that it can be used to characterize and recognize them, in addition to what they do for life. Chaney added that the idea that consumption has become the main focus of social life and cultural values underlies a more general idea of consumer culture. Humans have various physiological, psychological, social and cultural needs. All activities to meet all these needs can be expressed as consumption.

Consumption, which is shaped by consumer purchasing decisions, is a process that incorporates behaviors to exploit economic goods. Ritzer (in Y. Kim, 2021) follows Marx's description of classifying consumer goods as subsistence and luxury in order to define the concept of consumption, the ultimate goal of economic activity. Ritzer claims consumption as a tool that allows people to obtain goods and services and also exploits people by controlling them. In simple terms, consumption means owning a good or service, to own it, use it or throw it away to meet certain needs. In the early days when the concept of consumption was first put forward, consumption appeared among humans as something natural and simple; however over time consumption moves away from satisfying need and acquires a structure that defines social status. In fact, consumption is a necessity for social welfare, and competition is an efficient means of maximizing social welfare.

### ***b. Consumerism and Consumption Culture***

The culture of consumerism, especially emerged after the industrialization period when goods began to be mass produced, thus requiring a wider range of consumers. In this case, the media occupy a strategic position as well as determine; namely as a medium that bridges producers with the community as potential consumers. According to Werner Sombart, economic development is viewed from the organizational structure and ideology of society, Baudrillard, (in Kuwahara, 2014) examines that consumption activities are communication activities. Which is when we consume something, it means we communicate to people through different signs/objects. Consumerism is a mindset and action in which people take the action of buying goods not because they need the goods but because the act of buying itself gives satisfaction to them. The phenomenon that stands out in society today which accompanies economic progress is the development of a consumption culture which is marked by the development of a lifestyle. The various lifestyles that have been born from consumption activities are increasingly diverse in Indonesian urban communities. Adikila (in Hong & Jin, 2021) examines that in the past, there was a popular term from Descartes, namely "Cogito ergo Sum ", but now the popular term is: "I shop therefore I am". This term arises because the sense of belonging to the products they consume continues to increase so that people's fanaticism towards the products they consume continues to increase. As a consequence, they will continue to consume these products voluntarily as a form of loyalty to the community they are members of. People have no other choice but to accept consumption as a lifestyle because integrated consumers keep trying to appear. The thing that needs to be underlined is that here, the object that is consumed is not important, but how the object is consumed. This is what drives consumption, what is seen is how they are related to the goods they consume. Consumption activities are an obligation for consumers to fulfill their existence, and by consuming, everyone will shape how their lifestyle is formed (Y. Kim, 2021).

In this way, it can be understood that culture has a strong impact on consumer behavior. Featherstone has three perspectives on consumer culture: The first emphasizes the expansion of capitalist commodity production leading to the spread of recreational and consumption activities in contemporary western societies. This situation was greeted as allowing individual freedom and equality by some, while criticized by others as an increased capacity for ideological manipulation. The second perspective underscores the satisfaction that comes from goods related to socially constructed meanings. Consumption serves as a source of status differentiation because people use goods and experiences to "create social bonds or differences." The third perspective regards consumption as a source of fantasy and pleasure "celebrated in the cultural image of consumers and certain consumption sites such as malls that produce immediate physical excitement and aesthetic pleasure" (Axford & Berry, 2018).

### ***c. Popular Culture & Fandom***

According to Potts (2019), popular culture has two main meanings. First, popular culture is understood as a variety of sounds, images and messages that are mass-produced and commercial in nature, with a view to reaching as many consumers as possible. Popular culture has a meaning as a mean of supplying one-way commodities aimed at society as consumers. Second, alternative forms of popular culture which often contradict the first meaning have other forms of communication practices and are not the result of industrialization (non-industrialized), are relatively independent, and circulate by utilizing various forums as well as public crowds. Even though the two definitions of popular culture themselves appear to be contradicting each other, the relationship between the two is always marked by efforts to combine and adapt aspects contained in each other categories. Popular culture in a historical or social context can be very different depending on different times and places. All of that always depends on the context.

Whilst fandom, according to Henry Jenkins, is the ability to change personal reactions in a person into social interactions. One of the main characteristics of fandom is the transformation of a spectatorial culture into a participatory culture. A person becomes a fan not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating the vision into a kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about a program content they follow with the friends they have, joining other fan communities and have the same interests. Jenkins also explains that fans are not only consumers but also active producers. When fans interact with each other and form a

community, that is what is often called fandom. In his book, *Textual Poachers*, he also explained that fandom is used as a basis for fan activity, and shows its civil power. Fandom is also used as a way to implement fan culture. The objects of the fandom can be celebrities, sports teams, music groups, products, brands and so on (Lee & Zhang, 2021).

### 3. Method

In this study, researcher used a qualitative approach with constructivist method. Sugiyono (2008) suggests that the qualitative method is a research method used to examine natural subjects, where the researcher is the key instrument, the sampling of data sources is done purposively, the data analysis is inductive / qualitative, and the results of qualitative research emphasize meaning rather than generalization. The subjects in this study were individuals with the criteria of an informant, namely ARMY, where the informant carried out all kinds of consumption activities that involved purchasing BTS merchandise, the underlying factors and how their behavior in carrying out consumption activities (purchasing official and unofficial merchandise). The data referred to include in-depth interview transcripts (depth interviews). Descriptive or written narrative is very important in a qualitative approach, both in recording data and for disseminating research results. Secondary data will be obtained from literature studies and various sites on the internet. In qualitative research, the data collected is generally in the form of words, pictures and not numbers, which are only as a support. This research is expected to provide a systematic description of the consumption culture, consumption behavior and activities formed in the ARMY fandom.

Related to the on going COVID-19 pandemic results in the limitations of researcher in carrying out research properly, this research is therefore conducted using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology concentrates on the experience of individuals who consciously know or feel a phenomenon (an object or event) through the experience they experience directly.

The phenomenological approach is used to understand phenomena and their relation to the structure of consciousness of people who are in certain situations, with the intention of understanding the motives and meanings of human actions related to the objective of the study (Stephen W. Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2012). In this study, the researcher will attempt to describe in detail the consumption activity of ARMY and the motivation behind.

In the process of this research, researcher used purposive sampling technique because in this study the researcher had determined some informants who would later be interviewed in depth in order to obtain the information needed. The reason for using purposive sampling technique is because not all samples have criteria that match the phenomenon under study. Therefore, the writer chooses a purposive sampling technique which determines certain considerations or criteria that must be met by the samples used in this study, where the researcher used research subjects, namely fans who are members of the ARMY fandom.

The number of research subjects was 6 people with informant criteria, among others: 1) Informants are individuals who are members of the ARMY fandom. 2) Informants are individuals who purchase official BTS merchandise. 3) Informants are individuals who purchase unofficial BTS merchandise. 4) Informants are individuals who volunteer to become informants. Interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic online to research informants via a video call feature. Through this phenomenological study, it allows researcher to understand and be able to explain phenomena in depth because researcher become part of the subject under study by digging deeper into the consumption activities carried out by ARMY (Valunaite Oleskeviciene & Sliogeriene, 2020).

This research uses a qualitative data analysis model of Miles and Huberman which is carried out through three processes namely data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. To check the validity of the data, the research used a validity test technique by triangulation of data source. Triangulation of data source is done by comparing the results of interviews with observations, whether the answers of the participants in the interview are in accordance with the reality on the ground in the observations of researcher.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Based on the formulation of the research question, which is to find out how the culture of consumption is formed in K-Pop BTS commodities through fandom consumption behavior in the ARMY community, the results of this problem are obtained with the phenomenological method which is carried out online due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. This research was conducted by interviewing six participants. The following demographic data of participants in this study are presented in Table 1.

	<i>Participant 1</i>	<i>Participant 2</i>	<i>Participant 3</i>
Initial Name	Sofhya	Pri	Siti
Address	Sukoharjo, Central Java	Jakarta	Surakarta, Central Java
Age	17 years old	30 years old	18 years old
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Occupation	Kindergarten Teacher	Private Employee	Student
Last education	Senior High School (SMA)	Diploma (S1)	Senior High School (SMA)
	<i>Participant 4</i>	<i>Participant 5</i>	<i>Participant 6</i>
Initial Name	Dewi	Tsabita	Nada
Address	Yogyakarta	Samarinda, East Kalimantan	Karanganyar, Central Java
Age	20 years old	23 years old	23 years old
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Occupation	Student	Architect & Interior Consultant	Student
Last Education	Senior High School (SMA)	Diploma (S1)	Senior High School (SMA)

**Table 1.** RESEARCH PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Through this research, the researcher got the following results:

##### **A. Consumption of official and unofficial merchandise**

ARMY motivation to buy official BTS merchandise in general is a form of appreciation for their love for BTS and also for collection. Just like Dewi and Pri who think by buying official merchandise, they are supporting the idol they like.

*“Alasannya intinya karena aku support mereka. Soalnya menurut aku kalau semisalkan kita beli official itu cara kita menghargai si senimannya itu. Intinya itu sih. (interview Dewi, 30 Juli)”*

Beside Dewi and Pri, there are also those who argue that apart from being a form of support for BTS, the official merchandise is considered worth-to-buy because the price is quite expensive and is directly proportional to the quality represented.

*“Kalo aku beli itu tergantung worth it atau nggak kan kalo official kan mesti mahal kan dilihat dari segi bentuknya, isinya. Itu kalo misalnya yg official kan karena mahal itu jadi harus diperhatiin baik-baik gitu kan harus didiskusikan bareng temen. Sampai searching-searching gitu dulu takutnya kan nyesel udah keluarin uang. (interview Tsabita, 30 Juli)”*

According to Tsabita, even though the quality of the official merchandise released is guaranteed, he must still be careful and discuss with his ARMY friends before buying, so that in the future he does not feel that he has lost a lot of money. Then there is Nada who thinks that apart from being a form of appreciation, her official BTS merchandise can be used as a long-term investment that can later be sold back.

*“Kalau alesan beli merchandise aku yo alasannya paling nanti buat jangka panjang, itu bisa dijual lagi, palingan bisa jadi langka terusharganya bisa mahal.... (interview Nada, 30 Juli)”*

As for other than official merchandise, unofficial merchandise is an option for ARMY who are just buying it for fun. Like Sofhya and Siti who argue that their goal of buying unofficial merchandise is because they feel the merchandise they find has an attractive appearance and shape and finally decided to buy it.

*“Kalau aku sih pertama karena iseng-iseng aja, soalnya itu pas lagi seneng-senengnya....jadi ya udah iseng-iseng beli aja. Nah pas itu disitu ada yang aku suka ku beli gitu aja, ... (interview Sofhya, 30 Juli)”*

Then there is a condition where ARMY financial condition is impossible, but still wants to have BTS merchandise at an affordable price and adequate quality. For instant Tsabita who thinks that even if the merchandise is not original, she must check the merchandise's quality first.

*“Ya dilihat dari kualitasnya. Kan kalau yang unofficial itu kan murahan gitu lho. Kayak nggak niat. Jadi kadang aku lihat kualitasnya bagus atau nggak KW super jadi mirip sama yang official.....Jadi kalau bisa dapat harga yang lebih murah tapi mirip gitu. Tapi tergantung juga barangnya apa yang mau aku beli jadi nggak sembarang aku beli. (interview Tsabita 30 Juli)”*

### **B. Responses to unofficial merchandise**

The collecting activity becomes a form of fulfilling a sense of inner-satisfaction for ARMY. It can even become a form of self-existence to the outside world. Both official and unofficial merchandise have different target markets. All related to the abilities of each individual. In fact, ARMY itself clearly understands that buying unofficial merchandise is tantamount to not making direct contributions to BTS as art workers. Researcher wanted to examine how ARMY's opinion is related to other ARMYs who purchase unofficial merchandise.

After conducting interviews, the researcher found that there were five informants who did not mind the activity, and one other informant who felt happy because there was a feeling of fate because they all could not afford official merchandise.

*“Kalau menurut aku sih, tiap orang itu kan kemampuannya berbeda-beda, cara supportnya juga beda. Ya mungkin kalau orang yang bisa beli official itu ya pas emang kemampuannya ya kayak gitu. Menurutku juga kalau orang itu mampu ya pasti mau beli yang official. Kita kan nggak bisa maksa kemampuan orang kan...(interview Dewi, 30 Juli)”*

Dewi, Nada, Pri, Tsabita and Sofhya have absolutely no problem with ARMY purchasing unofficial BTS merchandise, because it returns to the rights of each individual. They understand and can feel how ARMY wants to buy unofficial merchandise, but is hindered by costs. Or like Pri, who is sometimes forced to buy unofficial merchandise when the desired official merchandise is sold out. Sofhya believes that it is important for her to think about the priority scale of the items he will buy, because BTS merchandise is for her is not a primary need.

*“Ya kesannya sih senang sih seperti melihat cerminan diri sendiri gitu, merasa senasib.....tapi kesannya kayak kasihan BTS nya masa karya nya dia itu, gimana ya kan mereka itu berkarya itu kan nggak mudah, masa dengan gampangnya dijadikan ilegal, kan jadi tidak dapat penghasilan gitu...(interview Siti, 30 Juli)”*

Although Siti feels delighted because she feels that she is not alone, she still feels guilty, because she clearly knows that her idol does not get income from her unofficial consumption of merchandise activities.

In addition to digging deeper into ARMY's opinion on unofficial merchandise consumption activities, researcher also examined the opinions of informants regarding BTS song streaming activities through illegal platforms. BTS, as an artist who focuses on the world of singing, automatically earns its income from music sales. Researcher found that five informants had consciously accessed BTS songs illegally and felt guilty, and one informant felt disappointed with ARMY who did it. The researcher also found the informants who even though they participated in streaming and downloading BTS songs illegally, they felt guilty because the activities they were doing did not reflect the form of “support” that fans did for their idols.

*“Kalau denger lagu Bangtan nggak di platform legal menurut pandanganku ya sebenarnya kecewa sih, menurutku ya lebih baik sih di platform legal gitu soalnya kan biar keitung chartnya BTS.... (interview Pri, 13 Agustus)”*

Pri stated that he was disappointed with ARMY doing these activities illegally because according to her, by streaming BTS songs through legal platforms, it really helped BTS on the world music charts. BTS who are musicians definitely need the role of their fans, aka ARMY in their career paths.

### ***C. Consumption in the Views of Fans***

As the researcher explained in introduction, according to Sumartono (in Fransisca & Suyasa, 2017), the consumptive behavior of fans becomes a behavior that is no longer based on rational considerations, but because there is a “desire” that has reached an irrational level. Consumptive behavior is done out of necessity, but to the desire factor. However, in this study the researcher found that out of 6 respondents who became informants, only 2 informants thought that the activity of consuming merchandise related to idols was a necessity. Dewi thinks that buying official BTS merchandise is a necessity, where she can give her appreciation of her love for BTS as the artists.

*“Aku lebih ke kebutuhan deh. Soalnya aku tuh kayak minimal harus punya satu gitu. Soalnya ya itu cara aku menghargai seniman itu.... (interview Dewi, 30 Juli)”*

The thing that distinguishes here is what Sofhya experienced. During the interview process, she told that in the past, the activity of consuming merchandise was a primary need, but over time these activities became limited to wishes.

*“...pas lagi ngefans2nya ya, jadi ya... pengen aja gitu lho, punya yang kaya gitu. Waktu itu, jadi primer, hehehehe...tapi sekarang udah hanya sebatas keinginan aja...(interview Sofhya, 30 Juli)”*

In contrast to what was experienced by other informants, they saw that the activity of consuming the merchandise they did was merely a wish and not a need that had to be met immediately. They carry out these activities with the aim of channeling their hobbies and to give support to BTS. Like Tsabita and Nada who think that rationality is needed in this case, where buying merchandise can be put aside if there is a more important and urgent need to be preceded.

Apart from seeing the priority scale described by the informants, the researcher also asked what factors drove them before deciding to buy BTS merchandise. Researcher found that most informants felt encouragement from personal factors felt in themselves and intimacy feelings to BTS members.

*“Kayaknya faktor nya lebih ke personal diri aku sendiri gitu sih....salah satu alasan aku jadi ARMY dan beli merchandisenya itu adalah aku ngerasa mereka adalah bagian dari diri aku. Ya sangat personal diri aku sih...(interview Dewi, 30 Juli)”*

Then there are other informants who carry out activities to consume BTS merchandise because of the supportive environment, where they are surrounded by other ARMYs and the urge to buy BTS merchandise is great because they can discuss with each other about the worth or not of the merchandise they are going to buy, and support each other to buy BTS merchandise. But back again to their personal selves, where they think the biggest decision before doing these activities is due to the impulse of their own desire and so much love for BTS.

*“Faktor khusus nya ya dari faktor lingkungan juga kan. Tadi kan awalnya aku nggak mau beli album-album gitu kan. Tapi kok pada beli jadi terpancing pengen beli jadi searching-searching kaya nya worth it gitu lho. Ya gara-gara ini juga konser, aku habis nonton konser jadi berasa lebih dekat sma mereka. Semenjak udh konser aku jadi pengen ‘menafkahi’ mereka hahaha... Jadi geliatnya kaya aduhhh jadi pengen beli-beli lagi...(interview Tsabita, 30 Juli)”*

From another informant’s statement, there is an ARMY community where indeed they try to support each other to carry out merchandise consumption activities which are intended as a form of appreciation for BTS, but she thinks that because everyone's economic conditions are different, the procurement issues are hard to be generalized. She thinks that it is the right of an ARMY individually to determine whether they decide to consume official or unofficial BTS merchandise or not.

#### **D. Consumption Activity and ARMY social status**

As an actor of consumption, “the goods” that is consumed certainly has its own meaning. As personal satisfaction, needs, to determine their status in social life. Researcher found that none of the informants thought that buying official merchandise could show their social status.

*“Kalau ke diri sendiri sih cuman kaya memenuhi keinginan aja. Kayak wah udah jadi berhasil jadi army. Buat kebanggan diri sendiri aja. Udah berhasil beli yang official. Tapi kalau untuk yang status sosial gitu enggak sih, jadi buat kebanggaan diri sendiri aja... (interview Tsabita, 30 Juli)”*

All of the informants interviewed by the researcher argued that they did not think at all about how the official BTS merchandise they bought shows their social status. Like Dewi's statement that she did solely to appreciate and support BTS as an artist, and Tsabita, who made her consumption activities feel satisfying and proud.

As same as with Nada, there is a sense of pride for them after buying official merchandise, she feels that she has given support directly to BTS and has succeeded in becoming ARMY. He explained that when fans consume products from their idol agencies, they will directly provide financial support for idols to continue working to make music that can be enjoyed until later.

#### **E. ARMY contemplate their consumption activities**

The consumption activities carried out by fans can be shown by several things, one of them is giving meaning. The meaning here means that fans can freely interpret the meaning contained in the goods they consume. ARMY are no exception. Each ARMY has its own interpretation of the merchandise they have consumed so far. Researcher try to find out about how informants contemplate the merchandise they have.

*“Kalau aku pribadi sih lebih ke buat investasi nanti di masa depan, kalo ada yang butuh kan bisa kujual mahal. Apalagi banyak merchandise official yang susah banget di cari jadi kalau dijual bisa mahal banget hehehe...(interview Nada, 30 Juli)”*

Nada perceive her BTS merchandise as a long-term investment product. She plans to sell the official merchandise she owns when the product is limited in quantity at a higher price for profit. She also wants other ARMY to have the opportunity to have the official merchandise that they don't have, so she intends to buy the merchandise and then sell it to ARMYs who want to have certain products.

*“Kalau aku sih kesanku banyak banget. Bisa dijadikan pajangan, kayak ada perasaan bangga udah bisa beli barang itu, jadi motivasi lah, kayak aku bisa beli lebih dari ini dengan penghasilanku nanti. Terus juga bisa nanti aku jual lagi hehehe...Terus juga ‘value’ yang ada di merchandise officialnya itu. Karena menurut aku worth it banget gitu loh beli merchandise official seorang seniman dan perusahaan yang punya value yang lebih tinggi.....sekarang yang kita tahu kan mereka punya ketulusan dalam berkarya, jadi aku ngerasa worth it, kayak ini keren ini jadi motivasi aku juga untuk berkarya...(interview Dewi, 30 Juli)”*

In contrast to Nada, researcher found that five other informants perceive their BTS merchandise as personal collections, where they make these items as displays and give themselves personal pleasure. Dewi thinks that the merchandise that she owns has its own value where it is the work of BTS's thoughts and creativity as well as the people behind the scenes who devote their abilities to produce merchandise that ARMYs can be interested in. But it is not possible for the informants to plan on selling the merchandise in the future.

#### **b. Discussion**

Consuming BTS merchandise has become a commonplace for ARMY, both official and unofficial merchandise. Because by consuming merchandise they are “part” of BTS fans. And as a result of pop culture practices, ARMY's consumption of merchandise related to BTS is quite high. This is in line with the explanation of (Hills, 2002) namely that the consumption habits of fans which can be said to be very high make them ideal consumers, so that they are easy to read and can easily be predicted by the cultural industry and are often stable. Therefore, consumption phenomena can be understood only through their inscription in the sociocultural context in which they exist and, furthermore, they must be seen in relation to the full consumption cycle (Askergaard, 2015).

This activity of collecting merchandise is one form of activity carried out by ARMY. BTS merchandise is one of the things that are popular among ARMYs. They are willing to queue and even follow pre-order to get the products they want. In general, products related to idols have two characteristics, namely official, coming from the management of the artist that covers them, such as albums, light sticks, photo cards, posters, clothes, keychains and so on. Unofficial merchandise is usually produced by fans who have the ability and creativity to make designs and be entrepreneurial by producing and selling items related to their idols. The merchandise is either produced or not produced by the management of the artist who houses his idol and is usually sold at a lower price than the original price. Production carried out in a fandom is the result of a discussion of cultural meaning carried out by individuals in it (Ramadhani, 2019).

Apart from official merchandise, researcher found ARMY's various motives for consuming unofficial merchandise. Among them are just for fun as a form of personal satisfaction, official products that have been sold out, and a background of unfavorable economic conditions. These things are based on the economic condition of the informants who on average have not worked and are students. Unlike the informants who already have their own income, it is not a difficult matter to buy official merchandise. Apart from being based on economics, researcher also found that most informants saw this consumption activity as not a priority or primary need, which made them think twice before deciding to buy official merchandise or decide to buy unofficial merchandise at a more affordable price.

Intimacy feelings with BTS are also the biggest factors in buying merchandise, as the researcher found that most informants buy merchandise after knowing and being amazed by BTS's struggles until now which are not easy, and feel motivated by it. According to Furmanovsky (2019), ARMY also have high degree of protectiveness and pride in BTS accomplishments and behavior. The intimacy of these feelings originates from the frequent intensity of fans connecting with their idols, which causes communication to feel like interpersonal communication for fans. Moreover BTS has various special programs that are intended for ARMY, from entertaining ones such as variety shows, performances, interviews with various media to where BTS members personally greet fans live and share stories about their lives. This continuous interpersonal communication approach can create a sense of intimacy for fans. But actually this intimacy is artificial and only felt by the fans. This is what is called parasocial relationship.

According to Hartmann (in Sagita & Kadewardana, 2018), the concept of parasocial was introduced by Horton and Wohl, with the basic observation that people in the media direct their social and communicative behavior to the anticipated audience, becoming the same as real interpersonal communication. With the development of the internet and easy access to sites fans fulfill the desire of fans to continue to know all aspects of their idol's life. And departing from this aspect is what makes fans want to have their idol merchandise to feel more intimacy between them and idols, as well as a form of financial support to their idols as art workers to continue working through music.

Environmental factors surrounded by ARMY also participated in making the decision, where the greeting circle fans discussed with each other regarding BTS merchandise which was on sale, and it was inevitable that the feeling of desire to buy was big enough afterwards. They are willing to spend money ranging from 100-200 thousand to millions of rupiah to buy official and unofficial BTS merchandise. This is also based on the feeling of loyal attached to ARMY where they feel that the merchandise is a part of their identity as loyal fans.

Baudrillard (Ulfa, 2017) explained that there is a term popularized by Rene Descartes which reads "*Cogito, Ergo sum: I think therefore I exist*" in the sense that human existence is determined by ideas and thoughts originating from him, in the present social change reality has undergone a significant change in meaning. The development of modern society has experienced a shift in values, including the economic aspects inherent in society. The most appropriate term to describe today's society is: "*I shop therefore I am*" (Umanailo, 2018). This term has become a popular slogan because the people's sense of belonging to a product continues to increase, and shows how closely the need to keep shopping is in everyday life.

Today's modern society has lived in a consumer culture, where consumption has become an aspect that affects values, meanings and daily activities in social life. Modern society is a society where most of the individuals have a cultural value orientation that is more focused on contemporary life, with the help of communication and information technology which is constantly being updated. This term appears marked by the use of technology in various aspects of life and science which continues to develop as a form of human intellectual progress (Madjid, 2002).

According (Ulfa, 2017:35) argued that the consumption of use and physical values has become secondary and provides only satisfaction. The most important thing is how to enjoy it by utilizing these consumer goods as a sign. In fact, signs on objects that are consumed are now able to become markers in social relations that are built, where the object of consumption is able to determine the status and certain social symbols for its users. Ulfa also explained that on certain items, codes of exclusivity values were implicitly attached which later determined the social status of the users.

The ARMY fandom is no exception, whereas active players of consumption, the merchandise they consume has attached signs that determine their social status as part of the fandom. Especially with the presence of unofficial merchandise which is intended for ARMYs who want to continue to consume BTS merchandise but with a budget that is not too expensive. In connection with the theory presented earlier, ARMYs who buy official merchandise can actually feel superior, because they have abilities that are somewhat more capable than ARMYs who buy unofficial merchandise. But in fact, the researcher found that none of the informants thought that buying official merchandise could show their social status. They explained that as ARMY, consuming BTS merchandise is a sense of appreciation and a form of support for BTS's hard work so far as art workers, especially music that can be enjoyed until now.

Then there are a sense of pride in them because they feel that they already become ARMY. This is in line with Baudrillard (2017) statement that consumption can strengthen unity in groups, because consumption has created a sociological difference exchange process, and it can be said that if an individual has become part of a particular group it can be reflected in his activity in consuming goods-certain items. Commodities have undergone a shift in meaning, where previously defined based on their use, now it has become how people interpret things. ARMY consumes solely because they want to feel closer to BTS, that is, ARMY interprets their consumption activities as a contribution to their passion for BTS, and is not limited to just determining certain social status.

In practice, ARMY gives different meanings to the merchandise it consumes. Most of the informants see their merchandise as a personal collection and get the pleasant feeling of each collection. However, there are those who see BTS merchandise as value goods where they feel very motivated and feel indirectly connected to idols. Where, they felt BTS's sincerity in working and the merchandise felt worth consuming. And others also argue that the collection they own can be a prospect for long-term investment where in the future it can be sold again at a profitable price.

The statements of several informants are in line with Baudrillard in (Barker, 2012) that culture studies explains that objects in consumer society are no longer purchased for use value, but as a sign commodity in a society marked by increased commodification. This means that people no longer buy goods based on use value but based on the signs on the product. This is the same as the findings of researcher who bought the product because the product was related to BTS. And this is also in line with the explanation of culture studies (Barker, 2012) that a larger share of consumption is the consumption sign attached to the growth of commodities, culture and the marketing of certain market gaps and the creation of lifestyles.

Researchers found that fans have become a 'free' labor during the dissemination of K-Pop globally. According to Terranova (2003), by looking at the internet as a specific instance of the fundamental role, free labor stands for continuously producing value by building Web sites through cyberspace and animating the internet by cultural and technical labor through and through whilst simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited. Free labor in this case is not necessarily exploited labor. Many, perhaps even most, fans organizing it without the desire to earn money in return, nevertheless, for the pleasure of communication and sharing the same interest with another fan in a whole fandom.

Every day we can see various forms of fan production in cyberspace such as opinions, commentary, reviews, up to fan art, edited videos and there are large numbers of creativity fan-made related to their idols. Terranova (2003) adds the concept of “Web 2.0” is a foundational premise as it leads to dramatic rise in “user-generated content”. As the development of the Internet, it is important to maintain a website continuously and prevent it from obsolescence. Since nowadays people tend to spent most of their time on the internet, it is inevitable for them not to see and produce “something” on the internet, and this where a fandom take places. By continuously producing and creating arts, sharing, also discussing and receiving feedback of their fan-made related post were crucial to maintaining the curiosity and interest from people all around the world.

As the results of this study, researchers also found that fans can be a significant part of marketing in the K-Pop industry. Andrejevic (in De Kosnik, 2007) explain fan labor’s “fan production” also succeed at customizing mass media, theoretically, the niche marketing and two-way communication facilitated by the internet promise to give consumers exactly what each of them wants, thus one of the key promises of postindustrial capitalism is personalizing fans interest and engage to customization to maintain their commitment as a loyal costumer.

Andrejevic also claims consumers who “freely” express their opinions, their likes and dislikes, about various mass products on various websites, provide marketers and manufacturers with key information on their customer base (De Kosnik, 2007). And in this case, through websites and all kinds of platforms on the internet, fans can freely express their opinions and deliver ideas of characteristics that related to idol’s product according to what they want. They also channeling their creativity into fan-productions, or production by consumers, results to benefits the larger market economy especially in K-Pop industry.

Fans are no longer passive consumers, however in this era, they became active consumers where they could impose most of the market base to be targeted into and create values for media producers, distributor and marketers in K-Pop industry. De Kosnik (2007) also adds therefore fans become more enmeshed in the logic of the marketplace the more they customize mass-media texts, for in dedicating their own effort and energy to mass media, they increase the likelihood that they will stay invested in and involved with certain TV programs, certain film franchises, or certain bands, over a longer period of time than they might have had they not invested their labor.

## 5. Conclusion

From the entire research process, it can be concluded that the consumption activities are something that unable to be avoided for K-Pop fans and in this case, is ARMY. By consuming both official and unofficial merchandise, they feel they have become part of BTS fans. Apart from economics motive, researcher also found that most informants saw this consumption activity as not a priority or primary need, which made them think twice before deciding to buy official merchandise or decide to buy unofficial merchandise at a more affordable price. Intimacy feelings related to BTS are also the biggest factors for ARMY, aside from certain values they get from the merchandise they consume. The intimacy feelings originate from the frequent intensity of fans connecting with their idols, which causes communication to feel like “interpersonal” communication for fans. And departing from this aspect, ARMY interprets their consumption activities as a contribution of their passion for BTS, and is not limited to just determining certain social status.

The most important finding of this research shows that fans have become a 'free' labor during the dissemination of K-Pop globally. As the development of the Internet, the various forms of fan production in cyberspace is something that often “encountered” by internet users. Fans have a big role in maintaining a website and fan production continuously and prevent it from obsolescence. As they channeling their creativity into fan-productions, or production by consumers, results to benefits the larger market economy especially in K-Pop industry. Fans are no longer passive consumers, however in this era, they became active consumers where they could impose most of the market base to be targeted into and create values for media producers, distributor and marketers in K-Pop industry. Therefore, the key promises of postindustrial capitalism are personalizing fans interest and engage to customization to maintain their commitment as a loyal customer.

The researcher realizes that this research describes the consumption and free labor culture in ARMY fandom with very limited coverage of participants and regions. For the next research, it is expected to conduct a broader study of the consumption and free labor culture in different scope from economic, social to geographical aspects. Thus, it will get a more varied and comprehensive representation.

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