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ARTICLE (REFEREED)

Transcending Boundaries: Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS) as Transnational Icon of Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract

Cosmopolitanism studies regained popularity in the 1990s. Case studies on individuals are finally emerging, mainly on celebrities, but they are still dominated by Western actors and limited to charitable movements for the poor and the ill. To fill this gap, we bring the South Korean music group Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS) into the discourse. The research questions are, in what respects does BTS represent a cosmopolitan outlook? What kind of behaviours and actions do they demonstrate? How do their behaviours and actions influence others? We adopt cosmopolitanism and the transnational actor concept to answer these questions. We use a descriptive-qualitative approach through the use of primary and secondary sources. As a result, we found that anti-racism and anti-discrimination are the two main issues that represent BTS' cosmopolitan views. Their practices are reflected in their daily conversations, music, donations, and advocacy. They spread their influence to large-scale fans through various media.

Keywords

Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS); Cosmopolitanism; Discrimination; Racism; Transnational Actors

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Introduction

In a recording of a speech at the 75th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that was circulated on social media, there was a statement from BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan) band leader RM (Kim Namjoon):

As a boy from a small city of Ilsan in Korea, as a young man standing at the UNGA, and as a global citizen of this world, I imagined the limitless possibilities before all of us and my heart beating with excitement ([UNICEF 2020](#)).

This speech is one of the triggers for our discussion about whether this Korean music group is cosmopolitan. It reminds us of the term ‘a citizen of the world’ that the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes used to describe himself when asked where he came from. He credited himself with something broader, beyond traditional constructs. This term is believed to be the origin of cosmopolitanism ([Nussbaum 1996](#)), a study that has recently regained popularity. Cosmopolitanism itself is now widely interpreted as a moral and political philosophy that highlights the importance of recognizing and respecting human differences by transcending national and cultural boundaries. Cosmopolitans have shared values that they seek to realize to create a just and peaceful world.

In the globalization era, the effort to manifest cosmopolitan values has become more complex and challenging. We need a collective awareness that everyone is no longer just a citizen of a country, but also a citizen of the world. In this era, transnational actors play an important role in raising such awareness. However, the manifestation of cosmopolitan values is often only associated with powerful actors such as multinational corporations (MNCs) and international organizations. It seems that the role of individuals or grassroots has not received equal attention.

Seeing a music group identifying themselves as global citizens made us wonder if they could be aligned with MNCs and international organizations that have long practised cosmopolitan values in their everyday operations. Previously, many studies have identified how MNCs and international organizations contribute to the practice of cosmopolitanism because they operate across countries and involve many people from different backgrounds. [Thomas Maak \(2009\)](#) identifies the contribution of MNCs in global social and environmental change efforts through conducive institutional schemes. Meanwhile, [Balabanova \(2019\)](#) shows that UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) through the ‘World Refugee Day’ campaign has promoted better protection for refugees who are also global citizens. They are giant actors whose names are well-known in the global social and economic spheres, so it is only natural that their actions are also easier to get the spotlight.

Several studies have examined cosmopolitan practices by individuals, for example, [Mitchell \(2016\)](#) and [Littler \(2008\)](#). Both articles are very close to this study as they involve public figures, specifically celebrities. However, the scope of cosmopolitanism practices they examine seems very narrow, being only in the form of donations/charity as if cosmopolitanism is limited to financial aid for the poor and the ill, especially those in developing countries. Upon further scrutiny, we argue that BTS does much more than that. Their social activities outside of music can be easily found as they have been widely researched, for example, in celebrity studies, celebrity diplomacy, and fandom studies. The traces were collected for review, as one of us is also interested in these fields of study.

Besides the scope of practice, we also find that previous research is dominated by Western actors, so bringing an Asian group like BTS into the discussion of cosmopolitanism is still uncommon and beneficial for the development of this study. For this reason, we formulated several research questions. In what respects does BTS represent a cosmopolitan outlook? What kind of behaviours and actions do they demonstrate to realise cosmopolitan values? How do their behaviours and actions influence others?

By adopting cosmopolitanism as the theoretical basis we consistently use in this research, we seek to answer these questions with a well-grounded and argumentative analysis. Choosing BTS as the research

object is also convenient, as their status as global rising stars makes the availability of data very abundant. We analysed everything related to their practice of cosmopolitanism, from their conversations on social media, the music they make, to the major events they are involved in.

This research argues that BTS' cosmopolitan reputation is powered by their involvement in anti-racism and anti-discrimination topics, which they demonstrate through conversation, music, and activism. They bring a breath of fresh air to the expansion of cosmopolitanism perspectives as they capture a large audience thanks to massive exposure due to their star status. By exploring BTS' cosmopolitanism, this article also includes the discourse on the comparison between BTS' advocacy at home and abroad.

The article is divided into several sections, including literature review, conceptual framework, methodology, results, and discussion. We first conduct a literature review by examining relevant previous studies, the theory of cosmopolitanism, and the concept of transnational actors. Then we elaborate on the methods used in this research. Finally, we conducted an in-depth analysis to answer the research questions we had formulated.

Literature Review

Transnational actors can be seen as cosmopolitans when they frequently operate across national and cultural boundaries, and bridge gaps in the global community. Thus, they can contribute to realizing cosmopolitan values. Not only do they recognize and respect differences, but they also promote the importance of human rights and world citizenship based on a humanitarian spirit. Transnational actors that are often considered significant players in cosmopolitanism are multinational corporations.

We identified several studies that comprehensively elaborate multinational corporations within the framework of cosmopolitanism. [Thomas Maak \(2009\)](#) finds that MNCs as transnational actors contribute to cosmopolitanism in at least three ways, which are being advocates of justice, agents of benefit through corporate social responsibility (CSR) and charity, as well as contributors to national or global political schemes that seek the welfare of society. Meanwhile, [Vandekerckhove \(2010\)](#) comes up with the idea that MNCs could develop a 'cure' for the problems that people think they cause, alongside the tremendous impact that MNCs have on the lives of global citizens. Lastly, [Surma \(2013\)](#) shows how MNCs are committed to social responsibility and global social change towards interlocutors by engaging with the concept of social relations that are political and perceived as progress towards cosmopolitanism.

Besides MNCs, another actor that has also received considerable recognition in the study of cosmopolitanism is international organizations, for example, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). [Balabanova \(2019\)](#) examines how this organization actively provides assistance and protection for millions of refugees who have fled their homes due to discrimination, violence, conflict, and war. UNHCR strives to ensure that refugees receive the human rights they deserve. On the other side, [Pace \(2018\)](#) investigates the progress of European integration strategies, social cohesion, and belonging in and by the European Union, taking into account new multicultural realities and promoting new integration models that enable the protection of human rights and the preservation of cultural values.

Considering the recognition MNCs and international organizations have received for their contributions to cosmopolitan practices, this article would like to bring the role of individual actors into this study. This article will certainly focus significantly on celebrity because the actors chosen are part of it. It is important to include previous studies on celebrity actions that are framed in terms of philanthropy, activism, and cosmopolitanism. They are examined based on their role; their impact; their relation to certain phenomena or concepts; their implications for certain fields; and some even 'question' them.

Examining how celebrities are directly involved in cosmopolitanism, this article acknowledges the work of [Lau \(2021\)](#). She explores Bollywood star Aamir Khan's humanitarian image as a regional but

cosmopolitan phenomenon. She seeks to unpack the power dynamics between media, advocacy, economics, and fandom in a world that is now borderless. She positions Khan as a cosmopolitan who, with his star power, can speak up for the weak, making him a local hero. Through his humanitarian TV programs and foundations, the status of philanthropist celebrity is attached to him. On the other hand, he is dubbed 'Male God' by his fans in China who describe him as a charming and dedicated man. The presence of Khan and his movie in China is seen as a mediator between two cultures that encourage racial tolerance. These two images create a duality to his existence at home and abroad.

Khan's fragmented personality confounds his brand of humanitarianism, between his philanthropy in India and his commercialism in China. [Lau \(2021\)](#) argues that Khan's cosmopolitan vision becomes vague as it is displaced by highly commercialized publicity in China, not to mention ideological and geopolitical issues that complicate the universal values he is expected to embody. Nonetheless, Lau still thinks that Khan brought a breath of fresh air to the study of cosmopolitanism because he was able to cross cultural and geopolitical boundaries, both benevolently and commercially.

This article finds significant differences between the cosmopolitan images reflected by Aamir Khan and BTS. Khan is portrayed as practicing his cosmopolitanism only domestically, while BTS does so both domestically and internationally, despite the uneven frequency. In terms of similarities, both articles highlight non-Western cosmopolitan visions as complementary rather than oppositional. We feel the importance of non-Western representation to enrich this global study with various adaptive perspectives.

Another piece of literature comes from [Mitchell \(2016\)](#) who takes up the celebrity discussion of humanitarianism and the rise of neoliberal citizenship. She investigates the emergence of a transnational field that appears authentic thanks to the encounter between humanitarian celebrities, fans, and beneficiaries in cross-border humanitarian aid agendas. Mitchell analyses the role of emotions that fans engage with their idols in the formation of transnational solidarity through long-distance charity. Although it only started with the love for the idol, in the end, they have cultivated a morally beneficial social space. This is also reflected in what BTS fans do, where their support for their idol transforms into a social movement that has a significant impact on the global community.

Conceptual Framework

COSMOPOLITANISM

Cosmopolitanism is a term that is making a comeback after the literature on it continued to emerge in the 1990s. The work of [Martha Nussbaum \(1994\)](#) and [Kwame Appiah \(1997\)](#) significantly influenced this study. Early in the development of this study, their emphasis on the dichotomy between cosmopolitanism and nationalism was understood to be important. According to [Nussbaum \(1994\)](#), the main point of cosmopolitanism is fundamental, to give our first allegiance to the moral community of all human beings, not to any particular government or country.

[Appiah \(1997\)](#) goes into detail to explain cosmopolitan patriots – the identity he attaches to himself and his family. He uses this concept to answer narrow nationalist accusations that cosmopolitans have no roots. Cosmopolitan patriots live in a world where everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan. They are bound to their home of origin with its set of cultures and norms, but they also deeply appreciate and cherish other places that are home to others and can be home to themselves. His family's dual Ghanaian and British identity and ancestry reflect this. In his father's last note before he died, there is a message that also sparked Appiah's writing, 'Remember that you are citizens of the world'. Therefore, in this research, we also touch on this dichotomy by raising the discourse on BTS activism that is carried out abroad, but not as massive as at home.

Over time, the discussion on cosmopolitanism has expanded and other scholars have emerged with various themes that they bring to the study. Given the scope and relevance of the case in this article, we decided to use Linklater's more generalized version of cosmopolitanism. Besides being a renowned international relations scholar, he has also significantly contributed to the work on cosmopolitanism as a conceptual framework for understanding global politics. Since there is no consensus on the definition of cosmopolitanism, [Linklater \(2007\)](#) conceives of it as a moral and political philosophy that stresses the importance of recognizing and respecting human differences while promoting shared values and objectives across national boundaries.

Cosmopolitans believe that all human beings belong to one global community based on a shared morality. Therefore, every individual deserves equal rights and opportunities, regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity, or cultural background. All people are interdependent, creating a moral obligation to work together to promote collective goals and values such as peace, justice, and environmental sustainability. These goals have proven to remain relevant to this day.

Through the lens of critical theory, [Linklater \(2007\)](#) explains that cosmopolitanism seeks to create a more just and peaceful world. This can be achieved through collective actions to address global problems such as poverty, environmental degradation, and human rights violations. Hence, it is important to build a global society that is committed to realizing cosmopolitan values.

The cosmopolitanism theory developed by [Andrew Linklater \(1998, 2007, 2011\)](#) is grounded in at least four key values:

1. Inclusivity, which recognizes and respects cultural diversity and rejects ethnocentric or nationalist views that put one culture or nation above another.
2. Human dignity, which believes that every individual has inherent value and dignity, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or cultural background.
3. Global justice, which suggests that all people have a responsibility to address inequalities and injustices such as poverty and human rights violations.
4. Ecological sustainability, which emphasizes the importance of protecting the environment and practicing sustainable development that benefits the present and future generations.

These four cosmopolitanism core principles serve as a framework for comprehending the moral and political implications of interdependence between individuals. It is these values that cosmopolitans seek to realize.

Another aspect to note is the correlation between cosmopolitanism and globalization. The two are not identical nor did they emerge simultaneously. Linklater mentions that the idea of cosmopolitanism or what he also calls 'world citizenship' already appeared in the Ancient Greek era around the fourth century BC, while globalization is believed to have emerged in the 19th century. Ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes called himself a 'world citizen' because, for him, the polis (city-state in Ancient Greece) no longer had the right to individual loyalty. However, he only used this idea to criticize the declining polis at the time, not to build a universal community for humanity. It was only later that Immanuel Kant, an Enlightenment philosopher, used the concept to promote stronger moral responsibilities between territorially separated citizens ([Linklater 2007](#)).

Since the Second World War, global social movements have marked a return to the idea of cosmopolitanism to pursue a sense of collective responsibility for the world as a whole. It has also encouraged the development of effective institutions to address global issues ([Dower 2000](#)). [Linklater \(2007\)](#) even considers cosmopolitanism as the key to the struggle for universal basic rights and obligations that can bind all people for a more just world order.

On closer reflection, globalization does increase the flow of ideas and people across national borders. However, this does not necessarily result in greater understanding or empathy for differences, especially regarding identity. Therefore, cosmopolitanism can also be seen as a response to the challenges and opportunities raised by globalization. We argue that globalization has contributed to the new relevance of cosmopolitan ideals today.

TRANSNATIONAL ACTORS

Since the Cold War came to an end, the term ‘transnational actor’ is often used in international relations. Transnational actors refer to entities that operate beyond state borders. They can be international organizations, multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), individuals, and other entities engaging in transnational activities. The presence of transnational actors is the result of an increasing flow of transactions and communication across countries through trade, migration, and tourism ([Deutsch 1957](#)).

Among the transnational actors above, this article focuses on individual actors who belong to a category of ‘super-empowered individual’. This phrase describes people who have remarkable levels of knowledge, resources, and/or expertise that allow them to have a substantial impact on global challenges. They can include activists, entrepreneurs, celebrities, religious leaders, and other actors who utilize technology and networks to achieve their goals. The super-empowered individuals can bridge the gap between different actors and catalyse collective action to achieve their common goals ([Bakry 2017](#); [Friedman 2000](#)). In this article, the transnational actors highlighted are celebrities.

Transnational actors usually act independently from their country’s authorities ([Thiel & Maslanik 2010](#)). [Keck & Sikkink \(1998\)](#) argue that transnational actors are considered capable of playing an important role in international relations. This is because they remain influential even without state support, including in influencing global governance, promoting human rights, addressing global challenges, and promoting cultural understanding and exchange.

The growing number of transnational actors has complex implications for international relations, both positively and negatively. The rise of transnational actors has led to the idea that they seek to challenge state-centric patterns. That is, they are considered to be trying to shift power from the state to non-state actors to form a decentralized and pluralistic system of governance. Transnational actors have even been able to influence national and global policies through their means and strategies, depending on their objectives. We find that celebrities as transnational actors can also do this through the various activities they initiate, although Keck and Sikkink do not mention celebrities in their concept of transnational actors.

According to [Keck & Sikkink \(1998\)](#), some of the common ways used by transnational actors to achieve their goals are (1) advocacy and lobbying, which is using their resources, networks, and expertise to shape policies and regulations that suit their interests and values; (2) networking, they collaborate with other actors (civil society groups, businesses, governments, and international organizations) to strengthen their position in achieving common goals; (3) mobilization, which is engaging in campaigns, protests, boycotts, and strikes to pressure governments and other actors to change their policies or practices; and (4) capacity building, which means transnational actors provide resources, technical assistance, and specialized training to enhance the capacity of governments, organizations, and other stakeholders to achieve their goals. It is in these ways that we then describe the behaviours and actions that BTS demonstrate in their cosmopolitan practices.

Methodology

In this study, the authors use a descriptive-qualitative approach because it allows researchers to gather in-depth information about a phenomenon, especially in social science research where human behaviour,

experiences, and actions are complex and diverse. This approach encourages more flexible and open-ended exploration, allowing contributions to both theory development and practical applications.

In terms of the typological level of theoretical visibility developed by [Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, and Herber \(2014\)](#), this research uses a level 5 approach, where theory is applied consistently. The theory is implemented throughout the research process because it acts as a guide for the research. It can frame the research questions and provide a framework for analysing the data ([Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, & Herber 2014](#)). This approach gives us the advantage of 'methodological congruence' which [Morse & Richards \(2002\)](#) define as a condition in which objectives, research questions, and research methods fit together into a cohesive whole.

The data collected in this research was obtained from documentation through library research. Researchers collected various data and information in the form of text, visual, and audio. Meanwhile, in terms of its source, the data used can be classified into two types, namely primary and secondary data. Primary data was gathered from statements of relevant actors coming from exclusive interviews and press conferences published by various influential & credible media such as the official YouTube channels of the United Nations and the White House, as well as multi-platform media Variety. Official social media posts of the states, leaders, organizations, and actors studied were also used to support the primary data.

Furthermore, secondary data was obtained from physical and electronic books, journals, official reports, news, press releases, online articles, magazines, and social media posts. It is certainly needed to provide a deeper and more critical interpretation of the research questions we seek to address. By exploring related secondary data, we can also improve the quality and accuracy of our analysis.

In the analysis process, researchers need to interpret the data that has been collected from text, images, and audio into structured, critical, and argument-based writing. This process requires researchers to be careful in sorting through the data and reorganizing it. There are at least five steps of qualitative data analysis carried out in this research, i.e. searching and preparing the data; reading the whole data; categorizing the data; narrating the organized data; and interpreting the data. Since we use level 5 of theoretical visibility typology, we apply the theory of cosmopolitanism throughout the research process, from formulating the research questions to analysing the data.

BTS: More than Musicians

The actor chosen in this article is the music group BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan), a 7-member boyband from South Korea that has now become a cross-border social icon. The group consists of RM (Kim Namjoon), Jin (Kim Seokjin), Suga (Min Yoongi), J-Hope (Jung Hoseok), Jimin (Park Jimin), V (Kim Taehyung), and Jungkook (Jeon Jungkook). BTS started their career back in 2013. They became the dark horse that made their agency Big Hit Entertainment transform into HYBE, a new powerhouse in the music industry at home and abroad. [Kim \(2022\)](#) argues that the most surprising aspect of BTS' career was not their unexpected rise to fame, but the reality that they were able to achieve popularity in the United States – a Western music powerhouse.

BTS is now considered one of the most popular music groups in the world. They have made remarkable achievements in the music industry, including winning various major awards and selling out stadiums worldwide. Those achievements are driven by the fact that they are not simply a group that offers visuals, but they also produce good music and often deliver social messages that are relevant to their listeners' experiences. From the beginning of BTS' career, they have criticized many social issues through music, such as the school system, social hierarchy, beauty standards, and mental health. 'It isn't a BTS album if there isn't a track criticizing society', said Suga in a press conference ([Do 2017](#)).

In recent years, BTS has also been active in spreading the message of self-love, especially towards youth. Since 2017, BTS and UNICEF have had a strategic partnership through the *#LoveMyself* and

#*ENDviolence* campaigns. The purpose is to eradicate violence, abuse, and bullying toward children and teenagers, and also encourage self-love ([UNICEF 2020](#)). BTS participated in the campaign by donating, spreading positive messages on social media, and inviting their fans to share their experiences in the process of loving themselves. As part of their campaign with UNICEF, BTS attended the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) several times. At the 75th UNGA, where conditions were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, BTS sent out a video message in which the members expressed their enthusiasm for an exciting future for everyone.

Other than BTS, there are not many K-Pop groups that openly address social issues as [Kim \(2022\)](#) stated in the article 'BTS and the World Music Industry'. BTS produces and writes most of their songs so they have greater freedom to choose what they want to cover. They have been doing that since their very first album. BTS producer Bang Si-hyuk said that the group received a lot of criticism for being vocal, but for him, what was more important was that they wrote and shared their own story ([Choi 2018](#)). Arguably, their stance on authenticity has also contributed to drawing in many fans, locally and globally.

In this article, we believe that the claim of BTS being cosmopolitan cannot be proven without explaining how they built a fan community called ARMY (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth). One of the biggest factors that attracts people to become BTS fans is their universal music that promotes self-love and social criticism that is relevant to today's society around the world ([Chang & Park 2018](#); [Chung 2022](#); [Kim 2022](#); [McLaren & Jin 2020](#)). Despite there being no diversity in race or nationality among the members, it is widely reported in industry media that BTS has fans who are recognized as having very diverse backgrounds.

BTS built a solid fandom early on by developing a distinct approach to the idol-fan relationship. They have been connecting with their fans through social media, especially Twitter, even since their pre-debut days. Unlike other K-Pop idols whose intensity of social media use was restricted by their agencies, BTS optimized the use of this platform to get closer to their fans. We agree with [Kim \(2022\)](#) that this was also because, at the time, BTS only received very little exposure from conventional media. Regardless, the interactions they built online transcend continental, linguistic, and cultural barriers. To this day, this relationship makes the sense of solidarity and belonging between the two grow and sustain.

ARMY has grown into one of the largest fandoms whose appearance, activities, and impacts have been widely examined in fandom studies. It continues to evolve as the value of fans changes in contexts with ever-widening perimeters. Since the evolution of media, fans have merged into the media landscape and have always followed technological transformations. The virtual world is now the 'arena' for fans in terms of communication, creativity, knowledge, and organizational power ([Bennett 2014](#)). It has also become a determinant of social hierarchy among fan groups.

[Chang and Park \(2018\)](#) refer to ARMY as a 'tribe' with a sense of organization and value for teamwork. ARMY is spontaneous, boundaryless, self-governing, and able to function without any leadership hierarchy. No wonder, because on many occasions, they mobilize the community on a large scale (mainly through social media) to coordinate projects whether it is related to BTS' entertainment activities or other good causes that require mass support. In an article that questioned 'how a fandom collaborates autonomously, effectively, and impactfully for a cause unrelated to its original purpose of formation', [Park et al. \(2021\)](#) revealed that a major factor in ARMY's success lies in their shared values, besides their initial intention to amplify BTS' positive influence by simply behaving and doing good things.

Of the many social issues and messages of kindness spread by BTS, this paper captures two specific issues that we feel strongly represent a cosmopolitan outlook, which are anti-racism and anti-discrimination. We find that the group often raises these two issues, either through casual conversation, music, or social activism. It could be said that this is because racism and discrimination occur in all parts of the world, and even they experience it. Additionally, the fact that BTS has a large overseas fan base makes this issue very relevant.

BTS has often been the target of racism, especially overseas after their name went global. They were made fun of for their appearance and because the majority of the members did not speak English. Many articles have surfaced covering how certain people hurled racist remarks at BTS, one of which was by identifying them with the coronavirus. Despite this, BTS continued to spread encouragement about how we should respect others and love ourselves for who we are. The members have been vocal about this, be it in live broadcasts, interviews, or official speeches. One of the most widely shared phrases to date is a snippet of RM's speech at the UN General Assembly in 2018, 'No matter who you are, where you're from, your skin colour, gender identity: speak yourself. Find your name, find your voice by speaking yourself.' ([UNICEF n.d.](#)).

Now the question is whether they also talk about racism and discrimination in their home country – which is widely perceived as quite discriminating. An online article written by [David Lee \(2022\)](#) in the *South China Morning Post* specifically addresses this topic. He describes BTS as the world's most talked about group not only for their music but also for their speeches at the UN and their meeting with Joe Biden, current president of the US. Lee reveals how South Korea is not yet a multicultural-friendly country, especially since it has yet to implement anti-discrimination laws. This sparks comments from people who argue that BTS is hesitant to get involved in this issue in their own country.

In general, many are angry that South Korean celebrities are perceived to be unwilling to use their influence to talk about racism and discrimination at home, yet they are seen advocating for those issues abroad. However, there is also a need for further understanding of the South Korean entertainment industry and the risks involved. [Lee \(2022\)](#) quotes Michael Hurt, a cultural theory lecturer at the Korean National University of Arts, that the K-Pop industry is very strict in regulating the image preservation of its artists. It is very risky for a public figure to address controversial issues, especially in a conservative society. Despite their limited movement domestically, we agree with that article's assertion that BTS has been 'very outspoken' on social issues that are still considered taboo to talk about, compared to the K-pop industry as a whole. But still, we also hope that BTS can advocate for issues of racism and discrimination specifically in their country.

Transnational Actors as Cosmopolitans

In the literature review, we have explained the immense recognition multinational corporations and international organizations get for their contributions to cosmopolitanism. In this section, we focus on individual actors who can make a major contribution to promoting the values of cosmopolitanism because every individual has the potential to influence their surroundings. By manifesting cosmopolitan values in their actions and behaviours, they can inspire others to do the same.

We also draw attention to the analytical dilemma reiterated by [Woodward, Skrbis, and Bean \(2008\)](#), of how being cosmopolitan cannot be defined by 'physical mobilization' that exposes one to a wide range of people and their set of norms and cultures. Being cosmopolitan is as simple as someone upholding cosmopolitan values that are demonstrated in their speech, attitude, and actions. So, we do not think there is a definite measure for someone to be cosmopolitan, as long as the identification also comes from self-awareness.

In this article, being a cosmopolitan as well as a transnational actor does sound like a double standard, which is to fulfil the criteria that one engages in cross-border activities by implementing cosmopolitan values. However, there are many actors who, we believe, already meet this standard. Transnational actors can contribute to cosmopolitanism in various ways. For example, they can promote cross-cultural dialogue, mobilize social action, and advocate for the protection of human rights and social justice on a global scale. They can also contribute to developing a sense of collective responsibility to address global challenges such

as disease, social inequality, climate change, and political instability. The actors can be politicians, religious leaders, social activists, or celebrities.

Individually, some of the actors have even established specialized foundations to collect and distribute private funds and public donations to various social problem areas in many countries. Oprah Winfrey, for example, established the Oprah Winfrey Foundation to help women and children gain access to adequate education and health, especially in developing countries. Elton John founded the Elton John AIDS Foundation after he lost two friends to AIDS. Since its inception in 1992, his foundation has raised more than \$565 million to support HIV/AIDS programs worldwide reaching 90,000 beneficiaries ([Elton John AIDS Foundation 2022](#)). Aside from the more common forms of charity, some advocate for certain issues such as America Ferrera who works for racial and gender justice through the Harness organization that she co-founded with her partners. All of this is done across national boundaries with one common value, which is care and compassion for 'others' on the other side of the world.

Countless names have been covered in various studies. In the music sector, two names whose echo is very strong in the study of social activism are Bob Geldof and Bono Vox. Geldof was the initiator behind 'Live Aid', the world's largest charity concert, to address extreme hunger in Ethiopia. The concert was held at Wembley Stadium in London and John F. Kennedy Stadium in Philadelphia on July 13, 1985, and was attended by more than 170,000 people. It raised £40 million in donations for food aid and long-term development in Ethiopia ([BBC 2000](#)). Meanwhile, Bono began to be an activist after participating voluntarily in the 'Live Aid' concert. He continued his activism by founding DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade, Africa), a non-governmental organization that advocates for equality and justice for African people. He also mobilized a campaign to fight extreme poverty and disease in Africa through ONE Campaign. Later, he created a product license called 'Product Red' whose profits are allocated to tackle AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria in developing countries.

Geldof and Vox certainly realize that their global star status and transnational activities have made them transnational actors. They play an important role in raising people's awareness of a serious problem that was 'out of their sight' and turning it into 'visible support' in the form of financial aid. Live Aid itself has changed the face of charity and social activism. Despite the good intentions, we should not close our eyes to the fact that those activisms are not that simple. Reflecting on what Julie Grant expressed in her article 'Live Aid/8: Perpetuating the Superiority Myth' ([2015](#)), such activism contributes to perpetuating the global perception that the Global North is superior to the South. The aid that flows from Western celebrity activism, for example, maintains the notion that the Global South cannot succeed without the help of the North. That is why we need to broaden the scope of this study beyond just focusing on Western case studies. One way is by showcasing BTS' recent activities on the global stage to illustrate how they can be placed within a broader history.

The contributions made by public figures above deserve a special place in the cosmopolitanism study, beyond celebrity activism. Although they're not directly contributing theoretical ideas, they have manifested real cosmopolitan practices. Similar to BTS, the activism of those figures was carried out outside their home countries. It shows that they care about the rights of people in other parts of the world. Despite debates about the seemingly inseparable links between public figures, media, and politics, we are keen to look at the big picture, as long as what they are doing is causing more good than harm.

Practicing Cosmopolitanism: from Twitter to the White House

BTS members identify themselves as global citizens. This is the first thing that makes us think that they are cosmopolitan. With this identity, they have a responsibility to fight for the universal rights of world citizens. These rights are based on the four core values of cosmopolitanism described earlier: inclusivity, human dignity, social justice, and environmental sustainability.

We explore various forms of actions BTS takes to realize cosmopolitan values, particularly in the discourse of racism and discrimination, and how their actions can influence others. We divide it into three sections referring to how transnational actors achieve their goals. First, BTS contributes to raising people's awareness of racism and discrimination by utilizing their music and social media. Second, they support movements or organizations that fight for human rights with financial assistance. Third, BTS advocates for inclusivity and equality through special meetings with country leaders regarding the issues they fight for.

RAISING SOCIAL AWARENESS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA AND MUSIC

BTS has been consistently using their social media platforms and music to raise awareness of global issues, particularly racism and discrimination which is the focus of this research. They utilize their tens of millions of followers to promote not only their music but also the causes. Through their social media, especially Twitter, BTS influences and mobilizes their fans to take a stance and action on certain issues. Through music, they spread social values that other musicians may not necessarily share.

Sourced from Guinness World Records, BTS has collected three world records as of February 2022, which have not been broken at the time of writing (May 2024). They became the band with the most followers on Instagram ([@bts.bighitofficial](https://www.instagram.com/bts.bighitofficial/)), TikTok ([@bts_official_bighit](https://www.tiktok.com/@bts_official_bighit)), and Twitter ([@BTS_twt](https://twitter.com/BTS_twt)) ([Pilastro 2022](#)), thanks to their massive fan base. This achievement is important because social media is now a key communication tool to increase their audience reach, build their branding, and promote their values. In BTS' case, these three things seem to be reflected in their social media activities. Social media has a significant impact since it is useful to provide space for marginalized voices and promote calls for action. As a result, these platforms help raise awareness, build communities, and create change.

We looked at several data that could explain BTS' influence on social media to determine their audience reach. This led to a global survey titled 'The 2022 ARMY Census' which is the largest fan-based demographic survey. The survey was shared across various social media platforms. Eventually, the survey was responded to by 562,280 people from more than 100 countries ([Grover et al. 2022](#)). To make it easier to fill out the survey, the questionnaire was available in 36 languages and conducted over two months, from April 1 to May 31, 2022. According to the organizers, the survey aimed to provide an overview of the fandom ARMY, as well as break the negative stereotypes attached to them ([Grover et al. 2022](#)).

Although the 2022 ARMY Census could not perfectly describe the entire fandom, the organizers were considered successful in collecting a remarkable number of samples. The survey collected some important data such as countries with the largest number of ARMYs; the year in which they joined the fandom; age; gender; education level; employment status; the industry in which they work; and the social media platforms they frequently use. The results of this survey were published through the organizer's official website www.btsarmycensus.com.

The various works, content, and campaigns that BTS produces and carries out arguably reach almost the entire world. ARMY's spread across many countries shows the inclusivity of the fandom. Even though they are just music listeners at first, they have the potential to become cosmopolitans themselves if they continue to be exposed to the various activism carried out by their idols. Since BTS is loved by people from different countries, it means that what they say and do can be accepted by different cultures. It is this universality that strengthens BTS' role as cosmopolitans. Through their field, BTS spreads cosmopolitan values around the world.

In their activism, BTS uses Twitter as their main medium as the platform is commonly used to share information, discuss certain issues, promote their work and activities, as well as create trends. The survey found that 78.9% of ARMY are Twitter users ([Grover et al. 2022](#)). Their engagement on the platform can be seen from the fact that in the last ten years, there have been nearly two billion mentions of BTS on Twitter. It means that in one day alone, there are about 500,000 conversations related to BTS on the

platform ([Newton 2023](#), no. 6). This massive number can be utilized by BTS to garner social support from their followers.

[Twitter Data \(2021\)](#) reported that BTS' post with the hashtags *#StopAsianHate* and *#StopAAPIHate* was the most retweeted post throughout 2021, reaching almost one million retweets. During a period of increased hate crimes against Asians that year, BTS put their influence and followers to good use. They shared a powerful message to fight discrimination and violence.

... We stand against racial discrimination.

We condemn violence.

You, I and we all have the right to be respected.

We will stand together. ([BTS 2021](#))

A year before, BTS had also publicly endorsed the Black Lives Matter movement, which formed in response to police brutality and systemic racism in the United States. Via their Twitter account, BTS condemned the racial discrimination and violence that black people experienced in the US. They said that all people deserve to be respected. This message is similar to what they conveyed in the *#StopAsianHate* movement. This means that BTS is fighting for equality for everyone, not just for the Asian community from which they come. Through their activism, BTS raised the voices of activists and encouraged their fans to take action against racism and discrimination. This is an example of how their popularity can be used to promote equality and social justice, principles that cosmopolitans stand for.

A journalist, Jae-Ha Kim, responded to BTS' post about calling for action to stop racial discrimination. She recognized how BTS was able to make good use of their platform. Through her personal Twitter account, she stated *'They are a musical group, yes, but they are also spokesmen for this generation in many ways. Their words are heard and they use their forum wisely.'* ([J. Kim 2021](#)). To be called this generation's spokesmen, we can feel the responsibility they carry forward.

In terms of music, BTS frequently incorporates social issues into their work. One song that focused on a very specific social issue was 'Change' released in 2017. It is a very critical and political song. RM collaborated with Wale, an African-American rapper. They explored social themes relevant to many people. They pointed out similar problems that occur in both Eastern and Western societies such as racism, poor education systems, lack of trust in the government, and cyber-bullying.

The song 'Change' shows how music can be a means to express people's experiences and perspectives on the social issues they face. RM uses this song to raise people's awareness and empathy that what happens around them can also happen in other parts of the world. The hope is that this song can stimulate the cosmopolitan conduct of many individuals to establish a more just and peaceful world order. When asked how they were able to work together on this song, RM said, *'They've got their situations and we've got ours in Seoul, the problems are everywhere and the song is like a prayer for change.'* ([Glasby 2017](#)).

In addition to RM's 'Change', there are other BTS members who also made songs with universal values. In 2022, J-Hope released '=' (equal sign) as part of his solo album 'Jack in the Box'. The song was received with such huge enthusiasm that it has been played more than 80 million times on the music-streaming platform Spotify. In a review video about his album, J-Hope mentioned that this song talks about equality. He said, *'No one is below or above me. Everyone is equal.'* ([BTS 2022](#)).

세상은 넓고 (The world is wide)

사람 마음 참 좁다 (But people have a very narrow mind)

꼭 같을 필요는 없어도 (It doesn't have to be the same)

다른 게 왜 죄일까? (Why is being different a sin?)

나이를 넘어 성별을 넘어 (Beyond age, beyond gender)

국경을 넘어 (Beyond the borders)

어쩌면 모두의 숙제 같은 것 (Maybe it's like homework for everyone)
 나부터 깨우쳐 (Awaken them that it is just a difference)
 차별 아닌 차이인 것 (Not something to discriminate against) ([Genius 2022a](#), [2022b](#)).

As in the song lyrics above, J-Hope straightforwardly expresses that every individual has a responsibility to respect each other. Differences in gender, age, and where someone comes from should not be a cause for discrimination. He also tries to remind his listeners that the victims of prejudice and discrimination are none other than ourselves. This means that anyone can experience it. Therefore, we should prevent it from happening to others so that the same thing does not happen to us.

The songs above are just two of BTS' many works with social messages for their fans. Using the universal language of music, they hope that these messages can be conveyed more effectively. With a large audience, they can also reach more people to implement cosmopolitan values such as inclusivity and global justice, both explicitly and implicitly.

CAPACITY-BUILDING THROUGH FINANCIAL SUPPORT

BTS not only expresses their opposition to racism and discrimination verbally but also provides financial assistance as part of their capacity-building efforts. On June 6, 2020, news broke exclusively that BTS and their agency donated US\$1 million to an international organization, Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (BLMGNF). This was later confirmed by representatives of Big Hit Entertainment and the Managing Director of Black Lives Matter ([Benjamin 2020](#)). The news caught global attention because not only was it an incredible amount, but the fact that it also came from a global rising star from the East.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) itself is a social justice movement that evolved in the United States as a response to systemic racial discrimination in society. The movement strives to resist police brutality, racial inequality, and other types of injustice suffered by black people in the United States and the surrounding areas. The BLM movement reflects cosmopolitan values relating to human dignity. By raising attention to the hardships of black people and advocating for their rights, BLM supports the idea that all individuals, regardless of their background, deserve equal respect and treatment.

BTS financially supported the Black Lives Matter movement through BLMGNF because they both share the same goals. They want to build the organization's capacity to uplift the lives of the black community. Moreover, it cannot be denied that BTS music, or K-Pop in general, has benefited from the influence and adaptation of Black American music and culture for such a long time ([Lee & Kao 2021](#)). The stark contrast in race between the two proves the inclusivity that BTS can present through cosmopolitanism. They were also faced with similar experiences of discrimination and racism that fostered their solidarity.

BTS' actions towards Black Lives Matter inspired their fans to collectively raise donations. By using the *#MatchAMillion* hashtag on Twitter, ARMY raised US\$1.3 million in donations in just 25 hours ([Johnson 2020](#)). Although ARMY is not the only fandom that actively donates, the duration and scale of the donations they raised at that time were incomparable, according to industry analysts ([Bhandari 2020](#)).

With their popularity, BTS can deliver positive messages across various media. Likewise, with their resources, BTS can donate to social issues that are worth fighting for. By donating to BLMGNF, they are contributing to the capacity building of the organization to carry out its mission optimally. In an interview with *Variety* (a US-based magazine), Jin and Suga shared their reasons for supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. According to them, when they were abroad to promote their music, they faced discrimination and various prejudices from other people. It was not uncommon for them to be underestimated simply because of their physical appearance. Therefore, they needed to speak out for racial equality worldwide so that every individual can live more safely wherever they are.

When we're abroad or in other situations, we've also been subjected to prejudice. We feel that prejudice should not be tolerated, it really has no place.

We just want to voice the fact that we feel it's the right of everyone to not be subject to racism or violence. ... Everyone wants to live in a better world and try to make this a better world ([Davis 2020](#)).

BTS' actions inspired positive change and mobilized their audience towards a common goal. By taking a stand and making donations dedicated to racial justice, they showed their commitment to making a difference and encouraged their fans to do the same.

ADVOCATING THROUGH A SPECIAL VISIT

BTS has also used their popularity to advocate for Asian inclusion in America. On May 31, 2021, BTS met US President Joe Biden in celebration of Asian-American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) Heritage Month. During the discussion, the members addressed discrimination and violence toward those communities, which had increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact of the meeting can be seen in numerous dimensions. First, the message of solidarity and humanity delivered by BTS received a positive response from the public. The meeting attracted enormous media coverage. They garnered a lot of appreciation for using their influence to advocate for social causes. One of the members, Suga, believed that they needed to speak out on the issue of racial discrimination. He said during their world tour, he and his bandmates witnessed the language and cultural barriers that music can break through. Therefore, by utilizing music and other media, BTS hopes that diversity can unite people.

As South Korean and Asian, we felt the need to voice ourselves to raise awareness of this issue. ... we wanted to talk about the power of diversity. We hope there will be more positive cases that differences bring people together. (The [White House 2022a](#))

Second, the meeting between BTS and Joe Biden helped raise awareness about the issue of discrimination and violence against Asian Americans. RM thanked the US Government for trying to find a solution to this problem, especially with the President's signing of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act. By speaking directly to the leader of the US, BTS helped the community to focus on tackling these issues.

Joe Biden recognized that many Asian Americans have faced discrimination in their daily lives. So, AANHPI Heritage Month is a crucial month to commemorate the contributions of AANHPIs to American society in various fields, including social, economic, and political. It is a reminder of the need for greater understanding, inclusion, and support for the presence of 'other communities' in the country. President Biden supports what BTS is doing to eliminate race-based hatred in society. To him, this is very important as many public figures have mobilized the public on this issue in the past. So, they can be an important part of a big change. Biden said, 'What you're doing makes a big difference. Talking about how we have to eliminate hate is important' ([White House 2022b](#)).

Third, the meeting showed the significance of openness in addressing social issues such as identity-based discrimination. BTS has been a driving force in promoting cultural exchange between the East and the West. Their meeting with Joe Biden spotlighted the potential of music and entertainment to bridge social gaps and promote world solidarity. Biden recognized that their talent in music has become an important means of communication. He directly showed his appreciation, 'I know you know what you're doing but don't underestimate it. Not just your great talent, it's the message you're communicating. It matters. This is one President who appreciates you' ([White House 2022b](#)).

It is also worth noting that we must be willing to look at the larger environment to realize broader inclusivity. Problems that occur in one country might severely affect people in other parts of the world. Therefore, BTS' call to treat and respect other individuals equally should be supported. So, the reason

that BTS is cosmopolitan is not only their openness to diversity but also the fact that although all of the members are from South Korea and settled there, they have become transnational actors who are responsive to what happens outside of their country and who is affected by it. It reflects their efforts to break down social and territorial boundaries to embrace everyone into an inclusive world community.

Conclusion

In this article, we investigate BTS' cosmopolitan identities and practices. By raising the themes of anti-racism and anti-discrimination, BTS enters into a discourse of cosmopolitanism dominated by case studies of multinational corporations, international organizations, and Western actors. We argue that BTS' speech, behaviour, and actions can justify their claim as global citizens. This also broadens the scope of cosmopolitanism practices beyond financial or charitable aid.

We found BTS members actively engaged in social media conversations on these issues. Their tweets condemning violence and racial discrimination became a huge buzz and resonated with many people. As musicians, BTS is also very brave to incorporate criticism into the music they produce. They use music as a universal language to address many issues that are relevant to a wide range of people. Through music, BTS' cosmopolitan persona is well established. This persona is then reinforced by their campaigns and advocacy, such as in the *#BlackLivesMatter* and *#StopAsianHate* movement. Having a large and solid fan base has a positive impact on the expansion and sustainability of BTS' cosmopolitan practices.

Through our analysis, we attempt to introduce BTS as a representation of Asia into the Western-centric study of cosmopolitanism, but as a complement rather than an opposition. We also address the discourse of how they address those issues at home and abroad. They take racial discrimination in the United States against Asians and blacks very seriously. As South Korean citizens, BTS is considered unwilling to advocate for this issue domestically. South Korea is still considered not safe for multiculturalism. The reason on the surface is that apart from the relatively conservative society, BTS is also constrained by the very strict business rules in the South Korean entertainment industry. Therefore, we do not think BTS has put their nationalism aside as they still speak out about other social issues in the country, such as social inequality, beauty standards, and mental health.

Based on the results of the analysis, we encourage further exploration of how BTS from Asia can advocate for racism in a developed country like the United States when Western actors are heavily involved in advocacy in developing countries. This does not seem to have happened much so it has rarely appeared in the literature. We also have not measured the frequency difference between the cosmopolitan practices BTS engages in at home and abroad. If we look at Lau's article (2021), we can see that Aamir Khan's cosmopolitan image is fully reflected at home because outside, his activities are commercial. As for Western actors, they focus on going out because they target the poor and the ill in third-world countries. These topics are worth exploring further to get a full picture of BTS as cosmopolitans.

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