



“You are finally Home”: Centering Playful Marginalized Community Values in Designing Online Social Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Social platforms possess great capabilities for supporting marginalized communities. However, they often become responsible for extending and amplifying similar hate and prejudice the communities face outside these spaces. We focus our research efforts on BTS ARMY, a playful community often misunderstood, and subject to discrimination due to the majority of members identifying as both women and racially diverse. We adopt a value-sensitive approach to unearth BTS ARMY’s values and study their manifestations on social platforms from a survey on social media platforms. Through inductive qualitative coding methods, fundamental values were identified: Respect, Love, and Community. In this work, we center this community’s values and experiences and present provocations prompting readers to re-think designing online social spaces for playful marginalized communities.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing.**

KEYWORDS

online communities, social media, fandom, play, marginalized communities

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1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Social platforms possess immense potential in developing marginalized communities. These platforms act as tools for strengthening community solidarity and empowering members in various aspects of their life, such as health, information, and sociality (e.g., as in online communities for individuals with chronic health issues

[4, 12, 15, 18, 22], and in marginalized communities [8, 13, 16, 21]). However, the same platforms can extend and, sometimes, amplify harm that these communities experience in the physical world [26, 31, 36]. Moreover, “playful” communities (e.g., fandoms, gaming communities) are further delegitimized as being ‘not serious’ [10, 32]. Our work pushes back on this dismissal by positing play-based marginalized communities as engaging in labor to protect themselves, reduce harm, build meaningful relationships, and engage in their passions playfully.

In this work, we look towards one such playful marginalized community, the BTS ARMY, the fandom for Korean musicians, BTS, that resides across both physical and digital worlds. The community specifically receives severe trolling and hate online as well as bullying, and is often dismissed as being primarily younger women [5, 11] or known as being comprised of “bots” [28]. BTS ARMY is important to understand *because* it is predominantly composed of members who are women (of all ages) and racially diverse. In a fan-led survey of 562,280 respondents, 69.7% were over the age of 18, over 96% identified as women, with over 100 countries and territories being represented [17]. The community members’ marginalized identities make them vulnerable to further harassment and harm [27, 32]. Recently ARMY has been discussing having a community-specific online social platform, particularly because of recent developments on Twitter¹ (a platform where the BTS ARMY community is active²) which led to many members reporting their accounts being shadowbanned³ and suspended. This is particularly meaningful to investigate because this community is based in play. Communities engage in play based on their unique subculture leading to the formation of rules and norms that inform the creation of a “magic circle” [32]. The magic circle is “the social contract that is created through implicit or explicit social negotiation and metacommunication in the act of playing” [34]. Therefore, play is socially-constructed in these communities that leverage social platforms [29] through the “magic circle”. Prior work studied BTS ARMY as a community that engages in play across multiple social platforms [32]. BTS ARMY members come to these platforms to relax, have fun, and build relationships. There should be cause for concern in designers, when members of these communities must constantly navigate hostile platforms and labor to prevent increased harm, instead of engaging in play.



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¹<https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/twitter-elon-musk-timeline-what-happened-so-far-rcna57532>

²For context, BTS had 48.3 million followers on Twitter in May 2023.

³Shadowbanning is an act of partial censorship of online accounts without acknowledgement or affirmative consent from the user [23]

To this end, we elevate the voices of this community and provoke readers to rethink the design of online social spaces for playful marginalized communities. We propose centering community values and lived experiences that may run counter to many of the motivations of current large social media platforms (e.g., divorcing design and development processes from capitalist endeavors [38]). Moreover, it is crucial to understand the underlying community values that form the basis of playful interactions in order to design social platforms for play-based marginalized communities. Past research in HCI used value-based design [14] approaches to highlight the voices of marginalized populations, supporting technology design that fulfills their needs [7, 9, 19, 39]. Turning towards playful marginalized communities, we adopt a similar perspective. Using inductive qualitative coding of data from a survey of 597 BTS ARMY members, we unearth the values of respect, love, and community and these values-related activities that the BTS ARMY community considers important. In this work-in-progress, we present preliminary findings to pose questions about designing future online social spaces for playful marginalized communities that align with their core values and experiences.

2 RESEARCH METHODS

We adopt a value-sensitive approach in our research inquiry [14]. We deployed a survey with open-ended questions comprising both short and long-answer qualitative questions. The survey questions were designed to elicit values participants believed were important to BTS ARMY and how they practiced these values. Moreover, the questions also sought to gain an understanding of the relationship between and among BTS and ARMY members. It was advertised in ARMY community social media spaces online, including Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Discord. The survey garnered 615 respondents, which were filtered down to 597 respondents who self-identified as members of the BTS ARMY and were at least 18 years old. Of these respondents 407 identified as women, 10 as non-binary, 6 as men, 84 identified as disabled, and 57 countries were represented (167 from the United States, 37 from Philippines, 27 from India, 26 from Canada). We used qualitative thematic open coding for data analysis [6]. Following a round of open coding, we conducted iterations of axial coding to identify emergent values (i.e., respect, love, and community). At least one of the authors of this work identifies as a member of the BTS ARMY community.

3 FINDINGS

In these preliminary findings of survey responses, we'll briefly expand on three core values of the BTS ARMY community: respect, love, and community.

3.1 Respect

The first core value of the BTS ARMY community, as surfaced in survey responses, is respect. Respect in this community means holding each other in high regard while also holding space for one another, including virtues such as protection and trust. The embodiment of respect is visible in a number of different activities and interactions such as setting boundaries (in both digital and social infrastructures), self-censorship, deference to BTS, and embracing marginalized perspectives. For example, BTS ARMY collectively, as

well as individually, set boundaries, which shapes their behavior in these online spaces. One of the ways they do so is by regulating information that goes out of these spaces.

“we ‘self-regulate’ a lot (have conversations about difficult topics amongst ourselves) (and I sometimes wish there was a better way to do that, so we could discuss things without trending and catching the attention of disingenuous onlookers) (I keep hoping we’ll get a [Weverse]⁴ 2.0 that makes it easier to interact with one another).”

Another act of regulation is reporting and blocking content on social media platforms deemed inappropriate because it violates privacy. For example, pictures of BTS members during their private time that were not approved by the artists. Information about BTS not shared by BTS is strongly encouraged not to be proliferated. Efforts to actively set boundaries and self-censor within BTS ARMY social media spaces are constrained and in some cases, dictated by the platforms the community is using. Regulating which information is accessible to whom is a way to prevent online bullying and harassment, and also to avoid untoward attention, especially from people outside the community (e.g., [27, 32]). Moreover, through regulating content sharing, members acknowledge boundaries set within the community. Some content is appropriate to share publicly, some is not, and some should only be shared with select audiences.

Respect in the community is also illustrated in the acceptance of diversity, while privileging marginalized perspectives. The community members, being racially and culturally diverse, continue to push back on colonialist institutions through the way they engage with each other, BTS, and the outside community.

“revolutionise the America-centrist music industry and change it to a more language-open options (and topple the redundant, xenophobic power of radio).”

This is evident from ARMY teaching each other about Korean language and culture, to participating in voting in various alternative music venues to support BTS' music, and protect BTS from the hegemonies of 'prestigious' music academies/awards. During voting of alternate venues, members would post their choice (BTS or their music) with certain hashtags, using the same online social spaces to reinforce their support for BTS. However, the BTS ARMY community is acutely aware of the tendency for certain topics or content to “trend” and, therefore, be picked up and spread virally by a social media platform's algorithms often making them vulnerable to bullying and online harm. Therefore, in many cases, the BTS ARMY community works to protect BTS and ARMY by *preventing* topics and content from trending, rather than leveraging platforms to trend content or topics. Such community-mediated sharing practices highlight the complexity and nuance of these activities.

3.2 Love

The second core value of the BTS ARMY community respondents is love, which is embodied in acts of acceptance of each other and passion for BTS and BTS' message. For respondents, other words

⁴A social media platform built specifically for artists and their fandoms. (<https://weverse.io/>)

associated with the value of love included positivity, hope, care, joy, and commitment. BTS ARMY members treat BTS' content with love—that is, listening to, sharing, streaming, and buying their music. This love also extends to other members of the BTS ARMY community, beyond the musicians. BTS ARMY activities include emotionally supporting one another, donating money for others to buy albums, giving away tickets to BTS' concerts, and donating funds to buy official membership. Love for the artists leads to passionate creative expressions in the form of music covers, edits, fan fiction, and art.

"It is a community that thrives off positive interaction between its members. There is a sense of we-feeling and protectiveness. Probably by interacting among the fandom and supporting/streaming when content drops."

BTS ARMY community interactions and activities are often grounded in joyful positivity, including rooting much of their activity in various forms of play [32]. BTS started a 'Love Yourself' campaign [2, 27] (which appeared in 26 survey responses). Loving oneself has been posited as an antidote to racism, sexism, and other marginalizing social structures in feminist literature [1, 3, 25, 37].

"Discovering BTS and ARMY when I did during the pandemic helped me find peace at a time when nothing was going right in my life and made me realize that I am more than what people think of me and more than their estimation of my utility and worth."

BTS ARMY members feel empowered to challenge powerful social structures through collective engagement with the value of love.

As mentioned in the above section about respect, the BTS ARMY community often has to reconcile with the algorithmic control of content on social media platforms. Community members struggle with algorithms that seem to support more "engaging" content such as arguments, toxic interactions, and hot topics, none of which engenders positivity or joy in these online spaces. ARMY members mentioned curating their feeds to best exhibit their BTS and ARMY-related interests in a joyful way. Given social platforms provide a space for a variety of interactions, it is imperative to reflect on how these social platforms for the community support the core value of love, which we highlight in the discussion section.

3.3 Community

The third and final core value that surfaced by our respondents is that of community. BTS ARMY members deeply connect with each other and BTS in more ways than appreciation for music. ARMY and BTS are candid with each other and express their emotions through creative mediums such as edits, covers, and art; also engaging in meaningful conversations. BTS concerts (physical and digital), live streams, and other content serve as congregating spaces for BTS ARMY members to connect with each other. These experiences are festive in nature. BTS ARMY members play with their collected lightsticks⁵ and share BTS photo cards and merchandise with each other. Our respondents referred to the BTS ARMY community members as not only friends but also family. Many members reported

building long-term friendships with ARMY members they meet at community events, be it virtual or physical.

"You arrive at the venue and it feels like you are finally Home. People you don't know give you freebies, hug you, you feel Like you know them since years."

This core value of community, especially as it is intertwined and reliant on the other two core values of respect and love, enables members to meaningfully connect across different modalities and platforms with one another. As mentioned above, members relate to each other beyond friendship, and rather as kin. They support each other holistically from financial support to afford access to various opportunities to social activism [27]. The community members engage in emotional labor and various acts of service to foster kinship and truly support each other.

It's like I have 1 million best friends all over the world. ARMY [performs] so much unacknowledged service for their communities and mutual aid for local ARMYs...I have felt such a loss of connection to other people in casual ways, those daily interactions that sustain a human mind [evaporate] over the last 2 years for me and I have found community and care based on 1 single thing, the shared love for a band. When the ARMY collectives set out to do something, whatever they take on, they accomplish it together.

Pro-social interactions among the members further deepen relationships within the community, such as teaching fellow BTS ARMY members about the Korean language and culture to better understand BTS. For example, the BTS ARMY community has a number of Korean-to-English translation accounts that live transcribe BTS' live streams and other content. In building relationships within the BTS ARMY community, members reported finding friends that they could confide in as other ARMY, despite not having many other commonalities in their lives. BTS ARMY grows and thrives as a community in and through these social platforms. Therefore, it is crucial to ponder over the social platforms' design that supports the organic growth of this playful community in alignment with its core values.

4 DISCUSSION

From the findings, we present provocations which would guide our upcoming research efforts in designing community-centric social platforms for playful marginalized communities, specifically BTS ARMY. Amplifying the voice of this community in envisioning alternate online social spaces, we hope to use these provocations to drive discourse towards making community-centric social platforms with this community in our future work.

Current social media algorithms are designed to boost content that evokes strong emotions, such as aggression and distress [24, 35], emphasized to increase user engagement. This emphasis on negative engagement could mean showing or trending content that might be detrimental to a playful community's values. Existing social platforms have established community guidelines that when violated, are taken seriously. To that end, how might an online social space for play-based marginalized communities, such as the BTS ARMY community, incorporate the community's own guidelines of privacy and boundaries during content moderation? How

⁵Lightsticks are essential concert items that connect with live concerts to create a participatory concert experience.

might algorithms be designed to not amplify unsolicited content? Recent work has pointed to the BTS ARMY community as one that actively works to combat misinformation [20]. Therefore, another provocation that we put forth is, how might social platforms reflect the community's means and efforts in curbing and correcting misinformation. Additionally, how might we design a social platform to sustain positivity (a virtue crucial to ARMY) in such playful communities? Further, we ask, how might we design social platforms that are responsive to the community members' passions? BTS ARMY members actively curate their feeds to avoid unsolicited content and hold space for and support BTS' and other community members' creations. How might an online social space be designed for the community to reduce the need for round-the-clock surveillance and curation?

We acknowledge the perils of toxic positivity in exacerbating harm [33] and dismissing uncomfortable yet necessary conversations [30], as does the BTS ARMY community. Conflicts are inevitable, therefore, we also ask, how might these platforms support conflict resolution? Past research on developing social platforms for marginalized communities has shown how not including community members in the design process can lead to an adverse experience for these communities [8]. As mentioned before, current platforms run on general community guidelines, which broadly prevent bad conduct. These guidelines, however, are not sensitive to particular community values. How can the process be more participatory, involving community presence? Social platforms are leveraged to mobilize support for BTS and ARMY, through voting, increasing song streams, supporting creative expressions, etc. Playful communities such as ARMY often negotiate with such algorithmic structures to grow in alignment with their values. We thus ask, how might we design a social platform that safely affords playful interactions for these communities?

ARMY and BTS are vulnerable with each other because of a strong presence of mutual trust reinforcing the shared belief that community members will act in the best interest of BTS and the BTS ARMY community. Hence, we ask how might a social platform embody trust for tight-knit interconnected communities, such as the BTS ARMY? Should social platforms make an effort to engender trust between members of communities? Or rather, how can platforms get out of a community's way and support the building of trusting relationships within the community? Despite being a community-based in play, community members perform emotional labor in forming meaningful relationships with other ARMY and BTS online. Moreover, they also perform significant labor to negotiate platform constraints and community norms in order to engage in interactions and activities that cultivate playful and safe community experiences. Therefore, we ask, how might we design social platforms to be a safe space for playful marginalized communities to experience and express vulnerability? We present these provocations to initiate discourse around building community-sensitive infrastructures in social platforms for positive interactions in and among playful marginalized communities, such as the BTS ARMY community.

5 FUTURE WORK & CONCLUSION

In this work, as part of an ongoing study aimed at designing playful community-centric social platforms, we shared preliminary key examples of the community's core values as they emerged from our qualitative survey data. Using a value-based approach, we identified three key values of a playful marginalized community, the BTS ARMY community. These values are respect, love, and community. We also highlighted some of the interactions and activities of the BTS ARMY community that exemplify their core values. Following this, we raised provocations that we hope serve as resources when designing online social spaces with communities based in play with diverse marginalized membership, such as the BTS ARMY community.

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