

BTS BTS's Global Influence and the Military Enlistment Debate
Military Enlistment

Brenda Osindo

Department of English, Anoka Ramsey Community College

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Prof. Chris McCarthy

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Military Enlistment Debate

The global phenomenon of BTS has not only transformed the music industry but also reshaped how South Korean culture is perceived worldwide. At the same time, South Korea's longstanding policy of mandatory military enlistment remains deeply ingrained aspects of national identity and defense strategy. Recently, an article by Gupta (2022) published by the Vanguard Think Tank argued that the military service requirement for BTS members poses significant challenges, not just for the band, but for the country's economy and its global cultural influence (Gupta 2022). While I agree with Gupta's claim that BTS's absence could impact South Korea's economy, the article overlooks the emotional and psychological influence BTS has had on millions of people worldwide, including myself.

In October 2022, headlines exploded when BTS announced their plans to fulfill their mandatory military enlistment, starting with the oldest member, Jin. Serving in the military is a duty every South Korean man must fulfill, and BTS never sought exemptions despite their global fame. According to Gupta (2022), "US \$3.6 billion is BTS alone, or 'around half a percent of the country's entire economy'" (Gupta, 2022)". The author argues that BTS's absence could hurt South Korea's economy, especially in industries like tourism, fashion, and food exports. For instance, over 400,000 fans traveled to South Korea in one day just to see BTS's 10th-anniversary fireworks celebration. While the economic numbers are impressive, I believe the issue runs deeper than just money. The debate surrounding BTS's enlistment forces society to question how we measure someone's worth, whether through financial contributions or the emotional impact they leave on people's lives.

One major flaw in Gupta's argument is the narrow focus on the economic loss without acknowledging the emotional and social impact BTS had made on millions of fans. BTS's music has touched countless lives by prompting messages of self-love, mental health, and social awareness, topics often stigmatized in many cultures. A 2024 study from the University of Zakariya and Private Schools of Multan found that BTS's music and message have had a positive effect on the mental well-being of young people and have a positive influence on the cognitive process of the youth that deals with depression, isolation, and anxiety. (Bhatti, M.A., Ahmed, M., & Khann, A. M. M., 2024). I personally experienced this impact when I discovered BTS when I used to struggle with acceptance and learning how to heal. Their music not only made me feel less alone but taught me how to love myself for who I am.

What sets BTS apart is their dedication to using their platform for social causes. Their partnership with UNICEF Love Myself campaign raised over \$3.4 million globally to end violence against children, sparking conversations about self-love and mental health worldwide (Yeo, 2022). Beyond charity work, BTS became the first K-pop group to speak at the United Nations General Assembly, with Kim Namjoon the leader of BTS and delivered a speech about self-love, saying, "No matter who you are, where you're from, your skin color, gender identity: speak for yourself" (Lufadeju, 2018). In 2022, they were even invited to the White House to address the rise of Asian hate crimes. Park Jimin expressed, "We were devastated by the recent surge of hate crimes, including Asian American hate crimes." Park Jimin also added, "To put a stop to this and support the cause, we'd like to take this opportunity to voice ourselves once again." (Venkatraman, 2022). They gathered at the White House with nearly 300,000 viewers watching online, where each member gave a brief speech. Talking about the racism they faced during their earlier days of BTS, discrimination, and how they saw how normalized Asian hate is

online. These contributions to society go far beyond what numbers on a balance sheet can measure.

Another point that Gupta overlooks is how BTS's temporary hiatus could actually strengthen their impact instead of diminishing it. Choi found that the absence of celebrities often increases public interest and anticipation for their return (Choi, 2022). During the hiatus, BTS members expanded their music genre instead of sticking to the typical K-pop sound. J-Hope's edgy rap track song "MORE" explored more of a 2000s rock, while Kim Taehyung's "Love Me Again" was more into jazz. Jeon Jungkook's solo single "Seven" became a global hit, earning over 493 million views in just a year and earned a platinum certification for selling one million copies in the United States (Bhatti, 2024). This proves that BTS is not only successful as a group but also as individuals, showing that the hiatus didn't weaken their influence, it only expanded it.

However, what makes this whole debate so controversial is how society chooses to measure who deserves recognition. South Korea has granted military exemptions to athletes and classical musicians for their contributions to national prestige (Onchi, 2022), but why is it harder to recognize the impact of popular music artists? BTS has done more than just South Korea's economy, they've created a global cultural movement that connects people across languages, races, and generations. A country that never speaks about mental health is the same country that promotes mental health through music. The fact that BTS never asked for exemption despite their global fame, shows their humility and deep respect for their country. One great reminder of how BTS really impacted South Korea is, at the Olympics, a slogan from the South Korean team said, "Three things that represent South Korea; BTS, Kimchi, Hanbok." (*Three Things That Represent Korea - BTS, Kimchi , Hanbok, 2024*).

In the end, the military enlistment controversy reveals society's tendency to prioritize financial gain over emotional impact. As someone who has lived more years without discovering BTS and only 2 years with them, those two years have shaped me more than any other time in my life. Their music and message have shaped who I am today, just like they have for millions of others around the world. With their return set for June 2025, I know BTS will not only rebuild South Korea's economy, but they will also continue changing hearts and minds around the world. BTS has already proven that their influence goes far beyond music; they've built a movement of self-love, *a Love Yourself Campaign*, mental health awareness, *UNICEF*, and cultural connection with their songs, proving that their true worth can't be defined by numbers alone.

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