Weverse: A look into a 'one-stop service' multimedia interactive platform as demonstrated in the case study of BTS



## I.     ABSTRACT

This essay will introduce Weverse as a revolutionary medium of communication between Korean Pop (K-Pop) artists and their fans and examine how it has both increased and eased interaction between both parties. A brief history of its predecessor will also be explored, together with analysing why there was a need to develop a 'one stop service' multimedia interactive platform such as Weverse.  Properties of communication on Weverse, especially translation, will also be examined.  To ensure consistency and fairness across examples raised in this essay, the BTS Weverse community will be used as the main case study.

## II.     BRIEF HISTORY

The Hallyu Wave has been tremendously impactful and positive to the South Korean image and more importantly, its economy. It was projected by the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism that the newest hit song, "Dynamite", of Grammy nominated boy band BTS alone would generate "1.7 trillion won of economic activity and nearly 8,000 new jobs" (Huang, 2020). The global success of K-Pop is largely driven by the fans, and the Korean entertainment companies understand extremely well that "nurture[ing] relationships with customers via social media" instead of "market[ing] performers in a one-way manner" (Oh & Rhee, 2016) would play right into the burning desire of a fan getting up close and personal with the idol that they look up to very much.

Before the rise of platforms such as Twitter or Instagram,  interactions between K-Pop artists and their fans were strictly monitored by the entertainment companies (Sherman & Kim, 2020) and often only occurred on fan cafés run through Daum, a South Korean web portal (Channel Korea, 2020). Even though the types of content one could find on a fan café would vary depending on the artist, they were in general difficult for non-Korean fans to navigate because Daum operated fully and only in Korean until an English language function was finally introduced in 2019 (The Kraze Magazine, 2020). It may be difficult to understand in today's hyperglobalised context why Daum added the English language function so much later, but it must be acknowledged that Daum was primarily a Korean blogging platform that focused on offering services to its Korean population.

While the biggest limitations of Daum fan cafés were indeed language barriers faced by international fans, it was not merely restricted to that. Flaws of Daum fan cafés extended to the flow of communication being largely only one-way, namely artist-to-fan interactions, though some argue that this was an unintended byproduct of the language barrier. If you wanted to leave a loving note of support to that artist, you would have to be a full member of the fan café (The Kraze Magazine, 2020), an application that entailed lengthy level-up processions such as answering notoriously difficult questions to show that you were not an anti, or even having to purchase the official membership of that artist's fanclub. This meant that both Korean and international fans alike could only passively consume the posts their favourite artists would leave on their fan cafés.

### III.    WEVERSE

Weverse was created by Big Hit Entertainment in June 2019 to overcome the aforementioned limitations of fan cafés and also take back the narrative of how the artists under them would interact with their fans. The artist-to-fan dynamic was of utmost importance to Big Hit Entertainment; co-CEO Lenzo Yoon emphasised in a press release that the fans were the "centerpiece… that they are at the center of the music industry and are indeed the core value of the Big Hit business model" (Herman, 2020).

As of December 2020, Weverse boasts impressive download and user statistics – a staggering amount of 17 million downloads, 19.2 million users in over 33 countries who have since made a grand total of about 117 million posts and counting (Bandwagon Asia, 2020). Weverse is also "home to 13 artist-fan communities including BTS, GFRIEND, NU'EST, CL…" (Bandwagon Asia, 2020), which are some of the big names within the K-Pop industry. Daily statistics are just as impressive, ranging around 1.4 million daily users (Mehta, 2020).

As a social networking application, Weverse is Big Hit Entertainment's strategy to facilitate organic interactions between the artists under their label and their huge fanbases. To do this, Weverse introduced a feature shortly after its initial launch that allowed for translations of any posts made on the platform, be it from the artists or content generated by the fans themselves.
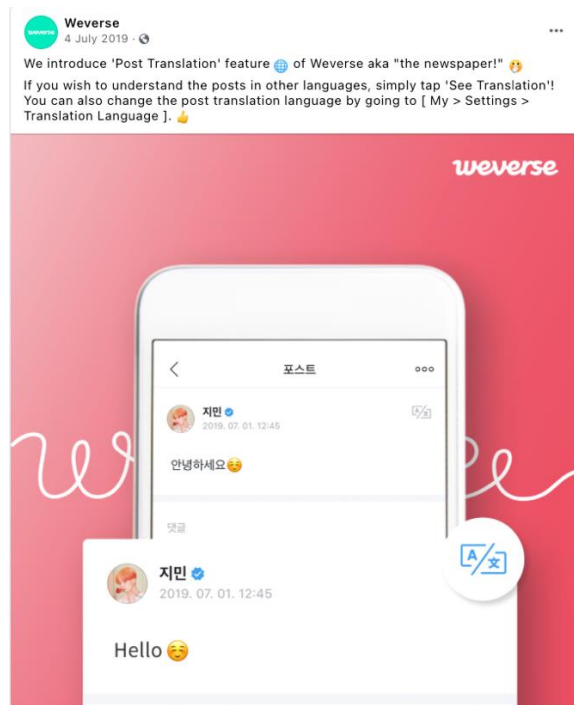
***Figure 1***[1]*: Introducing the 'post translation' feature*

With the development of Weverse, Park et al. pointed out with reference to BTS as a specific case study that Big Hit Entertainment removed the traditional gatekeeping mechanism of fan cafés and modelled an environment where "anyone can participate as ARMY" (p.3, 2021). This reduced the exclusivity that was produced as a side effect of Daum fan cafés being largely accessible only to the Korean domestic fans.

Other than the traditional forum style posts that both artists and fans can leave on the platform, Weverse also has a 'moments' feature that works similar to Instagram Story updates, but differ greatly when it comes to time-bound constraints. Moments on Weverse are not deleted after 24 hours, and fans are still able to access moments their favourite artists posted onto the platform be it just months or even years back.

| SPEECH-LIKE | TEXT-LIKE |
| --- | --- |
| Time-bound | Space-bound |
| Spontaneous* | Contrived |
| Face-to-face | Visually decontextualized* |
| Loosely structured | Elaborately structured* |
| Socially interactive* | Factually communicative* |
| Immediately revisable | Repeatedly revisable |
| Prosodically rich* | Graphically rich* |

***Figure 2****: Seven features introduced by David Crystal.*
*Features marked with * denotes its presence in communication on Weverse*

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[1] Screenshot taken from the official Weverse Facebok page

## IV.    WEVERSE: COMMUNICATION

Compared to the Daum fan cafés, Weverse has three languages of operations (Figure 3) and even allows for up to nine target translation languages, even catering to both traditional and simplified Mandarin Chinese (Figure 4). The China market is one of the key stakeholders for the Hallyu Wave, contributing to nearly $250 million USD in 2015 (Teixeira, 2019). Therefore, I believe it is not a reach to assume that having both versions of Mandarin Chinese as a translation language option is deliberate on Big Hit Entertainment's part to not alienate or risk losing any portion of this huge fanbase.
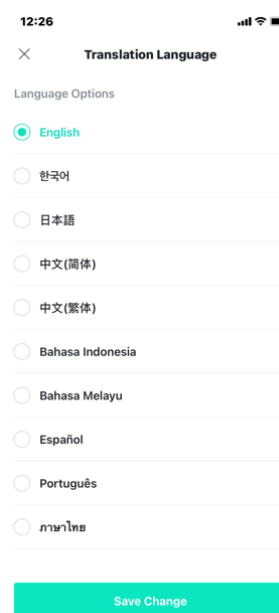


*Figure 3[2]: Application Language*    *Figure 4[3]: Translation Language*

The availability of this translation service has greatly encouraged the increase of artist-to-fan interactions, when fans are genuinely cheered by how they are able to directly connect with their favourite artists (Figure 5). Logging on to such platforms no longer felt like just passively consuming content that the artist puts out; Weverse also allows for the artists to leave comments on the sincere letters fans pen down, cute fanart or even mundane questions they are curious about. The entire fan experience is greatly elevated, because fans who get replied to are often on the top the world when that happens (Figure 6).

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[2] Screenshot from Weverse settings (general) page
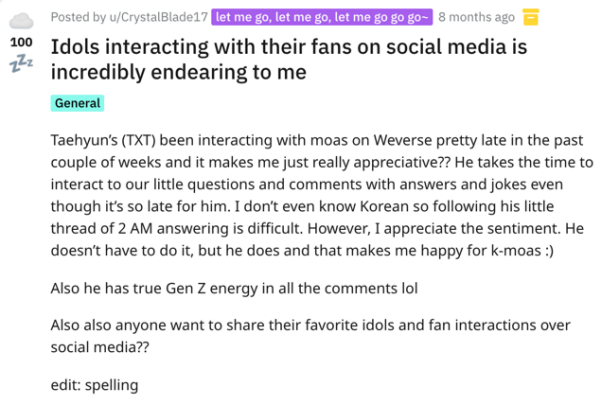[3] Screenshot from Weverse settings (general) page

Figure 5[4]: Reddit user endeared by artist interaction

Figure 6[5]: Fanartist reaction after getting a reply from her favourite artist

### a. POST TRANSLATION: WEVERSE VS FANS

While the post translation feature on Weverse is one of the platform's highlights, it is not without its shortcomings, with the most notable ones being errors in translation or the server being overwhelmed with translation requests. Translation errors on Weverse often occur due to the translated target text being overly literal. Fans have even made compilations of the times Weverse translations backfired (Lyons, 2019), which either turned out to be harmlessly funny or were completely senseless (Figure 7 and Figure 8). While fan translators have always been around, there are now accounts run by native Korean speakers dedicated to solely providing fans with accurate translations of their favourite artists' Weverse posts (Figure 9). This is especially relevant as Weverse does not allow for users to copy and paste posts made on the platform to check against external translation applications.
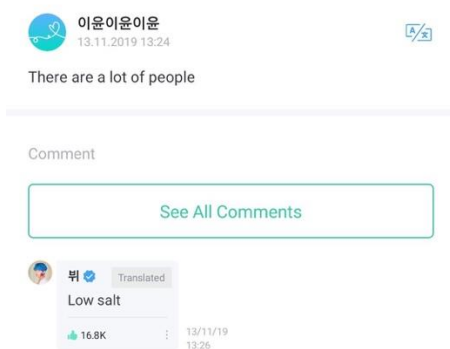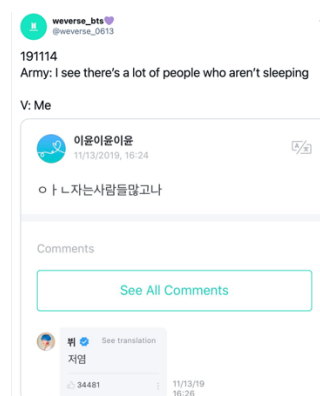




Figure 7[6]: Senseless translation by Weverse

Figure 8[7]: Accurate translation of the same post in Figure 7 by native Korean speaker

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[4] Screenshot from Reddit thread about idol-fan interactions
[5] Screenshot from Twitter with user permission
[6] Screenshot from Koreaboo's article "16 Times BTS's Weverse Translations Were Wilding"
[7] Screenshot from Twitter with user permission

***Figure 9***[8]: *One of the many fan run translation accounts solely dedicated to translating*

Server overload also occurs frequently, especially when users attempt to use the translation feature just first one to two minutes (Figure 10) after an artist made a post or comment on Weverse. For example, out of the total 19.2 million users, there are over nine million users registered to the BTS community. With such astounding figures, it is not unreasonable for Weverse to encounter an overload of their server when millions of users are logged in.



***Figure 10***[9]: *Users unable to access the translation feature when the server is overloaded*

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[8] Screenshot from Twitter with user permission
[9] Screenshot from Weverse feed page

## V.    WEVERSE: PLATFORMS & APPLICATIONS

 Weverse was first launched as a mobile application for iOS and Android when it was first launched, but is also currently available as a website. Weverse has even branched out to e-commerce, setting up the Weverse Shop website and mobile application under the same name (Mehta, 2020) to sell official merchandise for the groups under Big Hit Entertainment. This business endeavour matches Big Hit's goal of setting up Weverse as a one-stop platform hosting multimedia content, artist-to-fan and fan-to-fan communications.
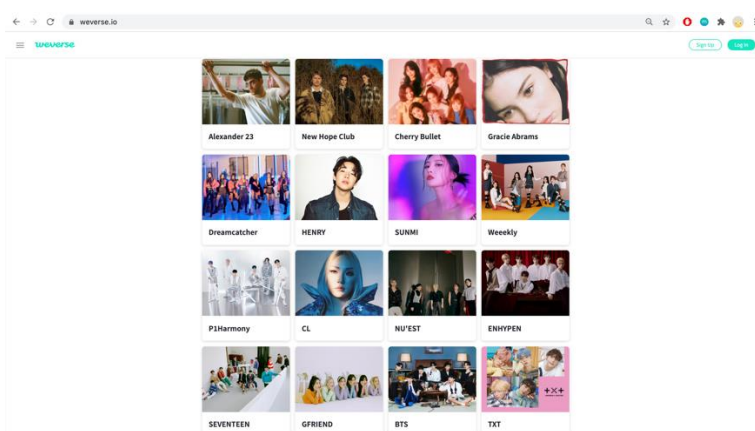


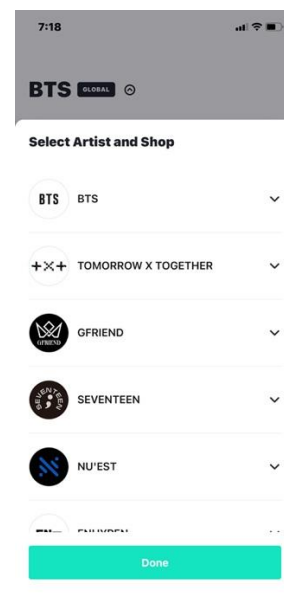***Figure 11***[10]: *Weverse website on desktop*



***Figure 12***[11]: *Weverse shop mobile app; its user interface is almost exactly the same as Weverse*

## VI.    CONCLUSION

The sustenance of K-Pop's longevity and success will be one its biggest challenges moving forward into the future. The level of accessibility of artists to their fans could be the deciding factor as to whether K-Pop can maintain its popularity while constantly innovating to create new breakthroughs. With the development of platforms such as Weverse, previous struggles of entertainment companies surrounding the absence of multi-language options to service the global market are slowly reducing. However, technological limitations such as server capacity and accuracy of machine translation continue to present as hinderances to an otherwise creative solution. More effort should be put into improving these drawbacks to improve user experience, which in turn would be greatly beneficial in improving the relationship and communication between fans and their favourite artists.

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[10] Screenshot from Weverse desktop webpage
[11] Screenshot from Weverse Shop mobile application

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