



ACADEMIC ARTICLES

# An Analytical Overview of BTS's *Map of the Soul: 7* Promotional Campaign

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## ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on the advertising campaign for the band BTS's most recent album, *Map of the Soul: 7*. The analysis of this campaign touches upon the mission statement and the values of Big Hit Entertainment, BTS's agenda, integrated marketing communications efforts of the campaign itself, and the polysemy of its messages.*

## KEYWORDS

*BTS, *Map of the Soul: 7*, campaign, integrated marketing communications (IMC), polysemy*

## INTRODUCTION

This overview is an analysis of the various facets of the advertising campaign for the band BTS's latest album, *Map of the Soul: 7*. The analysis begins with descriptions of the band, the company that manages the band's activities, the campaign, and its potential goals. Then, I focus on several key aspects of the campaign by applying theoretical concepts, including mission and values, agenda-setting and priming, integrated marketing communications, and polysemy among others. I conclude the analysis by evaluating the financial milestones that were achieved through the campaign and the public reaction elicited by the campaign.

## BTS, THE COMPANY, THE CAMPAIGN AND ITS GOALS

### THE GROUP & THE K-POP SYSTEM

BTS is a South Korean idol group consisting of seven members. They debuted in 2013 and have spent the past seven years establishing themselves as the biggest boy band in the world, and is even referred to as “The Beatles of the twenty-first century” (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-c). BTS is the creation of the veteran songwriter and producer Bang Shi Hyuk, who used to work at JYP Entertainment, a K-pop entertainment company, and then left to form his own company, Big Hit Entertainment (Glasby, 2018). Having established the company in 2005 (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-c), Shi Hyuk proceeded to search for people he could turn into idols — a type of entertainer whose celebrity status is heightened to levels of borderline spirituality, similar to the original, thirteenth-century meaning of the term, i.e., “a representation or symbol of an object of worship” (Merriam-Webster dictionary, n.d.). Idol culture is particularly prominent in East Asia (Japan and South Korea); however, the term is also used in the West, e.g., in the US TV show *American Idol*. Moreover, the Korean pop industry is highly structured: entertainment companies select artists and creatives and put them through an “intensive training system, which can start when artists are seven years old and last for 10 years

with no guarantee of a group debut” (Glasby, 2018). Glasby further states that those lucky to debut are then highly micromanaged: “the normal practice of K-pop is to oversee every element of the life of young ‘idols.’” However, BTS and Big Hit Entertainment have partially distanced themselves from such harsh structures; i.e., as Glasby (2018) states, the group has “autonomy to run their own Twitter and vlog from their studio, and for the rappers to write alongside Big Hit’s in-house production team.” Glasby also pointed out how the group’s music defies K-pop’s conventions: “their lyrics are emotionally vulnerable and socially conscious, sometimes bordering on angry.” They are also open about their struggles: “they embrace and expose their vulnerabilities and failings” and this “strengthens their messages of strength, love, hope and acceptance” (Glasby, 2018).

### THE COMPANY’S MISSION AND VALUES

Big Hit Entertainment’s mission statement is “Music and Artist for Healing” — a goal of “comforting and inspiring people around the globe” (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-b). The mission statement is “an important first step in the strategic planning process” that is used to set “a business apart from other firms of its type” and create a “public and visible” “organization identity” (Pearce & David, 1987, p. 109). Mission statements may include various components, such as the specification of customer groups or geographic locations. However, I believe that Big Hit’s mission statement mainly focuses on specifying the *company philosophy* and identifying its *self-concept* and *desired public image* (Pearce & David, 1987, p. 109). The core values of the company are “Passion, Autonomy, and Trust” (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-b). Both the mission and the values of the company are ingrained within the brand of the group, who seek to inspire their fans with their open lyrics about both struggles and strengths, and their unique position as a more autonomous K-pop band. This promotional campaign, too, reflects the company’s mission and values.

## THE CAMPAIGN'S SCHEDULE AND COMMERCIAL GOALS

The campaign to promote the group's latest album, *Map of the Soul: 7*, was announced on social media on January 8, 2020. The announcement included a schedule of the different ways the album would be promoted up until its release on February 21, 2020 (Figure 1). McIntyre (2020-d) noted that the decision to publish an entire promotion schedule in itself was rare, even more so for an act as massive as BTS. However, I believe that the first step in the album's marketing plan was unveiling the campaign schedule, because it helped to mobilize the fans on specific days. This can be seen as the utilization of the fear of missing out (FOMO) marketing appeal, which is defined by Przybylski as "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (as cited in Hodkinson, 2016, p. 67). Moreover, as the announcement of the schedule did not feature a lot of details, the surprise factor remained. Redick (2013) argues that "surprise is still probably the most powerful marketing tool of all," because it is addictive and has a great impact on a consumer's behaviour and emotions. In fact, a music video for the second single got a surprise release two weeks after the album release, showcasing how the element of surprise was also maintained by withholding parts of the promotional schedule (Moen, 2020).

The initially announced campaign consisted of two trailers, two dance performance films, four different sets of concept photos, the track-list reveal, the music video for the lead single, and five "CONNECT, BTS" events in different cities around the globe. The main goal of the campaign was to promote the album, but I also believe that furthering the brand equity was an additional goal, as BTS is a brand as well as a band. Brand equity is the "differential effect brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand," with brand knowledge being "all the associations the brand has with consumers — such as thoughts, feelings, images, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences" (Keller, 2016, p. 1). Moreover, these various associations strengthen the commercial value of the brand.



FIGURE 1. COMEBACK MAP OF BTS ALBUM, MAP OF THE SOUL: 7 (BIG HIT ENTERTAINMENT, 2020-C).

The level of BTS's brand equity may be seen in the fact that a lot of well-known mainstream brands want to hire them for promotional campaigns, including Fila (Pace, 2019), Samsung (McIntyre, 2020-c), and Hyundai (Hyundai, 2020). Additionally, even the brands that are not official partners of the band benefit from accidental associations with them. One of the members of BTS, Jeon Jungkook, possesses especially huge selling power as fans have sold out products such as toothbrushes, fabric softeners, books, wine, and phone cases after glimpsing the artist using them (SBS PopAsia HQ, 2019).

## ANALYSIS OF THE MAP OF THE SOUL: 7 CAMPAIGN

### ADDITIONAL CREATIVE GOALS OF THE CAMPAIGN: AGENDA AND PRIMING

Furthermore, while the campaign is aimed at marketing a product and a brand, its commercial goals however are not obvious and are rather obscured by the creative ideas. As the campaign's product — an album — is a reification of creativity and a piece of entertainment/art, it is marketed

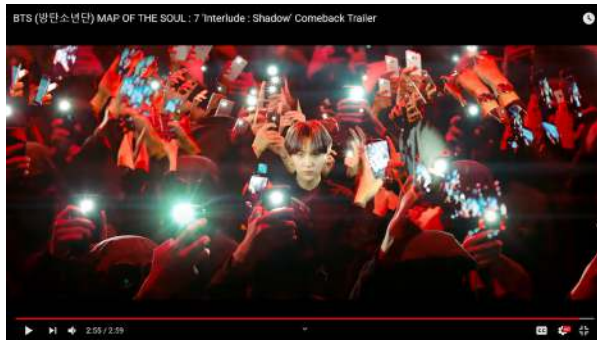


FIGURE 2. SCREENSHOTS FROM THE MUSIC VIDEOS “INTERLUDE: SHADOW” AND “OUTRO: EGO” (BIG HIT LABELS, 2020-C)

through its own creative concepts, themes, and messages. In that regard, the advertisement becomes a piece of entertainment in its own right, i.e., the campaign can be seen as an example of *advertainment* or “promotional practices that integrate brand communications within the content of entertainment products” (Russell, 2007, p. 3). Alternatively, K-pop videos’ “focus on the ‘spectacle of performance’ as a site for artists to ‘stage their action’” and make it “the only genre of music video that actively asserts its role as a promotional tool” (Railton and Watson as cited in Dore and Pugsley, 2019, p. 586-587).

Thus, the agenda of the promotional campaign or the key ideas that were chosen to be highlighted were related to the album’s creative concepts. In this particular case, the concepts were derived from the “major archetypes of the human mind that make up one’s personality as a whole: persona, shadow, ego, and self” and “the shadows and darkness that go hand-in-hand with celebrity” (Morin, 2020). Additionally, the campaign focused on “[recapping] the past seven years of BTS’s career [as well as] reflecting on how the path has not been easy, but was chosen by fate” (Zemler, 2020). The ideas of connection and collaboration were also prevalent. These various concepts correspond to the aforementioned mission and values of the company. The mission of healing the fans is seen in the examination of various psychological issues that numerous people struggle with, while the value of passion is highlighted in their career recap.

This was not the first time that similar ideas were expressed in both BTS’s work and their promotional materials. The band has previously

used works by Haruki Murakami, Ursula K. Le Guin, Carl Jung, Orwell, Hesse, and Nietzsche for inspiration (Glasby, 2018). The band has also previously released adolescent-themed albums with tracks emphasizing “hard work, dedication, and sacrifice as the key elements to personal success” (Dore and Pugsley, 2019, p. 583). Therefore, the fans were primed for this campaign and expected psychological yet deeply personal concepts, as well as metaphorical imagery (Figure 2). Priming is the previous knowledge that consumers use to evaluate new contents. Tversky and Kahneman (as cited in Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007) argued that “judgments and attitude formation are directly correlated with ‘the ease in which instances or associations could be brought to mind’” (p. 11). Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) have also argued that “by making some issues more salient in people’s mind (agenda setting), mass media can also shape the considerations that people take into account when making judgments,” which is priming. In this instance, since BTS has already highlighted similar issues in their previous works and continued with the same ideas in this campaign, everything can be seen as belonging to a single cohesive agenda, and the existence of this agenda has already set the stage or primed the consumers for new but familiar content.

### MAP OF THE SOUL:7 CAMPAIGN AS AN EXAMPLE OF INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

The notion that new communication efforts should work in tandem with preceding ones was also highlighted by Batra and Keller (2016)

when they wrote about integrated marketing communications. They argued that how well “each communication attempt [can do] depends on the messages that came before and the ones that will come after” (p. 123). Moreover, marketers must “be concerned not just with what each message can accomplish in isolation (its ‘main effect’) but also with what it needs to accomplish in the context of this entire sequence or stream of messages (its ‘interactive effects’)” (Batra and Keller, 2016, p. 123). In the case of *Map of the Soul: 7*'s marketing, the psychological concepts expressed in the trailers were built on the group's previous works, which was inspired by literature, psychology, and philosophy. The ideas of connectivity and collaboration were embodied in both “Black Swan’ Art Film” (Big Hit Labels, 2020-a) and “ON’ Kinetic Manifesto Film: Come Prima” (Big Hit Labels, 2020-b), as these videos were collaborations with MN Dance Company and The Lab Dance Company/Blue Devils Marching Band, respectively.

Furthermore, the integrated marketing communications theory can be applied to understand how all the different parts of the campaign – the different sections of online

marketing as well as offline marketing – worked together. Batra and Keller (2016) accentuate *consistency, complementarity, and cross-effects* as the three key aspects of marketing across different platforms (p. 124). They noted that for consistency and complementarity “the exact same persuasive message can benefit from being reinforced in different ways across different communications” and that “different communication options have varied strengths and weaknesses [which can] complement each other” (Batra and Keller, 2016, p. 124). In the case of this campaign, consistency can be seen in the fact that various online materials were distributed through all the different social media accounts belonging to both the group and the company: the videos and the photos appeared on mainstream social networking sites (SNS), such as Twitter and Instagram, as well as on sites or applications that are focused more on Korean entertainment or BTS specifically such as V Live and Weverse. In terms of complementarity, the choice of content for each platform utilized the features of the said site. The twitter announcements were short and often included links to other sites, whereas on Instagram, the site's grid layout was utilized (Figure 3). These

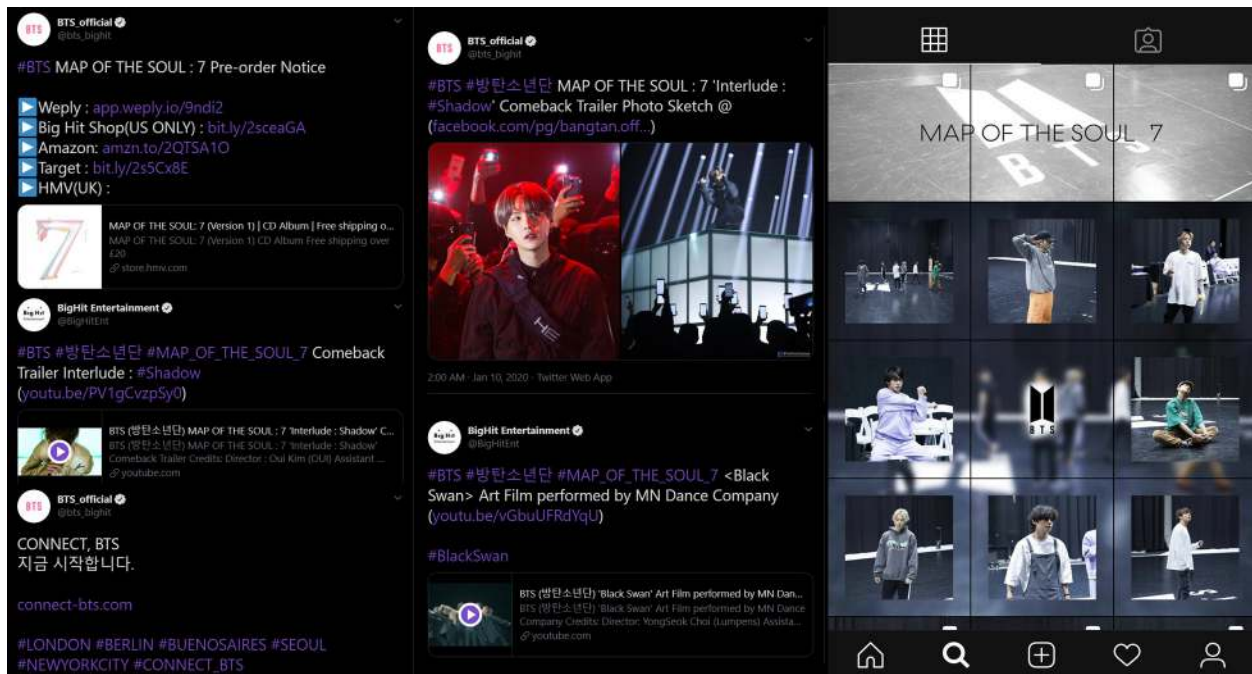


FIGURE 3. (A) TWEETS INCLUDING NUMEROUS LINKS AND (B) INSTAGRAM'S GRID BEING UTILIZED FOR 3X3 COMPOSITION (EXTREME RIGHT) (@BTS\_official ON TWITTER, @BTS. BIGHITOFFICIAL ON INSTAGRAM, 2020).

posts were further complemented with V Live's live streaming feature on the day of the album's release, when the band held a live discussion on the topics of creation and passion, which also permeated the whole campaign (BTS V Live channel, 2020).

Lastly, concerning cross-effects, Batra and Keller (2016) noted that the "communication effects from consumer exposure to one communication option can be enhanced when consumers have had prior exposure to a different communication option" (p. 124). I believe that in this campaign cross-effect occurred during the transition from online to offline marketing efforts, namely the CONNECT, BTS events. When the initial schedule of promotions was announced, the five CONNECT, BTS events were not explained, maintaining the aforementioned important element of surprise as well as raising fan engagement due to speculation. Despite all the speculation, fans did not predict that CONNECT, BTS would turn out to be a collaborative modern art project "connecting five cities and twenty-two artists" whose goal would be to "redefine the relationship between art and music" in resonance with BTS's philosophy (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-a). The locations for the events were in London (Serpentine Gallery), Berlin (Gropius Bau Museum), Buenos Aires (The Kirchner Cultural Centre), Seoul (DDP Design Exhibition Hall), and New York (Brooklyn Bridge Park Pier 3) (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-a).

The integrated marketing communications idea continued at the offline exhibitions via integration of Samsung augmented reality technologies: the visitors and users of Samsung smartphones could download a special app that would virtually bring a member of BTS on screen to discuss a specific art installation (Kim, 2020). Going back to the idea that a consumer's previous experiences with marketing should be enhanced by new ones, it can be speculated that a consumer journey could have occurred as follows: a person might have seen various online materials that piqued their interest; then, if they resided in one of the five cities, they might visit the exhibition and might subsequently use the AR app at the exhibition, during which their ideas about BTS and

the new album can get reinforced or expanded.

## **ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONNECT, BTS EVENTS: LOW VS. HIGH CULTURE**

The CONNECT, BTS museum events have several other interesting marketing implications as well. Firstly, they strengthened the global outreach of the band, as the exhibitions were held in multiple places around the globe and featured collaborations with artists and museum curators from a variety of nations – Denmark, UK, Germany, Argentina, and their native country, South Korea (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-a). Ideas of connectivity and collaboration, which were highlighted in the agenda and already found in the art and manifesto films, could also be seen in this part of the campaign.

Another interesting point about marketing a pop band's album through museum exhibitions is how such an act goes against the divide between "low" and "high" culture. Pop music, especially pop music created by groups termed "boy bands" is traditionally seen as belonging to popular or low culture. In contrast, many scholars have argued that museums are institutions that define high culture and embody it by being "temples of 'high' culture [by] deliberate exclusion of the material culture of pop culture" (Moore, 1997, p. 1). However, postmodernism has challenged this divide between high and low culture (Moore, 1997, p. 1), and CONNECT, BTS exhibitions did the same by combining what was believed to be low culture with high culture and subverting expectations (as no one predicted that museums would be used in this campaign).

## **THE MEANING(S) OF THE CAMPAIGN: POLYSEMY**

The utilization of museum exhibitions and the inclusion of philosophical, psychological, and literary ideas in both the product (the album/the music) and the marketing content (the music videos/the photos) made this campaign quite complex, which in turn leads to polysemy. "Polysemy in advertising [is] the occurrence of multiple meanings for the same advertising

message, [which may be used as] a strategic resource” (Puntoni et al., 2010, p. 51). There are two types of polysemy: “a *diachronic* dimension, [which is] when advertising polysemy occurs in the same individual, such as on first viewing an advertisement, or viewing an advertisement on repeated occasions” (Kirmani as cited in Puntoni et al., 2010, p. 52) and “[a] *synchronic* aspect, [which is] when multiple audiences are exposed to an advertisement [and it] means one thing to one group of consumers and something different to another” (Grier and Brumbaugh as cited in Puntoni et al., 2010, p. 52). Overall, I believe that polysemy is highly present in this campaign as well as in BTS's work. Fans from different cultures may find unique meanings while engaging with the content (synchronic dimension), and meanings may also shift over time as fans acquire new knowledge. For instance, after studying works by Carl Jung, the fans may come back to the music video and notice new aspects of it (diachronic dimension). This type of fan engagement is evident online, for example, in twitter accounts such as ARMY Theorists Society (Twitter handle: @army\_society) that facilitate the online discussion around various theories regarding BTS content or in the explanatory content created by fans on YouTube, such as xCeleste, DKDKTV, Hayden Brock, and Bookish Theories, which are just a handful of channels posting such content.

## THE RESULTS OF THE CAMPAIGN

I further assessed the campaign's achievements to provide a final evaluation of the campaign. The promoted album sold extremely well in both foreign (Western) and more domestic (Eastern) markets, so we can conclude that the campaign was quite successful financially or, simply put, profitable. The album debuted at number one on the Billboard charts with 422,000 equivalent album units earned in the U.S. in the first week (Caulfield, 2020). In South Korea, in less than a month, the album “moved just under 4.11 million copies,” becoming “the most successful title in South Korean history” (McIntyre, 2020-b). The reaction on social media also suggested that the campaign was successful. In terms of quantity, during the album release month (February), the ARMY (BTS's fandom) created 210 hashtags or terms, of which 89 were directly related to the campaign – track list, trailers, music videos, or the album release in general (ResearchBTS, 2020). The quality of reactions also falls on the positive side, as evident from *Figure 4*.

## CONCLUSION

This campaign analysis focused on the promotion of BTS's album *Map of the Soul: 7*.

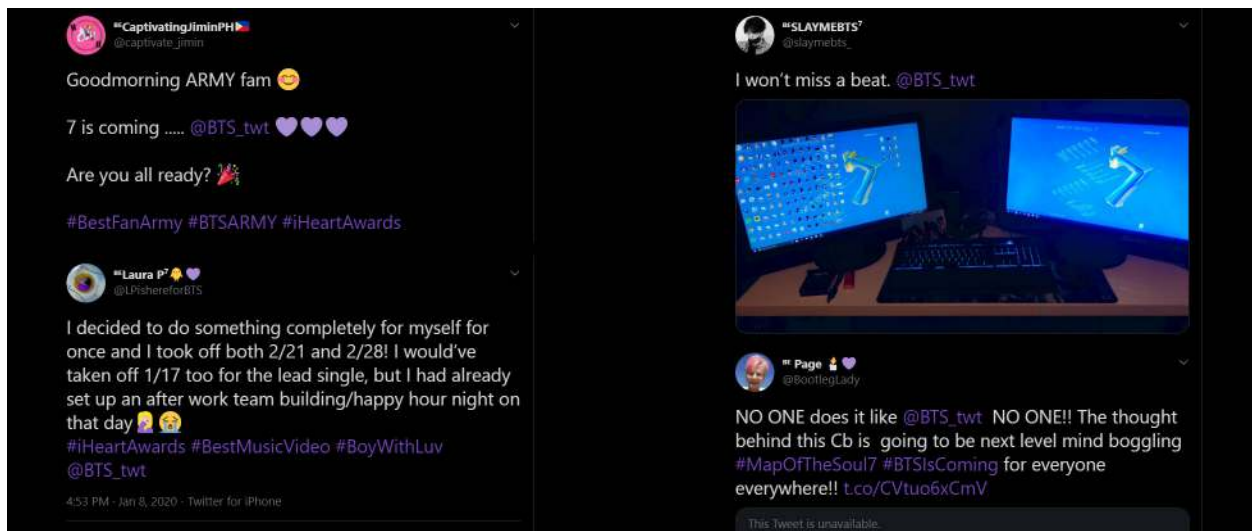


FIGURE 4. A SELECTION OF TWEETS SHOWCASING FAN'S EXCITEMENT FOR THE ALBUM (TWO ON THE LEFT), FEAR OF MISSING OUT APPEAL (RIGHT-TOP) AND POLYSEMY (RIGHT-BOTTOM).

The campaign was unique in that it combined for-profit goals of selling an album and various creative messages, i.e., it was a combination of advertising and communications efforts. The campaign was found to be an embodiment of both the mission and the values of the company, Big Hit Entertainment, which manages BTS, as well as the continuation of the group's messages in their previous works. Through the application of the integrated marketing communications theory, the campaign was found to have utilized multiple platforms for both online and offline promotions.

The offline promotion, which occurred in museums, was found to be especially unique. The fan engagement that this campaign elicited was also discussed through the theory of polysemy. In addition, the social media reactions and financial figures showcase that the campaign was successful. Lastly, integrated marketing communications theory suggests that previous messages should be maintained going forward, and this was achieved by future BTS content, through which the promotional campaign's messages were continued.

The connectivity idea was sustained after the campaign with the release of an educational series of videos titled "Learn Korean with BTS," whose goal was to strengthen the connection between the group and its global fans by overcoming the language barrier (Savage, 2020). Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing became necessary, the message of connectivity was being maintained by replacing cancelled or rescheduled tour dates (in promotion of this same album) with live streams of older concerts. The live stream event, which aired on YouTube on April 18 and 19, titled "BANG BANG CON," was in itself a clever marketing trick: McIntyre (2020-a) argues that "packaging several visuals together, setting a date and time, and giving it a brandable name [made] the entire endeavour much more exciting." According to the press release, the livestream garnered 50.59 million views with the "highest number of concurrent viewers [being] 2.24 million," while hashtags relating to the event appeared 6.46 million times on various SNS (Osen, 2020). Osen (2020) further reported

that half a million official light sticks (which fans normally use at live K-pop concerts) located in 162 regions around the world were connected to the livestream via Bluetooth and Weverse (the in-house SNS), potentially kick-starting an "untact era," a novel concert watching culture where fans all over the world can become one.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

BTS

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

*The creator has no relevant conflicts of interest to disclose.*

## **AFFILIATIONS**

N/A



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## IMAGE CREDITS

### FIGURE 1

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**SUGGESTED CITATION**

**APA CITATION**

Vasileviciute, L.(2020). An analytical overview of BTS's Map of the Soul: 7 promotional strategies. *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review* [20130613], (1). <https://ther3journal.com/issue-1/analytical-overview-7-promotional-campaign/>.

**MLA CITATION**

Vasileviciute, Lukne. "An Analytical Overview of BTS's Map of the Soul: 7 Promotional Strategies." *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review* [20130613], no.1, 2020. <https://ther3journal.com/issue-1/analytical-overview-7-promotional-campaign/>.