



Fan Activists or Activists Who Happen to Be Fans?

Complicating Monolithic Western Media Narratives
of the BTS ARMY's Fandom Activism During the 2020
#BlackLivesMatter Movement

ACADEMIC ARTICLE: ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the impact and organizing power of fandoms has spread far beyond digital fandom spaces to influence real-world political and social movements, using the BTS ARMY's activism during the 2020 #BlackLivesMatter movement as a case study. It argues that although Western media tends to paint K-pop and BTS fans as a monolithic group, either as crazed preteen girls or socially aware progressive activists, listening to fans directly provides a more complete, nuanced picture of how and why fandom can become overtly politicized. Through analyzing public ARMY responses to Western media portrayals of ARMY #BLM activism, I demonstrate that fans and celebrities have a symbiotic and rhizomatic, rather than top-down relationship when it comes to encouraging fan activism. I argue that at first fans engage with political causes as an "activist who happens to be a fan," but once the object of fandom (in this case, BTS) offers support for a cause, it becomes possible for fans, journalists, and scholars to label it "fandom activism." This is because fans intentionally avoid rallying the fandom around a singular cause in the name of BTS or ARMY before BTS gives explicit support, firstly because fans don't want their independent activist initiatives to impact BTS, and secondly because the diversity of a transcultural fandom like the BTS ARMY makes it difficult to rally as a cohesive unit without a universally uniting factor, such as BTS themselves. Thus, labeling them "fan activists" risks reducing the nuances in their activism.

KEYWORDS

Twitter, fandom activism, ARMY, media narratives, #BlackLivesMatter

In the summer of 2020, BTS and K-pop fans' involvement in online #BlackLivesMatter protests was prominently featured in news media, from hijacking white supremacist hashtags, to overwhelming police surveillance apps, to raising \$1 million USD for #BLM charities in a day (Alexander, 2020; Andrews, 2020; Kirkland, 2020; Park et al., 2021). Scholars have written extensively about "fan activism" before, succinctly defined as "the range of intentional actions by fans, or the use of fanlike strategies," including fan fiction, remixed videos, self-published media analyses, fundraising, and event organizing, "to provoke change" (Brough & Shresthova, 2012, p. 2.4). Although there is debate concerning where the line between fan activism and actual civic engagement is drawn, it has become increasingly clear that the fanlike strategies tying digital fandom together, namely digital event organizing and fundraising, have become a blueprint for organizing toward broader social change.

This paper explores how online fandom activism, using BTS and ARMY during the #BlackLivesMatter protests in the summer of 2020 as a case study, can or cannot be viewed as a public to mobilize for activist causes. Creating a cohesive political unit requires the formation of a public, which (in short) refers to groups of people united by common ideas, ideology, or hobbies. Specifically, this paper refers to networked publics, because "the term *publics* foregrounds a more engaged stance," than the more passive "consumer" or "audience," and furthermore, "[networked] publics are communicating more and more through complex networks that are bottom-up, top-down, as well as side-to-side" (Ito, 2008, Framework section, para. 1), which is the case in ARMY fandom, as this paper will discuss. I show that online communities, especially fandoms like BTS's ARMY, are one of the most accessible places to organically create the strong ties between people required for the formation of networked publics. These strong ties in turn are necessary for civic engagement to take place in today's age, largely due to this changing mode of modern political engagement toward the online (Vromen, 2017).

Online Fandom and Political Engagement

Despite the centrality of online fandom in facilitating significant amounts of modern-day political engagement (Hinck, 2019; Brough & Shresthova, 2012), popular narratives surrounding celebrity politics focus on fans as passive followers who will blindly take up any cause their beloved celebrity endorses. However, fan studies research has complicated this claim (Wheeler, 2013; Phillips, 2012). In fact, within these online fandoms, fans are active participants, often engaging in activism before the celebrity mentions it. I argue that, at first, individual fans engage with political causes as an activist who happens to be a fan, but once the object of fandom offers support for a cause, it becomes possible for fans, scholars, and journalists to label it "fandom activism." I show that it is difficult to organize a fandom around a cause before the object of fandom explicitly supports it. This is because fans intentionally avoid rallying the fandom around a singular cause before explicit support is given; firstly because fans don't want their independent activist initiatives to impact BTS, and secondly because the diversity of a transcultural fandom like the BTS ARMY makes it difficult to rally as a cohesive unit without a universally uniting factor, such as BTS themselves.

Therefore, harnessing the power of fandom for a particular cause is possible only if one attaches the desired cause directly to the object of fandom. I then turn to a discussion of Western media narratives surrounding BTS fans' organization of #BLM and public ARMY pushback to demonstrate how understanding fandom political organization requires insider knowledge from fans themselves.

Background: ARMY, Social Media, and Twitter

While the BTS fandom's primary platform is Twitter, ARMY fan networks spread across many types of differently structured social media (Lynch, 2020). However, since the bulk of BTS fandom and fan activism happens on Twitter, it will be the primary focus of this paper. Twitter is a decentralized network with many spread-out influential nodes, meaning that "decisions, ideas, and information can come from anywhere and travel throughout the group in any direction," epitomizing the "democratic turn" ushered in by social media (O'Leary Carmona, 2020, p. 2.3). Indeed, the BTS Twitter fandom fits this description, with tens to hundreds of potential "central nodes" categorized by a report in *Reuters* as the following: official BTS accounts, fan translators, mobilizing accounts, statistics, geographic fanbases, researchers, and original content creators along with miscellaneous others (Bhandari, 2020). This novel model of two-way communication has created many new possibilities for activists to engage with a wider audience for their political cause. However, some of the groups most consistently successful at mobilizing such a large and diverse group of people for a particular cause have been fandoms, especially BTS's ARMY (Park et al., 2021; Chang & Park, 2019). In fact, previous studies on ARMY activism have found that "involvement in all aspects [of social collaborative efforts] increased once becoming an ARMY," supporting the mobilizing potential of fandoms (Park et al., 2021, p. 6). What, then, might political activists learn from fandoms about mobilizing people in the digital age?

Changing Modes of Political Engagement

Traditionally, political engagement is thought of as what Foster et al. call the "arena" view of politics, which focuses on the formal institutions of the state, rather than how individuals experience politics in everyday life (Foster et al., 2013). However, Jonathan Dean (2017) posits that a political community (or organization) can be created without the formal institutions of the state or traditional political institutions like political parties. He describes the creation of a political community as coming from a series of "representative claims" by political actors speaking and acting for a certain constituency, meaning that "in line with performativity theory, the representative claim is thus constitutive of the community it ostensibly represents," and therefore, these claims can come from many different places and actors to create the political community's identity (Dean, 2017, p. 414). This is how a digital, decentralized fandom network can create a potential political movement, as any of the tens or hundreds of central nodes discussed earlier can popularize a certain representative claim (whether it's progressive or regressive) about the BTS fandom and have that claim come to constitute the fandom's political identity.

In an increasingly networked and decentralized world, fandom provides a way to study how one can create new, effective methods of civic engagement that adapt to this new digital world. Ashley Hinck describes how this is possible by arguing that "fan-based civic appeals invite fans to see themselves as citizens and public subjects, as public beings with a stake in public life . . . fandom offers a particular path through which individuals can come to see themselves as connected to citizenship, civic engagement, and social movement activism" (Hinck, 2019, p. 165). In fact, some argue that digital

communities are replacing the traditional John Dewey model of local communities as necessary for forming publics (Dewey, 1954). This is because “fan communities provide the grounding, anchoring and strong ties essential for public action,” which are slowly disappearing in the physical world but have rapidly increased with the onset of the global coronavirus pandemic (Hinck, 2019, p. 166). The disappearance of physical community spaces seems to mean that engaging in an online community is one of the best ways to create a networked public and form strong ties to each other, as this ARMY #BLM case study demonstrates.

However, for the transcultural ARMY fandom coming from a range of geographical, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, fans’ shared love of BTS is “but one in a constellation of contexts” that might inform why a fan chooses to engage with BTS, its fandom, or its activism, seemingly dooming the fandom to a loose, regional coalition that can’t effectively organize (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, p. 93). For example, transcultural fans generally stick to their own language, culture, or country-specific circles, as demonstrated by the many language, culture, and country-specific ARMY fanbases (BTS América Latina, n.d; ARAB ARMY’S PROJECT, n.d; BTS INDONESIA, n.d.). Thus, the ARMY fandom would appear to be in line with how many fan studies scholars have examined fandom activism thus far: confined to a specific national or regional context, and ignoring the transcultural parts of an English-speaking fandom altogether (Morimoto, 2018).

However, despite this, the transcultural nature of ARMY doesn’t mean fans are unable to cohere into a networked public. Due to the robust community-building within the ARMY fandom, as exemplified in the aforementioned *Reuters* piece (Bhandari, 2020), the existence of fan translators who allow ideas to spread between different language groups within the fandom, and the plethora of representative fandom claims, some of which are echoed by BTS themselves (such as working hard, “Love Yourself,” “ARMY is the face of BTS,” and “teamwork makes the dream work” (@BTS_twt, 2013) among others), these ties become strong against all odds. These representative claims are important because in order for fan-based activism to be successful, they “must be undergirded by a love of the fan-object,” and correspond to the claims that represent what the fan-object is about (Hinck, 2019, p. 164). These representative claims give ARMY an identity to latch on to, allowing for greater group cohesion (Park et al., 2021, p. 9). In ARMY’s particular case, unlike the regional focus of previous fan studies, the fandom’s civic engagement transcends the local or national and reaches the global, which wouldn’t be possible without the embedded transcultural nature of the ARMY fandom. The global network of ARMY based on shared values formed within the fandom allows their reach to be beyond anything imaginable before the internet.

The Synergistic Flow of Celebrity Influence and Fan Agency

Many scholars have written about celebrity politics, specifically how celebrities use their celebrity status to garner support for particular political agendas. One notable example of this is Lady Gaga and her repeated, vocal endorsement of LGBTQ+ rights (Click et al., 2017). Celebrities can effectively garner support for political agendas because social media allows for deeper connections between a celebrity and members of the public through the dissemination of everyday messages between a celebrity and their fans (Bennett, 2012). Because of these deepened connections, fans are more likely to identify with a pop culture figure, take up their causes, and turn to social media than before, which “provides a space where fans can access, discuss, and engage with other like-minded individuals on issues they care about, creating networked publics,” thus providing the digital replacement for the physical publics discussed earlier (Click

et al., 2017, p. 610). For this reason, a celebrity explicitly endorsing a political issue can cause the fandom to become overtly politicized as a result (Dean, 2017, p. 410). However, it is important to note that fans do have agency in this situation; they are not brainless extensions of the celebrity who follow their every word faithfully, as “fans are also using these social tools, without direct prompting or input from the celebrity, to organize and mobilize themselves in these acts” (Bennett, 2012, p. 3.1). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind “the capacity of fans of individual celebrities or texts (rather than the celebrities themselves) to actively shape certain kinds of political spaces” (Dean, 2017, p. 411). While a celebrity endorsing a political agenda is an effective way to engage a fan base in activism, it is also possible for fans to take upon themselves the role of activists, as I will now show.

BTS FANDOM ACTIVISM: AN EXAMPLE

In the specific case of BTS and ARMY fandom, a group of ARMY independently run a wide array of monthly charity projects under the Twitter handle @oneinanarmy (OIAA). OIAA has addressed issues such as transforming rural communities, COVID-19 relief, and #BlackLivesMatter among others (One In An ARMY, *Past Campaigns*). These initiatives have been partially inspired by BTS’s own UNICEF campaign to stop violence and other one-off charitable or socially conscious initiatives (UNICEF, 2019). However, they were independently started by fans, not BTS themselves, and bolstered by some degree of attachment to the object of fandom (such as BTS’s UNICEF campaign) or BTS’s representative claims (“Love yourself”), as we will see in the #BlackLivesMatter case study.

The 2020 #BlackLivesMatter movement demonstrates how a transnational fandom coheres into a networked public through a shared attachment to the object of fandom. OIAA publicized a #BLM donations campaign on June 1, 2020, three days before BTS made any public mention of #BLM (Bhandari, 2020). BTS tweeted in support of #BLM on June 4 (@BTS_twt, 2020), followed two days later by an announcement from *Variety* revealing BTS’s donation of \$1 million USD to the #BLM campaign on June 6. Before the announcement of BTS’s donation, OIAA’s campaign had already been successful in raising over \$50,000 USD, which was the largest amount OIAA had ever raised at that time (Research BTS, 2020). However, after the *Variety* article was published, fans were inspired to begin the #MatchAMillion campaign that same day, hoping to match BTS’s #BLM donation (which they did, in approximately 25 hours) (Benjamin, 2020). Fans began a campaign to support the #BLM movement on their own, without any prompting from BTS. However, after BTS publicly acknowledged and supported this campaign, fan activism and support exploded. The more direct association to BTS in the form of BTS tweeting about #BLM brought the fan-led campaign more notoriety and support within the fandom even though fans already independently started their own campaign. This is consistent with previous findings that 40% of ARMY respondents knew about fan-led donation initiatives to #BLM before BTS’s donation, but 83% knew about BTS’s donation to #BLM (Park et al., 2021, p. 7). Thus, this ARMY case study shows a synergistic, rhizomatic flow between celebrity influence and fan agency in creating these initiatives, wherein fans independently organize collective actions around a political cause and a celebrity’s later endorsement of the cause amplifies the scale of the actions.

FAN ACTIVISTS VS. ACTIVISTS WHO HAPPEN TO BE FANS: A CASE STUDY

Beginning in 2019, K-pop entered what Jenna Gibson describes as a “mainstreaming stage” in Western media outlets (Gibson, 2019). During this stage, “K-pop really

became part of the mainstream conversation in the West,” and journalists began to seriously cover K-pop and their fans, when before they had rarely received attention (Gibson, 2019, p. 34). However, despite the OIAA initiatives mentioned earlier showing a socially conscious and globally minded side of the BTS fandom even earlier than 2020’s #BLM movement, Western media outlets did not cover the relationship between BTS and ARMY’s activism this way. Instead, the media often portrayed K-pop fans as a “monolithic swarm of annoying, shallow screaming tweens,” obsessed with manipulating Twitter algorithms to prove their group is the best (Ohlheiser, 2020, para. 5). Therefore, when Western media outlets were presented with evidence that BTS fans can be more complex as well as socially and politically engaged than previously imagined with the visibility of ARMY #BLM activism, they began posting think pieces, asking whether ARMY might become the next “Anonymous” or other group of progressive online vigilantes (Carville, 2020; Coscarelli, 2020; Park, 2020). However, as scholar Crystal S. Anderson points out, “The K-pop fan-as-activist is the other side of the K-pop-fan-as-crazy coin,” as the fan networks that allowed for this fan activism are the very same networks that were created to game social media algorithms and music charts (Anderson, 2020, para. 6). Thus, this shows the two prominent narratives about K-pop fans in Western media: crazed tweens manipulating algorithms (“crazy fans”) and progressive online vigilantes (“fan activists”).

Both of these narratives, fan activists vs. crazy fans, have been superimposed by a Western media environment eager to reduce a complex and multicultural group of individuals to a monolith. While ARMYs have engaged in similar progressive social activism before, such as the recurring hashtags #BlackARMYBeauty, #BlackARMYequality, and #BlackoutBTS, which aim to share the experiences and stories of Black BTS fans, this is not the only side of the fandom, although it might be the most visible (Bhandari, 2020). Perhaps as a result of the transcultural nature and large size of the BTS fandom, problems involving cultural (mis)appropriation, stereotypes, and microaggressions exist within the fandom at the same time as this progressive fan activism (Duhaime-Ross, 2020). However, it’s important to note that this is not unique to ARMY or the wider K-pop fandom — as scholar Rukmini Pande has pointed out, most fandoms have these same issues with racism, and ARMY is no exception (Pande, 2018). The one-sided Western media-created narrative of K-pop fans, and especially ARMY, either as a monolith of screaming fangirls or as progressive activists, denies both the diversity contained within the fandom and the ability of fans to speak for themselves, particularly when it comes to their own activism.

WESTERN MEDIA NARRATIVE CASE STUDY: BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

One relevant case study that demonstrates the Western media narrative of ARMY as progressive online vigilantes is a think piece written for *Bloomberg Businessweek* titled “No One Fights QAnon Like the Global Army of K-Pop Superfans,” demonstrated in both the article’s content and ARMY pushback to its representation of the fandom (Carville, 2020). The article features several interviews with ARMYs, and the article even admits the fandom isn’t a monolith. Despite this, the article concludes with a quote from Wasim Khaled, the CEO of a company called Blackbird.AI that analyzes digital disinformation campaigns, stating “there’s definitely no other group [than ARMY] that can go up against QAnon,” giving the article its leading title, as well as the same overall “K-pop fans as a digital vigilante” narrative (Carville, 2020, para. 27).

After this article came out, many of the ARMY organizers featured in the article, such as those involved in OIAA, released statements criticizing how the article was written. OIAA stated that their words were “not only misquoted and erroneous, they were also

added to the piece out of context,” even after OIAA provided the correct information on a fact-checking call before publication (OIAA, 2020, para. 3). Additionally, OIAA said the “article seems to have been structured to not derive insights from the interviews but to use them as plausible justification to the writer’s own ideas about BTS and ARMY” (OIAA, 2020, para. 6). Indeed, this showcases Western media’s tendency to determine narratives about fans without truly considering their perspectives beforehand, despite the fact that fans are the reason these events happened. It erases the nuance required to understand how fan activism emerges and takes hold in the BTS fandom in the first place.

Fans didn’t only take issue with the article’s treatment of fan interviewees, they also disagreed with the narrative at the heart of the article. Ellie Kim, a BTS fan translator quoted in the *Bloomberg* article, rebutted the article’s ARMY fan-as-activist narrative by arguing in a statement released on her Twitter after the article’s release that BTS fans “care about BLM first and foremost as a fellow human beings,” and that while fans are used to harnessing their networked power to achieve many goals, they “don’t need [BTS’s] permission or opinion to do what we’re called to do as human beings,” reinforcing the previously articulated argument about the synergy between celebrity influence and independent fan activism (doyou_bangtan, 2020, p.1). But Kim adds another dimension to this synergistic influence, concluding that “we [ARMY] don’t do anything in the name of fandom — and therefore the idols — unless they have explicitly made mention of it” (doyou_bangtan, 2020, p. 1). What Kim is describing is that BTS fans, out of a sense of love and protection of their fan-object (BTS), will first organize around a social or political cause as like-minded individuals who happen to be part of the same fandom (ARMY), and are careful to emphasize that their activism is their own. For example, on OIAA’s website, their “about” section includes a disclaimer stating: “One In An ARMY is a fan collective composed of volunteers across the globe. We are not in any way endorsed by or affiliated with BTS or BigHit Entertainment” (One in an ARMY, About Us, Disclaimer section, para. 1). In this sense, they are an “activist who happens to be a fan,” rather than a “fan activist.”

Part of the refusal to adopt the “fan activist” label in favor of an “activist who happens to be a fan (ARMY)” that Kim describes stems from the diversity within ARMY, since even fanbases like OIAA themselves “do not consider it right to take it upon [them]selves to speak for fandom’s political views as a ‘collective,’” since they “come from different parts of the world,” and everyone “understands politics in their own way,” making it impossible to generalize how “the fandom” feels about any given cause (One in an ARMY, 2020, para. 7). In other words, calling themselves “fan activists” would imply that all fans in the fandom would support any cause OIAA endorses, which cannot be true due to the diversity of a transcultural fandom. In fact, there was disagreement within the fandom over whether BTS should publicly speak out about #BLM or not (Park et al., 2021, p. 11). However, once the fan-object speaks out about a topic, as BTS eventually did, then fan networks feel free to assemble in the name of the fan-object, rather than just as a network of humans who are passionate about a cause and happen to have a common hobby. As previously mentioned, this is because successful fan activism “must be undergirded by a love of the fan-object” (Hinck, 2019, p. 164). If the cause has not already been explicitly attached to the fan-object, it loses its connection to a representative claim that unites the transcultural fandom.

This case study shows us that fans do engage in activist causes without prompting from celebrities, as in the case of OIAA and #BLM. However, before fans receive explicit support from their fan-object, fans reject the “fan activist” label in favor of “activists who happen to be fans.” One reason for this is because the diversity of a

transcultural fandom makes it difficult to fully mobilize a gigantic fandom with a range of political and cultural beliefs. Thus, labeling collective actions organized by different fan groups within the fandom as fan activism risks misrepresenting the fandom and its activities as universally endorsed by fans. Another reason for this is that fans don't want their activism to be forced onto the fan object. For example, if ARMY were found to be donating en masse to a particular cause specifically in the name of BTS and the fandom, it could lead to outsiders assuming that BTS must also support that cause by association even if BTS never mentioned it, and could put pressure on BTS to make a statement. This is something ARMY are keenly aware of, as one of the fandom's representative claims is that "ARMY is the face of BTS." In other words, the way ARMY portrays BTS is the way the world sees them. Fans are aware that any cause fans endorse under the explicit label of "ARMY activists" would imply that BTS themselves also endorse that cause. Thus, fans are wary of their own initiatives unintentionally and unfairly pushing an unwanted agenda onto BTS.

Conclusion

Fandom activism is an increasingly relevant topic as our personal networks become more and more mediated by the internet and social media. Regardless of whether one personally engages in fandom spaces directly, the impact and organizing power of fandoms, particularly ARMY, has spread far beyond just digital or fandom spaces to influence real-world political and social movements, as ARMY's activism during the 2020 #BLM movement demonstrates. Since fandom allows for a quick way to create ties with people who otherwise may not have been reachable, it is a powerful way to form networked publics suitable for civic engagement and activism. The decentralized nature of most of these networks, particularly Twitter, is the reason why many fandom activist causes can start, since ideas can come from anywhere and spread anywhere in the network.

The case of BTS and ARMY fandom activism in the summer 2020 #BLM movement shows how we can begin to understand fans as a viable networked public for political organization. Although Western media tends to paint K-pop and BTS fans as a monolithic group, either as crazed preteen girls or socially aware progressive activists, listening to fans directly provides a much more complete, nuanced picture of how and why fandom can become overtly politicized. One lesson is that fans and celebrities have a symbiotic, rather than a one-way, relationship when it comes to encouraging fan activism. Fans are able to engage in activism for various causes on their own, but are usually created under the label of "activists who happen to be a fan" rather than "fan activists." In other words, fans are able to engage in activism for various causes on their own, thus, labeling them as "fan activists" risks reducing the nuances in their activism through which they act as a political networked public. Fans are also cautious of labelling their activities "fan activism" because that label implies all fans support the cause, and the diversity of thoughts and political opinions contained within a transcultural fandom like ARMY makes it difficult to give a concrete reason to support a cause that would appeal to all or even most fans. Additionally, fans are aware that their actions reflect on BTS, and don't want their independent activist initiatives to impact BTS. Thus, calling it "fan activism" would incorrectly imply that all fans and BTS themselves endorse the cause. However, once the celebrity speaks out about a cause themselves, it becomes viable to attach the activist cause directly to the celebrity and become a "fan activist," as this makes it easy to transfer fans' love for the celebrity into love for the activist cause.

This paper has primarily focused on Twitter fan activist networks, but further research could explore how fan activism works on other platforms. This paper has not addressed the diversity in motivations of fans for engaging in this civic activism; see Park et al., 2021 for more discussion on this. Additionally, future research could discuss any potential tensions between different sects of fans over various fan activist causes that stem from the diversity of a transcultural fandom. Finally, future research can explore in more depth how the social media platform itself affects the organization or type of activism fans engage in.

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Suggested Citation

APA

Lynch, K. (2021). Fan activists or activists who happen to be fans?: Complicating monolithic Western media narratives of the BTS ARMY's fandom activism during the 2020 #BlackLivesMatter movement. *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review* [20130613], (3). <https://ther3journal.com/>

MLA

Lynch, Kimery. "Fan Activists or Activists Who Happen to Be Fans?: Complicating Monolithic Western Media Narratives of the BTS ARMY's Fandom Activism During the 2020 #BlackLivesMatter Movement." *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review* [20130613], no. 3, 2021, <https://ther3journal.com/>.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The creators have no relevant conflicts of interest to disclose.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Dr. Ashley Hinck for spending her time to give useful feedback on earlier drafts of this research. I would also like to express my gratitude to my ARMY friends for giving their input on earlier drafts of this work. Finally, I appreciate my COM 432 class at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa for giving me the time and motivation to write the initial draft of this paper.

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