

**Studies of K-pop fandom culture : User  
experience and motive research of  
subscription app “Bubble”**

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experience and motive research of  
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University of Adger

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## **Preface**

Applying to the University of Agder and moving to Norway was one of the biggest decisions I have made in my life. During my time here, I have been fortunate to encounter many wonderful and supportive individuals who have filled this adventure with excitement and Joy.

First of all, I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Daniel, who provided me constructive feedback and support. I would've gotten lost if I didn't have your guidance. I also like to thank my lovely friends I met in Norway. From when I just moved to Norway, I never felt like I'm alone or misplaced since my time with you all was full of happiness and laughter.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my loved ones I left in my home country, South Korea. Professors, friends and my unnie, who always made time to catch up with each other, never hesitated to give me support and advice despite our distance and time differences. But most of all, I want to extend my love and appreciation to my family and my beloved cat, Karae. From the beginning of my decision to move to Norway to pursue my academic goal, and for the past 2 years, I received endless love and support from my family. Because of my supportive family, I could continue challenging a new task, focus on my studies, and be brave to put myself out there in the world - cause I knew that I could always return to loving arms of my family, this secure feeling gave me infinite willpower and motive to try harder. So everyone who made my life more beautiful, thank you so much. I will always try my best to make yours happier too.

To mention a little bit about my research motivation, As a musician, my love and passion about music always had a special place in my heart . However, if there's one thing that inspires me more than music, it is the people. I always loved to meet people, get to know them better and build connections. For me, everyone has these mesmerizing sparks within themselves and I truly enjoy discovering these sparkles from people that I come across in my life. Artists deliver words of comfort to fans with their lyrics, and voice. The unique bonds between artist and fans are one I admire most about music. Therefore I wanted to write something to introduce a new type of fandom culture, where the main focus is artists and their fans. Thank you to those who will read my small paper and I hope you enjoy it. Mom and dad! I'm finally graduating!

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## 1. Abstract

The digitalization of music has caused a significant change in the economics and logistics of the music industry. With the introduction of subscription-based music streaming services, music has become more accessible compared to the time when it was distributed and consumed in physical form. However, the sustainability of streaming services for artists has been a topic of debate for many years. During my studies at UiA, I attended the Kristiansand Roundtable Conference in 2022 and one of the most memorable quotes I heard was *"A single T-shirt merch sale are equivalent of the same profit as three years' worth of non-stop streaming of one song."* (KRC2022) This highlights the fact that being an artist is a career path that requires extra effort to make a living and support one's career. Given the complexity of the economics of music, finding additional ways to create revenue may be a viable solution as music lost its scarcity. Every Morning, we open our eyes to new types of concepts we haven't faced before. Creativity and artificial intelligence, NFTs, artists and music in metaverse and virtual reality. While technological innovation brings new challenges to adopt in the music industry on a daily basis, *"What does it take not just to **survive**, but to **thrive**?"* (Hughes et al, 2016,p.4)

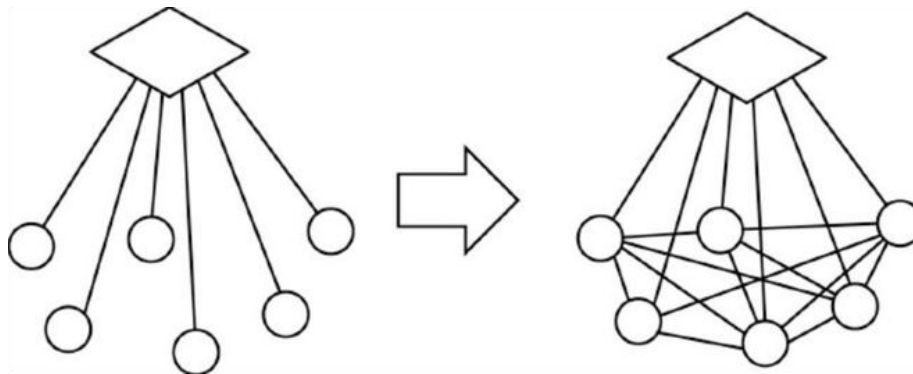
As one of the viable revenue streams to research, I selected one specific service that has been operating in South Korea that is rooted from K-pop fan culture - fan apps. These apps are either developed by external companies or acquired tech companies, and they offer fans exclusive content and opportunities to interact with their favorite artists and fellow fans. While there are various aspects to these apps, I will focus on two main functions. The first is their potential to generate revenue in various areas such as merch sales, marketing, ticketing, and as a platform to bring fans into the concept of the metaverse . The second is their ability to generate thriving income through communication. For instance, in 2020, revenue from an app called 'bubble' was approximately 7.3 million euros. However, with steady growth, the revenue reached over 32.3 million euros in 2022, with a yearly growth rate of over 30%. Observing this tremendous growth has

The purpose of this research is to aid understanding of fan cultures and finding factors that encourage proactive fan behaviors in case studies of K pop fan apps, in order to utilize these emotional designs of artist- fan relationships for other artists. In this thesis, my research will

be divided into two sections. First I will provide background information of three major apps (Weverse, bubble, Universe) including their finance, feature, artist pool. Second, I will demonstrate ethnographic and qualitative research of user experience on app Bubble, to provide users motivation and factors that differentiate this specific service to other social media platforms.

## 1.Introduction

In the traditional music industry, music firms were only providers of music in IP as one directional supplier. Music was distributed in tangible form, resulting in higher barriers for unauthorized uses and individual members of the audiences had weaker connections to each other. (Hughes et al, 2016,p.6)



(Hughes et al, 2016,p.6)

Increased connectivity led firms to lose control in flow of information. On the other hand, individuals' ability to access to the cloud and upload, download and exchange information has increased. But naturally, the range of behavior information that could be observed from the mass audience has also increased. In the music industry, fan support is crucial to one's success. Fans are a source of financial support by consuming their music, merchandise, and live ticket sales but also works as a mental stronghold for many artists. Behind almost every pop-star, there is their closest ally - proactive fans.

In this paper, I will focus on fandom culture, Fan-clubs that have been rooted from South Korea. Fanclubs are gatherings of people who support the same artists. Fanclubs have their own name, nicknames, logo, official merchandise such as glowing sticks. They are not only the consumer, but also act as prosumers - producing high quality fan goods such as posters, photocards, keyrings, mugs and stickers, etc. Fanclubs often organize events such as meetups, birthday gifting, volunteer works, joint charity donations to NGOs, and joint fund or vote for artists related contents on display boards.

**COMEBACK GOALS** **PROOF** Release date: 06.10.2022  
24 HRS, WEEK 1 & 2 GOALS  
CONSISTENCY IS KEY!

**GLOBAL GOALS**

		FIRST 24 hrs	WEEK 1	WEEK 2
YouTube	YET TO COME	100M+ Official MV 10M+ Audio 30M MV Teaser 4.5M+ Premier	225M+ MV 20M+ Audio	Surpass . 325M+ MV . 32M+ Audio
Apple Music	YTC	unfiltered 21M filtered 13.5M	filtered 70M	filtered 50M
Spotify	PROOF	160M	485M	360M
iTunes	YTC	—	#1 Global 200 Global excl US	#1 Global 200 Global excl US
Amazon	YTC	#1 in 100+ countries Single & Album Best Seller	Maintain #1 Single & Album Best Seller	Maintain #1 Single & Album Best Seller
SHAZAM	YTC	250K	500K	800K

**USA / PUERTO RICO GOALS**

		8M+ Official MV 1.5M+ Audio	16M—18M MV 3M+ Audio	Surpass . 24M—31M MV . 5M+ Audio
YouTube	YET TO COME	—	—	—
Apple Music	YTC	TOP 25	TOP 30	TOP 40
Spotify	PROOF	2.5M	12M	8.5M
iTunes	YTC	—	Hot 100 150K sales*	#1 Hot 100
Amazon	YTC	#1 (10K sales) #1 Best Seller	#1 (50K sales) #1 Best Seller	#1 or Top 3 #1 Best Seller

**COMEBACK GOALS**

**Butter**

PRE-SAVE (SPOTIFY)  
PRE-ADD (APPLE MUSIC)  
PRE-ORDER (MP3/CD)

2021.05.21 RELEASE  
15:00 KST / 10:00 EST

#BTSCOMING  
#BUTTERSCOMING  
#PRESAVEBUTTER  
#PREORDERBUTTER  
#PROOFBUTTER  
#BTS  
#BTS.Butter

**billboard**  
#1 on Billboard Hot 100  
150-200,000 Sales  
(250,000 if 2 Versions)  
(3-4 weeks at #1)  
#1 on Global 200, Global Excl. USA, Artist 100, Digital Song Sales, Top Social Artist, and others.  
#1 on BB Korea KPO100  
#1 on BB Japan Hot100  
#1 on BB Japan Streaming Songs

**YouTube**  
102,000,000+ Views & 9,000,000 Likes (First 24 hours)  
200,000,000+ Views (First Week)  
Biggest YouTube Premiere in History (3.3-4,000,000+)

**SHAZAM**  
300,000 Shazams (First 24 hours)  
600,000 Shazams (First Week)  
#1 on Shazam Global

**Spotify**  
PRE-SAVE ON SPOTIFY  
9,100,000+ Filtered Streams (1st Day) Global  
13,18,000,000+ Unfiltered Streams (1st Day) Global  
2.3-3,000,000+ Filtered Streams (1st Day) USA  
45,000,000+ Filtered Streams (1st Week) Global  
10-12,000,000+ Filtered Streams (1st Week) USA

**Apple Music**  
PRE-ADD ON APPLE MUSIC  
#1 in 30+ Countries  
#1 on Apple Music Global  
#1 on Amazon Digital, Google Play, Deezer, Last FM, Global Digital Artist

**qoon**  
#1 in 110+ Countries  
#1 on Shazam Global  
#1 on Gaon Digital, Streaming, & Download Chart

**Apple Music**  
PRE-ADD ON APPLE MUSIC  
#1 in 30+ Countries  
#1 on Apple Music Global  
#1 on Amazon Digital, Google Play, Deezer, Last FM, Global Digital Artist

**NETEASE**  
700,000 - 1,000,000 Sales (First Week)  
#1 on QQ  
#1 on QQ Digital Artist

**RECOCOKU**  
#1 on Recochoku  
#1 on Recochoku

**LINE MUSIC**  
#1 on Line Music  
#1 on Line Music

**DAUM**  
#1 on Daum  
#1 on Daum

**SOUL**  
#1 on Soul  
#1 on Soul

**COMEBACK GOALS**  
**LOVE YOURSELF 結 ANSWER**  
2018.08.24

50M VIEWS IN 24 HOURS  
120M VIEWS IN 1ST WEEK  
4.5M LIKES IN 24 HRS

PEAK AT #1 IN 85+ REGIONS ON THE ITUNES ALBUM CHART  
PEAK AT #1 IN 70+ REGIONS ON THE ITUNES SINGLES CHART

25M GLOBAL PLAYS IN THE FIRST WEEK FOR TITLE TRACK

**billboard**

TOP 10 ON HOT 100 | #1 ON BILLBOARD 200 | ALL 3 LOVE YOURSELF SERIES ON BILLBOARD 200  
#1 ON ARTIST 100 | #1 ON BILLBOARD TOP ALBUM SALES | #1 ON INDEPENDENT ALBUMS  
#1 ON WORLD ALBUMS | #1 ON DIGITAL SONGS SALES CHART | #1 ON STREAMING SONGS  
#1 ON ON DEMAND STREAMING SONGS | #1 ON DIGITAL ALBUMS | #1 ON SOCIAL 50

(Images from twitter)

Streaming strategy a.k.a. 'Comeback goals' from BTS fandom 'ARMY'

Fans also participate in online voting to help artists winning awards for public recognition and schedule global streaming acts to place new releases on top charts in multiple streaming platforms. Because of their loyal and proactive fanbase, Kpop labels are keen to provide a wide range of products and services to accommodate fans' needs.



## **2.Theoretical background**

### **1) Digitalization of music**

Traditionally the music industry was divided with three revenue streams : recorded music , live music and music publishing. With technological advancement, the music industry faced new challenges and opportunities . *“The Arrival of the internet and world wide web as technologies available to significant numbers of people in the 1990s and 2000s obviously intensified the digitalisation of cultural production”* (Hesmondhalgh,2013, p.313) In his book, Hesmondhalgh suggested 4 differentiated ways to define how internet could be used. *1) A means by which commercial transactions take place. 2) A medium for individual and small - group communication, especially via email and social networking sites 3) A means for storing and finding information. 4) A means of providing and experiencing entertainment.* (Hesmondhalgh,2013, p.322)

With mass supply of the world wide web accompanied by mobile devices, allowed individuals to access the cloud. Digitalization of music blurred geographical boundaries, enabled artists, audiences and companies to connect with one another in easy and effective ways.

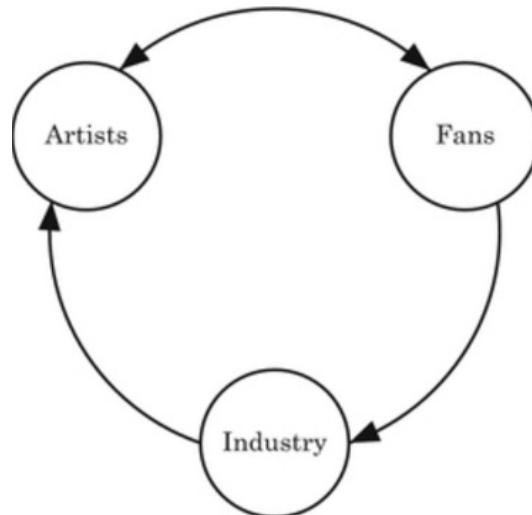
For example, in the new music industry. Music publishing plays a more creative role by bringing producers and songwriters together in collaborative songwriting sessions (Song camps), pitching creations to various labels all across the world. In this capacity, music publishers act as intermediaries and facilitators of musical exchanges on a global scale.

Similarly, the live music sector has experienced a remarkable transformation as it embraces the online realm. Due to its inherited nature, the live music industry has expanded the possibilities for both artists and audiences, allowing concerts and events to be enjoyed without the limitations of physical presence or venue capacity. Digitalization enabled transcending geographical barriers and providing a more inclusive and immersive music experience.

Furthermore, significant changes have taken place in the recorded music sector, particularly in terms of distribution. According to the IFPI report 2023, music streaming services have become the dominant form of music consumption, accounting for 67% of total recorded music consumption in 2022, accompanied by 589 million paid subscription user accounts for music streaming services. (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, 2023, p.11) These statistics demonstrate the immense impact of digitalization on the way music is consumed and highlight the growing significance of streaming platforms in the industry. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

In his PhD thesis, Morrow suggested that there are five primary groups of revenue streams that generate income from popular music, listing: live performances, merchandise sales, song publishing, recorded music sales, and sponsorship deals (Morrow, 2006) His suggestion for music industries revenue streams distinguish itself from traditional definition by highlighting revenues from sponsorship deals and merchandise. As regarding the topic of my thesis, I would like to focus on merchandise and its meanings.

Oxford dictionary defines the word merchandise as : *goods to be bought and sold, branded products used to promote a film, pop group, etc., or linked to a fictional character.* In my extended interpretation of the definition of merchandise 1) when we see a service as a product 2) and if that service promotes artists with exchange of financial cost, service that promotes artists by featuring communication with paid subscription can also be defined as a merchandise.



Circular model encompassing artists, fans, and industry As depicted in the circular model

(Image source : Watson, 2016,p.58)

**“The artist is able to communicate directly with the fan, and then when the artist engages enough fans, all these other people go ‘hey, there’s something going on there, I think I can help grow that’ and the journalist thinks that, the TV show thinks that, the promoter thinks that, and everybody starts to come on board. But instead of it going—artist—industry person—industry person—industry person—fan. It now actually goes—artist—fan—industry—artist. It’s a circle that begins with that artist-fan communication.”... artists can now have a direct relationship with fans in a range of contexts (such as via social media, blogs and through personalized artist generated fan emails)...A massive workload therefore lies with DIY artists because they have to manage their own presence through social media. (Hughes et al., 2013 p.54-59)**

Following texts are a partial collection of the book “ The new music industry: Disruption and Discovery”, outlining types of career development as an artist - involving 360, Entrepreneur and DIY artist model. In this chapter, communication - more specifically, artist - fan communication are mentioned in considerable amounts.

December 2019 was the beginning of one disease that has impacted all lives on earth. Global population suffered, grieved and scared while the end of the pandemic seemed like sand slipping through one's hands. During extending social measures and lockdowns, physical attendances were heavily restricted. Nearly all industries experienced a deficit in their income

and corporate management decided to downsize and cancel any events that required physical activities. However, catastrophic disease cannot mute our basic desires and needs as a human.

Naturally, us social animals were drawn to products to fulfill our needs through Zoom, google meets, Discord, concerts on digital settings such as roblox and fortnite...etc. As the music industry experiences active research and investment in digital platforms, there has been a notable advancement to provide methods of artist-fan communication online. One significant development in this area is the emergence of fan applications from South Korea - which serve to facilitate and enhance interactions between artists and their fans.

## **2-1 Kpop and Fandom culture.**

Kpop and Kpop stars are the result of “top to bottom” well-planned production. Kpop is completion work of label, producer, lyricist, choreographer, and the trainee who pawned their dream and time to become a Kpop star-also referred as ‘Idol’. (Gi-won Lee, 2020) However the biggest key component of this success is the fandom. Due to the trend sensitive, highly competitive and rapidly changing pop industry, fans support the consumption of music and related products while voluntarily sharing, reposting, creating second contents to introduce their artist to the world is crucial - especially social media is deeply melted in our daily lives.

Compared to traditional times where fan - artist communication was one directional , the Digital era enabled the environment of two way interaction where fan and artist can reach out to one another. From the debut(or sometimes even pre debut), active period - where artists are actively showing in media with new releases and tours, and even resting or preparing for the next release period , artists actively engage with fans on social media platforms while sharing their album process, tours and daily lives. These behaviors create solid bondings between fans and artists to provide a sense of belongings within fandoms.

To elaborate the concept of Fandom, is a group of enthusiastic fans who are active, creative, critical, and socially connected. They represent a new way of engaging with popular culture and mass media. The term "fandom" evolved from "fanatic" to "fan" and became associated with sports enthusiasts, like baseball fans, in the late 19th century. This separated it from its

original religious meaning. Additionally, Jenkins suggested fandom carries distinctive characteristics from religious devotion because it involves idealizing and supporting an entity without considering its moral values. In contrast, religious idolization and faith takes into account the moral rightness or wrongness of an entity's values. Therefore, idolization in fandom culture carries different meanings compared to religious idolization.

(Jenkins,2006,p.17)

Fandom culture has given fans a greater role, extending beyond being passive consumers of media. Thanks to digitalization, fans can now connect with each other and actively participate in various ways. They share information about upcoming concerts and merchandise, create fan accounts on social media to share their own creations, and engage with fellow fans in vibrant online communities. These interactions are widespread across different social media platforms, and fans often establish guidelines to promote positive communication within their communities. Fandom culture empowers fans to form connections, collaborate, and support each other beyond their individual experiences.

As a result of this exchange of information and active engagement among fans, their influence on an artist's success has grown. With a larger fan base, fans can make a substantial impact on various aspects, such as streaming numbers and concert ticket and merchandise sales etc. Recognizing this potential, artist management companies naturally strive to understand the needs and preferences of fans. By catering to these needs, they can harness the full potential of their fan base and amplify the impact created by their supporters.

### 3. Background research of Fan apps.

Fans apps are one of the measures that labels have been building up that functions as artist content platforms, magazine, merchandise sale, fan community, online concerts, marketing for different artists, games, live streaming platforms, etc. This chapter is dedicated for background information of three biggest fan apps - Weverse, Universe and bubble to provide insights of up-to-date music industry product, fan apps. First I will address the company background of each app, and highlighted features, User interface and finance - for those that were open in public access. Secondly, I will summarize the differences and similarities they share.

#### 1) Weverse : Official for all fans.

Weverse is a mobile app and web platform works as fan community, compound word of We and Universe, Developed and operated by HYBE's subsidize tech company called 'Weverse company' (formerly BeNX<sup>1</sup>). *"Hybe is a South Korean multinational entertainment company established in 2005 by Bang Si-hyuk as **Big Hit Entertainment**. The company operates as a record label, talent agency, music production company, event management and concert production company, and music publishing house."* ("Weverse"2022). Under many subsidiary labels, Hybe corporation manages multiple artists including BTS, Le Sserafim, New Jeans, Seventeen etc.

Initial release of Weverse was in June 2019, after 9 months of operation Weverse reached 1.4 million daily users with the connected app (shared user account) 'Weverse Shop' users 1.8 million from 200 countries. As of May 2023, Weverse marked up 65 million members, featuring global service with 15 different languages including english, chinese, japanese, hindi, russian, arabic, spanish..etc.

*"Artists can easily reach out to fans through YouTube or Twitter, but that's closer to content delivery rather than communication — artists needed to interact with devoted fans on a deeper level while the fans wanted a more in-depth experience than just simply watching - Seo Wooseok"* (Benjamin, 2020)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> BeNX was origin of weverse app, initially used as BTS official merchandise website.

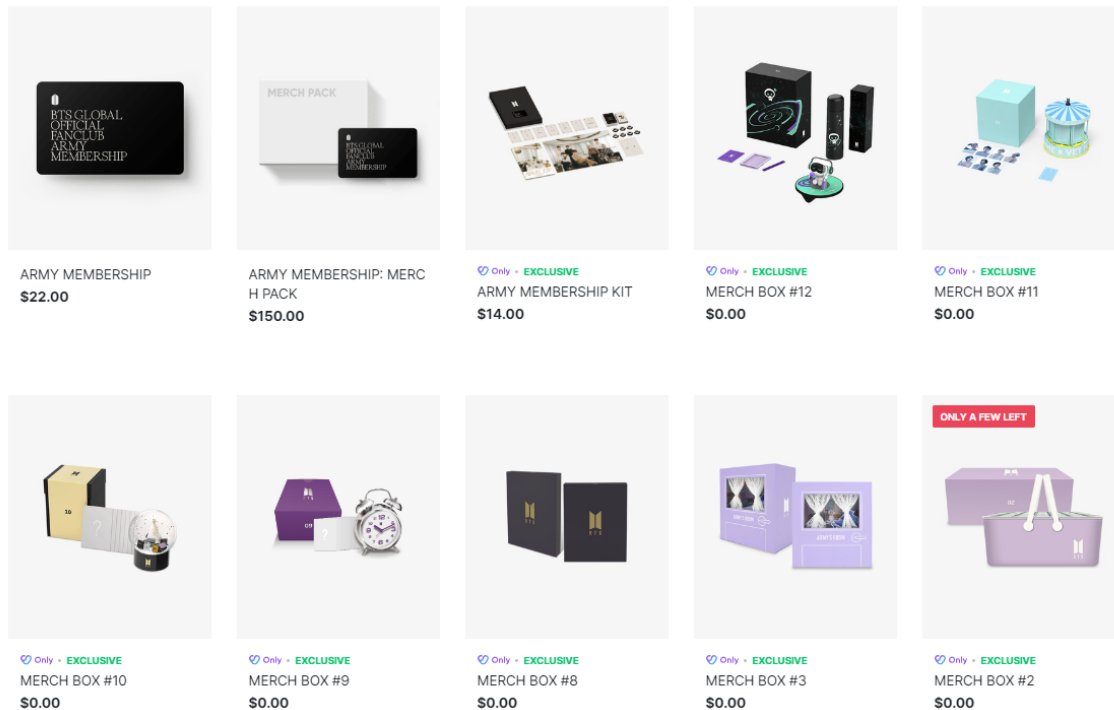
<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, J. (16th march, 2020) Why K-pop content creators are leaving YouTube and V Live. *Billboard*. <https://www.billboard.com/pro/why-k-pop-content-creators-are-leaving-youtube-and-v-live/>

*"one-stop service within the music industry giving fans a dedicated social platform to engage with each other and the artists, as well as a streamlined pipeline to sell merchandise. ."* (Fast company,2020) <sup>3</sup>

Weverse, a mobile application and website, is free to join, but offers users the option to purchase additional features, such as the 'year around membership' and its own currency, known as 'Jelly'. Users can purchase the membership through the Weverse shop, which provides access to exclusive content from the artists for one year. The membership is closely linked to merchandise 'membership kits', which are also renewed annually. The kits are based on a one purchase per person quota and often include items such as photo cards, coasters, keyrings, big and mini posters, stickers, and more. Some artists, such as BTS, offer membership merch packs - priced at \$150 per year, which are similar to a season pass in the gaming industry. Fans who purchased the merch pack receive a merch box, with the delivery cost being charged. Each merch box item contains snowglobe, orgel, alarm clock, picnic basket sets, mini luggage with travel pouch, clear backpack, music box... etc, with additional components such as postcards and posters and each merch box are made per quarter. However fans have no information regarding contents of the box before its release.

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<sup>3</sup> The 10 most innovative music company in 2020(March 10,2020) .*Fast Company*  
<https://www.fastcompany.com/90457855/music-most-innovative-companies-2020>



(Image from Weverse shop)

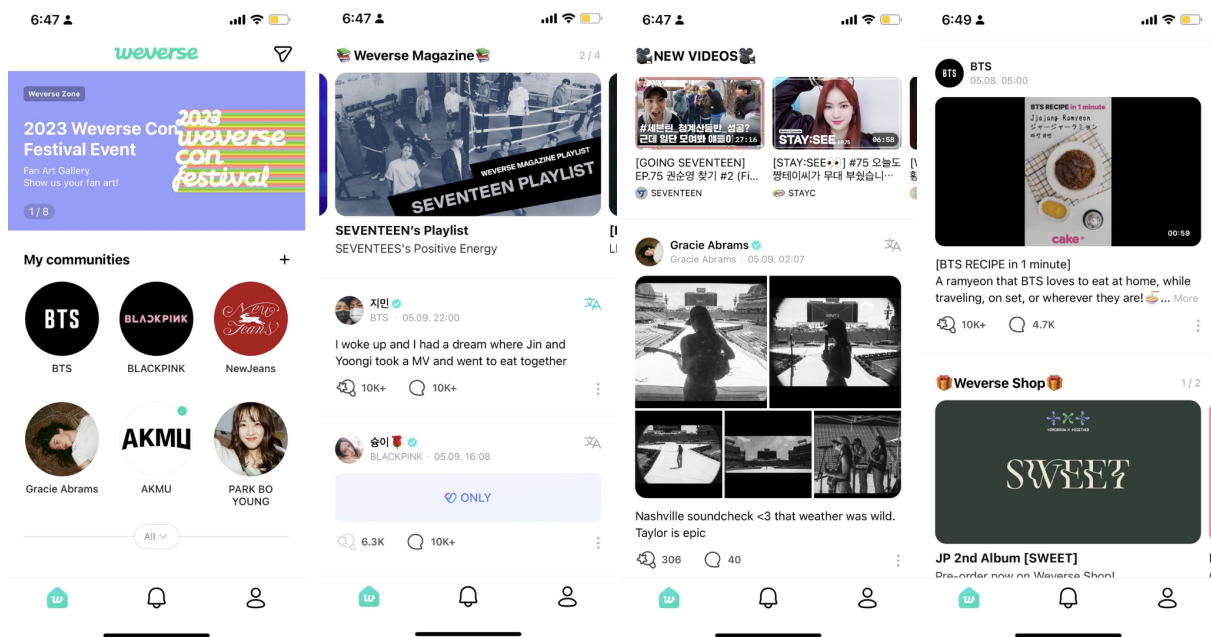
By obtaining membership, fans also gain priority access to purchase concert tickets, apply for events, and unlock the ability to purchase membership goods. The price for membership ranges from approximately \$20-23, while the cost of membership kits varies between \$10 and \$25. 'Jelly' is a one-time purchase currency that is used to unlock exclusive content on the Weverse platform. Occasionally, there are Jelly giveaway events for fans to participate in. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

### **Weverse app UI design and feature**

The Weverse app's front page is composed of four main components, each serving a distinct purpose. At the top of the page, an interactive carousel box provides users with updated information regarding album releases, new communities, events, and merchandise. The second section is dedicated to communities, with each artist having their own separate space where fans can engage in discussions and share content related to the artist. (This community concept will be further examined later in the thesis). The third component is the Weverse Magazine carousel box, which shows title and image of the article. Weverse magazine offers exclusive artist interviews, playlist recommendations from the artists themselves, concept



information about upcoming releases, and interactive articles <sup>4</sup> that engage the audiences, aim to enhance the brand image of the artists and provide up-to-date news on the music industry. Finally, the feed section displays the latest updates from various artists, including pictures, text, videos, and more, in an Instagram-like display format. This section enables to introduce different artists to users and stay informed about their latest projects, events, and activities. Additionally there's carousel tabs like Weverse shop and new videos in between feeds. (Rephrased by chat GPT)



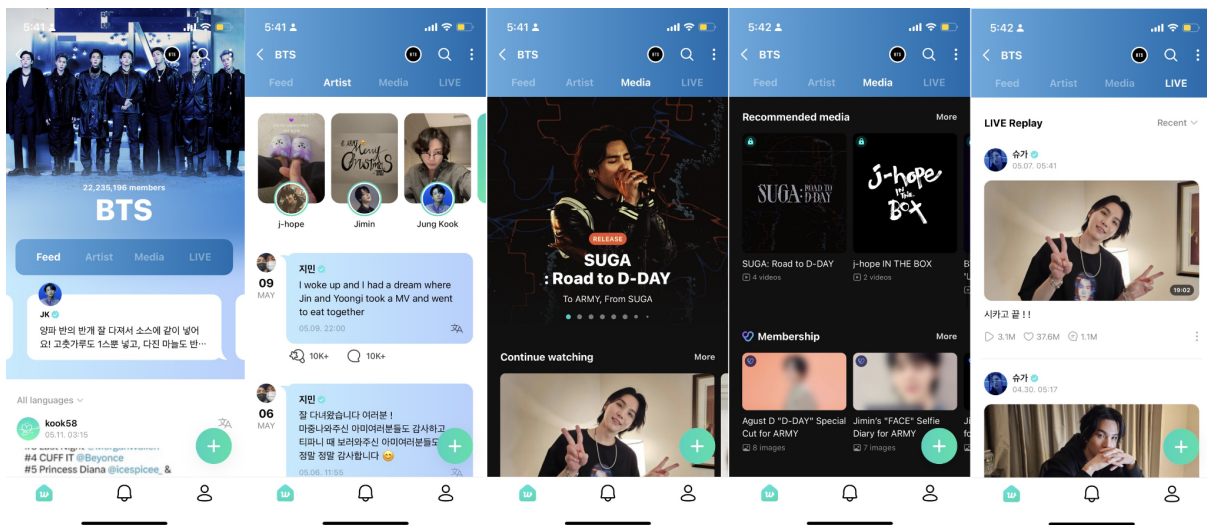
(Image: screenshot from Weverse app)

In essence, the front page of the Weverse app serves as a comprehensive marketing tool for all artists on the platform. Compared to traditional fan-websites and cafes, used to be a separate site, separate accounts to make, separated official merch online shop etc, to join one artist's community - which made introducing and joining a new artist was extra effort and hassle. Social media made introduction to new artists easier but yet, is not a fully dedicated platform for artists in the music industry and there was too much content in between to seek new artists' contents that users are not keeping on track. However, the Weverse app made fanclubbing into a one-step activity where you can buy merchandise, communicate with your

<sup>4</sup> Yejin Lee, "SVT makes SVT" *Weverse Magazine* (21th Oct 2021) <https://magazine.weverse.io/article/view?lang=ko&colca=3&artist=&searchword=&num=256>

artist, fellow fans, and visit other artists' communities to get their news updated easily.

(Rephrased by chat GPT)



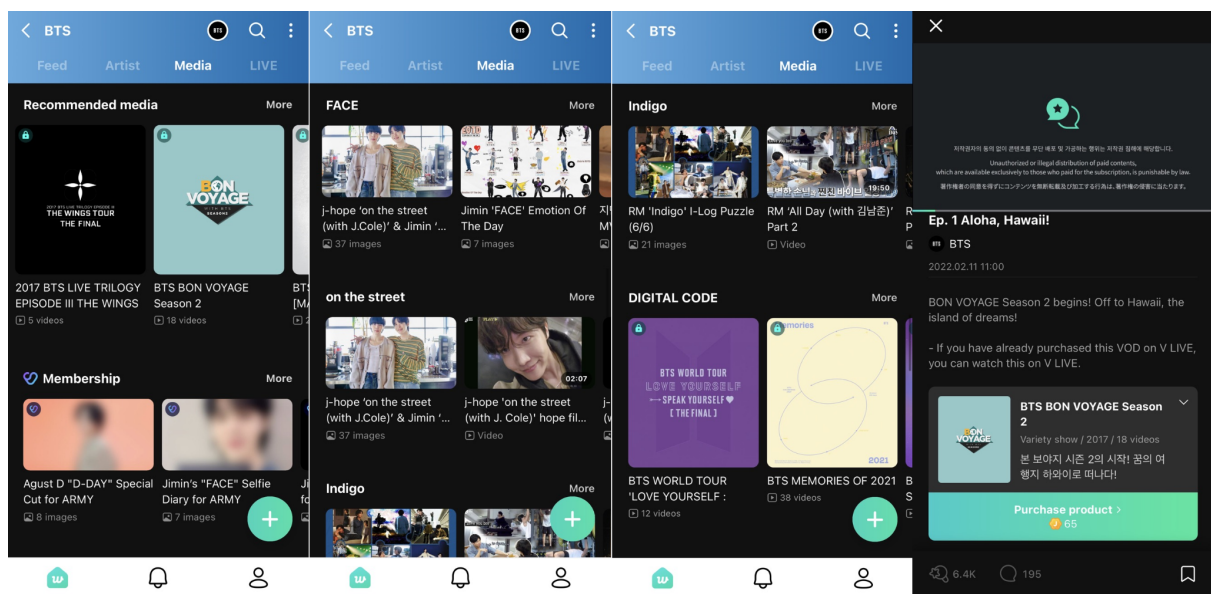
(Image: Screenshot of BTS community page Weverse)

Community page is a separate space for each group/solo artist and their fans. By 7th May 2023, Weverse held 86 communities with international artists with more additions on the way. Each community is made up with 4 main components - Feed, Artist, Media, and Live section, and every community on Weverse is free to join.

The Weverse community's feed section serves as a fan-centered social media platform that enables communication between artists and their fans. The user interface (UI) for the feed section begins with an image of the artist, and carousel text bubbles display the artist's replies to fans' feeds. The feed posts contain various types of media, such as text, images, and videos, and both artists and fans in the same community can click "likes" and comment on posts. The feed function's purpose is to provide fans with a platform dedicated to communicating with their favorite artists and other fans. To accommodate Weverse's 90% international user base, the platform provides an in-app auto-translation feature that allows easy communication between fans with different preferred languages. This feature currently supports 15 languages, including English, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Vietnamese, Thai, and others. Additionally, Weverse offers report and block user features in case of inappropriate posts or spam. All contents from fans are accessible without a membership, however some artists make membership only replies on

feed. In summary, the feed section serves as a fan-centered page whose main purpose is to reinforce the fan community. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

Secondly the artist section is artist centered UI design where artists reach out to fans. Carousel image top has - instagram story look alike - post from each member of the group - where fans can like, comment and download the contents posted from artists. Below sections are artists posts where fans can scroll down and read. Artists share their daily life, messages to fans, pictures, innermost thoughts and sometimes cooking recipe. In summary the artist section serves as a social media platform for artists where artists communicate with fans.

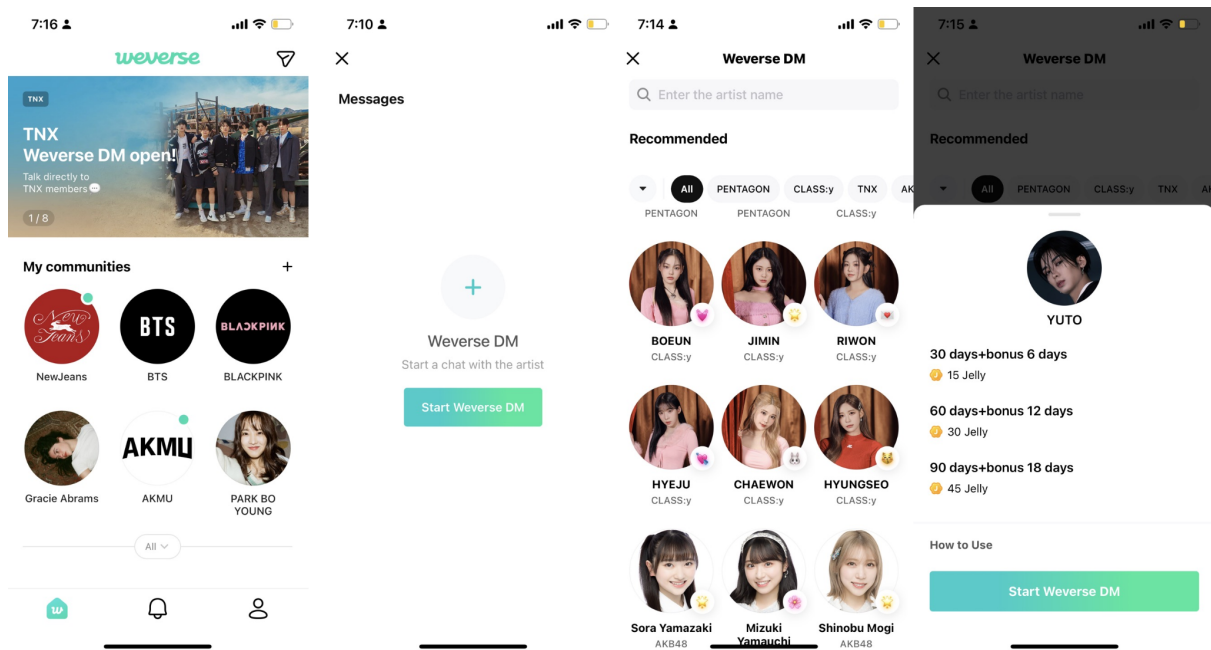


(Image: Screenshot of BTS community media page Weverse)

Third is the Media section - where most Weverse contents are stored. Weverse heavily involves with distribution of media contents related with Weverse artists. Artists release their music videos and make films, concert footage, dance practice videos, TV series, casual video clips, often containing weverse exclusive contents..etc. However(as you could see on the left top lock icon) not all contents are offered as free. It varies on each community but some contents can only be accessed with membership, and some contents require one-time purchase with weverse currency 'Jelly'. Jelly can be purchased in the Weverse shop with 9.49\$ for 40 Jelly, 18.99\$ for 80 Jelly, 59.99\$ for 240 Jelly...etc. For example, BTS starring TVshow 'Bon Voyage season two' which cost 65 jelly is equivalent of 16.5 \$. Another paid based product is Digital code - which is a high definition of full concerts video. Digital code

merchandise can be bought in Weverse shops. Unlike DVD merch, Digital code merch provides QR code cards to scan to unlock the digital code product on weverse, along with a few merchandise like photobooks, photo cards, etc. Weverse specified to prohibit unauthorized or illegal distribution of paid contents-beginning of their contents.

Live section is where fans can watch and interact with artists on live streams. Bubble users can comment on artists live streams - works similar with instagram live features. User can also rewatch the previous streams that have been placed on Weverse. It's free to join live streams and rewatch previous lives, however depending on artists preferences, some streams can take place with 'membership only'.



(Image: Screenshot of Weverse DM page)

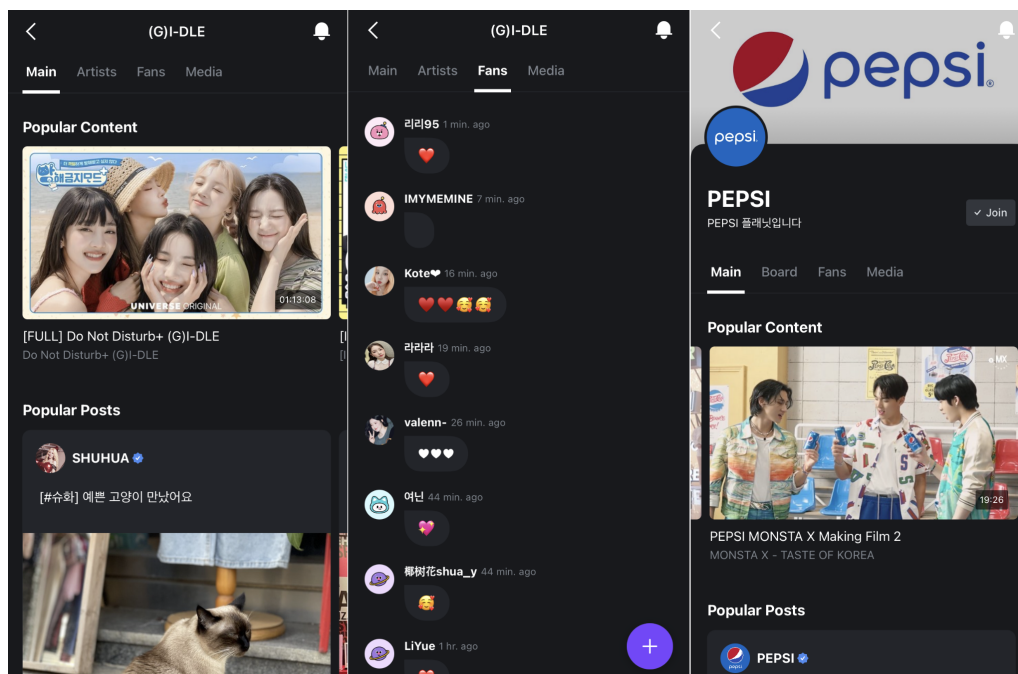
On April 24th 2023, Weverse released a new feature 'Weverse DM' which is similar to the private chat service offered by their biggest competitor 'Bubble'. Weverse DM is a paid service with 15 Jelly per month which is equivalent to 3.8 dollar per monthly subscription. By 12th May, 4 groups (Pentagon, Class:y, TNX, AKB48) joined the Weverse DM service and more groups are expected to be added in the future. The concept of private chat services will be further discussed in the introduction of the 'Bubble' app.

## **Weverse summary**

To summarize Weverse, the main function is to distribute artists' contents with social media features, as well as easy access to merchandise sales to fans. On the management side to review Weverse, it is an efficient platform to keep on track of fans' behaviors, search for their needs to provide merchandise and related products to artists. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Tiktok, Facebook etc.. where vast non-specific crowds mingle, artists have limitless potential to reach more audiences. However artists often encounter anti fans on social media, who share extremely damaging comments and contents towards them, which carries potentials of negative influence towards the artist's mental health. In these settings, there are more obstacles in the management side to prevent and intervene harmful interaction with anti fans. For instance, lack of resources to monitor anti fan-like posts due to social media's mass users numbers, also often takes time for third party-platforms support teams to review the case and act on. Continuous exposure of different artists also function as great promotion tools, that might lead to possible fandom secure for stronger support for artists but also merch and concert ticket sales.

## 2) Universe

Universe is a Kpop mobile app and web platform that was developed by video game developer NC soft and launched on January 28, 2021. Prior to its launch, Universe had already attracted over four million pre-registered users on both Google Play and the App Store. By January 2021, fans from 188 countries, including South Korea, the United States, Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Brazil, had completed pre-registration, with 80% of these users residing outside of South Korea. Two months after its launch, Universe had achieved over five million global downloads, with a total of 692 exclusive contents released (Universe, 2023).



(Image: Screenshot of Universe app before service closure)

Universe's operational style was similar to that of Weverse in that each artist group had its own dedicated community space, known as a "planet." These planets had similar components to Weverse's community pages, such as main, artist, fans, and media sections. As you can see in the Image, Universe also collaborated with brands like Pepsi, released their exclusive contents with various artists, making advertisement films and photos etc.. However In this case, artists tab of the planet page was replaced with a board.

To briefly summarize the components of each planet, the main page consists of the newest post of artist - in Instagram like user interface design, with the carousel headers for recommended contents where you could also find in the media section. Secondly there's the artists section. separated post wall containing contents only from artists, including videos text and image where fans could interact with likes, and comments. Fans pages were dedicated for fans communication. Originally, universe offered features enabled posts including images. However due to policy changes, this feature has been replaced with only text type posts - with comment thread style of user interface, where fans can only see each other's text and posted timeline. Lastly, the media section with Universe original contents, containing lists of contents both free to access and access with payment/membership.

To elaborate on their media contents, Universe had a unique concept whereby each artist group had its own lore or role within its "planet," and all planets were combined in one "Universe." Due to this creative settings, Universe were heavily invested in its original content production, known as "Universe Originals," by collaborating with artists to create a series of variety shows, music videos, concept photos, and more. Often multiple artists were involved in one production to intertwine their lores together.

Universe also hosted fan meetings and fan-artist live call events as paid services where you could purchase and apply with raffle tickets. Furthermore, Universe collaborated with South Korean broadcasting stations MBC to create "Idol Radio," a radio program that was available on both universe platform and radio broadcast.

As a video game developer company, Universe had access to a wealth of resources, such as software and motion capture technology. This allowed them to offer services such as "Studio," which enabled the creation of music videos in 3D character style with custom styling. Universe's business model was monthly paid subscriptions, known as "Universe Membership," which was priced at \$2.9 per month. Universe also had its own currency,(Similar to Weverse) "Klap " and "Love," which could be earned through platform activities or purchased through the Universe app. These currencies were sold as package bundles, ranging from 150 Love+500 Klap for \$1.(For example of currency value, users could buy a digital photobook with 100 Love).

Rooted from their technological side, Universe was also one of the platforms which offered NFTs as part of its merchandise collection- distributed as in a ‘pool’ system where users could buy tickets with Klap to win the prize. Additionally, currency Klaps were also used for artist support events, such as crowdfunding to send supplies for snack carts or coffee. Often used in crowdfunding to put artist pictures on display boards as a fan to artist events.



Image: 5 years celebration on subway station display board. (Image from Twitter)

In short summary, universe partially showed similar strategy with weverse, in their product line such as fan community, social media platform for music fans and artists, producing original contents and its distribution . However, despite its unique differentiation factors i mentioned, Universe underwent an M&A with Dear U Bubble, leading to the sale of exclusive contracts with artists and their production contents on February 17, 2023 - While immigrating their remaining contents to Universe official YouTube channel.



### 3) Bubble

On February 7th 2020, company Dear U released an application series Bubble. Bubble service is developed and operated by company ‘Dear U’ a subsidiary tech company owned by SM entertainment group. To briefly introduce, SM entertainment is one of oldest and biggest labels in South Korea which played a huge role in the development of Kpop culture and South Korean music industry. Since 1996, SM entertainment has continuously produced Kpop stars such as Girls generation, SHINee, Redvelvet, NCT, EXO and Aespa while collaborating with producers from all around the world such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark etc. Dear U was established under the name ‘Everysing’, originally mobile karaoke service company July 2017. Combining investments from SM entertainment and Avex, Dear U secured over 8 million dollar, merged with software development company Brinicle in January 2019. After the merger, Dear U released fan community platform Bubble as a main product. By 10th May 2023, Dear U is currently operating 14 different bubble series while collaborating with multiple labels, actors, sports stars and influencers. According to Yuanta security company research center, bubble’s distribution returns of their revenue split between 3 major groups with 45% Dear U company, 30% for management company with their artist servicing on bubble and 25% for google and apple for application distributor fee. (Yuanta research center, 2022)

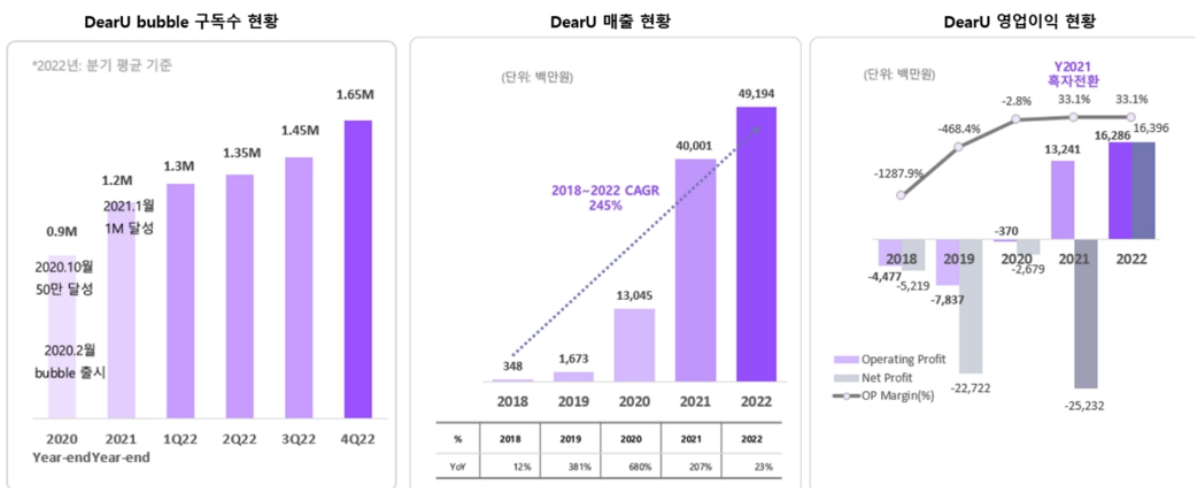


Image : Graph from Dear U company reports (2022)

From the left - Dear U subscription total, sales status, operating profit status

Dear U company mentioned in their report from December 2022, that bubble service already had collaboration with 72 labels, more than 127 groups and 372 IP (individual personal who creates original IP such as artist, actor etc) involved. Considering Bubble acquired IP's from Universe in February 2023, Bubble now has the largest IP pool in South Korea fan industry (Fan + Industry) competition. By 2022 December, bubble obtained 1.65 million on-going subscriptions, with 75% of international users. 80 percent of total users are from the age group of 10 - 20 and 95 percent of users are female. Based on a trend sensitive audience, bubble's aims to provide advanced service with constant updates. As an example, based on the high proportion of overseas users Bubble provides an in-app translation service cooperating with external translators such as Google Translator and Papago. With steady service development and bubble users, company Dear U experienced surplus in the year 2021, by surpassing \$29.9 million in revenue. Building upon this success, Dear U achieved over \$37.4 million in the following year, 2022. Furthermore, Dear U marked up a 33% increase for two consecutive years in operating profit. (Dear U company report, 2022)

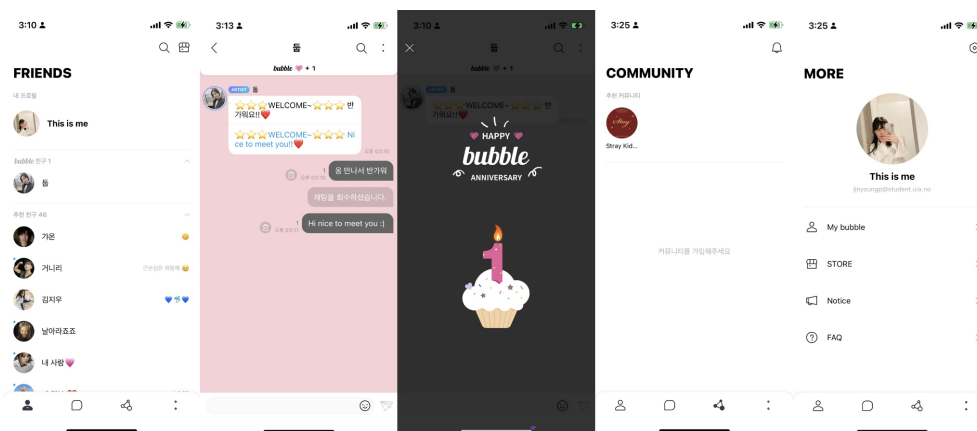
### **Bubble app UI design and feature**

While prior two apps (Weverse and Universe) were taken form of all around fan platform with both web and app service, Bubble series specifically targeted fans' needs for closer communication. launched product bubble which was specialized with private chat service. However the concept of 'Private Chat' has different definitions in fan industry compared to usual settings. Usually private chat refers to a state where two people sending chat directly from one to another, reply directly one to another in one chat room. However, private chat services from both Weverse and Universe function in different ways. Every Moment, numerous fans are sending messages to one artist. Therefore, the artist's interface is put together with a 'group chat look alike' UI, where a lot of fans are merged in one chat. Important thing with private chat features is that artists cannot send direct messages to one fan as a 1:1 reply. Any messages sent from the artist will not displayed only one fans screen, instead every fans will receive the same message.



(Image: Capture from YouTube channel 'Yoona's So Wonderful Day')

For example, let's say 5000 fans sent one artist “Hey how was your day?”, artists will see a lot of quantity of messages and share similar conversations. As the artist replied “I did a cover shot of magazine A today, I was very excited and I hope you like it!”. With this single reply, 5000 fans will feel an ‘illusion’ of direct conversation were made between her and the artist, meanwhile other fans who also received the same reply would feel a sense of intimacy from ‘artist sharing their daily activity’. There are also brilliant technical final touches to make psychological aspects to this moment. When the artist replies with “ I did a cover shot of magazine A today, I did a cover shot of magazine A today, I was very excited and I hope you like it!”. They can also insert a function to replace ‘You’ into a user selected name. Hence the message will be sent as “I did a cover shoot for magazine A today, I was very excited and I hope (user name) likes it!”. Making psychological fulfillment of each conversation more solid.



(Image: Screenshot of Bubble JYP nation)

Bubble has a lot of built in features that aims to tingle user satisfaction in physiological aspects. As you can see from the image , the user interface from bubble just looks like a normal messenger app. Instead of referencing artist as artist, bubble used terminology 'Friends To refer to artists - just like in messenger apps, giving the impression of lesser gap between you and artists as individuals. Artists' names also displayed with the artist's chosen nickname instead of their pseudonym. Just like users, artists can also put images for their profile pics, with backgrounds and short profile messages. When users enter the chat room, they can only see their message and artist's replies. All these small elements give the impression to users as a private chat, where two individuals make small conversations. Of course all users are all aware that conversations in Bubble are actually quite one-sided. However it is a more engaging experience compared to social media platforms, where you could see your comments mixed up with other numerous comments. Bubble's psychological design gives the illusion that you're not just one person in a huge crowd - with so much distance in between two entities. Instead, it's simply a conversation between two people.

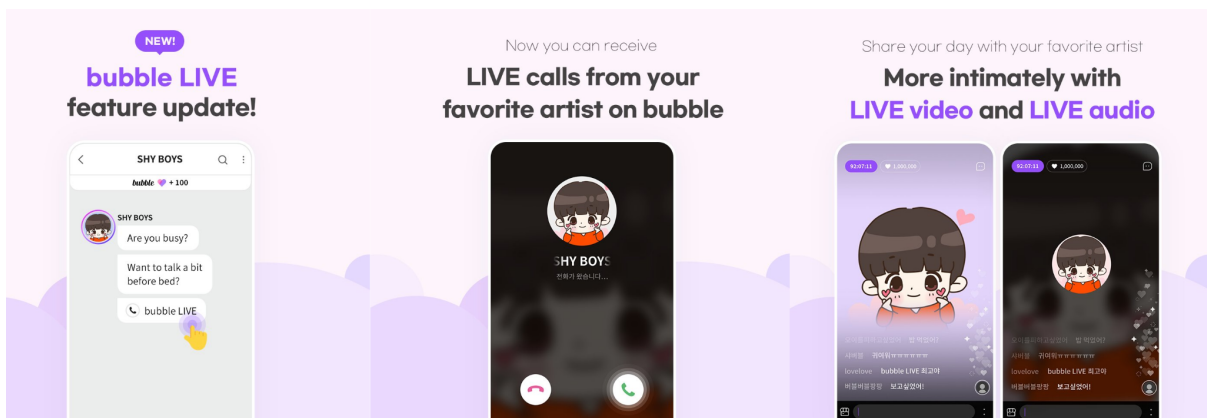
Bubble operates on a paid monthly subscription model, with a subscription price of \$3.4 for one artist's bubble. However, users who subscribe to multiple members within the same group are eligible for discounts based on the number of members. For instance, a subscription for one member costs \$3.4, while a subscription for five members costs \$13.9, and a subscription for nine members costs \$24.7.

Upon subscribing to an artist and entering the chat room, Bubble displays a Day 1 anniversary message. The chat rooms in Bubble feature the anniversary day counts at the top of the chatroom, indicating the length of time the user has been subscribed to the artist. The longer the subscription period, the more words in one text message can be sent to the artist. Additionally, users can send up to 3 replies for artists messages. As I mentioned earlier, the artist's interface resembles a group chat, with multiple comments displayed on one screen. Therefore when one message is longer than others, the artist is aware that the specific user has a longer subscription period, signifying their status as a long-term supporter. This visual distinction serves to make the user's messages more noticeable, increasing the chance of your artist replying to your message than others.

Subscription Period	Word limits	Subscription Period	Word limits
1-49 days	30 words	200 days	200 words
50 days	50 words	300 days	300 words
77 days	77 words	365 days	365 words
100 days	100 words	400 days	400 words
150 days	150 words	500 days	500 words

( Chart : bubble message word limits)

When a user cancels their subscription, the anniversary count resets to day one, and the word limits for messages become default state. Naturally, fans desire to maintain the ability to send longer text messages while also hesitating to break their anniversary streak. This design incorporates psychological elements to encourage users to continue subscribing and think twice before canceling their subscription. (Rephrased by chat GPT)



(Image from twitter : bubble live feature 2022)

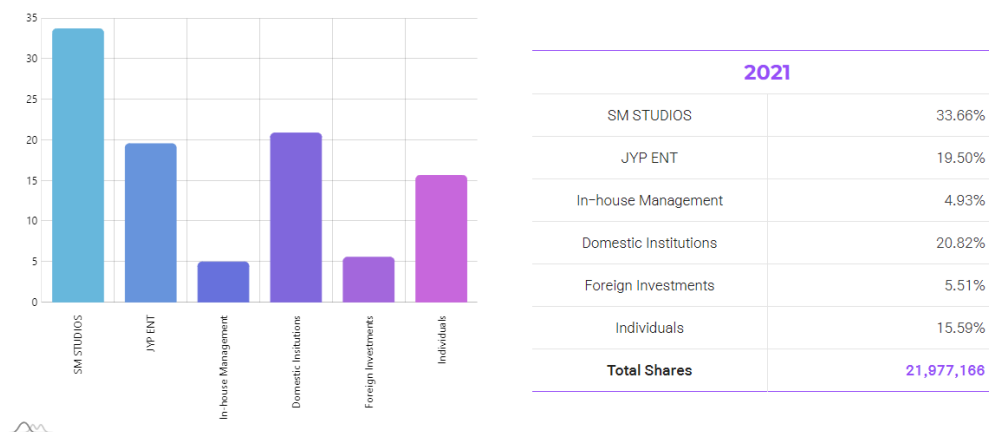
19th of August 2022, Bubble series (except one of the bubble series ‘Lysn’) released a new feature “Bubble LIVE”. Similar to an instagram live feature, enabling fans and artists communication on real time video call, where users can comment and react. However the user interface has distinctive elements from instagram which is more similar to a messenger app where the user receives a notification like a call receiving screen. As a follow-up update on 6th September, Bubble provided an additional feature where you can rewatch previous

Bubble Live within 24 hour limits. In the same year November, a community feature for a boy group “Straykids” was released on one of the series ‘bubble for JYP nation’- which is a bubble app series for artists managed by JYP entertainment.

JYP entertainment is one of the major 4 record labels in South Korea, also the partner company of Dear U, owning 19.5% of the Dear U company share. Explains closer collaboration with Dear U Bubble. By 16th of May, Stray Kids fan club ‘Stay’ was still the only operating community in bubble apps.

## Financial Information

### Shareholder Structure



( Image : Dear U financial information 2021)

Bubble’s contents from artists is exclusively available to subscribed users. Similar to Weverse and Universe, Bubble enforces a policy that strictly prohibits any unauthorized or illegal distribution of chat contents. This includes videos, photos, voice messages, and text messages sent by the artists. For instance, if a user attempts to capture a screenshot of the chat screen, a warning message will appear stating, "Screen capture detected. Unauthorized usage of the artist's pictures and information is considered an illegal act. You will be held accountable for any incidents." This warning message will only disappear once the user agrees to these conditions. As part of their stringent exclusivity policy, Bubble also restricts the use of screen recording features within the app. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

## 4. 'Bubble' User experience and motive research

### Research theory

Throughout my background research for three different major fan apps, I found app bubble has the most distinguishable features and fundamental design compared to Weverse and Universe. Even though Weverse recently added Dm features that function similar to Bubble's series, the range of IP pool is smaller in current state and gave me the impression of features that are in the process of building. Bubble was one of the first companies launched 'private chat' combined with a monthly subscription app. In January 2021, Marriam-Webster dictionary added 520 new words including the word 'Bubble' refers as *'usually small group of people (such as family members, friends, coworkers, or classmates) who regularly interact closely with one another but with few or no others in order to minimize exposure and reduce the transmission of infection during an outbreak of a contagious disease'*. (Marriam-webster 2021). In my interpretation, bubbles are a group of close people with frequent communication and intimacy.

While communication is a key element of their product 'Bubble', opposingly communication in the fan industry has different meanings compared to social context. In our daily life, communication refers to a state where two people are having back and forth responses to the same topic. Whether their opinion agrees or disagrees, people give their feedback to other people while making a dialogue. However conversations in bubble often ends with monologue of fans with getting often 'misplaced' feedbacks. While fans UI resembles a private chat between two person, artist side of UI resembles a group chat - where too much people sending you message with nature of direct reply to any of those messages are not available, most of users will get totally different replies from message they sent to artist. For example, let's say one fan had a really hard day, complained about her work, telling how awful her day was, with continued bad events. In Bubble conversation, she might get "I just ordered sushi! It was so good (photo of the food) Do you like sushi? - as a reply. This conversation ends with her monologue merged together with the artist side of the monologue, being displayed in the same chat screen. In this scenario, Bubble is not so much different with already existing social media platforms where communication is one sided. While there is already a social media platform where you could get one-sided communication with artists

without a cost, my research theory developed with a simple idea - If so, why do people still subscribe and pay for bubble service?

With bubble having 90% of the subscription continue rates, I assumed bubble had lot more they offers than other social media platform to fulfills the fans' needs. Traditionally, communication between fans and artists was free of cost, operated with artists voluntarily willingness to engage with their supporters and fans. As bubble transformed those voluntarily act into a service that is similar to a merchandise products in some extent, fans must have had additional motivations that leads to buy these products and continued using their service. However as something was free becoming a service you pay for, I assumed fans naturally wanted more from artist as well. In my research, I have formulated a theory that revolves around the psychological aspects integrated into the Bubble service.

Firstly, Bubble offers a wide range of features that cater to the needs of fans, all at a cost equivalent to that of a cup of coffee per month. It is important to note that 30% of the revenue generated from Bubble goes to the management company involved in the Bubble series. The exact percentage may vary based on the contract between the management company and the artist. However, artists on Bubble receive financial benefits for their contributions to the platform, which distinguishes their activities on Bubble from their activities on other social media platforms. Based on this information, my theory proposes that artists who are active on Bubble will have a more frequent presence compared to their presence on other social media platforms. This increased activity on Bubble may serve as a motivation for fans to subscribe to the platform.

Secondly, despite the potential for conversations on Bubble to be mismatched or not fully aligned with fans' expectations, individuals participating on Bubble serve as entities that evoke fans' desires. In this context, the accuracy of feedback, which we typically seek in real-life interactions, may not be the most crucial factor for psychological satisfaction. Instead, fans might value the authenticity and perceived real-time nature of the interactions, similar to the communication we have with our friends. Therefore, my second theory suggests that fans are primarily drawn to the immersive and real-time experiences offered by Bubble, regardless of the accuracy of the conversations.



Thirdly, I found the anniversary counting system in Bubble, coupled with the ability to send longer messages, intriguing. It seemed to tap into the human tendency to avoid losing something we have invested in. Consequently, even if some fans have had less than satisfactory experiences on Bubble, they might continue their subscription simply to maintain their anniversary streak or to retain the ability to send longer messages based on their subscription duration. Therefore, my third theory posits that fans will continue their subscription on Bubble in order to preserve these perceived perks and avoid losing them.

Through these theoretical perspectives, I aim to shed light on the various psychological factors at play within the Bubble service and their influence on fan behavior and subscription patterns. Also learn more about bubble users personal experiences and their impression on paid - communication app Bubble. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

## **Research question**

- A) What elements differentiate Bubble service with free-to-use social media platforms - and what brings motivations for fans to subscribe Bubble?**
- B) How was fans' experience with Bubble, and what are the factors that made up positive or negative impressions?**
- C) What are the main reasons that influenced users' decisions to continue or cancel the Bubble's subscription?**

## **Research methodology**

The aim of this study is to investigate the reasons why music fans choose to communicate through subscription-based fan apps- despite the availability of free communication channels such as social media. Additionally, the study aims to explore the positive and negative experiences of users of these subscription-based fan apps. Initially, the research design relied

solely on ethnographic research to provide insights into user experience. However, recognizing the potential biases and limitations of my own experiences, the study has expanded to include participants with varying subscription durations, artists, and age groups, in order to enhance the credibility of the findings. As a result, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both ethnographic and qualitative research, to provide reliable data on the user experience of the fan app 'Bubble'. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

### **1) Ethnographic research**

For close observation and immersed fan experience, I subscribed all members of female group 'Aespa' on bubble series 'Lysn'. Second usage of contents that has been provided from artists are prohibited. Therefore, referencing text, video, voice files and images are replaced with depiction of the contents. As a participant engaging with bubble experience, I collected quantitative data of contents received with contents generator, type, date, duration time (Audio or video), description. However, quantitative research has limitations to demonstrate the psychological and emotional aspects of experience. Thus I separately recorded qualitative data logs - such as impression regarding contents, sense of engaging with the artist, influence on my daily life, etc.

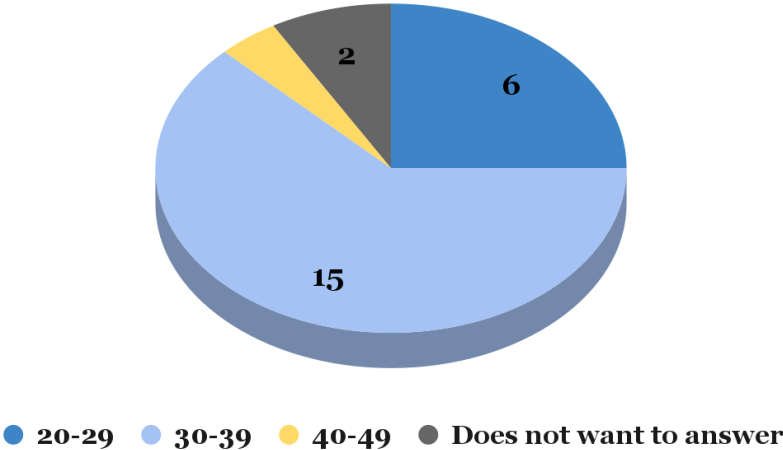
### **2) Qualitative research**

To conduct qualitative research, I used a Google Form survey as the data collection method. In order to ensure research ethics, I provided information regarding the purpose of the study, the intended use of the data, and the option for participants to choose not to share sensitive information in the beginning of the survey. Additionally, I guaranteed anonymity for all participants and informed them that all responses that have been written in different languages will be translated into English. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

Before to include participants in research, researcher need to identify eligible participants, it is important to integrate into the community and tap into the community's network in order to identify potential participants. (University of Virginia, n.d) The aim of this research is to investigate user experience and elements

of subscribing bubble. Therefore, convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods have been used to gather participants. “Convenience sampling (also known as availability sampling) is a specific type of non-probability sampling method that relies on data collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in study” (Dudovskiy, 2022) As I needed group of people with specific experience, I wrote an recruitment post on Kpop fan related open social websites and forums. After securing majority of participants, rest of the participants were gathered with snowball sampling method through acquaintances. “Snowball sampling (also known as chain-referral sampling) is a non-probability (non-random) sampling method used when characteristics to be possessed by samples are rare and difficult to find” (Dudovskiy, 2022). However due to the characteristic of snowball sampling method, sample group has limitations to reflect the whole user pool of bubble, due to the similarities they share in age group. For instance, according to ‘Dear U’ company report, majority of user was in their 20s unlike collected participant group of this research. Following graph is the age group of the responder, total participants are 24.

**Responders Age group**



The survey questionnaires were made of 8 distinct categories, comprising 2 objective and 6 subjective response items. English and Korean was the language that has been used for the survey questionnaire and 5 participants responded in english. Following text are the contents of the survey.

This survey aims to collect data for academic research purposes. Your responses may be cited in the thesis, but rest assured that no personally identifiable information will be included. Quotations will be attributed to "Responder A" or "Responder B"... for reference. As the objective of this survey is to gather qualitative insights, we kindly request that you share your detailed experiences and opinions regarding the Bubble service. Please note that the thesis will be written in English, so any responses in other languages will be translated accordingly.

### **Survey questionnaire item**

- *Subscription period and the artist.(available to classify one of the answer)*
- *Age group of the responder (objective)*
- *What were your reasons or route to subscribe to Bubble?*
- *Does your artist have any social media accounts? If so, what was the reason for subscribing on Bubble when there are free social media platforms available*
- *Frequency of the contents you receive on bubble (objective)*
- *Can you describe your experience on the app Bubble?*
- *If you're planning to keep or cancel the subscription, can you tell us the reason?*
- *If you have any additional opinions or experience you would like to share as bubble user (None mandatory-16 responses has been collected)*

## Participant's Information of this research

Participants in my research will be referred as alphabet A to X, Given in order of their response. Following charts in information of participant code, their total subscription number and current subscription numbers with duration of subscription period. Unknown is used for any response that was unclear or classified.

	Total Subscription/ Current subscription		Duration (Month)		Total Subscription/ Current subscription		Duration (Month)
A	5	1	32 Unknown(4)	M	1	1	14
B	6	6	35.32.30. 29.32.32	N	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
C	1	1	25	O	2	2	28
D	2	1	33.23	P	1	1	2
E	6	0	1	Q	1	1	36
F	1	0	1	R	1	1	6
G	4	4	1	S	1	1	24
H	4	4	10	T	1	0	24
I	4	3	8.6.6.7	U	1	1	1
J	5	2	30.30. Unknown (3)	V	1	1	25
K	2	2	Unknown	W	1	1	8
L	35	16	33. Unknown (19)	X	1	0	4

(chart : Information of bubble subscription for each participants)

For additional information regarding participants, Participant W's bubble is not a K pop Idol - leaving us possibility it could be a singer,actor,sports star or influencers. Also Participant X mentioned that she's subscribing to Bubble for sports. Participant N didn't want to share her/his subscription artists, however N did specify it was multiple artists, also duration of subscription varied between members from less than a year to more than 2 years.

# Findings : Bubble app experience explained

## 1. Beginning of the Journey



(Image from IFPI Global music report 2020)

In the year 2020, BTS’ made their biggest push-in to billboard Hot 100 #1 with the song “Dynamite”, accumulating over 101 million views in 24 hours of music video release on YouTube. According to IFPI<sup>5</sup> Global music report 2020, BTS was also ranked #1 in both global all-format and album sales.” (Ifpi Global music report,2020) While thriving on fans support, BTS also set Guinness record on ‘the most followers on Instagram for a music group,’ “the most followers on Twitter for a music group,” and “the most followers on TikTok for a music group.” (E.cha2023) and reached over 70,311,000 followers on Instagram as of April 2023.

*“BTS’s successes would not be possible without the ARMY<sup>6</sup> ... For two years in a row, BTS has won top social artist at the Billboard Music Awards. The distinction is awarded to the artist with the highest fan engagement on social media” (Chiu,2018)*

<sup>5</sup> Acronym for “International Federation of the Phonographic Industry”

<sup>6</sup> Acronym for “Adorable Representative M.C for Youth”, Used for Kpop group BTS’s fan club name.

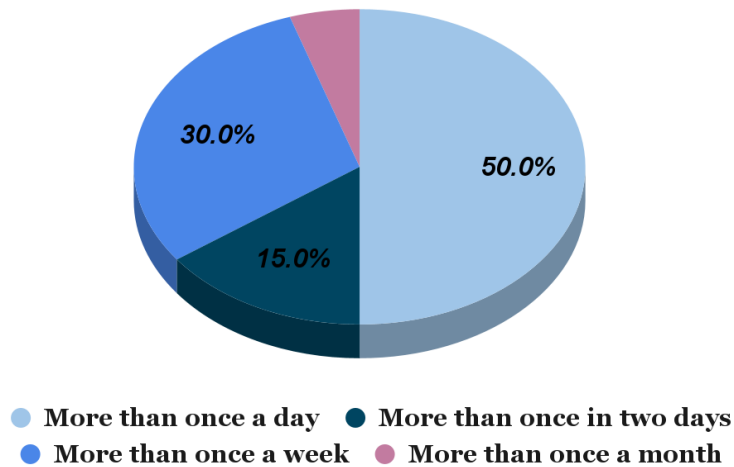
*“In the new music economy, the importance of physical music distribution and mass media has been radically reduced, while the importance of Internet media has exploded. These network-based communication technologies have an entirely different structure from the previous hierarchical media.”* (Hughes et al, 2016,p.5)

Modern music industry has witnessed an impact of social media, with its inherent potential to connect with a global audience constituting a crucial aspect for artists. While all of the artists in the Bubble series already have an official social media (SoMe presence), the boundlessness of SoMe platforms with their 'free-access-to-all' nature has also been cited as a factor in fans subscribing to Bubble. Findings from this research revealed that 40% of participants shared the impression that SoMe communication is akin to a 'megaphone to a huge crowd,' thereby rendering their favorite artists more distant. Conversely, Bubble provides a space for interaction that feels more intimate and personal in a 'closed space.' Participants perceived that this also applies to the artist persona on Bubble, as they share contents that are more relatable to their daily life, engage in more frequent and conversational communication and often express their personal views on sensitive social issues. Since Bubble users are typically active fans who exhibit a supportive tendency towards artists, artists feel like Bubble provides a safer environment. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

*“Compared to SoMe that is also open to the media press and all people, I believe that artists feel more comfortable and safer in bubble which are gatherings of fans who are willing to subscribe. Because they feel safer, artists can share more sensitive issues within their team or innermost thoughts”. (Participant M)*

This connects to most mentioned reasons: *Fans want more contents from their artists*. Since bubble has more selective audience,artist post lot more contents on bubble than their social media account.

## Average frequency on bubble



*“Even though they post content in SoMe, bubble gives me a wider range of pictures,message. Artists are more selective with posts on insta but on Bubble I can get more close to daily life texts-like weathers and pictures that shows what happened that day” (Participant N).*

*“Artist seems to avoid posting too much stuff on SoMe since it might seems like spamming - like what they eat, what music they listen to,their inner thoughts, and it often used from anti fans for creating memes in a negative sense. But on bubble they share somewhat emotional contents and that makes it helps to feel alike and friendly” (Participant L).*

*“It was nice seeing the small messages and extra content they do not post on their group's social media accounts. In a way, it felt more exclusive and extra” (Participant F)*

As you can see, multiple participants stress the activeness and closeness feeling as positive elements why they started using bubble. Even though sharing contents from bubble is prohibited, it's easy to find fans describing their user experience or characteristics of contents in Bubble on social media, bringing fans curiosity and motive to join bubble as well. Part of my ethnographic research, I subscribed the group ‘Aespa’ which was soon to have released a new album. Almost all members sent bubble everyday and artists seemed relaxed on sharing their daily activity- in-flight pictures on their way to international tour, food pics, music recommendation,spoilers pics or videos of new release. Sometimes they shared innermost



thought referencing their pre-debut episodes, and day related contents - For example, sending their baby pictures on 5th May since it was children's day in South Korea. Aespa has their official Instagram account but contents shared on bubble was not posted on any social media.

## **2. Which element differentiates bubble with other platforms ?**

This chapter is dedicated to demonstrating user experience on bubble. Throughout the analysis of the interview response, I noticed there were several commonly shared impressions and experiences between participants. Responses were often contained one or two elements together. Initially I planned to present the result by separating the quotes from the interview by binding with each category. However, I realized providing the whole context might give advantages to see emotional and psychological evaluation of bubble experience in a more natural tone.

Therefore this chapter will provide a whole dialogue of users' comments. Following text was an interview response of participants who described emotional value and experience they had on bubble that had influence on their daily lives. Revealing answers for my first research question, distinguishable elements of bubble service.

*“100% satisfied with my bubble experience...Because it's a chat look-alike UI, I find it more close and intimate. My artist sometimes plays ‘guessing what is this emoji’ kind of childish game with fans on bubble and when I participate in that kind of stuff it makes me laugh even when I am in a bad mood. And he often says something sweet cause of his personality, conversation like that makes me feel like we’re friends and it brings me comforts ” (Participant C)*

*“ First, when I’m physically or mentally having a tough time, getting a message from my favorite artist gives me a lot more comfort than I imagined. also receiving pictures, video and recordings of my artist singing or playing instrument and that feels special” (Participant D)*

*“I feel happy when my favorite artist asks how my day was and shares his days, how he feels and some thoughts he was having. Because it's a paid platform, where only fans are gathered, I find it nice that he can communicate more comfortably. It feels like a gift since*

*he came to bubble to communicate with his fans cause he cares about his fans.”*

*(Participant Q)*

*“Because artists receive thousands of replies for each message, the chances of an artist replying to my messages are extremely low, however I find receiving replies through private application not from official channels as a positive point. I also find intimacy when the subscription duration gets longer( since its present as an anniversary date). When I was heavily stressed from studies,my artist sent me a ‘how are you’ type of simple message and I still remember that moment of the comfortness till this day. As I assumed he was also very busy with his own life and schedule, him just sending small messages because he cares about his fans brings me a lot of energy to my daily life.” (Participant D)*

Based on the interviews I conducted for my research, the participants expressed that the messages and activities of artists on the Bubble platform brought them happiness and a sense of comfort in their daily lives. They emphasized that the communication on Bubble felt more friendly and intimate, primarily because artists appeared to be more relaxed and actively engaged on the platform. This perception of emotional value associated with Bubble as a communication platform was viewed positively by the participants. In addition to participant D’s response. Participant J also shared relation of intimacy with anniversary day counting features - by reinforcing her willingness to continue subscription. However few participants shared related opinions on this topic, which will be shared later on this paper.

While artists typically had official social media accounts managed by their management companies, these accounts were primarily used for uploading group-related content, such as teasers, album concepts, photos, and official schedules and activities. Some artists did not have individual personal social media accounts through which they could directly interact with their fans. For instance, Participant B,C and F’s cases fall into this category. Participant B provided specific examples in the interview, highlighting examples where artists didn’t have personal social media accounts for direct communication with their fans.

*“Artist 1 ~ 4 are members from the same group. My general opinion is that I was happy that they have a space where they can have communication since their management company didn’t have platforms like this where you could communicate with fans. Artists*

*are also most happy for that part. After being on Bubble, I find them more friendly and it feels like we are more comfortable and honest with each other . Since they had no platform they could communicate with fans, I could only interact with them on offline settings (like fan meeting event) but since artists find bubble in more personal space context, artist's are more candid on bubble “ (Participant B)*

Participant B's response aligns with my ethnographic research experience on the Bubble platform. In the case of my chosen artist, Aespa, they have official social media accounts; however, they do not have individual accounts that allow for direct communication with their fans. Throughout my subscription period, I received frequent messages from them, consisting of text, photos, and videos. They actively engaged with their fans by sharing snippets of their daily lives. They often sent behind-the-scenes images and videos from their music video shoots and album photoshoots.

One of the memorable interaction was when Karina, one of the members, shared a picture of a beautiful sunset in the afternoon in Korean Standard Time (KST), mentioning how the sky looked lovely around 7-8 pm. While the conversations on Bubble may not always be perfectly aligned, moments like these, where fans get notification from private chat application, read their artists' messages and simultaneously contemplate the sunset of the same evening, evoke a sense of friendliness and closeness. These instances create a unique bond between fans and artists, fostering a sense of intimacy that extends beyond mere communication. Few participants mention bubble features to this topic which insert user nickname in messages. During these sequence of real time- daily life melted interaction, users seeing customized messages with their user nickname increase the feeling of closeness, even if they are aware that its part of the bubble features.

*“Before I joined the subscription, I found it difficult to understand the concept of paid subscription for interaction with an artist. However, I often witnessed negative aspects of social media platforms, since its open to everyone lot of people posts extremely harsh comments, or spreading fake news and gossip. Because of this, now I believe artists having bubble as a communication space is beneficial for their emotional and phychological aspects. I’m not saying that bubble is complete safe place without any hateful comments,*

*but it allows artists to engage with a more selective and supportive audience” (Participant N)*

While many fans mentioned using Bubble for communication purposes, Participant H provided an interesting perspective. Instead of focusing solely on communication, she sees her Bubble subscription as a way to financially support the artist's career. Since she doesn't buy other merchandise or albums, subscribing to Bubble becomes her way of contributing to the artist's success.

Similarly, Participant C finds herself in a unique situation. Her artist is currently serving in the military, which means she doesn't receive any new content or messages on Bubble. Despite this, she continues her subscription because she wants to show her support for the artist during this period. For Participant C, it's more about the emotional support and the anticipation of the artist's return after completing military service.

For Participant H, it's a financial contribution, while for Participant C, it's a way to show loyalty - As bubble being a service with a cost, it can be seen as an act of supporting her artist that he has his fans waiting for his return. Although their motivations differ, both Participant H and Participant C use Bubble as a means to express their support for their favorite artists. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

### **3. User's Reflections on the Service Bubble**

Unlike traditional communication, bubble is a service operated with an exchange of cost. On one hand, fans become a buyer of a service who pays the reward with monetized cost. On the other hand, artists carry emotional and physical labor as service providers - naturally leading a sense of obligation. This chapter will aim to demonstrate fans' perception and opinion on the biology of Bubble -As an answer to my second research question, fans' experience with service bubble and factors that made up positive and negative impressions for users.

*“First I think bubble is an optimized service that provides elements to create illusions- with their anniversary date features and nick name inserted messages, bubble fulfills the needs*

*of fans who want elements to complete their relationship- like fantasy experience with artists. Secondly, fans join bubble so they will not get excluded from the information. Even when they are not happy with communication becoming a service that you have to pay for. However I believe that bubble is more comfortable and safe environment for artist's. Third, bubble use systematic design where duration of subscription influences fans ability to send long messages. I find this quite unfair since fans are somewhat forced to continue their subscription. So I think there should be an option to pause, instead of losing their subscription streak.” (Participant W)*

*“Of course there are positive elements for bubble being a paid service. However there are also existing negative aspects as well, for example when communication was free voluntary act, users didn't mind the frequencies of the contents. But in payed service context, Users often complain or feel dissatisfaction when artist are not communicative than other artists or sharing less contents.” (Participant T)*

*“I am a person with a solid income source who also consciously limiting my subscription costs. Because of this, my impression of bubble services are positive (since it's quite entertaining). However I also think payed communication service are inconsiderate form of channel to fans who cannot afford the cost of monthly subscription” (Participant U)*

Bubble operates as a paid platform for a service that is typically available for free in everyday life - communication. While fans subscribe to Bubble due to their emotional attachment to the artist, fans also take roles as consumers, who evaluate the value of the service, considering whether it is worth their investment. Inevitably, some fans may lose interest in the artist if their experience seems dissatisfying. This is because Bubble exposes artists' personal characteristics and behavior beyond their stage presence. For example, an artist might seem like he/she doesn't want to communicate with their fans, or shares too many details that might seem unappealing. In this scenario, artists could break fans fantasy - carrying the risks of damaging an idealized version of themselves, serving as a determining factor for fans in deciding whether to continue supporting the artist.

*“There are cases where bubble work in a positive way since its very immersive experience However there are cases where fans lose their interest in their artists. Just like a double edged swords”( Participant O)*

*“Some people, if they do not feel a strong connection to the artist - may see a paid private message service as a "waste of money". But to be honest, I personally find bubble prices quite reasonable. And there are artists who got famous from their bubble activity because of their frequent messages and interactions. Lot of people subscribed to those artist's even though they were not a fan before they knew them through bubble.” ( Participant D )*

Interview response from Participant O and Participant D align with my ethnographic research result. As a subscriber to all members of the group Aespa, I have noticed that Winter and Karina tend to engage more actively with their fans compared to Ning Ning and Giselle. Prior to my subscription, I was already aware of Winter and Karina's reputation for being highly involved on Bubble. For instance, I have come across numerous comments from individuals on social websites and fan forums, who subscribed to Karina specifically due to her frequent messages. Similarly, Winter has gained recognition for consistently keeping her promise with her fans - sharing video on Bubble every Monday , This act participates to build the impression that she is an artist who cares about her fans. In this case, Winter and Karina's active presence and persona on Bubble have positively contributed to attracting curiosity among 'not a fan yet' individuals, thereby establishing the potential for gaining future fans. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

#### **4. Determining the Fate of Subscriptions: Insights from User Responses**

In the interview questionnaire, participants were asked about their intentions regarding the continuation or cancellation of their subscription. The responses were categorized into three groups: those planning to continue, those who canceled, and those who partially canceled but intended to continue with remaining artists. The research findings revealed that 15 participants (62.5%) expressed their intention to continue their subscription, 4 participants (16.7%) stated that they had canceled their subscription, and the remaining 5 participants (20.8%) had partially canceled the subscription but continued to subscribe to the remaining artists. However, due to limited numbers samples the research result might not reflect the

whole user pool of Bubble. The table below provides a summary of the participants' responses, including their assigned codes, response categories, and a brief overview of the reasons underlying their decisions. (Rephrased by chat GPT)

Response	Participant code	Summary of the reasons
Continue (Group A)	B.C.G.H.K.N.N. O.P.Q.R.S.U.V. W	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Does not want to lose streak</li> <li>- To support artist</li> <li>- To keep informed with artist release and activity</li> <li>- Satisfying contents and artist's frequent presence</li> </ul>
Cancelled (Group B)	E.F.T.X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lost of interest to artist or contents</li> <li>- Burden of the cost</li> <li>- Too much contents</li> </ul>
Partially Canceled (Group C)	A.D.I.J.L	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lost of interest</li> <li>- Burden of the cost</li> <li>- Too much content merged inconvenience of the app.</li> <li>- Life got too busy</li> </ul>

(chart : summarized result of user decision regards on subscription)

Because they share the same subscription state, I divided participants into 3 groups with A,B and C. However since Group C is participants who partially canceled bubble subscription while continuing few subscriptions, their response consisted of two types of answers: reason they canceled and reasons for continuation.

Group A shared similar response for their reason to continue subscription. They mentioned that they are happy with what artists are sending, and the frequency of the messages , because they usually communicate through bubble, to support their artists, or to stay informed on their activities and release. Participants also mentioned that messages from bubble give them joy and energy to live through their daily life and because of these reasons they will continue to subscribe as long as they support their artist.

***“ I worried if my subscription would be canceled after he joined the army, but thankfully the subscription steak stayed on.. Unless he appears on news paper with controversial or criminal act, I will continue my subscription ” ( Participant C )***

***“ Will keep subscriptions. I like it for supporting the artist, comeback spoilers and keeping up with what other fans who are subscribed to Bubble are talking about.” (Participant H)***

***“ Monthly subscription for 3\$ price is not expensive and I’m planning to continue because I can get exclusiveness and closedness from bubble, unlike from other social media platforms” (Participant W)***

Participants in group B were the users who canceled all of their bubble subscriptions. They mentioned lost interest in artists or bubble contents. In this case they lost their willingness to support that artist. Few responses contained a financial element as a reason - where subscription cost being a burden for users.

***“I canceled my subscription because I felt like I was not interested in receiving extra content in that form. I like to support the group by purchasing their albums more and if I get to catch them in concert.” ( Participant F )***

Group C is participants who canceled part of their subscription which could be majority or minority cases of their subscription. Interview responses from participant A,D shared similar cases with their subscription tendencies but also shared the same elements that encouraged both participants to continue some of their subscriptions. Group C participants subscribed to multiple artists in the beginning. However, since it takes a higher cost to subscribe multiple artists, they chose to cancel a few artists and continued to subscribe to their favorite member. ‘Reduced to selected members behavior was mutually observed from all participants in group C .

***“ To give reasons to continue, first I don’t like the idea of losing an anniversary streak, also artists’ messages on bubble give me motivation and energy to live throughout the day. Because I only subscribe to my favrite member from that group, As long as I support him I will continue my subscription. I also partially canceled my subscription for ones I wouldn’t really miss it later on.” (Participant D)***



***“ Originally I have subscribed 5 members but throughout the time, I canceled all except one. My biggest reason was the cost , but I also lost interest for ones I canceled my subscription. But I have no intention to cancel my favorite member, Since its soon 1000 days anniversary soon and I don’t want to lose this streak. I think it works as a good business strategy” (Participant A)***

However some participants had more distinctive motives. For example, participant ‘I’ was subscribing 4 artists from 3 different groups. In her case, she had already subscribed to her favorite artist from each group. However participant I is non-Korean speaker. Where the majority of artists interact with their fans in Korean as their primary language, I’s communication has to go through additional steps. Even though bubble provides an in app translation service, non-Korean speaking users have to press the translate button for each message. Furthermore, since it’s auto translation, messages are often translated with different meanings. For these reasons, she also followed fans' translation accounts to cross check its accuracy. Due to these reasons she canceled one artist’s bubble. Following text is an interview from participant I, additionally name of artist replaced with code Y, for anonymity.

***“I canceled Y’s, because she sent way too many messages for me. I could either not relate or even understand most of the messages. In the end, it felt like a chore to click "translate" for each individual message I got, sometimes 100 in a day. Also, Y didn't really livestream on Bubble, she uses ITZY's Instagram for that. ( Participant I )***

Contrary to participants who answered frequency of the bubble as biggest benefits, Participant I’ considered too much contents as negative elements. According to a Dear U company report, Bubble’s user base consists 26% from South Korea, 30% China , 13% Japan, 10% from East Asia, 9% USA, 5% European countries and 7% from the rest of the world.(Yuanta research center, 2022 p.7). Considering the massive proportion of global users in bubble service, Participants I’s response might reflect the experience of 74% of the total user base in bubble.

## **Discussion**

In bubble, artists send messages to fans in a group chat setting while fans are sending private messages to artists in 'private chat settings' user interface. More faithful a given role to each side, the more misplaced this conversation can get. Artists can't direct replies to fans, so they compile all messages from fans, eliminate specifics from their message and reply to all, by sending same replies to different messages, equally. (Lee Naeun, 2022, p.157)

Bubble sell communication and the illusion of intimacy with a cost. In this setting, a private message is never a private message and conversation is a monologue of two entities. Since users are aware of the system, they transpose the reality of these monologues into conversation to satisfy their fantasy. After all, what its left is more volumes of content with exclusivity, and windows to see glimpse of artists 'off stage life', daily activities and fragments of thoughts that artists wanted to share with their fans. Without a context of emotional attachment between fans and artists, these situations can be viewed quite harshly. One person using their resources for another being that has no social and physical ties, makes no sense in an outsider's logical evaluation. However there is a long history of selfless support in the music industry where fans buy artists albums, merchandise and concert tickets to support their music, their presence in concerts. These sequenced acts of support bring happiness to individuals. In the end, Bubble is also one of those products where fans invest for their artist.

In bubble, artist send sunset pictures they took in afternoon, send food pics in lunch and dinner time, tells he/she is on the way to concert or TV shows on the way to their schedule. When contents are on time with users time and align with users reality, messages bring more realness to the illusion of conversation. In this setting, fans feel artists as a close entity that you can relate to , often making their emotional bond stronger. If artists are willing to share their daily moments to interact with their fans, both fans and artists only gain benefits from this social exchange.

Nature of the paid service, artists meet more supportive fans with positive emotion towards them compared to social media platforms. When activities on social media platforms are free,it is easier for hostile individuals sending DMs to artists, post damaging content towards

artists. Reporting these activities often leads to vigilanties of the platforms, often takes time to remove - exposing artists to harmful contents in the meanwhile. In these specific cases, Bubble has more benefits than harm. However, bubble also have disadvantages when it comes to the artist's side.

Because it's a paid service, an artist might carry some sense of obligation that he/she must communicate or share contents more often than other social media platforms. For instance , some members of artist fan clubs criticized the artist when he was posting more often on free social media platforms than bubble. Bubble being a service gives privileges to fans who subscribe, giving a sense of awareness to act as a consumer of this product. In this case, artists have more limitations on communication with fans. Additionally, being paid service highers the barrier to hostile audiences, not never means that there would be none in user pools.



(Image : screen capture from AB6IX fan)

Image above is the screen capture of group member AB6IX on Weverse DM. Artist mentioning anti fans presence in paid communication app while leaving hurtful and hostile comments to artist. Following text is translation for the partial messages he sent on Universe DM : *It's okay if you hate me but please don't say it where I can see, I know this platform is paid service. Is it really necessary to do this? We get critics all the time. I didn't want to say it here cause my fans are also here on this platform and I'm sorry for saying all this, but I just wanted to say that artists are also individual people with feelings .Thank you for my fans who support me, I will try to be better.*

As example mentioned above, there was considerable amount of cases where artist stopped paid communication service from fans negative behaviors, details of those cases were disclosed but all of them left service due to negative experiences of artists. However, it is also uncertain if artists get to choose if they are willing to stop communicating on such paid platforms. Some artists who had similar - negative engagement experiences stopped sending messages to fans after these incidents and fans who were subscribing to those artists didn't receive any content while they were still paying for the service. Noting it was a paid service to meet certain expectations, there are lot to consider than a communication with voluntarily act (Yang Inwha ,2023,p.77)

Many artists endure the impact of negative comments, which can significantly affect their mental well-being. Despite receiving love and support from numerous individuals worldwide, they also encounter a considerable amount of anonymous individuals with negative intentions. It is important to recognize that paid services may not serve as an impenetrable barrier against individuals having anger and hatred towards artists.

Inwha Yang's argument highlights an important aspect of the system: the perspective of artists on paid communication services. Due to the confidentiality of artist contracts, it is difficult to determine whether artists willingly joined these platforms, to invest their time in communication, and create additional content to meet the needs of subscribers. On these platforms, all members of each group are included as subscribable artists, meaning that it is a collective decision for the entire group to participate or not. However, if artists are listed as available, each individual artist may have had a different opinion about joining the service. Even if artists had the option to make their own choices and some decided not to join paid

communication apps, it could potentially be interpreted as a lack of care for their fans.  
(Rephrased by chat GPT)

In this scenario, artists have to go through a dilemma where he/she have to choose the potential of losing fans cause they might have been seen as artists who don't care about their fans or to sacrifice their time on a daily basis. On one hand, artists can meet their fans in a safer environment where inappropriate content from fans can take measures with fast intervention, also fans in this environment might tend to be more supportive since they are willing to pay extra to interact with this artist. In this scenario it is beneficial if they have the desire to communicate with their fans often. On the other hand, artists might want to use his free time with no obligation, feeling obligated to provide extra content to their fans. But also forced to join the platform due to collective decision process or pressure from their management company.

Since the introduction of private message services, there might have been a potential to increase artist's workload and psychological pressure to do something more to attract or sustain their fanbase. Even they provide additional revenue for artist, as a third party who don't know specifics of all cases - if artist gets to chose to join or percentage for revenue split between management and the artist- it is unclear to say if paid services were morally right or wrong and if it has more beneficial or harmful elements for artist's mentality.

Nonetheless, revenue is growing and the IP pools of each platform are also expanding. With a good setting such as an artist's personality goes well with the services on fan applications and if they have willingness to communicate with their fans more often, fan apps can be a great tool to promote artists, give them extra revenue streams, and a gateway to foster stronger fan community while gathering more supporters of one artist. It will take more time to see the aftermath of this business model, but it is indeed interesting to observe its features and influences within the music industry and fandom culture.

## **Limitation of this research**

This research has involved with 24 participants, which over 60% of the participants belongs to age group of 30-39. However, considering user base of bubble showed 80% of users consist in age group 10 - 29, this significant difference in age distribution suggests that this research result might not reflect the whole bubble users experience, motive and subscription duration time etc. By assuming individuals in there 30-39 might have more financials than individuals in 10-29. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that majority of the participants of my research was Koreans, while bubble consists 74 % of oversea users. Additionally, the cancellation rate among the participants of my research was observed to be higher than the rate reported by the company Dear U. Also the nature of qualitative survey method , there were limited resource to analyze to see deeper dimensions of psychological aspects of individuals experience and behaviors. These considerations highlight the limitations of the present research in capturing the comprehensive experiences, demographics, and cancellation tendencies of the wider user population.

## **Original text before rephrased by chat GPT**

**Reparaphrasing process was done with one request : can you re-paraphrase this text into more academic and fluent tone? . After this I also edited with adjustments and added of more information through out my writing.**

Technology advancement blurred the borders between countries, aided artist and audiences all across to have easier access to each other. With inherited features of internet, music industry could expand their territory gained new roles and re-defined their functions. Among many other changes brought from digitalization, music publishing sector gained more creative roles, gathering producers and song writers to open song camps, to pitch it to different labels - took a role as mediator, and diplomats of musical exchanges all across the world. Live music expanded their territory from offline - physical attendances - to online realm - where no limits of capacity and physical attendances, enabled audience to enjoy concerts and events in a global scale. According to Ifpi report 2023, 67% of the total recorded music consumption in the year 2022 was made from music streaming services, with containing 589 millions of paid subscription user accounts for music streaming services. (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, 2023, p.11) The digital landscape has truly transformed the music industry, creating exciting avenues for artists and listeners to connect and engage with music in diverse ways.

In fandom culture, fans have expanded roles beyond being passive recipients of media content. The advent of digitalization has allowed fans to interact with each other and take on various active roles. For instance, fans now share information about upcoming concerts and merchandise, create fan accounts on social media to distribute fan-made content, and actively engage with other fans in online communities. These interactions within the fandom community are highly dynamic and prevalent across social media platforms. In fact, fans themselves often establish community guidelines to foster healthy communication and interactions among fellow fans. Overall, fandom culture empowers fans to connect, collaborate, and support each other in ways that go beyond their individual experiences. Due to exchange information and active fan-fan engagement, influence from fans to artist's success has increased. While they have more numbers, impact that fans can bring where

quantity of supporters can make a lot of change - such as streaming and concert ticket sales etc. Naturally artist management companies try to investigate fan's needs and their tendencies to amplify the potential of numbers of supporters.

Weverse is an accessible mobile app and webpage that is free to join, but offers a range of additional features, such as the 'year around membership' and its own currency, known as 'Jelly'. The membership can be purchased in the Weverse shop and lasts for one year, providing access to exclusive content from the artists. The membership is closely linked to merchandise 'membership kits', which are also renewed annually. Membership kits are based on 1 purchase per 1 person quota, often contains photo cards, coasters, keyrings, posters, stickers, etc. Some artists for example BTS has merch pack with price 150\$ that is similar to a season pass in gaming industry. containing merch pack provides fans to get merch pack items free with delivery cost By obtaining membership, fans gains priority access to purchase concert tickets, apply or purchase tickets for events, and unlock the ability to buy membership goods. The price for membership ranges from approximately \$20-23, while the cost of membership kits varies between \$10 and \$25. 'Jelly' is a one-time purchase currency used to unlock exclusive content on the Weverse platform. Occasionally, there are Jelly giveaway events for fans to participate in.

Front page of Weverse app has major dividance with 4 components, First on top has interactive carousel box where new information displays regarding album release, new community, events and info of new merchandise. Second part of front page is your community tabs. To elaborate the concept of communities, each artist (weather its group or solo) forms a community separated with other artist. I will comeback to reviusit this topic later. Third is Weverse magazine, to increase the brand image of artists and to provide up to date news regarding music industry. Weverse magazine provides astist interviews, playlist recommandation from artists, concept information of new release, also often contain interactive articles . Last componant of the front page is feeds. Feed section is dedicated to newest update from various artist including pictures, text, video etc in instagram-like display.

For short summary to front page of weverse, my opinion is that it was a neat marketing strategy for all artists on weverse platform. Compared to traditional fan-websites and cafe, used to be separated site, seperated accounts to make, seperated official merch online



shopt etc, to join one artist's community- which made introduction to new artist was extra effort and hassle. Social media made introduction to new artist more easier but yet, is not fully dedicated platform for artist in music industry and there was too much contents inbetween to seek new artists contents that users are not keeping on track. However weverse app made fanclubbing into one-step activity where you can buy merchandise, communicate with your artist, fellow fans, and visit other artists community get their news updated easily.

First I will start with the feed section. Feed's UI starts with artist image, carousel text bubbles shows artist's replies for fans feed. Feed posts contains text, image, videos and artists or fans in same community can click likes and make comments. Fans often say good morning and good nights to each other - to easily put, feed function as social media platform dedicated to fans where you can communicate with artists and fellow fans. Since international user makes up for 90% of total weverse user, weverse provide in-app auto translation features. Enabling easy communication between international fans by clicking translate button to translate based on their preferred languages settings. Currently Weverse in-app auto service with 15 languages includes English, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Vietnamese, Thai etc. Also report and block user features in case of inappropriate post and spams. Every contents on feeds are accessible without obtaining membership. In a summary, feed is fan-centric page where reinforcing fan community is the main purpose.

Purpose of this research is to find why music fans choosed the communication route that has to be charge monthly, while using social media is free. Also what was the beneficial or negative experience while using subscription fan communication apps. In the early stage of my research design, I planned to only rely on data from ethnographic research to provide insights of user experience. However I realized the limitation of my own experience might be biased or lack to represent all the users experience. Hence I expended the range of participants with various duration of subscription period, subscription artist, age group of user, to secure credibility on this research. Therefore, the data collection of my research will be combined result of ethnographic and qualitative research to provide reliable data in user experience of fan app 'bubble'.

As qualitative research method, I conducted qualitative survey using google form. To observe the research ethics, I informed data collecting purpose, usage of the data, freedom for not to

share information with their own will for sensitive question ,and anonymity as participants.and all response that has been written in different language will be translated into english.

Bubble is operating with paid monthly subscription and price range for subscribing 1 artist's bubble is 3.4\$.However, when users buy subscription for multiple members in the same group gets discounts for certain percentage - for example, for a group with 9 members, subscription for 1 is 3.4\$ , 5 members for 13.9\$, 9 members for 24.7\$. The moment user subscribe artist and go into chat room, bubble application pop up Day 1 anniversary message. As you could see from the image, every chat room has anniversary day counting on top and longer you subscribe on that artist, the longer the text message you can send to artist. As I mentioned earlier, in artist side of UI is similar to group chat where multiple comments are shown in one screen. If the message is longer than the others, artist are aware of this specific user has longer subscription period - long term supporter and visually more noticeable its than others messages. When user cancel the subscription period this anniversary counts go back to day1 and word limits get shorter. Naturally, fans would like to keep the availability to send longer text message but also dislike to break the anniversary streak. This is also one of the the psychological design for users to hesitate canceling subscription.Bubble chat with artist is only available with subscription, and just like Weverse and Universe, Bubble also takes same policy with prohibiting any unauthorized or illegal distribution of bubble contents, this includes artist sent videos, photos, voice message and text messages. For example, screen capture of bubble chat screen will pop up warning message of ' Screen capture detected, unauthorized usage of artist's picture and informations are illegal act. with any incident occurs, yourself will carry the accountability' This pop up screen only disappear with user agreeing this condition. As another practice of strict exclusivity policy, users can't also use screen record features on bubble apps.

As I built around my research theory with those psychological traits melt in bubble service. First, bubble have lot to offer compares to social media platforms that satisfy fans needs, with cost equivalent of one cup of coffee for month. 30% of the revenue from bubble goes to management company participating on bubble series. It defers in percentage between management company and the artist based on their contract, however artists on bubble will receive financial benefits for their labor on bubble compares to their activity on social media

platforms. Therefore my theory is that artists on bubble will be lot more frequent compares to their social media presence and this might have been the motivation for fans to subscribe bubble.

Second, despite of often mismatched conversation, fans might feel satisfied from conversation in bubble on their daily life scale. Individual personals on bubble is the entity that evoke fans desire. In this sense, the accuracy of feedback which we seek in real life might not be the most important element for phycological satisfaction completes. Instead of the fact if this reply matchs from message I sent, fans might find ‘how real- this feels like or how it seems to be’ as more important factor. Or if its feels like a real time communication like we have with our friends. Therefore my second theory is fans are actually drawn more to realtime immersive experience regardless of the accuracy of their conversation.

Thrid,I found bubbles anniversary counting system connected with length of message features interesting, but also had impression of using human mindset of not willing to lose something we invested for. Leading to curiosity if bubble users experience were not good as their expectation, some fans might continue their subscription just because they don’t want to lose their anniversary streak or to not lose ability to send longer messages due to their subscription duration. So my third theory is fans will continue subscription just to not lose this perks.

Social media is deeply melted in modern music industry. Endless potential to reach to people all around the world is crucial for artist. Naturally all artist on bubble series already had their official SoMe account. However the endlessness of SoMe platforms and ‘free- access to all’ was also one of the reason how fans described for start subscribing bubble. According the research result, 40% of the participants shared similar impression from SoMe communication as ‘Megaphone to a huge crowd’- making their artist feels more distant being - while bubble provide interaction that feels more intimate in ‘closed space’. In their perception, this also applies same to artist. Participants often mentioned that artist persona on bubble feels more personal being such as sharing contents that is close to their daily life, more talkative and often share their personal view of sensitive social issues - since bubble users are active fans who has supportive tendencies to artist, artist feels bubble as safer enviorment.

From my interviews with the participants, many participants stressed artist's message and their activities on bubble platform brought them happiness in their daily life, bringing them comforts. Many participant emphasised that communication on bubble feels more friendly and close - distance due to artist are more relaxed and active on their bubble presence. This resembles their emotional value on bubble as a communication platform in positive way. Participants were also mentioned that artists are more eased and relaxed, compare to their activities on social media platforms. For, example all artists had official social media platforms however, it often managed by management company only used to upload group contents , to upload informations such as teasers, album concept, photos for upcoming release and official schedules and activities of the group. In this case, lot of artists didn't had individual members personal SoMe accounts where they could directly communicate with their fans. Following text is partial of interview from participant B, giving examples of such cases.

Participants B's response also align with my experience on bubble. My artist Aespa does have official social media accounts but does not have their own individual accounts where they can freely communicate with their fans. During my subscription time, they sent frequent messages including text, photos and videos. Actively engage with their fans sharing small daily activities, often sent behind scene images and videos of their new release M/V and their photoshot for album covers. One of the member Karina sent a picture of sunset at afternoon in KST, saying sky is pretty around 7-8 pm. Even though conversation might have been miss matched, moment like this where you check your artists message and look up the sky, thinking about that specific days sunset brings fans a sense friendliness and closeness.

While many fans mentioned communication as their main reason for bubble, Participant H offered a different perspective. For her, the subscription serves as a means to support the artist's career, similar to an act of purchasing artist goods, since she doesn't purchase other merchandise or albums. In some extent, Participant C shares comparable situation. Due to her artist is currently on military service, leaving her without any new content or messages. In this case, bubble is not serving function with communication context. Nonetheless, Participant C remains committed to her subscription, in a means of supporting her artist. Participant H's bubble subscription primarily serves as financial support. On the other hand, Participant C's clarified her reason are more close to emotional support, to present her artist

have fans waiting for his comeback after his military duty is over. Even though their motives have differences, still shares similarities where bubble serves as a method to show their supports.

Participant O and D's response shares similar impression with my personal experience. As I subscribed 4 members from group Aespa I noticed Winter and Karina are more engaging with fans than Ning Ning and Giselle. Before I started my subscription, I was already aware of both Winter and Karina are quite active on bubble. For example, I observed comments from lot of people subscribe Karina because of her very frequent messages. and Winter were known for keeping her promise with her fans - Every monday she share her daily video on bubble. In their case, artist persona on bubble worked in positive way, attracting peoples curiosity builds up potential fans in the future.

On of my interview questionnaire, I asked each participant whether if they will cancel or continue their subacription. Response was divided with 3 categories with plan to continue, cancelled and partially cancelled. According to result of the research, 16 participants (66.7%) answered to continuing their subscription, 4 participants (16.7) said they cancelled their subscription while rest 4(16.7%) participants answered as they partially cancelled but will continue subscribing rest of the artists. Following cart is the summary of the participants response, exhibiting participants code, category of their response and summerised reason for their decision.

Lot of artist suffers from negative comments, often damaging their mentality. As much as they being loved from individuals all around the world, some experience hatred from many people as well. For those who contain anger and hatred towards artist, payed service could not be a solid wall to stop them.

However Inwha Yang's argument also brings very important factor of this system - the artists perspective on payed communication service. Because of confidentially of artist contracts, it is hard to know if artist's willingness to be on these platforms, share his/her time to communicate and create additional contents to furfulls the needs of subscription users. On this platforms all of the group members are lined up as subscribable artist on each platforms. To put it easier, its go or no go for all members of the group. However even they are in

service line up, each artist might have had different opinion to join or not join the service. And If individual members could make decision to join or not join, and choose not to join payed communication apps, wouldn't it been shown as they don't care about their fans?

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