

**Fannish Healing and “the Tentative Step Forward”:
Musical Affect and Parasocial Directionalities in BTS Fan
Narratives**

by
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Abstract

Situating itself within the frameworks of musical affect and relational labour, this research examines the healing practices of BTS fans from all around the world. As the biggest Korean musical act to enter the global stage to date, BTS as a group have fostered a unique iteration of the parasocial relationship with their fans and, in doing so, redefined the structures and potentials of the fan-artist relationship. Both through their music and public image, the resulting expansion has allowed fans to create individual networks for affective healing. The purpose of this research is then to establish relational networks as a conceptualization of fannish healing as it is transformed and reappropriated into the lives of individual fans.

Keywords: fandom, affect, healing, music, parasocial, K-pop

Dedication

To the seven legends and the gremlin they sent me,

이 모든건 우연이 아냐

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1. "Kim Namjoon, I would live for you."

In late October of 2018, Kim Namjoon, group leader of global pop music sensation BTS, released his second solo album entitled *mono* under the stage name RM. The album, frequently referred to as a mixtape or even a playlist, debuted on the Billboard 200 charts at number 26, dubbing RM the highest-charting Korean solo act on the chart and landing him a number one spot on Billboard Emerging Artists. Despite having little to no promotional precedent, *mono* went on to top the iTunes charts at number one in 91 countries and, at the time, broke the iTunes records for the Korean Act with the most number one spots secured.

The media storm following the release of the album resulted in a multitude of articles highlighting just how different the melancholic flow of *mono* was from RM's previous, more aggressive song writing. Critics and fans alike underscored the overwhelming sadness and loneliness in *mono*'s character. For example, the lyrics to *Moonchild* deal with a collective and inescapable sadness, while the song *everythingoes* assures the eventual passing of all pain. My personal favourite track, *uhgood*, addresses the pain of isolation and feeling inadequate with oneself, two themes I intensely related to at the time of the album's release. At the time of *mono*'s release, I had been a BTS fan for over 2 years and had just completed an undergraduate research project about Canadian K-pop fans. Having just moved away from home to start a new degree in a new, much rainier city, *mono*'s lull echoed deep within me and I found great comfort in keeping the album on repeat throughout the weeks following its release. I was lost and alone in a gray and unfamiliar place; the timeliness of the album was almost eerie, if not impressive. My Twitter feed reflected similar sentiments from all around the world, with fans relishing together in the bittersweet masterpiece of RM's making and more so, how it came to them just when they needed it the most.

Within the enthusiastic flood of fan reactions, one post and its many reiterations made appearances on my Twitter feed and stood out to me more than any other. It read: "Kim Namjoon, I would live for you". For those who are less familiar with fandom vernacular, the weight of the phrase also lies in its subversion of a more common expression, one where a fan "would die for" their idol. The reason why "Kim Namjoon, I would live for you" resonated so loudly was because I was so used to seeing its more common antithesis, "Kim Namjoon, I would die for you." Fans usually use this phrase as an exaggerated declaration of their dedication to an idol. However, this reversal of the original phrase reflected the album, both in its decree for healing and its poeticism. For all its sad, lonely wandering, *mono*'s relatability seemed to appease its own pain and make its audience feel just a little less sad, a little less lonely, and little more seen in the world. Somehow, through its reception, the album healed itself into an almost ironic source of comfort for its audience. The phrase "Kim Namjoon, I would live for you" is a promise towards healing, of overcoming the loneliness and melancholy that the artist bled into his music. It is a gesture of gratitude for the gift of a most intimate sorrow.

To a certain extent, that single phrase inspired the direction of my research, as did the themes of healing present not only in RM's solo work, but BTS's entire discography and message. It is no secret that music elicits emotions from its listeners and healing through music is a topic that is well studied across disciplines. We, as the audience, see ourselves in its undefined narrative and transform abstract artistry into deeply personal experience. People associate songs to their lived experiences, memories, and many emotional states. When I talk about healing through music, I am referring to the many ways in which listeners relate to music and how they describe this connection. This research starts by examining how fans draw meaning from BTS's music, but ultimately, it looks at how they use these meanings to overcome hardship. It is not uncommon for people to turn to music during difficult times in their lives, as we might often hear someone recount how a specific album got them through something or even saved their life. Such are the stories I share in this research and, in analyzing the properties of these experiences surrounding music, offer a clearer understanding of music's healing potential among individual audience members.

In this research, I identify two distinct avenues through which audience members achieve healing through music. The first is the role of the artist as an affective catalyst for healing. Music as a form of expression is bound to its author in terms of affective resonance; the love fans feel towards the musician as a performer permeates into a love of character, a love for the artist as a person (Cavicchi, 2017). Since music can elicit deeply personal emotion from its listeners, it is easy for audience members to create affective bonds with the creator who embodies said emotion. Authorship is an intimate ordeal when it comes to music; fans of an artist's music are often also fans of the artist themselves, which is not always the case for other artistic forms such as the literary arts. I approach the fan-artist relationship as an important determinant of healing, as I unpack the many ways BTS as artists work to strengthen and reaffirm this relationship with their fans. The second avenue I identify are the fan communities or 'fandoms' built around artists and their music, which act as sites of collective healing. In connecting with the same music and the same artist, fans also connect with each other and exercise healing amongst themselves in fan spaces. There exists extensive research on healing in fandom contexts, mostly pertaining to the sense of community belonging and support that fans find in their respective fandoms. In focusing on individual fan experiences surrounding BTS and their music, my goal is to highlight the sheer multiplicity of healing present within the marriage of music and fandom, and how its meaning and purpose are transformed by fans—consciously or unconsciously—to create personalized independent networks of healing.

Music fans often cite how music has helped them during difficult times in their life. In its use of the term 'healing,' this study situates itself within this idea of music's capacity to "help" and therefore, maintains a lax definition of healing in fandom contexts. This definition is primarily informed by the experiences shared by fans during interviews. That is, fans provided the definition of healing throughout this research, which encompasses any form betterment in well-being that they connect to their fan participation, whether it be in terms of mental health, lifestyle, or general outlook. Simply put, the healing described delves into how music helps fans.

As mentioned, healing through music and fan communities is not a novel topic of research, as both music and fandom exhibit characteristics that encourage healing in individuals who engage with them, such as emotional validation or a sense of community belonging. The authenticity in BTS's music and message, which is then mirrored and therefore reinforced through consistent efforts in relatability on the part of the group members, creates model conditions for healing within the fandom and presents a stable resource for fans to build upon. However, in the case of BTS fans (henceforth referred to by their name, 'ARMY'), processes of healing seem to further develop within the manipulation of the pre-existing intertextual, experiential, and behavioural channels present in their musical and/or fan experiences. That is to say, in the BTS fandom, it is not the presence of healing properties that piques interest, but the trajectory and reappropriation of healing as it leaves the fannish¹ realm and enters the individual lives of fans. This research concerns itself with what fans *do* with the healing opportunities they are given in fannish contexts and how they eventually make this healing their own, separate from those contexts. This research thus represents a break from the dominant community perspectives in fan studies that approach healing within the social structures of fandom and instead, aims to accommodate the individuality of fans outside purely fannish realms.

In following these instances of healing, as they originate from the fan text and travel beyond it through shifting contexts and branching directionalities, I propose that healing loses its fannish sensibilities when it is introduced into what I call the 'relational network' of an individual fan. This term derives from Nancy Baym's concept of 'relational labour,' which describes the affective labour undertaken by artists to relate to connect to their audiences out of their music (2018). Relational networks are the result of relational labour, as they are an exploration of fans' reception and transformation of this affect. I define relational networks as a series of references built upon the fan text (i.e. the artist), but which ultimately branch out far enough into the fan's personal life that they obscure the connection to the fan text. Essentially, healing behaviours that fans adopt in relation to the fan text become so integrated into other non-fannish parts of their lives that these

¹ 'Fannish' is a term commonly used in fan studies and describes anything characteristic to fandom or relating to fans.

behaviours cannot be explicitly contextualized in or “traced back” to the fan text. The healing becomes so personalized and so removed from the fan text that it can only reference it when the fan consciously draws the connection themselves. In this way, the healing work of fans is transformative and self-fulfilling, and is often taken on through conscious individual effort. As many participants in this research state, BTS and ARMY do not generate healing itself, but are a means towards it. In the phrase “Kim Namjoon, I would live for you,” Kim Namjoon is not the subject and the promise of healing, while directed to him, is not his promise. Fans undertake the endeavours of their own healing independently, at first using the resources given to them through their fan membership. Their dedication to their artists is therefore not indicative of reliance, but of appreciation. Fans heal themselves; *mono* just happens to be playing in the background.

1.2. Research Outline

As a fan of BTS, my personal experiences of healing heavily inform the analysis presented in this research. To accommodate my membership in the fan community, I employed a mixed methods approach to data collection which combines insider ethnography and narrative analysis. The goal is not to study the relationship between the fan community and the fan text, but how the two inform each other to produce meaning. The data collection process takes into consideration the different contributors to the meaning making surrounding healing, some of which come out of the community contexts, while others present solely as textual sources. My fan status grants me direct access to the fan community, which represents my primary site for data collection where I conducted both participatory observation and semi-structured interviews with fans. This portion of data collection took place in Seoul and Vancouver but included participants from all over the world. Participatory observation consisted of attending various events, including fan-organized events and BTS concerts, as well as gathering data from the online sphere, whether it be fan produced content or official content put out by the group or their company. In tandem, I conducted twenty-two semi-structured interviews with fans from all over the globe from various different backgrounds and age groups.

When first designing my methods of data collection, my initial goal was to examine participants' mental health histories and how their status as BTS fans mediated their mental health, if that were even the case. Upon further reflection, however, I decided against the use of such terminology for two reasons. First, I felt that direct questions about the state of a person's mental health crossed some ethical boundaries. Second, I found the terminology restricting, as struggles with mental health are not a prerequisite to benefiting from being a fan. For these reasons, I widened my scope to include any iteration of personal betterment expressed by the fan and referred to them as instances of healing.

I did not maintain a strict definition of what 'healing' constituted and only arrived at a clearer delineation of the term through way of process. Between my personal experience with BTS and the observations I had made as a member of the fandom, I had an idea of when healing was present, but did not want to limit what it could entail. For this reason, I built my interviews using a looser concept of healing, in hopes of defining it more concisely based on the data from the interviews instead of my own preconceived ideas and the definitions acquired from the existing literature alone. In my search for instances of healing during interviews, for example, I asked interviewees about the reasons behind their fan membership and the benefits they gained from their fannish involvement. Thus, I define fannish healing through scholarship, but also outline a definition of healing that is specifically tailored to ARMY. As such, my data analysis establishes 'healing' as an umbrella term that encompasses improvements in psychological health, overall wellbeing, lifestyle, and self-care practices.

In the following chapter, I review the history of the fan studies discipline in order to elucidate the various functions of fandom as a social structure and space of identity creation. While community perspectives of fandom are relevant to ARMY, I propose a focus on the individual fan in order to accommodate the transcultural realities of BTS and their fandom. BTS are a Korean act with a global fan base, which creates a fannish space where both fan cultural sharing and tensions strive, especially in online spaces. BTS fan cultures are bound by a multiplicity of geolocation, which an individual fan approach can

better consider. Moreover, in this chapter, I provide background to underscore the significance of BTS as a Korean music sensation and their immovable presence on the global stage. It is increasingly relevant to discuss BTS as a band and as a movement at this time in music history, especially in the context of healing. This section will begin by outlining a short history of what scholarship refers to as the Korean Wave, a multimedia phenomenon that marked the advent of South Korean popular culture before international audiences. Many scholars argue that it is the cultural hybridity of Korean popular culture that attracts its wide audience. This media remains imbued with the Korean cultural context from which it came, while also accommodates both the tropes present in global (i.e. Western) popular culture and elements from other cultures as well. While I debate the accuracy of the hybridity argument, I do highlight how the transnational flow of Korean popular culture results in the creation of transcultural fan bases who engage in counter-hegemonic fan cultures. Fans' capacity to relate to BTS plays a crucial role in the healing described in this research, as well as the creation of transcultural fan identities, making the historical and political contexts surrounding their success as Korean artists and the establishment of their global fanbase all the more relevant.

In the second chapter, I explore music as the initial instance of healing put forward by BTS, which fans referred to in their interviews. Music is the most intimate form of interaction a musician can commonly extend to their audience, but as an artistic medium, music is often shrouded in ambiguity. Here, I outline the properties of music, namely, the dichotomy between its semiotic nature and strong affective capacities. I establish music as an embodiment of emotions and how, in its lack of narrative, allows us to relate it to our personal experiences. In short, we don't know why music makes us feel the way we do. Referring to Nancy Baym's (2018) concept of 'relational labour', I argue that formulating a clear message out of music then depends on the relationship between the artist and their fans that exists outside the limits of music. The concept of healing, abstracted in its artistic musical form, is thus concretized by explicit statements and clarifications made by the group members directly to their fans within the context of the parasocial relationship. Applying 'relational labour' to the defining moments of healing with BTS that fans shared in their interviews, I determine that BTS continuously work to reinforce the messages of

healing in their music through their peripheral communications with fans; they verbalize their intentions with their music and turn emotion into explicit sentiment, creating authenticity in their art and image as a group. The latter unravels twofold, meaning both their music and BTS themselves foster authenticity in the other, which in turn, fosters trust in fans.

Leading into the third chapter, I discuss fan engagement with BTS within the context of the parasocial relationship and how this engagement creates environments favourable to healing. Here, I briefly summarize the existing literature on the psychological implications of engaging in parasocial relationships, as a result of eudaemonic entertainment. In doing so, I begin my differentiating between hedonistic and eudaemonic entertainment and how BTS's content encourages both forms of consumption from the fans. While BTS's content can be light and pleasurable—serving escapist purposes alone—it can also encourage reflexivity and a sense of community. Most poignantly, fans do not receive this message passively and, in identifying with and internalizing the message, transform sentiment into action. Both eudaemonic engagement and parasocial relationships encourage healthy behaviours in affective processing among individual fans, as is demonstrated through the psychological studies presented in this section. Through the combination of their music and relational labour, BTS exhibit characteristics that encourage these psychological processes which later translate into healing behaviours within fans' relational networks.

In the third and final chapter, I propose relational networks as a model to trace fannish healing while acknowledging fans as active participants in their healing. This model approaches healing as a personal undertaking among fans that stems from their fan engagement, but ultimately, ends up outside the fannish realm. Across previous chapters, we see how BTS's relatability stems from the authenticity of their music and from the parasocial relationship they foster with their fans through their constant relational labour. At its very core, however, BTS's prominent relatability exists simply because their message is relatable. Fans recognize inherent and applicable value in BTS's messaging; we must note that relational labour is not a way of “tricking” fans into an affective relationship with an artist. The connection the group establishes with its fans does not exist in its own fandom

vacuum but concerns the experiences of their generation and today's youth. Their message is relevant to current issues and real-life societal struggles, it holds a certain social value for their audience. Since BTS's content often engages its audience and presents as much of a eudaemonic form of entertainment as a hedonistic one, themes surrounding healing that are almost catered to their audience inevitably prompt action towards healing. Fans internalize BTS's messages of healing because, through aligning social and experiential contexts, it is easy to do so.

The questions this research poses concern the instances of healing that permeate into the aspects of fans' lives that exist outside of their fan membership. Through relational networks, healing behaviours that began in fandom contexts end up branching out beyond them, sometimes even abandoning their initial fannishness. Some fans describe this as a naturalization of healing behaviours, where fandom acted as positive reinforcement for them in the beginning, but ultimately, their healing behaviours became habitual in their daily lives. Relational networks, as expanding affective channels, trace fans' healing as it is translated from the fannish to the personal. As fan behaviours distance themselves further from the fan text, their relational networks expand, blurring any clear reference to the fan text. The process of building relational networks from fan texts is at once indicative of the healing structures present at multiple levels of fandom and the inherent agency and selectiveness of audiences in not only their consumption, but active use of fan texts in their healing.

Chapter 2.

From the Shire to Seoul, There and Back Again: Conceptualizing Backgrounds and Methods in Transcultural K-pop Fandom

2.1. One Does Not Simply Walk into Fandom (Except That They Do): a fannish history of affect, identity politics, and new media cultures

During the summer following my twelfth birthday, I watched the entire Lord of the Rings trilogy at least once every single day, totaling a daily average of nine hours where I chose to dismiss the fleeting Montreal summer in favour of the company of Frodo Baggins through the screen of my basement television. I wish this was an exaggeration on my part, but the state of those DVDs today speaks louder than any type of nuance I could offer here. As months passed, I populated my father's desktop computer with folders containing hundreds upon hundreds of saved pictures of Elijah Wood, both in and out of his hobbit costume. I bought the books, the extended DVDs, and the calendars. I decorated my notebooks with printouts and filled my sketchbooks with subpar drawings of the characters who occupied my every thought. My daily routines began to involve checking updates on a handful of fan forums and fan pages dedicated to the films, the characters, and the actors. There was rarely a conversation I could get through without mentioning the franchise, especially when it came to its protagonist or lead actor. To this day, my family assures me that I was insufferable.

Lord of the Rings was my first fandom experience, although I did not know it at the time. While my fixation stemmed primarily from my enjoyment of the story and its characters, my participation as a fan also extinguished my anxieties about entering middle school or more so, served as a form of escapism. At that point, I had struggled with anxiety for years and while it did not remove the cause, the films offered some relief. My fandom involvement only deepened alongside my mental health issues, the former always acting as a safe haven, a distraction, something I recognized and enjoyed with other fans, as the

latter worsened with time. My high school years especially were marked by many fandom phases—some far more embarrassing than others—which led me to K-pop by the time I started my university career. It was as a K-pop fan that I first realised I was not the only one to find such solace in fandom.

There are countless social structures at play in fandom that allow for the fan experiences that I described above and for the many others that I share later. In this section, I will outline the theoretical frameworks that contextualize the topics and arguments surrounding fandom. Upon providing a brief definition and history of fandom scholarship, I identify affect as the primary driver of fandom involvement. People's initial fan experience or participation in fandom stems from affective motivations. At their core, fans are fans because they feel an emotional attachment to the fan text. From there, I discuss how fan affect translates into fan practices, how fans act on the emotions they feel in relation to the fan text. Here, I discuss the affective economies of fandom in which fans participate and to which they also contribute. Lastly, I summarize the roles and functions of fandoms as fan communities, focusing on their presence online and their influence on internet infrastructures. Fandoms were the first online communities and were responsible for shaping how many social media platforms operate today. This research focuses on the fandom of Korean music group BTS and while I will cover the cultural phenomena from which this group emerged, I want to lay out a more generalized approach to fandom to better highlight the interplay between these social structures and how contribute to the creation of healing spaces in the BTS fandom specifically.

2.1.1. An Overview of Fandom as Community

The following two paragraphs offer a quick overview of fandom within a generalized productive community paradigm. I chose to include this overview in order to explain fandom within a context that is not wholly embedded within its own field of study. While fandom differs significantly from traditional understandings of communities, fandom still functions as a form of cultural community and establishing these equivalencies aids in outlining the finer points of fandom more clearly below, especially when discussing the

role of individual fans within the larger concept of fandom. Furthermore, as a piece of Korean cultural media, BTS and their fandom exist with additional layers of cultural meaning alongside those that stem from fan cultures alone. For this reason, I chose to use my first fandom experience as an example, as it is better known to Western audiences and also because my fan experience took place during a time that preceded the advent of new media. In short, the example of Lord of the Rings makes for a simpler application for the purposes of this overview.

The simplest way to define fandom to a person who has never been in one is to understand it as a community of fans built around an existing fan text. This fan text can consist of any form of media and the communities built around them can differ in structure and culture depending on the type of media. While there exists significant cultural overlap across fandoms, each fandom operates within its own set of cultural distinctions. Fans create their own conventions that define their fan communities around which they establish “boundedness” (Hills, 2002). Fandom, like any traditional understanding of community, consists of a group of people that identify with and respond to a certain set of symbols in the same way (Cohen, 1985). In fact, scholarship may even use the terms ‘fandoms’ and ‘fan communities’ interchangeably, which I will also do in this research. This definition is founded on two key components of Cohen’s understanding of communities and how they are formed. First, communities are created through the establishment of cultural boundaries stemming from contra-distinctions (1985). Essentially, a culture considers itself a culture because it does not identify with another. Fan communities work in a similar fashion and are equally tiered and complex in their differentiations. K-pop fan communities differentiate themselves from the fan communities associated to Western music. Then, ARMY (the BTS fan community) will differentiate itself from the fan communities of other K-pop groups, who will also do the same. Differentiations can occur all the way down to a local level, as I found that Vancouver based BTS fans refer to themselves as VanMY (Vancouver ARMY). These fan experiences, despite sharing significant commonalities, are also subject to dynamics that allow them to distinguish themselves from each other.

Continuing within the structure of traditional cultural communities, Cohen adds that communities are established around a collective understanding of unique symbols. In fandom, these symbols are drawn directly from the fan text or more so, the fan text is the symbol around which the fan communities are built. Audiences thus create their own cultural environments using the cultural sources around them (Grossberg, 1992) and proceed to create their own, original cultural sources. More specifically, fans create their own texts that relate to, contribute to, interact with, or even alter the original fan text. Fiske (1992) defines fandoms by their semiotic productivity, through which new texts and content are produced by fans and then circulated amongst them. This is also what attributes fandom its intertextuality. As fans create their own texts, they allow the fan text to travel through media forms and consequently, fannish meaning (Sandvoss, 2017). Similarly, Henry Jenkins identifies the presence participatory culture as a primary determinant of fandom, versus the habits of casual audiences. In understanding fandom as a community, participatory culture describes instances of fans participation in the fan community through both the consumption and production of media (Jenkins et al., 2016). Differentiating between casual fan behaviour and fandom membership depends on the practice of participatory culture. Casual fan behaviour is limited to consumption of content, while fandom is defined by a diversity of fan practices. Affective levels of engagement also play a role in making this distinction and are often a determinant of a fan's degree of participation in their respective fan community.

In applying this rudimentary understanding of fandom, we can assess that I identified as a Lord of the Rings fan because I engaged with the text in a way that held affective significance. I was bound to the text and sought out others who also exercised this boundedness. Within the umbrella of the Lord of the Rings fandom, I distinguished myself more specifically as a fan of one of the characters, Frodo Baggins. More so, I distinguished myself further as a fan of the actor who played Frodo Baggins, Elijah Wood. While I participated in and interacted with the Lord of the Rings fandom online, I was also present in the nicher subcultures of the fandom, including fan pages dedicated to Elijah Wood. These fan pages contained photos and videos of the actor in his role as Frodo Baggins, but also as the many other characters he's played in other movies. Here, we get a glimpse at

the intertextuality of fan texts and how they transform across forms and media. Finally— if the level of affective attachment is not reason enough— we can rule me out as a casual member of the audience when considering my engagement in participatory culture by following fan-run forums and sharing fanart. Again, this is an incredibly simple approach to fandom participation, but these basic community elements are what the most interesting fandom functions are built upon and it is crucial to establish them in a general sense before delving into the nuances that the discipline itself brings to light.

2.1.2. Studying fandom, a Brief History

The study of fandom is embedded within the study of mass cultures, and therefore, begins at the contingencies between high and low culture. The concept of fan studies, as an academic field and independent discipline, is in and of itself political in its subversion of class discourse. Through Bourdieu's concept of habitus, we understand the performative relationship between cultural capital, class, and power, where "good taste" is associated with "high culture." In the realm of high culture, arts and media that are considered complex and intelligent also remain inaccessible to the masses. Meanwhile, popular culture as a product of mass culture, has always been accessible to the lower classes, but was scrutinized and belittled for its perceived banality (Hills, 2002). The concept of "high culture" then becomes a product of class oppression that allows the upper classes to exercise cultural power over the masses. In this performance of "taste," enjoying popular culture is equated to having "bad taste," an inevitability for the masses. However, by studying popular culture and its fans, fan scholarship attributes value to these texts, arguing complexity and depth in a cultural form that was presumed to have none (Busse & Gray, 2011). Beyond the texts themselves, studying fans also transforms the masses from a passive audience to an active audience that engages with the media it consumes. In reference to Bourdieu's habitus, Fiske (1992) describes fandom as a subordinate habitus that "does not distance the text and the artist from the audience as it refuses to distance it from everyday life" (p. 40). Fandom draws pleasure from forms of entertainment and art that are looked down upon by the dominant upper-class value systems and therefore, aligns itself with the tastes of marginalized people in terms of age, gender, race, class (Fiske,

1992). Relying on feminist theory, first wave fan studies characterized fannish participation as a predominantly female pastime (Scott, 2017), locating gender as an important axis of marginality and a driving factor behind the pathologizing rhetoric surrounding fan behaviours (Jenson, 1992). By studying fandom and fans on an academic level and approaching it with the same complexity with which products of high culture have been studied, fan scholarship elevates popular culture and dismantles class– and heavily gendered– stigmas surrounding its enjoyment.

The perceived passivity of the masses in their media consumption is a subject that has been highly critiqued in both audience studies and later, in early fan studies. Stuart Hall's (1973) reception theory, arguing against the assumption of audiences' passive acceptance of intended meaning in texts, was a key proponent to the development of theoretical frameworks surrounding the multiplicity of fan interpretation in fan studies (Busse & Gray, 2011). Meaning is relational and is not necessarily something the text offers on its own. Fans ascribe meaning to the text from their own personal or shared experiences. For fans, meaning comes from collective discourse, where interpretation occurs in groups within fan communities (Duffett, 2013). These interpretations are embedded in the cultural semiotics that Cohen (1985) identifies as a cohesive factor in community building. In the case of fandom, where meaning is generated by the fans themselves, Duffett (2013) refers to affective semiotics to describe fannish interpretations, as they stem from fan emotion. Fandom invokes strong feelings among fans and those feelings determine the way fans frame their interpretations. Fannish affect may manifest physiologically on a universal level, but the resulting interpretations are diverse between them (Duffett, 2013). Together, these interpretations make up fandom interpretation as a whole, as fans interact critically with the text and with one another.

Through their interpretations, fans analyze and rewrite the source text. Busse & Gray (2011) in part use Stanley Fish's (1976) concept of interpretive communities to define fannish interpretation of text does not occur through reading, but through writing (i.e. rewriting) where they assert the intentions of the text themselves. While Fish did not mean writing in a literal sense, Busse & Gray approach the writing of interpretive communities

literally as examples of fan creations, including fanfiction, fan-made videos, forum discussion, social media posts, etc. The point here is that, while fandom texts are expected to refer to the source text and require familiarity with the source text (Sandvoss, 2017), they represent a refusal to decipher the source text or seek out its “true” form. Instead, “fan readers and writers, however, provide us with an approach to reading that is more personal and more idiosyncratic, thus offering an approach to the text that is more immediate and less normative” (Busse & Gray, 2011, p. 435). The interpretations that exist within these fan creations, besides further depicting the intertextuality of fan texts, also highlight the dual negotiation occurring between a fan’s personal, affect-driven interpretations and the source text, as well as between individual fan interpretations that are shared and debated in fan spaces (Busse & Gray, 2011). Through the analysis of fan texts and the work of interpretation, it becomes clear that fandom often represents a constant, almost cyclical interplay between the actions of the singular fan and the experience of fan community, where the former makes up the latter, while the latter informs the former.

In more recent years, fan studies has refocused its approach to fandom away from community perspectives and towards the state of the individual fan and their use of fandom as a means for identity construction. This research contributes to that shift by examining the ways individual fans construct personal healing spaces out of fandom. As I touched on with fan interpretations, the fan text can serve as a sounding board for the self, a text to which the fan feels affective attachment, but onto which they can also project themselves (Sandvoss, 2005). Fandom is a space for identity creation as the individual fan status represents another layer of identity that makes up the self. Furthermore, as we saw previously, fan identities play a significant role in defining fan communities considering that, historically, fandoms have been created by and for marginalized groups of people. Hills (2002) and Duffett (2013) bring up the fact that, for many fans, the moment of their becoming marks a moment of significant change in their lives. Most fans, including myself, remember their first fandom experience or the moment they became a fan vividly.

2.1.3. A Note About Affect

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sarah Ahmed examines the circulation of emotions between bodies and argues that our dispositions towards objects determines their emotional meaning; we assign affective signa to objects (2014). In this way, Ahmed describes emotion as being “sticky,” where how we feel about an object imbues it with that affect which, in turn, can “stick” to another body (2014, p. 11). Ahmed’s concept of emotional stickiness represents the very foundation on which all fan experiences are built. Put simply, fans become fans because they *love* the fan text and feel a strong emotional attachment to it. Since fans not only interpret texts for what they mean, but for the ways in which the text connects to their own lived experiences, we can assert that fans’ involvement with the text is rooted in affect (Grossberg, 1992), and operates within the realm of emotional stickiness (Ahmed, 2014). At this point, we establish that it is not just that the text matters to fans, but that fans make the text matter by investing in it affectively. That being said, Duffett (2013) also emphasizes the importance of the meaning of the text as the thing in which fans are investing emotionally. Fan scholarship has referred to fan affect through countless terms. In the context of music fans, for example, Duffett (2017) has identified screaming as an expression of affective citizenship and belonging as a fan in a community. Like the interpretation of fan texts, the realm of fan affect also exists in conversation between the individual fan and the fan community. Affective investment in the fan text stems from personal emotion, but within fandom itself, “members are characterized not only by their affect and engagement with the source text but also by their engagement with one another” (Busse & Gray, 2011, p. 426). Earlier in this paragraph, I used the word ‘love’ to describe what fans feel in relation to the fan text. Fan scholarship refers to fannish love through many terms, ‘affect’ being one of them. Fannish love is difficult to describe because it is felt and expressed in ways that exist outside conventional understandings of love, but it is through affect— more accurately, through actually feeling fannish emotion— that fandom membership comes to alter the lives of fans.

Throughout my fieldwork and interviews, one phrase that came up constantly was “BTS changed my life.” As a person who has gone through my fair share of fandoms, I can say that this phrase is not unique to the BTS fandom but is a phrase that I believe is often

misconstrued by the general public. As we will later see, fans are well aware that BTS did not personally enter their lives and changed them. There is a clear understanding among these BTS fans that they are responsible for the positive changes in their lives, and that BTS and the fandom merely contextualize these changes. Fandom does not alter the affective lives of fans but empowers fans to better their affective lives (Grossberg, 1992). It is best to imagine fandom as an arsenal of affective tools that fans can turn to in face of struggle. In a very general sense, this capacity of fandom to take control of their affective lives through fandom is what this entire research is based in. I touch upon affect briefly in this section but will revisit it in more detail in the following chapter, where I approach affect specifically in the context of music and the fan-artist relationship.

2.1.4. Affective Online Communities, a Case Against the Imaginary

Fans constituted the very first internet communities. As far as communities went, early fandom relied on face-to-face communication (i.e. fan conventions) or the dissemination of fan-created serialized magazines (Duffett, 2013). The internet was a means for easy and more constant communication and so, fans built their spaces online. These spaces served as community spaces, but also acted as sources of information and expression, including forums, blogs, art, fanfiction, etc. Most important, as both Jenkins (2006) and Duffett (2013) point out, an online presence allowed for these communities to interact and communicate outside industry-controlled avenues. That being said, referring to what Jenkins terms convergence culture, industry efforts to appeal to fan cultures online mimics the subcultural structures of fandom preceding their online presence. This is how we can identify fandoms as one of the first to create community infrastructures on the internet (Baym, 2018), while also observing how the infrastructures of the internet came to be shaped by fandom. Convergence culture allows fans better access to the source texts created by industry, but also allows industry better access to fans. From a marketing perspective, industry understands and encourages online fan-made content as it allows subcultural fan expressions to enter the mainstream (Busse & Gray, 2011). That being said, Busse & Gray also highlight the underlying consistency of the fan identity that remains across the shift from traditional fan communities to industry-driven fandom. The fan

identity, even as it transforms, exists independently from convergence culture and industry influence.

Fan communities, but online fan communities especially, have often been referred to as “imagined communities,” a term that I argue is inappropriate as it overlooks the affective value of these communities to the individual fan. Originally coined by Benedict Anderson (1991), “imagined community” is an understanding of nationalism, where individuals who identify as members of a nation feel a sense of community with other members of said nation, despite not having any knowledge of the other. Imagined communities embody a shared cultural experience that transcends proximity. In modern contexts, the concept imagined communities have also been used to describe non-nationalistic communities, such ideological subcultures or communities built of gender identity and sexuality. Fandom’s transnational quality, achieved through its reliance on online participation, allows members to overcome distance in their establishment of communities, therefore aligning fandom with understandings of imagined community. However, Morimoto & Chin (2017) explain how describing these communities as “imagined” depoliticizes online fandom and point out the reductiveness of equating the online to the imagined, especially since the latter is only being used to describe an overcoming of distance. These communities, based in affect and belonging, represent a field of identity politics on a multitude of levels. Approaching them as “imagined communities” fails to recognize that online fandom communities practice as much exclusion as they do inclusion, with “culturally specific practices” that are accepted and some that are not (2017, p. 175). It also fails to acknowledge that the connectivity that online fandom offers still remains bound within local geographic and cultural contexts. This also relates to the marginality referred to by early fan scholarship that relied heavily on feminist theory to approach fandom, but as Scott (2017) points out, fandom marginality does not exist on a gender axis alone. Fans from different cultural backgrounds consume media and pop culture from other cultures, a phenomenon for which K-pop is a prime example. Both cultural sharing and tensions arise online in the resulting “fandom contact zones.” where we witness fandom clashes that are informed by difference in cultural backgrounds (2017). Morimoto & Chin point out that new technologies and platforms allow fans from different cultural backgrounds to interact

in the same spaces, making it even more impossible to profile the “normative fan.” Not only does this further emphasize the need for a turn towards individual fans in fan studies, but also calls for a shift to transcultural (Morimoto & Chin, 2017) and intersectional (Scott, 2017) perspectives on media fandom, perspectives which we further explore in the following section.

2.2. K-pop and the New Korean Wave: transnational flows in transcultural spaces

In May 2017, BTS became the first K-pop group to perform and win at the Billboard Music Awards (BBMAs). Their attendance marked the first of many at US award shows and this was certainly not lost on their fans, who showed their support in an outflow of trending hashtags on Twitter and soaring numbers in viewership for the evening. At the time, I was in the process of completing my undergraduate degree back home and I remember being curled up in my bed on a Sunday night, pillow clutched to my chest, watching the award show through an unreliable stream link. I remember the atmosphere of apprehension among fans online, the unbearable anticipation as we watched artist after artist walk down the red carpet. A buzz of questions flooded my timeline: What will they be wearing? When will they perform? Will they win? When they finally showed up, I screamed so loud I startled my mother in the other room. I remember cheering and chanting out loud along with the crowd on the screen throughout their *DNA* performance. Afterwards, I remember crying when they announced their first win. I hadn't been a fan for very long, so I can only imagine how veteran fans were feeling, but in that moment, when they stepped on stage to accept their award and Kim Namjoon delivered his speech in English with a couple of the lines in Korean at the end, I felt all of my swelling pride and awe from the evening culminate into a single thought: *I can't believe you're here.*

The purpose of this section is to both expand on and refocus the fan studies frameworks outlined in the previous section in order to integrate them into the theories surrounding K-pop as a transnational popular cultural product, as well as to highlight the need for transnational perspectives to fandom that accommodate the cultural complexities of global

fanbases. The purpose is to place BTS within a fandom context that is relevant to their Korean cultural context in embodying the origins and significance of their global success. The truth of the matter is, while my shock and elation were well-founded in witnessing a Korean group win at the BBMAs, their presence at the award show and their international celebrity was a long time coming in the decades long history of the entry and presence Korean popular culture on the global stage. In this section, I first provide a history surrounding the entry of Korean popular culture on global markets and contextualize K-pop within this larger cultural phenomenon referred to as the Korean Wave or *Hallyu*. Then, in discussing the transnationality of Korean popular culture, I approach theories of cultural hybridity surrounding K-pop as a genre and offer a critique of these arguments. The latter will further illustrate the need for transcultural perspectives in fandom studies, in light of which I will argue for a social distribution approach as a circulation model for fan texts, as opposed to the models commonly used in Western fan studies. Finally, I dedicate the last portion of this section to answering the question: why BTS? While we understand the historical and cultural contexts that lead to their success, between the group's underdog beginnings and immense talents, it is unfair to attribute the entirety of their impact on circumstance alone. The Korean Wave gradually expanded its reach on the global market over decades, but the speed at which BTS rose to international fame was exponential in comparison. Thus, it is crucial to understand who BTS are and how they came to achieve the status of cultural icons for an entire generation of music fans.

2.2.1. K-pop in Context: A Brief History of the Korean Wave(s)

The history of the Korean Wave and its stages is reflected in the South Korean state's relationship with pop culture starting from the 1960s. Up until the 1980s, South Korea's cultural policy reflected a desire to preserve and uphold traditional iterations of Korean culture, while products of popular or mass culture were deemed invaluable. The rise in democratic and labour movements in 1980s, however, led to the deregulation of content, a move that emphasized freedom of expression that was also spearheaded by music artist Taechun Chung and popular boy group Seo Taiji and the Boys who were against the censorship of their music (Lee, 2013). In the early 1990s, the advent of the Korean Wave

was marked by a neoliberal shift in Korean cultural policy, reflecting the South Korean government's novel interests in the economic potential of the cultural industries (Jin, 2016). As Hye-Kyung Lee (2013) describes in the title of her book chapter, we can recognize a move from “national culture to transnational consumerism” by understanding the overarching– but every-changing– role of the state in Korea's cultural policy leading up to the Korean Wave phenomenon.

In his book *New Korean Wave*, scholar Dal Yong Jin identifies two distinct waves characterizing the export of Korean cultural products outside of domestic markets. The early 1990s mark the first Korean Wave, where Korean cultural products were disseminated outside of Korea into east Asian and Southeast Asian countries, joining the ranks of the dominant transnational popular cultures in Asia originating from the United States, Japan, and Hong Kong (Jin, 2016). These cultural products included Korean television dramas (K-dramas), Korean films, and video games. While the first and second waves are arguably part of a single cultural phenomenon, Jin notes several distinct differences that demark one from the other. Starting in 2008, the New Korean Wave saw a significant rise in its cultural exports to countries outside of Asia, including Western countries. The spread of Korean popular culture was facilitated by the rise of new technologies and social media, that allowed for faster and easier dissemination on a global scale (2016). While social media technologies are arguably the most important vehicle through which the second Korean Wave spread across borders, an increase in government involvement in cultural policy, as well as a significant increase in budget for the cultural industries, played a huge role in the advancement of the Korean Wave (Oh & Lee, 2014). The first wave observes deregulation to further the cultural movement beyond the domestic market, which highlighted the role of popular culture in the cultural industries. However, as Jin (2016) points out, government interests shift in the second wave, moving from the cultural industries to the creative industries, specifically intellectual property. This further illustrates that while the Korean Wave is made up of cultural parts, its function as a “national-institutional policy initiative” that stretches into industries outside culture, such as tourism, beauty, and food (Jin, 2016, p. 7).

The export of Korean popular culture in the context of the Korean Wave represents a great source of soft power for South Korea (Nye & Kim, 2013). According to Nye & Kim, a nation's potential for soft power rests in its "cultural attractiveness," political values that are reflected domestically and abroad, as well as foreign policy that are perceived as morally favourable (2013). A country's soft power can translate into benefits usually yielded through hard power, such as positive impacts on trade and diplomacy. The South Korean government invests a great deal of resources in reinforcing these three points abroad, Korea's popular culture being one of the strongest vehicles through which nation branding can take place. Multiple sectors of the South Korean government make use of Korean popular culture's popularity abroad, often in explicit ways. Since 2017, BTS have been named the Honorary Tourism Ambassadors of Seoul, featuring in multiple tourism ads for the city of Seoul where each member presents a different attraction to experience when visiting. During my fieldwork, I stumbled across the members' cardboard cut-outs right outside a tourism office in the heart of Hongdae, one of the most vibrant and bustling neighbourhoods of the city. The idea behind this display was if you took a picture with the cut-outs, posted it on Instagram, and tagged and followed the tourism office's account, they would give you a free BT21² fan. While difficult to calculate, the Korean Foundation of International Cultural Exchange estimates that approximately 800,000 tourists visit South Korea for "BTS-related reasons" every year (KBS World, 2020). Not to mention, touching on the domain of diplomacy, BTS performed at a Korea-France relations concert in 2018 on the European leg of their world tour, in front of Korean president Moon Jae In and an audience of 400 others, including both French and Korean officials (Billboard, 2018). These are just two of countless examples of how K-pop, as a Korean cultural export and a soft power tool, is one of the most profitable industries to emerge out of the Korean Wave, both economically and symbolically, as representation of national identity abroad. In the next section, I elaborate on the transnationality of K-pop itself; scholarship has sought to understand why audiences were so attracted to K-pop in the first place, citing many different elements of transnationality to justify the consumption of K-pop abroad.

²BT21 is a collaboration between Line Friends and BTS, where each member designed their own Line Friends character that were then made into various forms of merchandise, such as plush toys, stationary, home goods, clothing, and more. The fan I received had Chimmy on it, member Park Jimin's character.

2.2.2. K-pop as Transnational: A Case for Transcultural Fandom Perspectives Within the Social Distribution Model

In explaining K-pop transnational flow, scholarship attributes K-pop's international success to the genre's hybridity. Despite being a Korean export, K-pop represents a union between its Korean cultural origins and a "selective appropriation" of the dominant global tropes in Western popular culture (Iwabuchi, 2013). This reformulation encourages the consumption of K-pop on an international scale as K-pop's contribution to popular culture remains imbued with the globally recognized themes established by the Western entertainment industry (Ryoo, 2009). K-pop accommodates the shared entertainment interests of fans on an international scale, while also exposing them to Korean culture. Fans may identify with the youthful and aesthetic components of K-pop, which they recognize through their knowledge of Western popular culture, only to encounter certain aspects of Korean culture as a by-product of their consumption (Han, 2017). However, Iwabuchi (2013) argues for a shift towards inter-Asian referencing when discussing hybridization, consisting of an East Asian comparative approach to hybridization that negotiates Western cultural hegemony while acknowledging regional dialogues. Starting from its initial dissemination abroad in diasporic Asian communities, it is safe to say that K-pop has now made its place in the global mainstream. Audiences who are both culturally and geographically distant from K-pop engage with the genre on deeply affective levels. Understanding the transnational flows responsible for spreading K-pop as a non-Western fan text is crucial in understanding how its audiences negotiate these distances locally.

When describing K-pop as a hybridized transnational product, Jung (2017) summarizes the concept as "similar but different," coming from an obviously different cultural context, but containing cultural elements familiar to international audiences. In reference to this, Jung proposes a social distribution model to conceptualize the transnational flow of K-pop as a fan text. Social distribution is a combination of the global paradigms of top-down music distribution as designed by industry and the online user-empowered grassroots networks, a mix of "formal and informal networks" (Jung & Shim, 2014, p. 486). Using the example of Psy's viral song "Gangnam Style," Jung illustrates how grassroots participation via online fan networks has aided in K-pop's popularization on global markets alongside the

existing globalization strategies utilized by the industry that rely on hybridized production. K-pop's now mainstream presence on global music charts is a result of social distribution, "where both grassroots participation and corporate intervention are organically intertwined and interact" (Jung, 2017, p. 54). Thus, when linking transnational flows of fan texts and their establishment of transcultural fandoms, social distribution as a circulation model highlights the blurring between overarching global paradigms of music distribution and local, transcultural consumption of content. Moreover, this fusion in two-down and bottom-up models informs the produced hybridity of the fan text by reframing it into culturally specific contexts, both in terms of varying fan cultures and geocalities.

Some scholars use the terms 'transnational' and 'transcultural' interchangeably or do not make explicit distinctions between the two. I want to specify that I consider K-pop a transnational product of Korean popular culture, while I approach its consumption as transcultural. The transnational reach of K-pop music requires a transcultural approach to its fandoms, especially when considering the interpretations of individual fans who are at once bound within their local cultural realities and influenced by the transnational fan cultures that they consume. The interview excerpts presented in this research are reflections of just that, cultural encounter on top of cultural encounter, contextualized in the theoretical frameworks of this chapter and then recontextualized within individual fan experiences later. In making the argument for transcultural perspectives in fan studies, Morimoto and Chin (2017) write:

By recognizing fans as more than the sum total of a singular affective interest or national belonging, and fan communities as inherently transcultural sites characterized as much by conflict as concord, we open up a space for the possibility of understanding fan studies as a fundamentally transcultural enterprise (p. 176).

While transcultural perspectives to fandom cannot entirely accommodate the transnational flow of K-pop as a fan text, it is an approach that acknowledges the plurality within its global consumption. Furthermore, approaching hybridity in K-pop as a negotiation of local

Korean cultures and the dominant global cultures generated by the West excludes the very local realities of its consumption. I am not arguing against this definition of hybridity but am acknowledging that the inherent hybridity of K-pop loses its original meaning following its fannish consumption within a multiplicity of intersections that may or may not require negotiation with said hybridity on the part of the fan. From an audience perspective, hybridity of the K-pop product ceases to exist as a holistic concept and instead, is reframed and redefined across localities of fandom consumption. In analyses of BTS fandom membership, this research elucidates what ‘hybrid’ becomes among fans and ultimately, seeks to understand how industry produced hybridity is pluralized and transformed through fan consumption. While we understand how ‘hybridity’ is responsible for the transnational attractiveness of K-pop, how much of this ‘hybridity’ is actually at work in the establishment of enormous global fanbases such as BTS’s ARMY?

2.2.3. BTS

K-pop scholars tend to use Psy’s “Gangnam Style” to draw the connection between the cultural hybridity of K-pop as a product and its transnational popularity. While there is strong evidence to suggest this, I would argue a need to differentiate between a K-pop song going viral on the internet and the establishment of global fandoms around K-pop artists and groups. If anything, BTS are the epitome of the latter and consequently, tend to subvert the frameworks of fandom theory and transnational flow. BTS are Korean pop music group consisting of seven male members: RM (Kim Namjoon), Jin (Kim Seokjin), SUGA (Min Yoongi)³, j-hope (Jung Hoseok), Park Jimin, V (Kim Taehyung), and Jeon Jungkook⁴. The group debuted in 2013 and over the course of the past 8 years, paved their way into a degree of international stardom that no other Korean music acts has achieved before. In her book *BTS and ARMY Culture*, Jeeheng Lee describes them as a group that has come to be associated with the prefix “Korea’s first” (2019, p. xviii). BTS have not only become the

³ Min Yoongi also goes by the stage name Agust D for his solo music releases.

⁴ Most of the members have stage names, with the exception of Park Jimin and Jeon Jungkook who go by their first names (Jimin and Jungkook).

biggest K-pop act in the world, they are easily one of the biggest music acts in the world. Their success story is shrouded in underdog narratives and heightened through a sense of authenticity that has followed their artistic careers. Unlike most of the top idol groups to come out of Korea, BTS are not a product of a large agency and did not benefit from the promotional opportunities on broadcasting channels that the industry allocates to groups from big companies (Lee, 2019). Most of all, BTS share an intimate relationship with their fans, one that I will unpack significantly in later chapters. As mentioned, their underdog beginnings, explicit and honest messaging, and intense passion for their craft constitute the primary reasoning behind fan investment.

Ju Oak Kim (2021) isolates distinct aspects behind BTS's success, drawn from various publications surrounding the group. The first is their "multimodal creativity," in which BTS constantly elevate their performances, constantly referring to a diversity of modes of artistic expression with every musical release. BTS's discography is surrounded by an intertextual narrative rich with imagery and references that prompts active engagement with their art, which fans are eager to do. Notably, the release of their album *Map of the Soul: 7* in February 2020 can only be described as a multidisciplinary artistic event spanning weeks leading up to and following the actual album drop. The release included the unveiling of multiple visual art installations by international artists all around the world commissioned by the BTS members themselves. The group also collaborated with two different dance troupes for their music videos. Their orchestral version of their song *Black Swan* was released as an "art film" starring the performance by the MN Dance company and did not actually feature any of the members. Similarly, two music videos were released for their title track *ON*. The first was described as a "kinetic manifesto" and consisted mostly of a dance performance by BTS featuring the Blue Devils marching band and The Lab dance group. The second, "official" music video depicted a narratively rich storyline layered with complex cultural references and metaphors. The narrative of the album itself is inspired by Jungian psychology, which describes the titular "map of the soul" in three parts: the persona, the shadow, and the ego. These three parts appear on the album as three solo songs, each performed by one of the groups rappers who incorporate their interpretations and self-reflections surrounding the concept into their respective songs.

Map Of The Soul: 7 is a prominent example of BTS's artistic depth and use of transmedia to offer audiences a multisensory experience that goes beyond the perceived limits of pop music (Kim, 2021). While the sheer artistry of their music is not easy to dismiss, fan's dedication to BTS is a testament to the group's authenticity as musicians. Authenticity is a central theme in the chapter on music, so I will only touch on it briefly here. One of the most important factors that fans cited in justifying their commitment to the group's music is the fact that BTS has always been, to some degree, self-produced. Simply put, BTS write and produce their own music and play a hand in coming up with the accompanying concepts. BTS's music is about them and their experiences, and the act of sharing their music then becomes an act of intimacy. In the way they speak about the group and its members, fans often equate the authenticity of BTS's music to the authenticity of their characters as human beings. The legitimacy of BTS's intentions and message as artists exists in a cycle of dual validation, where the themes of their music confirms their motivations, while they themselves vocalize the themes of their music by relating them to their motivations. This "cycle" is far more complex in its actuality and is indicative of greater interpersonal investments.

In using BTS as "method," Ju Oak Kim (2021) highlights the support systems established by BTS's fan networks to elevate and empower BTS in the global industries. Critical fan studies often cite how the power dynamics between industry and fans resulting from convergence culture allow for the exploitation of fan labour by industry (Stanfill, 2019). In contrast, BTS fans understand these mechanisms and take advantage of their monetized status as fans. BTS fans engage in counter-hegemonic practices, one of which is translating BTS's content for other fans, therefore "decoupling the prestigious association of English with universal messages" (Kim, 2021, p. 11). Fans' declaration of support at once subverts the perceived globality of Western, anglophone music and highlights the privilege of anglophone artists on the world stage. These counter-hegemonic practices are a reflection of BTS's strict maintenance of their musical identity, consisting of a constant reassertion of their Korean cultural identities (Davis, 2020). BTS continue to produce music in Korean, exercising cultural specificity even when faced with controversy. Jeeheng Lee (2019) cites

the countless times BTS have been asked about producing an English album in American interviews, a question that never fails to anger their fans who have no qualms with singing along to their songs in Korean, if every single one of the stops on their world tours are anything to go by.

To summarize, this research adopts a transcultural fandom approach to synthesize the experiences of individual BTS fans in understanding how personalized forms of healing occur through fannish flows. Highlighting the transcultural character of the BTS fandom accommodates the individual fan experience; the purpose of this section was to place BTS within the general functions of fandom structures as well as their Korean cultural context in order to highlight the intersections of meaning that construct BTS fan identities. Furthermore, I adopted the social distribution approach to transnational circulation to best contextualize the counter-hegemonic practices at play across these transcultural fan communities, especially in the online sphere. Finally, I present BTS as an elevated example of these concepts and how their unique characteristics as a group results in an equally elevated manifestation of transcultural fannish expression.

2.3. Methodology

The methodological foundation of this research and its discursive motivations emerge out of my own lived experiences as both an active BTS fan of five years and a lifelong participant across a diversity of fandoms. Like music, fandom constitutes a deeply personal experience articulated within a larger collective and in conveying such emotion, personal experience becomes an important tool. When studying fandom, the methodology must reflect the social, cultural, creative, and affective dynamics at play in the fandom community. These networks are rich in complex community structures, nodes of identity negotiation, and language systems. The possession of lived experience and cultural knowledge through immersion is then crucial to grasping fandom practices at their fullest and engaging in valuable discourse. Thus, fandom membership is an indispensable credential for fan study; to research fandom, you must first be a fan.

Fan scholarship is primarily produced by fan academics, meaning fans who study their own fandoms in formal academic contexts. In understanding the role of the academic-fan– or “aca-fan” (Jenkins, 1992)– it is important to first acknowledge the benefits and shortcomings that this status brings. I begin this section with an overview of different approaches and perspectives surrounding the aca-fan and its influence on fandom research, while also providing my own stance on the subject. Upon defining my role as an “aca-fan” researcher, I delve into the various methodological frameworks commonly used in fan scholarship and justify my choices in the methods I adopted for this research. Mainly, I address my reliance on autoethnography as a primary tool for data collection and analysis, in addition to the data from interviews and participant observation. I also outline my use of narrative analysis in approaching anecdotal evidence provided by participants and my own personal vignettes. Finally, I examine the limitations, delimitations, and unexpected outcomes of this methodology.

2.3.1. The Aca-fan

While I do build my methodology within the aca-fan framework, I do so with some reservation. The fan scholar, who is at once a researcher and a fan themselves, is a topic I explore in depth here. The status of aca-fan implies a level of fan membership on the part of the researcher, but this definition is often interpreted too broadly. Aca-fan implies that the researcher is studying their own community and therefore, possesses existing knowledge of the community through lived experience. While this may be the case, such an approach also abstracts identity politics through monolithic understandings of fan communities. Fan scholarship that has traditionally adopted the aca-fan framework represents a specific fan profile that does not reflect diversity in fandom and especially, cannot represent the range of individuality and difference that my research encounters in the BTS fandom. I acknowledge that the aca-fan approach offers a valuable methodological approach, but I also want to stress that its influence is not far reaching, at least for this project.

As a relatively new discipline, fan studies differs from its precursors, which include cultural studies and media studies, in that its pioneer researchers were almost exclusively members of the communities they studied. Most fan studies scholars were first fans, who went on to study their own fandoms within academic contexts, a contention that remains subject to debates in ethics, biases, and authenticity. The inevitable affective presence of the fan scholar in their research is what distinguishes fan studies from other disciplines and drives it to constantly define and redefine itself and its researchers. The role of the fan-scholar, better known as the popularized term “aca-fan,” is a highly self-conscious one, that both precedes and contextualizes the work and scholarship they create.

The status of the aca-fan has been subject to a lot of scrutiny, many scholars citing the lack of distance between researchers and the communities they study as a gateway to biased, self-fulfilling work. The underlying fear is that fans are loyal to their fandoms before all else, which poses the question of who is equipped to conduct fan studies research if not fans? Music fandom scholar Mark Duffett (2013) argues that anyone can study fandom, fan or not, but after studying my own fan community over the course of two degrees, I am reluctant to attribute this facility to non-fan research on fandom. It risks the same shortcomings of early anthropology, where researchers wrote about other cultures through a Western lens, resulting in a wide spread of insensitive misinformation and Othering (Said, 1978). Historically, studies on fans have infantilized and pathologized fans (Hills, 2002; Gray, 2003), a perspective rooted in misogyny, considering that these studies focused heavily on female fans. Gray (2003) addresses the Othering of fans that risks occurring when using ethnography and studying fans outside of their texts. In a similar fashion, Hills (2002) argues against the “imagined subjectivity” celebrated by academia that upholds the status of the detached, rational researcher. Maintaining this academic distance between the scholar and the fan legitimizes the claims the scholar makes about the fandom and highlights the separation between the rational and the immersed (Hills, 2002). Like Gray, Hills is critical of fan ethnographies for this reason, elaborating that such methods assume that “fans and academics can fully account discursively for their cultural practices” (Hills, 2002, p. 89). Unbeknownst to each other, both sides work to validate their own stances: the fan on their fandom and the academic on academia (2002). The information

communicated to the academic from the fan in the context of an ethnography presents a cultural disconnect. In this case, the academic lacks the cultural knowledge and lived experience to accurately interpret what the fan relays to them, and thus, has no choice but to receive it as fact.

In light of the ‘rational’ versus ‘immersed’ binary, as addressed by Hills, I further argue that if the scholar is not entirely immersed as a fan, then they cannot be rational when studying the fandom. Gray accurately points out that “fan research has been institutionally and personally convenient” (Gray, 2003, p. 67). While this is true, I believe that immersion should not be a happenstance, but a necessity. The reality is that fans recognize fans and if you are a scholar who is also a fan, your informants will recognize that, rendering the ‘fan versus academic’ narrative obsolete. Conducting interviews further proved this; fans were more than willing to talk to another fan, even eager to do so. In conversation, you are but two fans, one of whom is a scholar. Therefore, instead of dismantling my bias as a fan in a perfunctory attempt at achieving “imagined subjectivity”, the methods outlined below allow me to acknowledge my bias through exercises in reflexivity. Simply acknowledging my bias would be nonsensical when studying my own community. Autoethnography, as many of these scholars propose, presents a solution in that it holds the researcher accountable, as both a fan and a scholar. I do not wish to negotiate my biases, as they are what inform the entire study. This is the reasoning behind the autoethnographic approach I discuss in further detail below.

2.3.2. From Text to Context

Fandoms are built around their respective fan texts, which vary in type and form. Fan texts, when the subject of research, often prompt a literary theory lens. Sandvoss (2017) argues that the forms of fan texts determine their meanings, suggesting that the same text in different forms can mean different things. Fan texts travel through various forms and across media, whether it be text, audio, video, hypertexts or even transformative work. Fandoms transform their fan texts, they move them from one media to another and in doing so, assign them new meanings. Fans texts are thus reconstituted from one form to the other, where

each new form references the one that precedes it (Sandvoss, 2017). For example, fans can consume the original content BTS puts out on platforms like Youtube or Weverse, and then consume forms of this content again on Twitter where it has been reconstructed by other fans. Snippets from an official music video may appear on Twitter with a funny caption, it could be edited to focus on a specific member's dance move, it could have an entire piece of fanfiction associated with it. The point is that fan texts encompass a large number of forms with an equally large number of meanings and are "by definition intertextual and formed between and across texts as defined at the point of production" (Sandvoss, 2017, p. 33). Fans build their fan identities out of these textual networks, which is why the reception of these texts is a crucial point of study (Lamerichs, 2018). Gray (2003) argues that studying the fans does not remove them from the text; fans are their own environment and when you study fans, you are also studying their environment. For the reason that the text cannot be separated from the fan, understanding how to study the text as more than just context represents an important methodological step.

This research employs a mixed methods approach to autoethnography by combining participant observation and interviews as methods of data collection. Drawing from Lamerichs (2018), I then use narrative analysis to interpret the data. I chose this approach as not to study fans or fandom texts exclusively, but their relationship and how they inform each other. In doing so, my aim is to emphasize the shift from "text to context, from art to lived cultures that can be studied in mutual dependency" (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 49). This mutual dependency between texts and lived experiences is central to the conceptualizations of fandom networks I offer in later chapters. Fan texts both rely on and are formed through intertextuality, but are simultaneously embedded in presupposed familiarity (Sandvoss, 2017). That is to say, fandoms are formed around fan texts, but fandoms also inform the fan text; knowledge of one requires knowledge of the other. Narrative analysis of interviews and my own experiences is necessary to avoid descriptive or performative storytelling by engaging in reflection and interpretation as a fan (Chang, 2008). Engaging in this type of dialogical performance (Conquergood, 1985), where I speak as a fan with fans, encourages reflexivity and bias management on both ends. My experiences as a fan can legitimize or delegitimize those of my informants, just as their experiences can

legitimize or delegitimize mine. Insider ethnography, understood as an ethnography of a community of which the researcher is a member, is in itself a mixed method that combines participant observation and autoethnography. In consequence, I end up contributing to the “cultural work” specific to the fandom by producing data all the while gathering it from its other members (Robben & Sluka, 2012). In conducting this research, I am also participating in fandom and therefore, offering data. For this reason, this approach focuses on narrative, but executes the interpretation of stories with significant consideration towards reflexivity and the sociocultural contexts in which they took place (Lamerichs, 2018).

In the same vein, I also rely on self-narrative to exemplify and contextualize fandom-specific concepts being discussed. Self-narratives are an autoethnographic storytelling tool where the author writes about themselves in relation to their subject (Chang, 2008). Chang describes the self as a “relational being” and thus, argues that self-narratives are never about the self alone, but include everyone involved in the stories (Chang, 2008, p. 33). The personal vignettes I include here represent instances of participant observation from this research, as well as anecdotes from my past experiences as a fan. Self-narratives, when studying one’s own community, also reflect the shared values of the community back to the researcher, encouraging them to reflect on their ‘self’ as the storyteller (2008). As mentioned, the importance of reflexivity and bias management are key discussions in fan scholarship; my use of self-narrative aims to emulate these discussions. This method facilitates meaningful analysis, where data remains embedded within its cultural contexts while being analyzed through a constant back and forth between the experiences of the narrator and those of their informants.

2.3.3. Interviews

For reasons of convenience and accessibility, I conducted my research in Vancouver, Canada and Seoul, South Korea. One of the main purposes of travelling to South Korea for fieldwork was to interview Korean fans, which was initially a crucial factor in this research in order to properly consider K-pop within its own cultural context. However, despite their

fluency, a lot of the Korean fans I met in Seoul were reluctant to be interviewed in English and my Korean was nowhere near good enough to hold a comprehensive interview. Luckily, another unexpected factor allowed me to reimagine my study sample. I used a snowball sampling method to find interviewees, where I started by posting a call for participants on my personal Twitter account, inviting interested parties to send me a private message for further information and scheduling. Following my call for interviewees and a handful of messages from interested individuals, the sampling process led me to communities of international fans who were residing in South Korea at the time. This demographic shift resulted in a more culturally diverse sample, instead of one limited to South Korean and North American fans. Through an international sample, I was able to access a culturally wider scope of BTS fan experiences, that better encompassed the group's strong global presence.

The final interview count totaled 22 interviews with women⁵ between the ages of 20 and 46 from South Korea, Canada, the United States, Brazil, Panama, Indonesia, and the United Kingdom. The first half of my interviews took place in Seoul and the second half took place in Vancouver; I conducted an even total of 11 interviews in each city. While Seoul gave me access to the fanbase on a more international scale, the interviews in Vancouver yielded a predominantly Canadian sample made up of fans from a diversity of cultural backgrounds who spoke about their identities through both Canadian and diasporic lenses. In both cities, I obtained my interviewee sample through the same snowball sampling method, starting with a call for interviewees that I put out on my personal Twitter account. While I only got a couple of responses each time, I was able to find more willing participants through the connections of my first two interviewees. They connected me to their friends and invited me to fan events where I was able to meet other fans. Prior to scheduling interviews, potential participants were sent a consent form to read and sign containing an overview of the research project. Participants were given the option to be interviewed with or without an audio recording. Interviews were then scheduled at the time and place of the interviewee's convenience. Mostly, they took place in public spaces such

⁵I did not purposefully limit my interviews to fans who identify as women. BTS's fanbase consists predominantly of women, so this outcome was merely circumstantial.

as cafes or restaurants, and in cases where the distance was too great, through Skype. Considering the subject of the interviews and in order to prevent or mediate the possibility of causing the participant psychological distress, all participants were given a list of local crisis centres to call in case of emergency.

The interview itself totaled 12 questions (Appendix). The first three questions ask the interviewee about their age and their history as a BTS fan. The purpose here is to build a fan profile from the start and potentially differentiate between newer fans and veteran fans, not in terms of age but by how long they have been a fan. These questions also gloss over the interviewees reasons for being a fan of BTS. The following four questions (four to seven) cover how the interviewee perceive their role as a fan and how their fan status fits in with their daily life. The goal with this part is to determine how the interviewee participates as a BTS fan and what they gain from this participation. In the next four questions (eight to eleven), the questions delve into the interviewee's mental health. The questions avoid their mental health history and instead, focus on the relationship between their mental well-being, their self-care practices, and their fan status. Here, I also differentiate between BTS's influence on their well-being and the influence of fandom membership in order to clearly identify the avenues through which fans might be accessing healing. I differentiate between mental well-being and self-care for a similar reason; I want to highlight instances where interviewees speak about healing in an affective context versus one of praxis. The last question is an open question for them to share anything that the interview did not cover, but that they feel is worth sharing or to ask any additional questions they might have about the research project. Some interviewees used this question to share personal anecdotes that they believed could contribute to the topic of the study, but many used it to return previous questions to me and ask me about my own experiences as a fan. While I did not anticipate this outcome, it contributed greatly to my desire to exercise reflexivity in this research.

2.3.4. Participant Observation

The bulk of my data comes from the stories and experiences shared in interviews, and so the few instances of participant observation in my fieldwork are meant to contextualize those narratives. Prior to finalizing the interview questions, I predicted that many interviewees would resort to storytelling when answering questions, and that these stories would involve both online and in-person experiences surrounding BTS, the fanbase, and other individual fans. Here, I do not use participant observation as a traditional method of data collection, but as a vehicle for the narrative analysis mentioned earlier. Thus, for the purposes of this research, participant observation serves as a means to present information specific to the BTS fandom and add significance to the stories shared by fans through my own personal experiences in these fan contexts. My attendance at the sites and events described in this research was not formal in any academic capacity, meaning my participation remained wholly fanish. Such moments include my experience at concerts, fan-organized events, or sites of fan pilgrimage, such as a music video filming site, all of which I discuss alongside the experiences of the interviewees. Most experiences, however, are representative of general online fan participation, as social media platforms house the majority of fan activity. In this case, Twitter and Weverse represent the most meaningful platforms on which fans build and participate in their communities.

Online ethnography offers a new cultural dimension to the subject of study. The online universe is its own space but does not exist outside the influence of its geographic and social contexts (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). This is especially true for online fandoms whose cultural meanings, as we saw, are inseparable from the initial fandom text. That being said, historically, we can trace how at once the presence of fan cultures online has shaped the internet (Baym, 2018), while the latter also remains a mediated space. Fandom and the online sphere continuously shape the cultures of the other and, depending on each individual's level and type of participation in these online spaces, the cultural meaning of online spaces can differ from person to person (Lamereichs, 2018). Fan scholarship often uses the term "online communities" to describe fans' presence online and while these communities certainly exist and operate within their own cultural structures, a strict community approach to fans online disregards the nuances in motivation observable among

individual fans. Lamereichs (2018) points out that not every fan uses the internet for community and membership, as some use these spaces for purely entertainment purposes. This was the case for many of my interviewees, whose presences online were not equated to a traditional community membership.

Finally, I mirrored the ethical dimensions surrounding my online data collection as closely as possible to those of my in-person participant observation. Data is recorded differently online; Twitter allows me to bookmark, screenshot, and interact with the content participants produce. Prior to recording the data, I reached out to users to obtain consent for their participation in the study and their permission to use the post in question as data. I remained transparent about my status as a researcher, as well as the subject of my study. I want to reiterate that, as in my in-person participant observation, I was not an outside observer and conducted research openly as a fan using my fan accounts. For both online and in-person fieldwork, the observations I make relate to the events themselves or my personal experiences participating in them. All information about singular individuals relayed in this research is done so with the person's informed verbal consent.

2.3.5. Scope

BTS and their fans produce an overwhelming abundance of information and data, which I did not have room to cover here, despite its relevance to this project. BTS create an enormous amount of content and ARMY are a large and active fanbase; I would wake up every day to find new information relating to my research and so, I limited my scope to a specific timeline ranging from their debut to their latest album release, *BE* in 2020. Even within this timeframe, I chose to overlook developing news stories and announcements as I could not do their significance justice within the scope of this project.

The language barrier presented another limitation to the study, in terms of accessing the international fanbase at its full potential. I mentioned that many Korean fans were reluctant to participate in interviews in English even when they were fluent, but my lack of fluency in many languages denied me access to some of the largest ARMY fanbases.

These fanbases include Japanese fans, Chinese fans, and Russian fans, among many others. No matter my level of linguistic access, speaking in broad terms about an international fanbase would have been impossible within the scope of this project. However, the fanbases I named are so large that they often operate within their own fan cultural contexts. Japanese fans even have their own official fan platforms, independent from the "global" platforms that Big Hit has created for the rest of its non-Korean fans. Similarly, the online spaces in which Chinese and Russian fans are active are platforms specific to their countries. Again, this is the case for many country-specific fan bases, and I am only using the above ones as examples. For example, despite having interviewed some Central and South American ARMY, their experiences are not necessarily representative of all the fan cultures specific to these regions and therefore, I have delimited my study to include fans from various cultural backgrounds who are active in English-speaking fan spaces.

Chapter 3.

Musical Affect and the Quest for Connection

3.1. Music, a Meet-cute

I was first introduced to BTS by a classmate in the second year of my undergraduate degree four years ago. Like many people who meet in university, her and I were friends by convenience, as we shared most of our religion studies courses and our schedules always happened to align. We barely knew each other, but would often sit together and chat before and after the lecture, mostly to complain about professors and upcoming assignments. One morning, I remember arriving to class and finding her already seated in our usual spot, completely immersed in a video she was watching on her laptop. She did not hear me when I came up behind her and was startled when I appeared at her side but, upon taking note of me, did not bother greeting me at all. “Come look at this,” she said and pulled me into the seat next to her, “I think you’ll like it.” She pushed her laptop between us and with one of her earbuds now in my ear, she replayed the music video to what I deduced was a song called *Blood, Sweat & Tears* by a group called BTS; those were the only English parts of the title.

I greatly enjoyed the song, as well as the elaborate music video that went with it. I was completely enraptured from the moment the music video began and, along with the song itself, it was unlike anything I’d seen before. Between the vocals, the dance breaks, the outfits, and the story, the artistry of the entire production was on another level. We watched in silence until the very end and once the screen went black, I was left with the familiar feeling of being on the cusp of yet another fannish obsession. It usually takes me a few listens to determine whether or not I like a song, but I listened to *Blood, Sweat & Tears* again on my commute home, on the treadmill later that evening, and again while scrolling on my computer in bed at night. For a few days, it was the only Korean song I knew until I saw my friend again and she quickly added some more tracks, both by BTS and by other groups, to my growing K-pop playlist. We started coming to class earlier and lingering

behind longer afterwards to watch music videos together. She familiarized me with the fan culture around K-pop and eventually, even invited me over to her house to teach me how to read Korean. It was not long before I started calling myself a fan and it took even less time to consider myself an ARMY. As the fall semester dragged on, I found myself at her dining room table almost every other day to watch BTS content for hours on end. She bought me my first physical album for my birthday in the spring, and that summer, we visited South Korea and travelled around the country together for a few weeks.

I remember exactly how I became a fan of BTS. More so, I have an explicit memory of the first time I heard their music. The reality is that for many fans, especially those foreign to South Korea, their initial introduction to BTS is similar to mine in the sense that it is more of a story than it is an instance. At the time, BTS's celebrity presence was obvious in their home country, but less so abroad. During my time in Seoul, I saw their faces on billboards and buses, and heard their music in cafes and stores. They headlined stories across news sources and were advertised as ambassadors of tourism and multiple brands. The gateways into BTS were numerous and even without knowing their names, exposure to their faces and music was almost inevitable. For fans living outside of South Korea, their first exposure to BTS's music usually involves a more elaborate account rather than coincidence or circumstance. It is unlikely that these fans stumbled upon BTS whilst listening to the radio or over shopping mall speakers, especially prior to 2019. When I asked fans how they were introduced to BTS, those who were not from South Korea had a detailed account readily on hand, which included specific dates, settings, and parties involved. Fans can recount how BTS entered their lives and more often than not, a musical experience is the starting point.

Music represents the initial point of contact between an artist and their audience, it is what sparks the relationship between them. An audience first connects with the music before connecting with its artist. Due to its high levels of affective engagement, music fandom blurs the separation between the art and the creator. Music is an incredibly personal form of communication, meaning that relating to an artist's music can easily imply a relation to the artist themselves, an intimacy that is far less obvious in media such as television or

books. Its properties as an artform and as a cultural object both contextualize and emphasize its influence on the lives of its listeners. Music is a vehicle of affective communication between individuals and an agent of community cohesion. While I would argue that BTS themselves represent the core fan object around which the fan community is built, their music is the meet-cute, the first interaction between them and their fans. When being introduced to BTS, no matter what that process looks like, listening to their music is the first fannish step. In prefacing its role in the realm of healing, it is important to establish these structures of music as they allow for the realisation of this healing.

3.1.1. Music, an Affective Duality

Our prehistoric ancestors used music to communicate over a million years ago and we continue to do the same today (Tomlinson, 2015). The sociality of music is inherent in the way we use it to understand each other and ourselves. Christopher Small, musician and prominent writer in the field of musicology, equates the “gift of music” to a “gift of speech” (Small, 1998, p. 8). The object of music on its own, even in imagined isolation from its social context, is still a social object in its propensity for communication. Through communication, music also creates sociality and surrounds itself with it. The creation of music and musical experiences requires participants, whether they be passive or active in the process. Small refers to this as “musicking,” a term he coined to describe the act of taking part in music in any capacity, including performing, composing, listening, dancing, and even working the ticket booth at a concert venue (1998). Everyone involved in any step of a musical process is musicking, thus highlighting music’s inherent social character. Music requires participation, it is a site for collectivity and shared cultural experience.

In his book *Why Music Matters*, Hesmondhalgh (2013) outlines various philosophical, cultural, and psychological perspectives surrounding musical affect and draws two important points. First, he acknowledges that musical affect can be an aesthetic experience, while also noting that these affective experiences also go beyond aesthetics. For example, a person may listen to music for its beauty or artistic value and a person may also listen to music for a purely emotional experience. We can enjoy a song because we find it beautiful,

but we may also seek out a happy song when feeling happy or wanting to feel happiness. Second, Hesmondhalgh emphasizes the value of musical affect in its influence on people's lives and emotions. There is great social power associated with musical experience, which must also be considered. Music has the capacity to move us, both in the emotional sense and in the collective sense. Between these two points, we can observe a convergence between the private and the public. As a response to why music matters, Hesmondhalgh introduces his book by noting that "music often feels intensely and emotionally linked to the private self" while also being "the basis of collective, public experiences" (2013, p. 1-2). In applying Hesmondhalgh's approach, we understand the individual intimacy musical affect creates, while also placing this intimacy within the greater range of collective musical experiences which possess important social implications. To simplify, fans experience and feel through music individually, but share a collective social response to what the music makes them feel.

Assuming the audience perspective, the experiential duality of music is what grants it great cultural value. This is due in part to the polarity in range of musical experiences, where music acts as an incredibly intimate form of communication, while also boasting an equally vast sense of cultural collectivity. Music is cherished on personal levels, but also enjoyed in large social settings, representing a confluence between the private and the public. Hills points out that while all fandom is characterized by strong levels of affective engagement, affective reception is especially powerful among music fans. This is because music infringes on the personal, giving fans space to exercise reflexivity (Hills, 2014). An easy example to differentiate between personal and collective enjoyments of music would be to compare the act of listening to music on your commute using headphones versus listening to a playlist in a car on a road trip with friends. A live musical performance, on the other hand, can demonstrate both experiences happening in unison. Concerts bring a large number of people together to experience music collectively, but also elicits emotion in each person individually. They represent a large group experience made up of singular experiences, but their significance is where they meld in the realm of affect. We have established that, in its many ways, music represents an affective experience, but how it does so is difficult to explain. Music does not describe emotion through language or image,

but represents it. Music is an embodiment of emotion and it is to that embodiment that we attach ourselves (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). In part, musical affect has a lot to do with music being a form of semiotic communication, thus allowing for such personal attachments.

3.1.2. Music, a Semiotic Dilemma

Artists communicate with masses of people through their music, but the message they convey is received by each person individually. While artists put out music for faceless crowds, each member of that crowd absorbs its effects differently. In the case of live performances, music represents an intimate interaction that is meant to establish a relationship between its participants (Small, 1998). Small even argues that the success of a musical performance is dependent on the establishment of such a relationship. Music embodies emotion, thus eliciting an affective response from each listener, one that “feels intensely and emotionally linked to the private self” (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 1). The intimacy at play in musical experiences is personally felt by each member of the audience, resulting in a multitude of unravelling intimacies. In her book *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection*, new media and communication researcher Nancy Baym writes: “Music is a way of communicating that somehow, by evoking without referring, has extraordinary power to help people find their deepest selves, bring them together, and feel connected to what feels most important” (2018, p. 32). Here, Baym draws the connection between music as an emotional form of communication and music as a site of sociality, but in doing so, also alludes to the dilemma of semiotics. As we saw previously, music deals in affective responses both in cultural and deeply personal settings. But it is the abstract nature of this communication, the “evoking without referring,” that complicates the study of musical affect.

As humans, we communicate through stories and it is through these stories that we understand each other and ourselves; this is also how music connects an artist to their audience (Baym, 2018). Through music, we observe a validation of emotion on two separate ends. The artist validates their audience’s emotions by writing music they can relate to and then the audience validates the artist’s emotions by relating to the music they

wrote. It is possible to understand this process as an exchange of stories, but it is also important to note that these stories lack a narrative. Nussbaum argues that we understand emotions through narrative, but that music has no explicit narrative from which to decipher concrete emotion the way stories do (2001). That is to say, what music makes us feel is, again, an embodiment of emotion. It presents listeners with an abstract subject to fit their own experiences into. As audience members, we make the music about us because there is room to do so. As such, Stevenson (2006) argues that music fans “anchor themselves into the narrative” of the music (Hills, 2014, p. 183). Earlier, referring to Hesmondhalgh, I mentioned that music is an affective experience that can be described by the individual feeling the emotions it embodies. While that remains, providing such a description lacks the more concrete structure of stories, especially if one does not understand why a song makes them feel a certain way. Knowing what a song is about is not a requirement for the experience of the emotion it conveys. When talking about the first time she heard the song *Singularity*, one fan described the experience in the following way:

I was crying when I was listening to the song. You know when you connect to the song on such a deep level where you're like 'what is going on? I can't believe this is a real thing I'm listening to'. That is how I felt. (Interviewee Q, 24)

Music pries shapeless emotion from us, emotion we can name but that we don't always understand or have the ability to identify accurately. Despite her confusion surrounding her emotional response to the song, she felt connected to it. It is also interesting to note that she phrases her observation in the form of a rhetorical question directed to me. This is not only because she seeks emotional validation from another fan, but because there is an understanding between us that I know what she is talking about, that she needs not attempt to explain the unexplainable any further. I don't know exactly what she felt when she listened to *Singularity* for the first time, but I know what it's like to be overwhelmed with emotion after listening to a BTS song. Another fan shared a similar experience with me, this time pertaining to Park Jimin's vocals and to two songs on Suga's mixtape titled *Agust D*, which is also the stage name he uses for his solo work.

The vocals I think are really amazing, especially with Jimin's voice. I really connect to the emotion in his voice, Jimin's voice. So actually, the first thing– the first time I actually took them seriously was when I came across Suga's mixtape. *The Last* and also *First Love*. Just, the way he raps with a lot of emotion, even before I read the lyrics I was like 'oh, this hits somewhere' and I don't know why it does! (Interviewee M, 23)

Once again, we observe an undefined, but very strong, emotional response to songs, but also to a group member's voice and the way another member raps. This fan assigns emotion to performance, which only emphasizes how abstract a musical experience can be when the sound of voices can affect us in this way. Emotion was not only conveyed to her through the music but was found imbued in the voices of the performers. She does not describe the emotions Suga's and Jimin's voices made her feel and she does not know why she felt them but knows that she did. The phrase "this hits somewhere" is in reference to those abstract emotions that she cannot place.

The second fan brings up another important point to consider here and that is the question of lyrics. The lyrics of a song are its sole textual component, meaning they are the closest source to an explicit narrative to be found in a song. They provide a more tangible structure of emotion for fans as a "notable source of extra-musical meaning" (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 23). However, as in the case with this fan, most non-Korean fans do not have immediate access to BTS's lyrics. Addressing the affective semiotics communicated through music is especially relevant for BTS. The lyrics to their music are in Korean, a language in which a large portion of their international fanbase is not fluent. This language barrier establishes yet another layer of ambiguity, at least for non-Korean speaking fans. Some fans contrasted between their experience listening to a BTS song for the first time versus how they felt after looking up the translations to the lyrics. Upon finding translations of the lyrics, these fans described a heightening or a confirmation of the emotion they felt during their first listen. The second fan quoted above made this distinction as well, once again referring to the song *The Last* from Suga's mixtape:

And then once I read the lyrics, I was like he's definitely talking about mental health here and that's super cool. And afterwards when I got into the fandom, a lot of translators put up posts that were not just direct translations but gave more context and meaning. And so that way it was— it was easier to connect to what he was saying. But also, just things like, when he censors a word in *The Last*, we know that word is “suicide” but I wouldn't have known that unless someone had explained it, like a translator. (Interviewee M, 23)

In Suga's song *The Last* there is a censored line that is meant to allude to suicidal thoughts. The fan uses this example to highlight the importance of good translations that contextualize lyrics, thus preserving their meaning. She connected to the song without the lyrics, but seeking them out later only further validated the emotions she felt. Later in the interview, Interviewee M also differentiated between the first time she encountered BTS when she was younger and her current fan membership. At first, she only listened to the songs and watched the videos without listening to the lyrics, but now makes it a point to read the lyrics.

Because sometimes for myself, I don't want to— it's really hard for me to know that I have an issue with myself, in a sense. Like, oh I don't want to face it. But listening to the lyrics... it's not like you're facing, but you're more aware of it. (Interviewee M, 23)

We see ourselves in the music we listen to and understanding lyrics plays a huge part in this process of meaning making. There is an additional level of depth achieved when paying attention to the lyrics, as they offer clarification to the otherwise abstract affect that music communicates. In Seoul, I sat in a cafe with a fan as she showed me the many BTS playlists she'd made for her different moods. She pulled up the one reserved for particularly bad days and explained: “I just listen to their music. Sometimes I'll pull up the lyrics if I'm feeling like I need some extra inspiration.” Fans have a desire to gain access to the meaning in songs and lyrics are a step towards uncovering that meaning, especially when the song is in a language they do not speak.

Finding meaning in the relationship between music and emotion is difficult because we are so used to expressing emotion within the cognitive structures of language (Nussbaum, 2001). When we identify with music, when we see it apply to our lives but fail to see how, we search for a narrative to fill the gaps. Nussbaum provides the example of hearing Achilles sing a dirge over the death of Patroclus, explaining that hearing the dirge elicits grief in the listener not just because of the music itself, but because of the textual narrative that surrounds it (2001). However, not all music is accompanied by a textual canon to provide narrative and the affective purpose of music is not solely to seek one out. Nussbaum writes: “what we need, then, is an account that preserves the cognitive and symbolic complexity of musical experience, while refusing to treat the music as a mere means to a cognition that is extramusical in nature” (2001, p. 265). In this way, fans search for context to the music that moves them, not in the name of a narrative that will make sense of their emotions, but to feel these emotions more acutely through a better appreciation of the music. The effort to find accurate translations to lyrics is indicative of this desire, one that does not seek to define emotion, but that wants to experience the music in all its affective potential. Then, it is pertinent to ask ourselves where else fans might turn to when unravelling this potential? What else can fill the affective gaps that music’s abstraction leaves? It is this quest for meaning that forces us to look outside the music object and towards the social and affective contexts that surround it.

3.2. The Artist, a Connection

I want to return to my friend who introduced me to BTS and elaborate on more of what that introduction entailed. Upon exhausting all the title tracks and their accompanying music videos, my friend insisted that I learn all of the members’ names and stage names. It was important that I memorize them and be able to identify each member when I saw them on screen. This was a necessary process that would lead up to my choosing a “bias.” A bias, she explained, was essentially my favourite member, the one I connected to the most on a personal level. The process of choosing a bias was not limited to names, faces, and musical talents either. It involved the consumption of a large body of content spanning

from even before the group debuted all the way to the present. Through this content, I would “get to know” each member in order to make an informed decision. It included stage performances, vlogs, interviews, appearances on talk shows and variety shows, behind the scenes footage, livestreams, and episodes from their own web shows, to name a few. In the beginning, even before I knew all their names, she would play videos or show me photos, saying “point to whoever you like best” and jotting it down for the sake of uncovering a pattern. Like this, she guided me through hours of content and, once I had chosen my bias, guided me through content that was specific to him.

It’s safe to say that I had never been introduced to fandom like that, but this process is by no means indicative of a universal experience among BTS fans. Indeed, I doubt everyone is as thorough and practical as my friend in their hazing efforts, as many of my interviewees’ entrance into the fandom was entirely of their own doing. Even the linguistic specificities have changed significantly since my joining in 2016. By the time I started my interviews for this project, fans had come to use the term ‘bias’ less frequently, some preferring to use the more general online fandom verbiage of ‘stanning’ a member, while others could not bring themselves to single out a favourite, citing equal love for all the members. No matter the terminology, the implication here is that there is a large amount of information and knowledge to be gained, that the connection fans are drawing between the artists and themselves is not confined to the consumption of music but expands into the consumption of the artists’ selves. More so, it is an extension of the intimacy put forth through the music, one that represents an integral aspect of fan identities and meaning making in fandom.

Music establishes the beginnings of the relationship between the artist and their audience. As previously mentioned, Christopher Small that it is the strength of this relationship, the palpable intimacy in the interaction that determines the success of a musical performance. A good musical performance will make the audience feel something, it will connect them to the artist, but what happens to this relationship when the show is over? How does this relationship not only survive, but develop outside the context of music? Both the audience and the artist are left with the task of furthering the relationship and while each maintains

it differently, they do so in tandem. Among fans, there is a desire to know and understand the source of the emotion they felt. To them, musical affect is contextualized by the artist themselves, the person who created the music. Today, the practices under the umbrella of Small's "musicking" prove more numerous and diverse than ever. Participation in the musical process goes far beyond the consumption or production of music itself and often, does not involve music at all. Instead, "musicking" is embedded in meaning making, authenticity, and identity validation.

3.2.1. The Artist as Relatable

In the digital age, the act of "getting to know" an artist takes on a whole new meaning. Not only do fans have immediate and easy access to an enormous body of music online, they also have access to information, specialized content and, most importantly, interaction. Fans no longer need to rely on a handful of interviews in magazines or radio broadcasts to learn more about who their favourite artists are. Instead, artists join their fans on social media platforms where they are able to further build their image and better connect with their audience. BTS's company, Big Hit Entertainment, went as far as to create a separate social media platform called Weverse reserved for BTS and ARMY, where the artists under the company and their fans can make posts and, on occasion, interact. In addition to their music, artists must now learn to produce their selves online. Musicians are expected, both by fans and the industry, to hold a constant online presence by strategically reaching out to audiences on various platforms. Nancy Baym refers to this aspect of the modern musician's job as relational labour. For her book "Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection," Baym interviewed North American and Western European artists across musical genres and levels of success in understanding the nuances at play in the relational labour of musicians. She defines relational labour as "the ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work" (Baym, 2018, p. 13). Through their relational labour, artists are able to cultivate a relationship with their fans and, in the process, give fans opportunities to relate to them. Baym also differentiates between relational labour and emotional labour, where emotional labour operates within a

set of rules, acts of relational labour are entirely up to the type of relationship the artist wants to build with their fans. While both forms of labour center around performance, relational labour is meant to result in an interpersonal connection between the artist and their fans. Emotional labour is one-sided and lacks the need for relatability that fuels the fan-artist relationship.

Since we relate to music on a personal level and therefore, connect with the creator of that music on a personal level as well, authenticity in that emotion becomes a key consideration for artists when they interact with fans. In order to maintain authenticity, an artist's image and message must be reflected in both the primary method of communication (music) and all other forms of interaction. Authenticity can only exist if it is present in the music and the artist's self. Eliciting emotion from fans through musical performance is one thing, but validating those emotions requires relatability and more concrete expression. This form of intimacy exists like any other, embedded in a mutual sense of acceptance and dependency (Baym, 2018). Through music and acts of relational labour, the artist is able to validate the emotions of their fans twofold: first, through the shared emotional semiotics of their music and then again by concretizing those emotions through their relational labour. These acts are not limited to the sharing of information or a constant online presence, but through the creation of an authentic self that reinforces the initial musical connection. BTS exhibit a remarkable amount of relational labour that constantly ricochets back and forth between that authentic self and the musical experience. As artists, their relational labour not only fosters an interpersonal relationship with their fanbase but becomes highly productive in their music as well. BTS's music represents the initial fannish step, but upon the establishment of the fan-artist relationship, BTS re-emphasize the reciprocity of that relationship in their music. This creates somewhat of a validation cycle, where ARMY "see" BTS through their music and their selves, and then BTS acknowledge ARMY by "seeing" them in their music. The constant mutual recognition and affirmation of the other is what authenticates BTS's relatability to their fanbase. From my interviews and observations, I've noted the following three points of reference.

A. Relatability of music

Since their debut, BTS's music has been the subject of controversy due to the societal critiques and subjects of generational struggle that continue to occupy its thematic core to this day. Not only do these themes resonate with fans, but the consistency with which they return to these themes— even after their enormous rise to global fame— speaks to a level of authenticity that fans recognize and trust. BTS's message has only grown alongside their music; their evolution as artists is not a linear progression as they never entirely move past their older work, but refer to it with fresh perspectives in their newer releases. In this context, I approach their music production as a form of relational labour. BTS certainly discuss their music at length and openly stand by the message their music embodies. However, this first point looks at the innate relatability of their music, independent from any paratextual confirmation on their part, and how BTS establish that initial connection through the music themselves.

Starting with their first album era dubbed the “School Trilogy” (2013-2015), which chronicles the struggles and frustrations of early youth and high school life, the stories and messages BTS share through their music always reflect the current stages in their lives. The youthful struggles that BTS describe in their music represent the universal struggles of an entire generation. Fans relate to their music because it addresses their realities and in doing so, alleviates fans of their perceived loneliness in the world. Of course, their music is not a magic cure to all these problems, but interviewees were eager to express the relief and comfort they felt listening to BTS's music for these reasons. More so, they made it a point to contrast the themes of their music to those of other mainstream songs. A few interviewees made similar comparisons, one comparison concerning depictions of youth in popular culture, and the second about popular music's fixation on romantic themes.

When talking about their favourite era, one fan talked about how they appreciate the way BTS do not just glamorize youth and instead, explore the struggles that mark this passage into adulthood, especially in terms of the anxiety and instability of youth that she also experiences. In reference to their iconic HYYH (The Most Beautiful Moment in Life) era,

she brought up that most songs about youth describe it in a “beautiful and positive” way, but that the songs from HYYH bring out the negative aspects of youth as well. The overarching theme of the era marks the first steps out of school-age and towards uncertain futures. This interviewee is not the only one to bring up HYYH, as this era is infamous for its accompanying, highly emotional and nostalgic storyline highlighting these growing pains. Another fan brought up *Moving On* from the HYYH album, a song that BTS wrote about moving out of their first dorm as a group. It truly embodies the feeling of what it means to leave a first home, especially as a young adult. The song is a great example of the general concept behind the album, depicting the nostalgia of moving forward and into new stages of life. This fan connected the song to a similar experience in her life: “In 2017, I got out of really bad friendships with people and one of the songs– I wish I was joking about this– *Moving On*, I played it on repeat and it got me through it. I was so anxious about being alone, I made a playlist of all their songs” (Interviewee J, 25). On a different topic, three other interviewees mentioned the abundance of songs about romantic love in mainstream music and how, in contrast, a lot of BTS’s music offers a more realistic and relatable option for them. Referring to the subject of love songs, one fan shared her thoughts with me: “I’m so over it! So, it’s really nice to see the way they make music and about things that are common for us” (Interviewee E, 21). The point to highlight here is there is some universal relatability to BTS’s music, but in terms of demographics, the interviewees who emphasized relatability through life experiences belonged to the same age group and generation as BTS themselves.

Lastly, a couple of other fans also talked about the subject of mental illness in Suga’s solo music and how they relate to the way the artist speaks out about his struggles in his songs. One of them says: “His songs *The Last* and *So Far Away*, the lyrics are so... I can empathize. It’s so interesting that he’s so public about his mental health and it makes it more easy to talk about it. Cool to see someone I look up to talk about it, so I can talk about it” (Interviewee J, 25). Mental health is a crucial point that almost all interviewees brought up and will be further developed when I discuss healing in the later chapter. However, I want to bring it up briefly here in the context of this particular demographic and relatability:

And part of the reason I was feeling so depressed was that I finished music school and I didn't want to go into performance... and it's hard to explain to someone that you had to let go of something you really loved. Got a jaw injury and couldn't play the flute anymore and it took me a long time to accept that. I listened to *So Far Away* and I thought it's okay to not have something right now. It's okay to exist. As millennials, we don't feel that way. We're not encouraged to just exist, but to reach for the next goal, be better than your neighbour. It gave me the comfort of not having a dream. It allowed me to live in the moment. To feel sad when I need to feel sad. We don't encourage people to feel sad when they're sad but sometimes it can be good I think. (Interviewee T, 27)

The quote above is from an American ARMY who, after an injury, could no longer pursue a career in music. I chose to include this quote because it connects to my argument about relatability, but also because the quote behaves like BTS's music. Her experience is unique to her, not many people have gone through what she has and yet, she describes a sense of comfort that she applies to her entire generation. Her story is hers, but when she talks about how the song made her feel, she refers to common experiences that many young people living during this time face. The line "it's okay not to have a dream" from the song *Paradise* was cited as a source of comfort by four other interviewees, who were distressed by their futures and feeling pressure similar to what the musician ARMY described.

Mental health is not an issue that is unique to BTS's age demographic, but the mental health issues that BTS address are those specifically relating to their demographic. As is illustrated by this last quote, fans are not only conscious of the relatability of BTS's music, but that this relatability aligns very closely with the experiences of their age group, despite its vastness. This applies to many of the other themes in their music. The struggles of youth, anxieties about the future, different relationships are all subjects that BTS approach through their personal experiences as young people, which is what makes their music so specific and deeply relatable to their generation. Nothing crystallizes this more than their *Love Yourself* era, an entire era of music dedicated to learning how to love yourself.

B. Expressions of fannish appreciation

As mentioned, the overall relatability of BTS's lyrics and message has resonated with fans from all over the world, but BTS work to constantly validate that message outside of their music. They are explicit about what their music means, leaving no room for interpretations of their message. In a sense, their relational labour perfectly reflects their music and in doing so, reinforces their image as relatable, authentic artists. BTS are always proving that they are who they say they are and fans are intensely aware and appreciative of this. The most obvious example comes from BTS's *Love Yourself* era, which consisted of three album releases between September 2017 to August 2018. The albums *LY: Her*, *LY: Tear*, and *LY: Answer* and the following world tours were accompanied by the Love Myself and #ENDviolence campaigns, a partnership between BTS, Big Hit, and UNICEF aimed at preventing violence against children and teenagers around the world. Both BTS and ARMY have made significant donations to the campaign every year.

The *Love Yourself* era was meant to represent a journey towards self-love that BTS and ARMY travelled together. As I write this phrase, I realise how childish it sounds to put this much faith on both ends of a parasocial relationship. At the same time, I cannot overlook the strong statements my interviewees made about this era, especially when it helped them so much. The truth of the matter is, in appreciating BTS's music, fans internalized their message and elevated relatability into accountability. In promoting their music, the idea of loving one's self was consistently presented as a goal more than a theme. The members spoke openly about their own journeys towards self-love, the difficulties they were facing, and the moments of defeat. The entirety of the three-album era was dedicated to this concept, as many of the songs also reflected these themes. In particular, Jin's concert performances of his solo song *Epiphany* were brought up multiple times. The song is an emotional ballad reminiscent of actual love songs and talks about realizing one's self-worth and learning to love oneself, despite our flaws and imperfections. In parallel, interviewees spoke to me about their own experiences with self-love, in light of the era and campaign. The responses were surprisingly nuanced. For me, the *Love Yourself* movement was marked by great moments of relief and comfort, where BTS's stories and songs made me

feel less alone and part of something bigger than myself. While many participants sang similar praise, others were less enthusiastic or, more accurately, were more realistic in their approaches to self-love. Below are three quotes from three different fans that both highlight the efficacy of *Love Yourself* in terms of BTS's role in mobilizing the fan base. Through these quotes, it becomes clear that fans do not passively absorb BTS's messages, but more so, that BTS as the medium of this message is what inspires actual mobility out of mere sentiment.

A lot of people feel really insecure about themselves; they criticize themselves a lot more than they would others. Their message, ever since they launched the *Love Yourself* campaign that really helped a lot of people including me. It's cheesy, saying that they are just like us, but they emphasized that there is no shame in loving yourself and telling other people that they should love themselves. There's something really empowering about a stadium full of people saying that "I'm the one I should love." It's not a new concept, everyone knows about it, but it's just the fact that they... I don't know, brought it back and emphasized it. Because they are not— people who say that are your therapists or friends, but they're just musicians, artists, idols doing that and that's kind of new. (Interview F, 24)

At first, I was really hesitant about it because, is it really going to work? Their album came out and their lyrics just spoke to me. Accepting yourself for who you are and not changing yourself to be accepted by others was a really big thing for me. (Interviewee A, 22)

I realised, BTS told me to love myself but I don't know. I don't hate myself. I'm trying to practice it, but I'm still not there. But you know, I think the point is that they gave me a realisation. I think that's important. I didn't know I was at my lowest point before I got to know them. And I think the realisation is very important. Like, 'oh, I should love myself,' even though it's hard to do it. Yeah, they gave me the realisation. (Interviewee H, 23)

These three quotes illustrate three distinct journeys in relation to *Love Yourself*. Interviewee F explains how the idea of self-love is not a novel concept, emphasizing that BTS as the source of the message is what determines its efficacy. She also highlights the importance of the fan community in the dissemination and application of this message; the stadium of fans singing along to the chorus of *Epiphany* was a defining moment for her, one that she describes as “empowering.” Meanwhile, upon approaching the movement with doubt, Interviewee G expressed how the music and the contents of the message itself resonated with her. Once again, acceptance is not a given; we know that fans are critical of the media they consume, but what can be deduced here is a level of trust that exists between this fan and BTS. As we will see in the following section, this fan has repeatedly questioned her devotion as a fan. This is indicative of a choice, where fannish dedication is understood as an investment to be made. Fans are making an informed decision in choosing to engage with BTS’s message at the personal level, which implies that BTS are giving them good reason to. As for the last quote, it ties the previous two together, where we can observe the importance of BTS’s role as the mouthpiece and the self-awareness of the fan. Interviewee H did not engage in the movement the way the other two fans did. In fact, Interviewee H acknowledges her own shortcomings when it comes to self-love but specifies that she appreciates BTS's goal. Thus, it becomes clear that fans are selective in their participation and are realistic in what they can gain through their relationship with BTS, while also highlighting the importance of BTS, specifically.

In her book *Playing to the crowd: musicians, audiences, and the intimate work of connection*, author Nancy Baym argues that the purpose of boy band fandoms have less to do with the artists and more to do with the fan community around them.

“One need only look at the commonalities among fandoms around the boy bands of the day over time to see that they have much more to do with the pleasures and lessons girls experience in building community with one another through common practices that set them apart from other demographic groups than with the specific young men around whom those practices take form” (Baym, 2018, p. 47).

While it is clear that the presence of a fan community plays a huge role in the dissemination of messaging, as well as the establishment of systems of support and the sense belonging, I would argue that in BTS's case, "the specific young men" play an active role in the building of community and the practices that define them. Based on these interviews, it seems that the fans themselves consider them as important players in their own growth as individuals. More so, I believe that BTS are active participants within these fandom structures and that their participation mirrors those of their fans.

C. Artists' acknowledgement of fans

Finally, BTS themselves complete the cycle of acknowledgement by actively recognizing ARMY's dedication. I call it a cycle, but it is important to view it not as a closed circuit, but a complex system of affective reciprocity that constantly affirms and reaffirms both parties of the other's dedication, as well as reinforces the authenticity of the relationship. As far as parasocial relationships are concerned, BTS and ARMY know and understand each other through these constant exchanges within the affective system. BTS harbour reciprocity in a multitude of ways in response to ARMY's very vocal dedication, but for the sake of staying true to this chapter, I want to continue using their music and musical concepts as the affective vehicle of choice.

I want to specify that these songs are written not only *for* ARMY, but *about* ARMY. These are not songs about being an artist or being a celebrity (although their discography includes a couple of those as well), they are songs where the fans and their relationship with the fans is the subject matter. Often, these songs are conversations, they are a direct message from BTS to ARMY. Even overlooking BTS's comments about the songs, the lyrics are explicit in their intention and targeted audience. The first ever song about the fans appeared on their Wings album in 2016. The song *2!3!* was meant to comfort and bring reassurance to fans that everything is going to be alright, as the chorus asks the listener to count down with them: "It's okay, come on, when I say one, two, three forget it." From *Map of the Soul: Persona*, the song *Mikrokosmos* depicts BTS and ARMY as stars in a single universe, symbolizing that they have each other even in the darkness. The members have openly

stated that these songs, as well as many others, were written about the fans, giving some of these songs (i.e. *Mikrokosmos*) anthem status in the fandom.

Already, BTS disturb the unilateral structure of the parasocial relationship, or at least, they do so through the eyes of their fans. Fan dedication is easy to observe, but it is clear that fans enjoy a level of dedication on the part of the group as well. In their participation in the fandom, fans not only expressed a desire to support BTS, but felt that they were “giving back” and identified BTS as the ones to give them something first. Across the interviews, the language of giving was prominent and almost universal; every single fan talked about what BTS have “given” them, including comfort, confidence, courage, and inspiration to name a few. They also talked about how they expressed that appreciation by actualizing BTS’s message, also referred to in the previous point of reference. When I argue that BTS disturb the one-sided nature of the parasocial relationship, it’s because they acknowledge fan’s appreciation and reciprocate that appreciation, not in the context of celebrity, but on the same plane as their fans and within the same context of their message. I want to close this argument with a quote from a personal experience. In 2018, I went to my first ever BTS concert in New York at Citi Field stadium. At the time, I wasn’t aware of the infamy of RM’s ending comments where, for every single concert, the leader of the group gives a short and often emotional speech to close the show. I also had no idea that that particular speech would go on to be one of the most iconic ones he’s given:

Now, one last thing, this Love Yourself Tour, I’m finding how to love myself. You know, I didn’t know anything about loving myself but you guys taught me through your eyes, through your love, through your tweets, through your letters, through everything, you guys taught me and inspired me how to love myself. And loving myself is my whole life goal until my death. And what is loving myself? What is loving yourself? I don’t know. Who can define their own method and the way of loving myself? It’s our mission. It’s our mission to find, to define our way to love ourselves. So, it’s never intended but it feels like using you guys to love myself. So, I’m going to say one thing: please use me. Please use BTS to love yourself. Because you guys taught me to love myself. Everyday. (RM, 2018)

In a way, this speech alone summarizes the three points of reference I outline here. Kim Namjoon establishes the benefits of both sides of the fan-artist relationship but, in addition, equalizes the dynamics of the relationship. The *Love Yourself* journey is one he is on as well, it is a journey that he also struggles with and, most importantly, it is a journey he is taking with the help of his fans. The point here isn't whether or not any of this is true. There is no way for me to actually confirm whether or not Kim Namjoon went through this journey towards self-love through the help of his fandom. The point is in how this message is being said and, in the fact, that it is being said at all. "Please use me. Please use BTS to love yourself" is an explicit acknowledgement of the relationship they share with their fans. BTS know what fans take away from them, they understand their purpose as artists when it comes to fannish healing and they lean into it. Kim Namjoon's invitation to "use" him and BTS to achieve self-love is an explicit iteration of both the eudaimonic characteristics of their music, as well as the purposes of the parasocial relationship.

3.3. Interlude: Psychological Frameworks of Eudaimonic Engagement and the Parasocial Relationship

Prior to delving into the final chapter where I propose relational networks as a conceptualization of fannish healing, I want to briefly cover two concepts that explore the affective responses associated with fandom. Since this research uses a vague definition of healing, while loosely connecting it to mental health, the following section looks into psychological studies concerning the eudaimonic consumption of entertainment and the establishment of parasocial relationships. Both these concepts play a significant role in most fandoms but can be explicitly observed among BTS fans. Eudaimonic engagement relates to how audiences engage with the text beyond pleasure by participating in the intellectual and emotional processing of the text. Audiences feel challenged by the text, but also challenge the text itself; the eudaimonic character of the engagement is what engenders the creation of fan communities where, in being challenged, audiences feel compelled to engage with others who also actively processed the text. Through this emotional engagement with the text, fans also facilitate the creation of a parasocial relationship, where

audience members build an attachment towards the celebrity or media icon as they are both represented in the text and developed through eudaimonic engagement. While acknowledging how early psychological studies on fandom infamously pathologized fans, more recent studies highlight the benefits and positive outcomes of engaging in these types of entertainment and relationships. Based on the three reference points of mutual validation between BTS and their fans listed in the previous section, we determine that BTS and their audience present an explicit example of eudaimonic engagement. In the same vein, we can also determine the many ways in which BTS fall within the beneficial paradigms of the parasocial relationship that are discussed here.

3.3.1. “I can’t believe it’s not trash!”: Processing Affective Meaning through Eudaemonic Engagement

The pursuit of media entertainment is often rationalized through two dimensions of experience. The first dimension is defined as the hedonic experience, which describes the feeling of happiness derived from pleasure as a primary motivation for seeking entertainment (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2017). Hedonic stimulation exists at the base of all types of entertainment, as some feelings of pleasure and joy are the reasons individuals want to be entertained. For this reason, hedonic experiences of entertainment are associated with psychological detachment and are considered a source of higher relaxation (Rieger, et al., 2014). While hedonic experience represents one type of motivation, it does not account for all forms of entertainment, namely those that do not provoke happiness. Such forms include films that depict human hardship and injustice, or simply have a sad ending to them. These cases are indicative of a second, more complex motivation behind the pursuit of entertainment, known as eudaemonic experience.

This second dimension of entertainment experience is associated with self-development, learning opportunities, and other intellectual or emotional challenges undertaken by the individual. Essentially, eudaemonic experiences are characterized by "meaningful affect," where the pleasure derived from entertainment does not simply result in feelings of happiness, but more so in individual growth. (Oliver, et al., 2012, p. 366). Eudaemonic

experiences of entertainment force individuals to react to the narrative by engaging in meaning-making, instead of detaching one's mind for the sake of relaxation (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2017). Through these experiences, the consumption of more meaningful entertainment can be rewarding when individuals feel both intellectually and emotionally challenged, since "this type of entertainment experience seems to encourage viewers to make a cognitive effort toward a more profound understanding of the self and the world" (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2017, p. 46). Thus, in their benefits towards self-development, the impact of eudaemonic experiences is not limited to the periods of consumption of entertainment.

In their study on individual well-being and the eudaemonic potential of entertainment, Reiger et.al. (2014) argue that well-being, as achieved through entertainment, is not solely dependent on positive affect, but the "importance of self-determined behaviour and psychological growth" (p. 457). For this reason, the study focuses on instances of "media-induced recovery," a process following a stressful situation where individuals return their mental and physical capacities back to pre-stress levels through the consumption of media (Reiger et. al., 2014). Reiger et. al. (2014) propose that entertainment media exposure and psychological well-being are linked through "a hedonic mode that fosters well-being by facilitating the recovery dimension of psychological detachment and relaxation and a eudaemonic mode that fosters well-being by providing opportunities for mastery experiences" (p. 472). The latter consist of experiences during leisure time that compensate for lack of affirmation in everyday work and translate into better coping methods to stress (2014). While both the hedonic and eudaemonic experiences contribute to this recovery, the coping benefits of eudaemonic entertainment experiences continue to exist beyond the entertainment experience and can be applied in instances of real-life stress.

In the same vein, Tsay-Vogel and Sanders (2017) extend post-exposure well-being to fandom participation, arguing the existence of major eudaemonic motivations behind fandom community membership and contact. Multiple key elements crucial to fandom membership align with those of eudaemonic experiences, including group belonging and open communication. Individuals experience affective, cognitive and relational benefits in

participating in fandom, which contribute to their well-being (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017). Here, the eudaemonic experience not only exists beyond the entertainment factor but can occur without it through active fandom participation alone. While the original source of entertainment may act as the initial trigger, fandom communities create their own unique eudaemonic experiences in the periphery of their respective objects of entertainment.

BTS, as idols and through their music, encourage active engagement from their audiences. Fans participate in the process of relating to them and their music, but this does not come without an affective toll. The level of relatability in BTS's music creates a connection with fans, but it also facilitates the internalization of those emotions. Because fans relate to BTS, they also relate to challenges BTS face and therefore, are willing to face those challenges. When my interviewees said that BTS taught them to love themselves, they are referring to the work of processing affective meaning, a feat they willingly undertook in light of BTS's music and message. In terms of eudaemonic entertainment, BTS's *Love Yourself* era and campaign were an explicit challenge. It is important to note the language fans used to talk about *Love Yourself* was not one of appreciation, but of learning and of struggle. Fans understood the achievement of self-love as a difficult task and acknowledged their shortfalls, their wins, and their journeys ahead accordingly.

Moreover, as a transcultural fandom, ARMY's engagement is inherently eudaemonic through their constant expression of counter-hegemony. For international fans, being a fan of BTS and putting in the effort to understand and relate to an artist that exists outside the context of dominant global media is already a challenging form of engagement. When fans talk about relating to lyrics in another language, for example, it is implied that complex translation work went into capturing and empathizing with the embodiment of emotion in their artistry, beyond the limits of language. Like in any other relationship, understanding one another is at the core of the affective exchanges between BTS and ARMY and is crucial to maintaining both ends of the fan-artist relationship.

3.3.2. Feeling Is Believing: Affective Investments and the Parasocial Relationships

When I returned to Vancouver after spending a handful of weeks visiting my family in Montreal, my friend Jasmine and I decided to meet at a local cafe in Kitsilano to catch up and get some work done together. An hour into this meeting, Jasmine got a V-Live notification on her phone, signaling the end of all productivity. V-Live is a popular South Korean broadcasting app that allows celebrities to livestream content to their fans, who can communicate with them through comments on the stream. A lucky coincidence, it so happened that the members going live were our respective biases, Kim Namjoon and Park Jimin. We watched the entire stream together on Jasmine's phone, with Jasmine providing rough translations throughout their conversation. When Namjoon and Jimin smiled into the camera, Jasmine leaned over: "It's like they knew we were finally seeing each other today." At that, I nodded and laughed, "they definitely did." These exchanges are joking, and they are common between the two of us as well as between fans on Twitter. They happen when Kim Namjoon wears a scarf that I also happen to own, and they happen when Park Jimin references the movie *Aladdin* in his song *Filter*. Like many fans, we suspend disbelief to bask in the bubbly warmth of these random coincidences that make us feel closer to our favourite idols.

A term originally coined by Horton & Wohl (1956), a parasocial relationship describes the relationship between an individual and a media figure, often characterized by the one-sided nature of the relationship. Audience members rarely have personal access to their favourite media figures, and their dedication is not directly reciprocated, on individual levels at least. While each member of an audience holds a personal relationship with the media figure, that single celebrity can only hold a relationship with their audience as a whole. Moreover, reciprocity becomes especially impossible when the parasocial relationship is between a person and a media character or personality who doesn't actually exist in real life. Yet, this does not prevent fans and audiences from expressing admiration and adoration for their favourite media figures. As Stever (2017) notes, many fans talk about their favourite celebrities like they would about a friend. Koenig and Lessan (1985) even found that people rated their favourite TV characters as closer than acquaintances, but not as close as friends.

In their study of television audiences, Horton & Wohl attribute these aspects of parasocial relationships to the result of “illusions of face-to-face conversation” and deceptions of intimacy (1956). Following this line of thinking, parasocial relationships are often scrutinized for their perceived superficiality, where commitment to a parasocial relationship is then indicative of social shortcomings in the fan’s life. Compensation for a lack of meaningful relationships is specifically cited as the rationale behind fans’ need to engage in parasocial relationships. In this way, early conceptions of fanship portray parasocial attachment through a pathological lens. The waves of intense fan excitement surrounding the late 19th century Austrian pianist Franz Liszt and the 1960s British boy band known as The Beatles, were referred to as ‘Lisztomania’ and ‘Beatlesmania,’ respectively. Despite these musicians existing a century apart from one another, the pathological language referencing a sort of fan ‘mania’ remains consistent in both cases.

While core definitions of the parasocial relationship vary very slightly between approaches, scholarship across disciplines has aimed to deconstruct the social stigma surrounding parasocial relationships in attempts to normalize such forms of attachment. In outlining cognitive processes within the human brain, both evolutionary and psychological approaches establish that engaging in parasocial relationships is a common reaction in response to visual exposure. Within the evolutionary framework, visual exposure is the key player in understanding how parasocial relationships are formed. According to De Backer (2012), “eye-witness observation equates to an I-witness feeling,” meaning that anything the human eye sees is registered as proof of existence (p. 147). Evolutionarily speaking, our brains interpret the visual as truth, even if it is just a photograph, and these visuals create a false impression of witnessing (2012). In this way, our brains process representations of celebrities as though they were a real presence in our lives. Based on evolutionary theory, parasocial attachment is expected, since our brains react to characters and celebrities in mass media as they would to someone in real life (Stever, 2017). Digital media only facilitates this process. Livestream videos, for example, blur the boundary between the actual physical presence of the celebrity and their visual representation. When a celebrity addresses their audience through these real-time streams that fans can join, the “I-witness feeling” is further reinforced. De Backer adds that these processes are not so

strange, as they apply to non-celebrity contexts as well. We tend to be closer to people who we see and whom we interact with on a daily basis rather than people we've just "heard of". The amount of exposure, alongside visual representation, determines the level of connection a person will feel towards a celebrity. It makes sense to feel sympathy for a celebrity or character after watching them on a screen over and over again (Stever, 2017). Parasocial relationships and attachment, therefore, do not compensate for a lack of social relationships, but represent an extension of a person's social life.

Psychological frameworks approach parasocial relationships through the lens of attachment styles, where the extension of social life is further narrowed into the realm of personal relationships. Attachment theory operates within three elements of relation expectations, including comfort with intimacy, the ability to depend on significant others, and the ability to trust in their faithfulness and love. While attachment style remains stable, it is common for the attachment figures to change throughout a person's life (Cohen, 2004). Relationships come and go, but oftentimes, when the attachment is severed, the person experiences distress. In his study, Cohen (2004) applies attachment theory to parasocial relationships. Specifically, he uses the dissolution of attachment relationships to draw parallels between attachment in parasocial relationships and attachment in social relationships. As cited in Cohen (2004), John Bowlby (1980) notes that our mental models of attachment are not selective within our relational environment and therefore, are not exclusive to close, real-life relationships.

With a phone propped up on the table between us and our coffees warm in our hands, in its own sense, Jasmine and I were "hanging out" with Kim Namjoon and Park Jimin of BTS in real-time during their livestream. They were present at our cafe meeting, as present as idols who live across an ocean could be. Fandoms, in reflecting traditional understandings of cultural communities, fulfill our evolutionary need for group belonging. Fandom membership grants fans access to a support network made up of other fans. With the fan community, these individuals already know that they share at least one interest and this commonality—the commonality of the fan object—facilitates their interactions. In existing on a similar plane to real-life interpersonal relationships, parasocial relationships yield

similar benefits. Much like the relationship between the fan and their fandom community or the fan and other fans, the parasocial relationship between the fan and the fandom object can serve towards a sense of belonging. In the case of the parasocial relationship, the resulting support network manifests as a form of reinforcement, rather than the relational surrogacy Horton and Wohl (1956) initially describe.

Considering the intensity of BTS's relational labour, we understand that the emotional validation and affective engagement fostered between the group and their fanbase reinforces the attachment qualities of the parasocial relationship. However, this relationship does not exist outside of the real, individual lives and daily experiences of each fan. If their relationship with BTS elicits real emotional responses, then the relationship and outcomes of said relationship cannot be denied their tangibility. As established here, parasocial relationships are just another relationship in a fan's life, one that yields benefits just as well as doubts. Entering a parasocial relationship is a choice, where devotion and commitment are earned on both ends. After sharing their struggles with anxiety, one interviewee explained how they questioned this exact choice when justifying their dedication:

And the last thing I would say is eventually I've had a few times where I've experienced doubt about— is this a good idea dedicating my life to this? Am I... Am I crazy? Is this a good idea? What am I going to do without— what am I going to do when this stops? Have I just grossly misinterpreted these translations and things. But in times where that's happened, the members have put out stuff that's turned that on its head. And they continue to prove that they're worth my investment. And by investment I don't just mean money, but time and love. (Interviewee G, 22)

Similarly, another interviewee talked about their struggles with body image and self-esteem, and how BTS's growth, while not responsible for her own, served as a source of validation for the choices she made herself. She describes a feeling of "being right," where BTS's encouragement almost legitimizes or confirms her own journey and struggle.

In seeing them change in terms of— especially Jimin. If you look at his self-esteem, he seems way more positive in terms of body image. Seeing that is encouraging. The promotion of *Love Yourself*, Namjoon’s speeches. It all reinforces the feeling of ‘I was right,’ and that’s what they’re saying too, about what I realised over the years. (Interviewee U, 33)

ARMY put in effort in maintaining their relationship with BTS because, in spite of a complete lack of interpersonal interaction, they benefit from this relationship. The *Love Yourself* era is indicative of the trust that fans place in BTS and their awareness of the emotional risks involved in this investment. Fans are not beyond doubt and questioning when faced with the integrity of the parasocial relationship. Cohen (2004) even highlights the significance of parasocial relationships in people’s lives by pointing out their capacity for fall-out. However, the quote above illustrates how fans’ dedication to BTS is not unfounded; fans are willing to dedicate their time, money, and emotional energy to BTS because BTS are constantly proving themselves to be “worth the investment.” Ultimately, there are observable results involved. What fans get out of this relationship influences their personal lives, beyond their fan engagement. In the context of relational networks, the parasocial relationship and the eudaemonic values of entertainment come to represent vehicles of traceability through which we connect healing behaviours from individual contexts to their original fannish context. As will be explored in the next chapter, the eudaemonic qualities of BTS and their propensity for strong parasocial relationships allow for the permeation of affective benefits into the personal lives of fans.

Chapter 4.

“The Tentative Step Forward,” Tracing Fannish Healing Behaviours Through Relational Networks

4.1. Relational Networks, All that Baggage

In describing BTS as eudaemonic entertainment and outlining the equalizing functions of their parasocial relationship with fans, we understand how healing manifests within the fandom. Healing, in this context, encompasses moments of growth and self-improvement that fans experience through their fan membership. In maintaining a loose definition of healing, the term is able to range from using BTS as a source of support when completing a degree, all the way to using them as a source of comfort in the context of mental health. In any sense, healing here describes a step—no matter how big—towards individual well-being. The purpose of this research is not to establish a strict definition of fannish healing, but to trace healing as it emerges from engagement with the fan text and permeates into the personal lives of fans. In this transition, relational networks serve to identify how this healing is transformed as it obscures any clear connection to the fan text and becomes integrated into the fan’s life. The idea here isn’t that any reference to the fan text is lost, but that this reference is no longer explicit. Essentially, relational networks represent a number of points where fans, in using healing behaviours in the context of fandom, reappropriate these behaviours and make them their own. It should be noted that these networks are made up of activities and behaviours and are not the networks of people we usually understand as fan communities, as they exist as unique expansions of each individual’s fannish experiences.

Relational networks exist within what Matt Hills refers to as the “pop music paratext” (2014, p. 17). As to not compromise their affective reception of the artist and their music, fans must negotiate the fact that both of these are products of industry. As mentioned in previous sections, K-pop especially is often misrepresented as a highly manufactured form of music and performance. While this can be accounted to xenophobic Western perceptions

of East Asia, the language of manufacturing adopted by media surrounding K-pop is a constant allusion to the music's industrial origins of production, one that must be kept hidden from fans in order to salvage their affective connections. Manufactured qualities in music and performance might threaten authenticity and relatability, making it favourable for industry to marginalize the production processes present in the pop music paratexts (Hills, 2014). However, Hills goes on to argue that these elements that are made invisible by the industry are then made visible by fans. If the pop music paratext is intrinsically related to the music and the artist, then it remains within reach of fans' desired intimacy. Fans care about the people who create the music they love or work with the artists they love and therefore, often interact with industry on top of interacting with their idols (Hills, 2014). Despite industry efforts to render processes invisible, fans seek them out, as they pertain to furthering the intimacy between the artist and themselves. In this way, fans perform their own relational labour in connecting with the more implicit elements surrounding the music and artists they love.

4.1.1. Mythologies of Production

It's common for fans to develop interests in new artists through collaborations and features. Personally, I discovered the UK duo Honne after they featured as producers on RM's *mono* and when RM featured on their song *Crying Over You*. The BTS members also have their personal Spotify playlists available on their group's profile, in addition to the occasional song recommendation posted on their Twitter account. In terms of making the invisible visible, such connections are obvious, nor does the discovery of new music through a beloved artist bring attention to hidden industry processes. More in line with Hills's argument is ARMY's appreciation for BTS's production team. Most fans are able to name at least one or two of BTS's producers, which also ties into the group's underdog beginnings, as many of these producers have worked with BTS since their debut. This sense of nostalgia extends to the producers, as well as Big Hit's founder Bang Sihyuk, who was also their producer at the time. Overall, it is not that the production processes of BTS's music are unknown to fans, but that they are shrouded in fandom myth. The group's humble

beginnings (Lee, 2019) at once underline their status as cultural icons, while also making their success story accessible to their audience, as one fan points out.

They are a symbol of underdog. In this world, there are a lot of underdogs. Maybe most people are underdogs, in their own mind. Because they think they are deprived of many things, or assets, or opportunities and everything. And they haven't watched an example of underdog can go to over ground. But BTS... big time proof that it's possible, so it touches people's heart and mind too. And just work ethics and their quality of reflecting [on] themselves. After all this success, huge success, their position is like totally changed, but they are still very suspect of themselves and reflect without a pause. (Interviewee C, 46)

In reference to work ethic, more than half of interviewees cited being inspired by BTS's ambitions and hard work in their own goals and endeavours. In this way, the BTS members' status as producers lends to these mythologies, but also to the accessibility of such narratives. Since they spend significantly more time interacting with the fandom and considering the amount of content they put out for fans in general, there is a higher likelihood for their roles in the production process to be revealed. My personal favourite story comes from BTS's early years and surrounds J-hope who was recruited after his dance audition. In addition to being one of the main dancers of the group, J-hope was also given the title of rapper alongside RM and Suga despite having no previous experience in rapping or music production. As one of the first to join the group, he clung to Suga a lot and would often sit squatting on the floor next to him in his studio to watch him make songs. J-hope relayed this story on the second season of *Bon Voyage*⁶(2017) and it stuck with me. I was so impressed by his commitment as an artist to learn a form of expression outside his experience and comfort, not to mention being thrown into the ranks of two seasoned rappers. This story, paired with my knowledge of J-hope's present rapping skills, not only inspired me, but increased my admiration of him tenfold. Similarly, a fan from Panama expressed how much she admired BTS's well-roundedness and active involvement

⁶ *Bon Voyage* is a reality series that follows BTS as they travel to different places in the world. Each season takes place in a different location.

in their own music as producers, songwriters, dancers, singers, and rappers, and finished the sentiment with the following:

If I tell you that I want to be an artist, before it was only the glamorous, going on stage, put nice clothes, but they changed that. They're more about the connection they have with the fans. So, if I want to be an artist, I want to be like BTS. (Interviewee P, 24)

Ultimately, what makes these mythologies accessible is that fans are able to witness BTS at work in a lot of the different content they release. This content, disseminated online for free, represents a major manifestation of BTS's relational labour and is a vehicle of reinforcement for the artist-to-fan flow of intimacy in the parasocial relationship (Baym, 2018). More recently, in the fourth season of *Bon Voyage* (2019), fans went online to discuss how RM spent their New Zealand getaway stressing over lyric-writing, highlighting his hard work and dedication. Such moments are a recurrence in BTS's content, especially in documentaries like *Burn the Stage*, which follow the group's experiences and hardships on their world tours, painting an emotionally heavier picture when it comes to mythologies of production. In their interviewees, many ARMYs expressed how much these stories inspired their work ethic, but mythologies of production inspire far more than work. Mythologies of production, in their intertextuality, inspire fans to branch out into artistic realms and instances of inspiration that they would not have considered otherwise.

In an interview for KBS's "Culture Plaza" in 2016, BTS explained how their concept for the recently released *Wings* album and for their song *Blood Sweat & Tears* was inspired by the book *Demian* by Hermann Hesse (Soompi, 2016). More recently, the albums of the *Map of the Soul* era refer to psychologist Carl Jung's theory of the map of the soul. BTS's intertextual inspirations were an important subject of discussion among interviewees. In Vancouver, I ended up conducting a joint interview with two fans who were also close friends. I had their interviews scheduled one after the other, but after they showed up to the cafe together, we decided to hold them both at once for the sake of convenience. The first

interviewee, whom I will refer to as Interviewee L, described a highly active membership in the local ARMY community and was also the one to introduce her friend (Interviewee M) to the fandom. Their interview held great insight into fan community dynamics and their resulting support systems, but for the purposes of this section, I want to focus on a specific project Interviewee L started in Vancouver.

So, the first year I was kind of nervous, like book clubs are kind of geeky and I don't know if anyone is going to want to do it. But because [BTS] uses so much literature, it was the perfect opportunity to go into literature. We read *The Art of Loving*, which was a huge inspiration for the *Love Yourself* series, right? And honestly, we call it a book club, but literally: therapy session. Therapy session, because we would just sit down and talk about what self-love means to us. (Interviewee L, 23)

When looking at fandom through a community perspective, to some degree, it seems fandom has a lot to do with boundaries and the constant work of distinguishing one's group from others. However, it is also about connections and moving through different networks of knowledge, like the ones I list here. Moving through fandom networks and encountering different artforms "indicates a multi-dimensional diffusion of fandom's affect along intertextual lines" (Hills, 2014, p. 20). In expanding relational networks, fans open themselves towards self-transformative experiences, where they encounter and elevate arts and media outside the mediums of their initial fandom. In this way, they bring attention to industrial processes without dismantling them, and instead, repurpose them into existing fandom structures. Fans isolate the affective elements of the process, including those embedded deeply within industry, and elevate them into mythologies. This is an essential element of fannish meaning making, where fans work to reinforce the very foundations of BTS's authenticity as artists by establishing affective narratives in the processes surrounding the group. Mythologies of production then become a reference point within relational networks or, more so, a steppingstone towards the reappropriation of fannish healing. In their dismantling of industry processes, fans reap the benefits of fandom within their own personal contexts, whether it be artistic inspiration, motivations in work ethic, or even evaluations in self-love. Like mythologies of production, there exist other fannish

reference points through which we can trace the personalization of healing behaviours in fandom contexts, another one of which I explore in the following section.

4.1.2. Mythologies of Place

Like production myths, places often hold myth status within fandom paratexts and represent sites of pilgrimage. Fans will visit these places because they hold significant cultural value to them, as they are directly associated with the media text. In fact, it is more pertinent to look at these places as texts themselves rather than physical spaces, as their narrative significance is what attributes them meaning (Sandvoss, 2014; Duffett, 2013). The mediation of an image by fiction refers to Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, where reputation casts a fantastical filter over an otherwise unrelated reality. Duffett describes it as a type of confirmation bias, as fans enter these "sacred spaces" already expecting them to be magical (2013). Music and spaces are similar in this way, where both lack a clear narrative unless they relate back to a pre-existing one. Like music, places can be made up of symbolic representations of affect. That is not to say there is no inherent value in places, but that they often come to hold meaning through the stories they are a part of. Narrative is bestowed upon places and music, which crystallizes their affective significance in the eyes of fans who are familiar with these stories. In her book *Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and the Selling of Place* (2018), Younjeong Oh describes how Korean cities "spacialize" the abstract affect associated to K-pop music and idols in order to attract international fan tourism. Oh argues that, historically, the urbanization projects of cities and municipalities have sought to recreate the fantastical imageries of K-pop in physical places (2018). An explicit example of this was mentioned earlier in this research, concerning how BTS were named official tourism ambassadors for Seoul, starring in advertisements and campaigns where each member represented an activity or experience unique to the city. Here, we observe the manufacturing of the Baudrillard's hyperreality, where the image-driven nature of K-pop allows cities to inject meaning into place by associating them to these images.

In music fandom, the interplay in affective experience between music and places heightens the hyperreality. The idea of heightening a hyperreality may sound redundant, however, it is relevant to note that this connection between music and place can be a mere association but can also occur as an exercise in immersion. In his chapter on music and places, Sandvoss uses the example of Ibiza and EDM music to illustrate how places become crucial aspects of fandom paratexts. Ibiza is a hub for EDM music, drawing in DJ communities and in consequence, EDM fans. Ibiza and EDM music thus inform each other in the process of fanish meaning making, leading Sandvoss to suggest that “music and place are both part of the same textual field out of which subjective fan objects are born” (2014, p. 138). Then, fan tourism transforms Ibiza into individual hyperrealities that encompass fanish affect related to EDM. In tandem, the fantasy created by the simple act of being on the island is due to the affective significance Ibiza holds as an imagined fandom object. In this way, both fan experience and the fan object (place) also inform each other’s significance by constant association. When I talk about heightened hyperreality, I imagine an experience that transcends association. I want to expand on Sandvoss’s argument by distinguishing between different experiences of hyperreality— how more intense and immersive fan experiences have the potential to elevate places and, in doing so, become fan objects themselves.

During my research in South Korea, my friend and I took a day trip to Yangju, a city in Gyeonggi province. Specifically, we wanted to visit the abandoned Iryong train station where BTS filmed their iconic *Spring Day* music video. When we arrived, there was no one else present and we were able to kneel on the tracks and sit on the bench like Kim Taehyung does in the music video. We took photos of each other recreating these scenes and while we had technically inserted ourselves into the narrative of this place, the peak of our hyperreality was when we sat down on the edge of the tracks and played the song on speaker. *Spring Day* is an emotionally loaded song, imbued with the regret and nostalgia of past friendship. Listening to it while sitting by the tracks where the music video opens, hearing the first notes of the song and envisioning the accompanying scene in which we were also physically present was transcendent in a way where memory melds with reality. The magic of the music video and the song permeated into our present moment and became

our reality. The same way fans are able to insert themselves into the semiotic narratives of music and places and give them affective relevance, we inserted ourselves directly into a hyperreality and made it our own. Both the song and the place became about us and our experience there because both song and place allow for such subjective, private experience.

Ultimately, the reasons behind our excursion related directly to BTS. However, fandom places play an important and recurring role in the expansion of relational networks. As stated, relational networks are a series of actions that, while initially driven by fandom, branch out into behaviours that are only loosely connected to the fan object. Often, places contextualize relational networks and are also the running string between degrees of separation. Basically, places as experiences within relational networks lead back to the fan object. When my friend and I reminisce about our trip to the abandoned train station, it is something we did together, and it is an experience that exists within the realm of our friendship. That experience is our own, but the Iryong station as a place is what connects it back to BTS. Again, this is an easy connection to make, where our motivations trace back from one point to another before returning to the fandom object, but the affective reach of place can withstand a lot more distance within relational networks, even when the experience itself seems almost detached.

4.1.3. ‘Namjooning’ and place within the relational network

“Namjooning” is a term created by ARMY that essentially makes a verb out of member Kim Namjoon’s name. The term was coined based on photos he shared of himself on various outings and so, “to Namjoon” means to do activities that Kim Namjoon would do. The nature of the activity does not matter, as “namjooning” encompasses a multitude of experiences. One interviewee describes it as such: “he [Namjoon] goes and does fun stuff on his own. Going out and experiencing part of the world” (Interviewee D, 24). While only two interviewees actually used the term itself, many others talked about activities in which Namjoon or other members have partaken and how they have inspired them to replicate these behaviours. Here, I use “Namjooning” and other activities to illustrate how these

replications can unravel into relational networks using places as points of reference. Multiple interviewees provided examples, but I want to cite four of them to illustrate the various degrees of mediation place holds in relational networks, starting with the interviewee whom I will refer to as Interviewee A.

When I became a BTS fan I was like I want to see this place through their eyes, not just a regular tourist's eyes. In Korea I went to the bookstore Joon always goes to. In L.A. I went to the museums Joon and Tae went to. In New York, MOMA... it was healing for me. Being there in that exact moment and knowing they were there was really comforting. (Interviewee A, 21)

The association she makes between the place and the fan object fits into Sandvoss's argument about Ibiza and EDM fans. Interviewee A visited these museums to experience what BTS experienced which, consequently, heightened her own experience by bringing her comfort. The act of seeing these places "through their eyes" creates the hyperreality that assigns an affective relevance to the museums that they would otherwise not have. Interviewees B and C draw an association similar to that of Interviewee A, but also imply a change in behaviour that, while attributable to BTS, can also exist beyond any traceability to the fan object. The quotes below are excerpts from their responses to a question that asked about the ways their fan membership informs their self-care practices:

Self-care actually not very changed. But what I watch is changed. Also, I think they influence me. I mean, I go to the art museum. I rarely go to art museums, but you know RM and V like to go... like, to go there and watch them, obviously this could be something to relieve my stress, I realise. I never thought about going to an art museum to relieve my stress... (Interviewee B, 21)

For background, Interview B is a female student I met through a friend in Seoul. I met with the two of them at a café fan-event celebrating Park Jimin's birthday, where we had the interview and also hung out afterwards. In her response to this question, she mentioned that being a fan of BTS did not change her self-care practices, as much as it did the type of

content she watches, referring to the BTS content she had mentioned earlier. She then, however, adds that she visited art museums because Kim Namjoon (RM) and Kim Taehyung (V) liked to visit them and that, in hindsight, this relieved her stress. What is relevant here are the results of this experience (i.e. stress-relief), as they relate to the experience of visiting the museum and not the fan object. BTS's influence here is circumstantial; they are the reason she visits the museum but are not the reason for the stress-relief. We can observe the experience branch off from the fan object into realms outside its influence. Interviewee C's comment branches off even further:

That's what I get affected by, their behaviour, I guess. BTS makes you move! Makes you work! Makes you want to ride a bicycle! Makes you want to go into the forest! Yeah! Makes you go visit the museum. I did twice because of him [Namjoon]. Because I love museums, but I always delay it to the top chores. But okay, I have time, two hours before class? I go to the museum. Okay, move or you will never do anything. But that's what I learned from them, very practical. (Interviewee C, 46)

Interviewee C is a university professor who replied to my call for interviewees on Twitter. We met in her office at the university where she teaches, also in Seoul. Her response implies habitual change stemming from the fan object, where BTS make her want to do things she already loves to do, but never did. She went to the museum because Kim Namjoon did, but then continued to fit trips to the museum into her schedule independently afterwards. The language she uses, mainly in terms of getting "affected by their behaviour" and "learning from them," also points to changes in behaviour. These are behaviours inspired by BTS but, ultimately, she is doing them for herself and through her own motivations.

The museum as the element of "place" can lead us back to the fan object, but physically speaking, these places are not always the same. Fans are not only visiting the museums that BTS members have visited but are visiting museums in general because the members do. This is where the network of changing behaviours emerges and also creates a break from

the fan object; again, the members have not necessarily visited these museums. Visiting museums frequently is thus a change in behaviour and separates itself from concepts of place and therefore, from the fan object. This can also be observed in the quote below from Interviewee D, who also provided the definition of “Namjooning” used in the beginning of this section:

Namjooning sometimes pops in my head, Namjooning around. He goes and does fun stuff on his own. Going out and experiencing part of the world. And not taking aesthetic photos because I’m alone and I don’t have people taking aesthetic photos of me. It’s usually... I go for walks in downtown Vancouver, a rich fancy neighbourhood near my favourite café. Or I’ll be at the mall or I’ll be at the beach. (Interviewee D, 24)

Kim Namjoon has never been to the places that Interview D lists, but the act of going out for walks and visiting places alone becomes defined by the concept of “Namjooning.” There are no fannish motivations behind these behaviours, they don’t connect back to BTS beyond the simple fact that Kim Namjoon also enjoys going out and exploring on his own. Yet, the fan still makes the connection to the fan object. In terms of the relational network, Interviewee D’s example offers a case where both the behaviour and the place relate back to the fan object through the fan’s imagination alone. I distinguish between the degrees and reiterations of distance within the relational network, as it is in these realms that healing takes place. Before moving on to discussions of healing, I want to conclude the interactions of place and fan objects in relational networks with one last example.

I started this section with a quote from Interviewee A that drew a foundational connection between fans, places, and BTS. When talking about the museums, she did not refer to the visits as “Namjooning,” but she did mention the term elsewhere in her interview. Now, I want to return to Interviewee A, specifically to her use of “Namjooning” and how it demonstrates the development of relational networks in a fascinating way. When answering a question about her preferred self-care practices, she brought up the following:

And seeing Namjoon “namjooning” I love that. I'm into that. When I was a kid back in the Philippines I would do it with my cousins. Back in the Philippines we had a hacienda with a tree house, and we would go there and spend time with each other and enjoy nature. And seeing Namjoon do it reminds me of those times. Because obviously I can't do it here, we're in the city, it's hard to go into the country every once in a while. (Interviewee A, 21)

The affective relevance of “namjooning” embodies a nostalgia only she has experienced, where Kim Namjoon’s activities remind her of activities from her childhood. The distance between personal experience and the fan object is especially prominent in this example, as the behaviour the fan describes is a memory from a time preceding their knowledge of BTS. The fan draws the connection between their memory and the fan object, but the memory itself has nothing to do with BTS. While this is a unique example— as it implies the backwards temporal reach of relational networks— it helps illustrate the overall concept of relational networks presented by the other interviewees. I argue that, with enough relational distance, fans reclaim once-fannish behaviours as purely their own. The connection this fan made between “namjooning” and their past is evidence of this phenomenon; the fan makes the connection themselves, but it is impossible to trace BTS’s influence to a time where they did not even exist as a group yet. The experiences of other interviewees reflect the experience of this fan, with the difference that they are moving forward in time from their encounter with the fan object.

4.1.4. Relational Networks: Healing in Good Company

Hills (2014) argues that fandom often involves the establishment of boundaries but adds that it is also about making connections by navigating the networks of knowledge embedded in fandom. The encounter of different artforms and media through fandom demonstrates “the extent to which popular music fandom is rarely something that’s singularly artist-centered or singularly object-oriented” (Hills, 2014, p. 32). His implied expansion of music fandom’s paratextual reach overlaps with the private affective narratives that Nussbaum (2011) ascribes to music. When fans reclaim and rewrite musical

paratexts, the semiotics of music are preserved across relational networks. Fans build their own narratives within relational networks and use these narratives as a personal paratext that stretch past the music fandom paratext. Essentially, fans do not attach themselves to the fan object's narrative nor do they insert themselves into an existing one but make their own narratives to which they attach the fan object. Not only does this mythologize the fan object further but adheres its mythology to the lives of fans.

In combining Hills's definition of the pop music paratext and Nussbaum's approach to musical affect, my goal was to outline the properties of relational networks and how they are formed in order to contextualize fannish healing. Relational networks present ideal conditions for personalized healing through fandom, as they are both a creation of the individual fan while also belonging to a collective imaginary. Differentiating between relational networks and fandom networks is crucial in order to emphasize the independence of fannish healing from the fan object. Fans' healing processes are not reliant on BTS, as much as they are inspired by them. Therefore, overturning causational understandings of fan behaviours that rely on simple associations to the fan object is a necessary preface to fannish healing.

I used production processes and places as traceable points within relational networks, but this can be achieved using other elements from the fannish paratext. Interpersonal relationships present another traceable point and were a recurring theme throughout interviews. Friendships that were formed through a mutual interest in BTS were cited as one of the most important outcomes of being part of the fandom. Many interviewees specified that, while these friendships began in a fandom context, they are certainly not limited to fandom and that these support systems exist beyond BTS. While these are traceable themes that came out of fans' stories that I identify as potentially healing behaviours, I want to draw attention to the concept of healing itself as a point of reference that many interviewees brought up. That is, due to the intentions and themes of BTS's music and messaging, healing becomes not only an underlying phenomenon in BTS fan membership, but a point of reference of its own in fans' relational networks. Healing becomes a goal that fans strive for in the context of their fan membership, but achieve

through their own means, independently from their relationship to the fan object. It is important to note that more than half of interviewees cited BTS having “helped” them in one way or another and so I want to outline what this form of “help” entails in the context of relational networks using three quotes from three different interviewees.

They really helped me. I think seeing them going through the same things as us. It’s not like they love themselves. They’re going through the same journey and talking about this journey with their music. So, people who are going through the same journey as them– to have company for this journey. So, they really helped me. I feel like I don’t know... It’s like they’re just people like us. And seeing them, people who I admire so much, going through the same thing as me. It's like, oh I’m... yeah, I don’t know how to describe it. But it’s really good, it’s like you’re not alone. (Interviewee E, 21)

In reference to the *Love Yourself* campaign and albums, Interviewee E describes BTS’s help as having “company for the journey,” which not only underlines BTS’s relatability through musical affect, as previously discussed, but also highlights two other points. First, fans understand the properties and limits of BTS’s role in their healing. Second, even when acknowledging how BTS have helped them, fans are aware of their active role in their own healing. Here, the use of “help” should not be misconstrued for passivity; fans are responsible for their own healing journeys or in this case, journey towards self-love. As is described in this quote and, consequently, in the title of this subsection, BTS represent a solution to feelings of loneliness and are best understood as “company” on a healing journey and not the catalysts. Such an understanding is reinforced more explicitly in the quote below.

I never thought I was good enough compared to other people. I was always like, this other person is so much better than me, I’m not good at one particular thing. Why can’t I be super talented, or super smart, or this or that. Oh, yeah! [BTS helped] a lot. And therapy. I want to stress that BTS with the assistance of

professionals really helped with that. And myself! I'll credit myself!
(Interviewee G, 22)

Once again, we notice the use of “help” in relation to BTS’s hand in healing but understand this help as tangential to the proactivity of the fan themselves. In terms of relational networks, I want to stress once more that the healing is taking place outside of fannish contexts, despite its connection to the fan object. Interviewee G acknowledges professional help, BTS, and herself as actors in her healing journey, and while I do not wish to remove BTS’s influence from the narrative, the influence of therapy certainly exists independently from her fan membership. This differentiation, however, puts into question BTS’s role. BTS are peripheral actors in fans’ healing, which occurs independently from the fan object in the context of relational networks. In describing the implications of this periphery, one fan proposed the following imagery:

It’s like someone holding your hand in the dark. So, it’s not like they’re dragging you into the light, or splashing the light on you, but there’s a hand there and that hand being there is enough for you to take a tentative step forward. (Interviewee L, 23)

This quote inspired the title of this research, as it summarizes the healing model I propose here. The darkness Interviewee L refers to above was a constant theme in the interviews; I had the privilege of hearing about the hardship interviewees faced and many of these stories were difficult for them to recount. In all cases, BTS represented some form of solace for the fan going through these negative experiences, which makes it easy to come to the conclusion that these fans see BTS as some sort of solution to or distraction from their problems. In reality, however, these stories demonstrate how the healing relationship between fans and BTS is not built on dependence, but a mutual understanding to lean on the other to achieve well-being. As Interviewee L points out, BTS are not the solution— they do not even lead to the solution— but represent a form of support in fans’ personal journeys. For these fans, the “tentative step forward” was taken in the context of their fannish involvement and their parasocial relationship with BTS, but

as is observable through relational networks, not every step that follows remains in this realm, as fans internalize fanish healing into personalized healing behaviours.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

In April 2019, BTS performed their songs *Boy with Luv* and *Mic Drop* on the popular American comedy skit show *Saturday Night Live* (SNL). While their appearance on the show was limited to their guest performance, the episode's accompanying skit starring actress Emma Stone focused on the group's fan base, ARMY. The skit opened with a group of teenage girls at a sleepover dressed in BTS merchandise, putting up BTS posters on the bedroom walls. Overall, the skit painted an infantilizing picture of fans, pigeonholing them into the character of "screaming teenage girl." In portraying teenage fans, the actresses in the skit spoke in overdone, childish voices. Fans on Twitter were quick to express their displeasure with the skit, many citing their adult age and careers to emphasize the diversity in the fandom. But even within the questionable portrayal, one line in particular was subject to unanimous fan critique. When Emma Stone's character's father walks into the room, she stops him at the threshold with the classic: "no boys allowed."

Prior to the establishment of fan studies as a discipline, scholarship surrounding fans understood fandom as abnormal behaviour, as even the earliest iterations of parasocial relationships approached the concept as a sign of interpersonal and social shortcomings in a person. While the first wave of fan studies that began in the late 1980s, as well as the waves that followed, worked to dismantle these stigmas and misconceptions, popular media and general public alike continue to uphold pathologizing and infantilizing perceptions of fandom. Mainly female fan bases, but boy band fans especially, have dealt with unsavory portrayals of themselves and of their communities. The SNL skit is only one of example of such an instance alongside countless other terms like "crazy" or "insane" used by journalists and talk show hosts to describe BTS's fanbase. These terms, while not necessarily used with ill-intent, can be insidious when considering the history of how we have discussed female fans in the past.

Much like other work produced by fan scholarship, this research also reframes pathologizing rhetoric surrounding boy band fandom through more accurate analyses of some of forms of fannish expression that are deemed to be extreme. It's important to contextualize the motivations and dedication of fans in a way that is not reductive and instead, elevates their fannish expression in order to highlight the complex affective structures in which it exists. This research subverts pathologizing narratives surrounding female fan bases and specifically, BTS's fan base, by approaching the very forms of affective expressions that tend to be stigmatized and instead, presenting them as healing behaviours.

Additionally, in light of recent shifts in fan studies perspectives, the model of fannish healing proposed in this research contributes to the new directions taken towards the individual fan among fan scholarship. Relational networks, as a conceptualization of healing that emphasizes the reappropriation of fannish healing into individual behaviours of healing, underlines the relevance of the individual fan as a subject of study in a predominantly community-oriented discipline. By focusing on individual fan experiences, relational networks allow us to examine how fans go to use fandom beyond fannish context and in their everyday lives. In this way, relational networks not only outline healing practices in the individual fan, but in the fan as an individual. More importantly, these processes of internalization are not underlying, but occur consciously and with purpose among fans; fans are active in their healing journeys and in their use of fandom as a healing tool. In this way, literal manifestations of Kim Namjoon's invitation to "use him" and "use BTS" to find self-love are easily identifiable in fans' relational networks. These instances of "use" are crucial not only in tracing relational networks, but in understanding fan motivations on individual levels.

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Appendix.

Interview Questions

- 1- How old are you and how long have you been a fan of BTS?
- 2- How were you introduced to BTS? How did you become a fan of BTS?
- 3- Why are you a fan of BTS? What do you like about them?
- 4- In what ways are you an active member of the BTS fandom? How do you participate in the BTS fandom?
- 5- How does BTS or being a fan of BTS influence your daily life?
- 6- In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of being a BTS fan, if any?
- 7- How do you benefit from being a BTS fan?
- 8- Does BTS influence your mental health or well-being in any way? If so, in what ways?
- 9- Similarly, does being a BTS fan influence your mental health or well-being in any way? If so, in what ways?
- 10- In your opinion, what is self-care? How have you, personally, practice self-care in the past?
- 11- Does your fan membership inform your self-care practices? If so, in what ways? If the case, how have your self-care practices changed in light of your fan membership?
- 12- Do you have any final thoughts or questions?