FROM MUSIC GROUP FANDOM TO FAN FICTION:

SOCIO-TECHNOLOGICAL BONDS OF THE SOUTH KOREAN BAND, BTS

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ABSTRACT

From Music Group Fandom to Fan Fiction:
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This study deals with the emotional field between public figures and their fandoms. Following the example of the South Korean band BTS and their fanbase ARMY, the thesis explores the 'social' tie between the virtual representation of public figures with their following. May their virtual relationship be viewed as a form of social relationship? Through what means do these emotional ties develop? In what forms do they manifest themselves? Through a theoretical analysis that takes interest in the quasi-dyadic structure of the relationship between the producers of the content and the receivers, this thesis chases the answers to these questions. In order to really grasp this relationship, the band's brand is explored in the historical context of the South Korean popular music industry. Then, the demographical profile of the fanbase is visited. Finally, Weverse, a platform frequented by the band's fanbase, is put under the microscope. Through the reviews of a sample of posts from the platform, the study reveals that the band members are illustrated to be role models by their fanbase, to be friends, love interests and confidants.

The thesis also visits Wattpad Turkey, a popular platform in which a smaller group from the fanbase publishes and accesses fan fiction written about the band members. A sample of books is selected from the website which narrates the adventures of heterosexual couples and involves sexual themes. The sample is reviewed to illuminate how gender, love, relationships, and sex are depicted in the Turkish corpus of BTS fan fiction. In the sample, a very clear juxtaposition between the ideal type of the male lead and the ideal type of the female lead is revealed. It is noted that in the relationship of the leading couple, a particularly violent 'social form' of domination/subordination prevails. The study also follows how the violence embedded in this relationship extends to the leading couple's sex life and manifests itself in the vivid descriptions of sexual assault. Finally, the very vibrant anxiety over first-time sexual experiences and the blurry depictions of consent throughout the sample is discussed in relation to contemporary daily life.

ÖZET

Müzik Grubu Hayranlığından Hayran Kurguya:
Güney Koreli Müzik Grubu BTS'in Sosyo-Teknolojik Bağları

Bu çalışma, ünlü figürler ve hayranları arasındaki duygusal alanı ele almaktadır. Tez, Güney Koreli müzik grubu BTS ve grubun hayran kitlesi ARMY örneğini takip ederek, ünlü figürlerin sanal temsilleri ve söz konusu figürlerle takipçileri arasındaki 'sosyal' bağı incelemektedir. Bu sanal ilişkiyi bir tür sosyal ilişki olarak ele almak mümkün müdür? Bu duygusal bağlar hangi yollardan geçerek meydana geliyor? Hangi biçimlerde tezahür ediyorlar? Bu çalışma, hem içerik üreticilerini, hem de içerik tüketicilerini dikkate alan çift odaklı bir teorik yapı yardımıyla, bu soruların peşinden gidiyor. Grubun markası, söz konusu ilişkiyi bütün derinliği ile kavrayabilmek adına Güney Kore'deki güncel popüler müzik endüstrisi bağlamında değerlendiriliyor. Sonrasında, grubun hayran kitlesinin demografik profiline değiniliyor. Son olarak, grubun hayran kitlesi tarafından sıklıkla ziyaret edilen sanal bir platform olan Weverse, mikroskop altına yerleştiriliyor. Bu platformda yapılan paylaşımlardan meydana gelen bir örneklemde, grup üyelerinin hayranlar tarafından birer rol model, birer arkadaş, ilgi duyulan birer kişi ve birer sırdaş gibi resmedildiği görülüyor.

Bu çalışma, aynı zamanda grup hakkında yazılan hayran kurgu kitaplarının paylaşıldığı popüler bir platform olan Wattpad Türkiye'yi de ziyaret ediyor. Özellikle heteroseksüel çiftlerin maceralarını konu alan ve cinsel öğeler içeren kitaplardan seçilmiş bir örneklem aracılığı ile bu tez, grup hakkında yazılmış Türkçe hayran kurgu külliyatında cinsiyet, aşk, ilişkiler ve seks konularının nasıl ele alındığı inceliyor. Bu örneklem, kadın baş kahraman ve erkek baş kahraman arasındaki karşıtlığı berrak bir biçimde gözler önüne seriyor. Kitabın konu aldığı çiftin ilişkisinde ise, şiddet dolu bir tahakküm/tabiiyet biçimi olduğu görülüyor. Bu şiddet, çiftin cinsel hayatına da taşarak, cinsel saldırı motifleri şeklinde tezahür ediyor. Son olarak bu kitaplarda gözlemlenen ve ilk cinsel deneyimler etrafına topaklanan kaygılara değiniliyor ve rızanın bulanık tasvirlerine dikkat çekiliyor. Bu detaylar, çalışmada gündelik yaşam ile bağlantılı olarak tartışılıyor.

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To my friend,
To my light,
To my love,

To my grandmother, Mualla.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> It was at a soirée in the Chaussée d'Antin. A radiant soirée, and none of the traditional ingredients of social pleasure were missing: There was enough light to illuminate one, a sufficiency of mirrors to permit one to view one's self, enough people to crowd one's self warm, and enough sugar-water and ice to cool one's self off. They commenced with music. Franz Liszt allowed himself to be driven to the piano, stroked back the hair from his genial brow, and delivered one of his most brilliant battles. The keys seemed to bleed. … The whole room was filled with paling faces, heaving bosoms, faint breathing between the pauses, and, finally, tumultuous applause. The women always act as though intoxicated when Liszt has played something for them. With madder joy, they now abandoned themselves to the dance, these Willis of the salon, and it was with difficulty that I managed to make my escape into an adjoining room.
>
> —"*The Florentine Nights*," Heinrich Heine

At the height of his days, Franz Liszt was nothing less of a rock star. The Hungarian composer drew large groups of passionate admirers with his magnetic stage presence, spellbinding the spectators with his ferocious playing. They say women fainted during his performances, surrounded the pianist, attacking him almost, in hopes of grabbing a glove, a lock out of his hair; some admirers picked his cigarette butts off of the ground and carried them around in their cleavage. (Walker, 1983) This highly emotive, visceral, galvanic behavior, or "vulgar displays of hero worship," (Walker, 1983) as many people thought at the time, was strange to Liszt's contemporaries; they did not understand it. Heinrich Heine, a famous critique of his time, called the phenomenon 'Lisztomania' (Heine et al., 1922) and after making a few inquiries to a physician, he abruptly concluded: "The solution of this question belongs to the domain of pathology." (Heine et al., 1922)

The notion of 'illness' embedded in this deduction is reflective of a prevalent perspective about female excitement towards male performers. A hundred years have

passed, and this time, the Beatles took over the world by a storm that was called 'the Beatlemania.' Overcome with emotion, fan girls reportedly shrieked their lungs off in the presence of their idols, wet their pants, or simply collapsed. (Ehrenreich et al., 1992) At the time, the American public was terrified of the wildfire the band ignited and viewed the movement to be "an affliction." (Ehrenreich et al., 1992) Today, the worldwide 'K-pop' explosion evokes an almost identical reservation in groups who are strangers to the culture. Behind this phenomenon, however, lie fascinating ways crowds bond with famous people.

The overarching goal of this project is to follow the group formation around the virtual representations of famous figures and to lay down the cartography of this very process, from the 'formation' of the famous figure to it being received and later repurposed by the fandom, phase by phase. In this study, I unfold the various layers of the relationship between the South Korean boy group BTS[1] and their fanbase ARMY for demonstrative purposes. The study consists of two main chapters: The 1st of these chapters deals with the highly emotional, quasi-dyadic, socio-technological bond between the band members and their fanbase and questions this bond's place in contemporary social theory. The 2nd of these chapters takes a deeper look into the vivid works of fan fiction written by the fanbase about the band members and follows the revealed patterns of gender stereotypes, of stereotypical relationships, and of sexual scripts in these novels. While each chapter deals with a different feature of this relationship and a particular foible of this particular case, they come together for the purpose of demonstrating the sociological relevance of this relationship.

[1] The band has debuted with the Korean name, 'Bangtan Sonyeondan' (방탄 소년단), which roughly translates to 'bulletproof boy scouts.' In the international market, the band's name is very often abbreviated as BTS.

1.1 The Framework: Semantic Taxidermies of the Famous Figure

The focal subject of this study stands at the intersection of various conversations about the entertainment industry, about the contemporary fan experience, about cyberspace, about fan networks, about gender, about emotion, and about sexuality. In a quest for a way out of the chaos, I have outlined a walking tour of the field which assembles relevant information under four different stops and explores how a flesh and bone person ends up receiving fame, earns the affection of thousands, sometimes sticks to daily thoughts, to fantasy and eventually becomes the lead character in a work of fiction. It, of course, will not be able to represent the nuances of individual fan experiences involved in this journey; however, outlining a system that is at least partially representative of the field allows the study to make beneficial abstractions and eases up the process of making analyses.

While building this system, I was heavily inspired by Roland Barthes' concept of 'the myth.' Throughout the 1950s, Roland Barthes wrote an array of essays about various aspects of everyday French life, and these essays were later compiled in the book, *Mythologies* (1957). In the book, Barthes commented on several products of mass culture, working with an analytical tool of his creation: Myth. Understanding the path through which a myth comes to being is helpful for the classifications I make moving forward, and to do just that, one must travel a few decades back and review the concept of 'the sign,' a tool Roland Barthes borrows from Ferdinand de Saussure.

In the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, the sign has two aspects: It has 'a signifier,' a form that takes on meaning, and 'a signified' that is the meaning. (Saussure, 2011) To represent the signified that is a metal, hollow circle with a shiny

piece of stone on top of it, for instance, the English language tucks this meaning in the acoustic image pronounced as ‘diamond ring,’ which becomes the signifier. Together, they make up the sign.

The original perspective was a revolutionary contribution to the field of linguistics; however, the model is simple and explanatory and applicable to other fields that are entangled with the questions related to meanings. It is at that exact point that Roland Barthes takes the opportunity to further develop the model to make it applicable to the products of mass culture and employs it to systematize his social critique. Thus, it morphs into the following model: (Barthes, 1957)

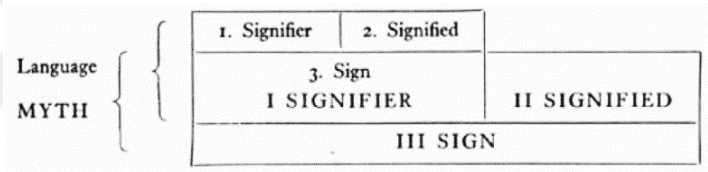


Figure 1:Reprinted from Mythologies by Roland Barthes, 1957, Paris, France: Éditions du Seuil.

If the example of ‘the diamond ring’ were to be followed after adopting the perspective of *Mythologies*, for instance, the sign that is the diamond ring would take on a new signified, say, the promise of eternal togetherness of a spouse and morph into a new sign. However, there is more: For explanatory purposes, I am trying to replicate the perspective of Roland Barthes, here, and I assume that the French philosopher would likely bring the critique of the petit-bourgeois ideology, of their morality, of the institution of marriage, of the normalization of monogamy to this double-baked sign that is the diamond ring. This is ‘myth.’

In this project, I do not borrow the concept of myth from Roland Barthes. I do not move forward with his premise that petit-bourgeois culture is the wolf in the

universal nature's clothing, I do not follow through with his attempt at "an ideological critique bearing on the language of mass culture." (Barthes, 1957) But, I do adopt his attentiveness to 'collective representations.' After all, the famous figure, a product of mass culture, stands at the heart of this project. It's, indeed, a collective representation and clearly, there are meanings attached to it. These meanings spread, build consensus, the famous figure is often drained of them, charged with new meanings on the way. And just like Roland Barthes, I, too, will unfold this journey under several levels.

The walking tour consists of four stops. For illustrative purposes, I will follow the journey of a selected famous figure in this section and explore how Jeon Jung-kook, the youngest member of BTS is perceived and repurposed by the fandom as the man makes his way through these levels. As he flows[2] from one level to the other, Jeon Jung-kook is filtered out of some of the properties he holds and charged with new properties, instead.

At the 1st level, we begin with the flesh and bone person. This is a complex human being with blessings and flaws who eats, sleeps and lives their everyday life. This level is relatively opaque, because it's impossible for the public to completely, truly 'know' this person. Thus, the 1st level is the black box of the study. I call this level *The Human*. This is where Jeon Jung-kook leads his life, outside of the public gaze.

As *The Human* steps under the spotlight, he also passes through a filter and leaves some of his personal qualities behind. The intentional and unintentional interventions of the job description of a famous figure sift away some bits of Jeon

[2] I describe the celebrity image in liquid form in the following paragraphs with the sole purpose of making it easier to visualize the process.

Jung-kook. *The Human* lends his body to his public representation along with the remaining bits of his personality, his past; with the remaining bits of himself. At the 2nd level, *The Human* becomes a novel being, a virtual representation: I call this level *The Persona*. Various interrupters pour new properties to *The Persona* and determine who Jeon Jung-kook will become under the spotlight: There already exist, for example, an industry and a culture surrounding Korean pop music which precede Jeon Jung-kook's debut as an idol, which create certain boundaries and expectations as for what an idol is and what it is not. The band's company is also determinative of who *The Persona* will become: HYBE Corporation mentors Jeon Jung-kook, manages him and gives him a platform to showcase his talents. Jung-kook is coiffed a certain way, dressed a certain way, styled a certain way; he is featured, framed and highlighted in a certain way, and not the other. At the 2nd level, Jeon Jung-kook incarnates stardom and morphs into his *Persona*, Jung Kook[3] of BTS. *The Persona* emulates a certain perfection: Jung Kook is a conventionally attractive, young idol who is very likable. He is a very talented vocalist and a dancer; he raps, draws, boxes, he does it all.

Once *The Persona* oozes through the screens of the viewers, he begins traveling in fan networks. He, again, passes a filter: This time, it is the public opinion that sifts away some bits of Jung Kook and attributes new properties to this virtual being. Jung Kook, of course, is perceived in various different ways by the band's fanbase; however, I select a sole example for illustrative purposes: The fandom has given Jung Kook a loving nickname to represent the soft, cute, doe-eyed side to the idol: Kookie. This side of Jung Kook is also heightened by the band's company, for

[3] Albeit the same with the artist's personal name, Jeon Jung-kook's stage name is, in fact, stylized in this distinctive way.

instance, through his portrayal in the variety shows; however, the ideal type of Kookie truly comes to life and solidifies while being tossed around in the networks of the fanbase. Little clips of Jung-kook smiling with heart-eyes, petting a lamb, or lovingly hugging the other band members circulate on the Internet, drawing people's attention to a singular side of Jung Kook, making Kookie a dominant narrative of who Jeon Jungkook actually 'is.' This is the 3rd level, the fanbase's mental representation of the famous figure. I call it, *The Idol*.

Lastly, a narrower group of people who occupy the intersection between the BTS ARMY and the fan fiction[4] subculture takes over *The Idol*, and the famous figure passes through their filter, for the last time in the system. This group borrows the mental representation of Jeon Jung-kook and employs him as the lead character in their books. Fan fiction has a history of at least forty years, and inevitably, there exists a longstanding tradition that provides the authors with certain fictional molds. The avid fan fiction reader is familiar with certain prompts, certain character stereotypes and certain storylines. It is not uncommon to find Jeon Jung-kook assuming his new fictional form within these molds. There also exist trends that come and go in the world of fan fiction, trends that may determine who Jeon Jung-kook will become in a fan book: One year, vampires swarm fan fiction websites in the form of Jeon Jung-kook, accordingly with the contemporary popular fictional tropes outside of the world of fan fiction, for example, while the other year, disturbed chief executive officers with a dark past claim the idol's body and invade the very same fan fiction platforms. Finally, websites that feature fan works develop different textures from one another over time, attracting authors and readers of different

[4] I explain what fan fiction is in better depth in Chapter 3; however, briefly, the expression refers to any type of fictional work written by fans about a source text, a book, a movie or a celebrity figure.

groups, different tastes around them, building particular subcultures which affect the prospects of fan works. All of this intermixes with the cultural background the author brings to the table, their personal experiences and personal literary decisions, sometimes affected by the expectations of the readers, and a story comes to life. I call this 4th level, *the Lead*. A popular example of Jeon Jung-kook as *The Lead* would be the mafia boss Jung-kook for the contemporary Turkish fan fiction, violent and broken, who is also the jealous, yet protective boyfriend of the female lead. *The Lead* concludes the walking tour.[5]

1.2 The Outline of the Thesis

Now that I have unfolded the field through a brief theoretical outline, it's time to locate and excavate the relevant points of the phenomenon.

The 1st thing I want to do with this study is to unfold the quasi-dyadic relationship between the famous figure and the fan, because I believe this relationship playfully confronts possibly the most fundamental question of the discipline: What is social? The seven band members address crowds that consist of countless people, somehow infiltrate their daily lives and become virtual acquaintances for a lot of the members of the fanbase. Yet, the band members do not personally know the majority of their followers. This highly emotive interplay between the famous figure and the fan, however, these intangible experiences have

[5] Because I wanted to make the field known without explaining the heavy details which are irrelevant to the study, I have oversimplified things. In reality, the relationship between the famous figure and the fanbase is much more elusive and much more convoluted, of course. For example, my progressive recount of the events gives the impression that I am doing a diachronic analysis of the phenomenon; however, there's clearly a synchronic state to the events: For example, how the famous figure is perceived and received by the fanbase simultaneously trains how the famous figure will be presented to the public.

perfectly tangible, fascinating, real-life consequences. Thus, the question remains: What is social?

Henceforth, I will lean on a simple definition proposed by Georg Simmel: “A society exists where several individuals enter into interaction.” (Simmel, 2009) Indeed, sociology rightfully takes great interest in structures, in behavioral patterns, in traditions, in values, in influences, in decisions; but there lies something much more urgent under all of this, something that places it all in the social context: Interaction. Every individual is determined by their anatomical and biochemical compositions to a degree, their behavior influenced by their unique psychology; everybody lives within the borders delineated by their class, their gender and their ethnicity. We are products of the structures that process us, we absorb the traditions, the values around us, our choices are guided by our experiences, and all of this irrefutably influences the ways we socialize. However, none of this becomes ‘social’ until two individuals interact with each other. Interaction is the electricity sparking between neurons, the blood traveling in between organs; interaction is what breathes life into systems, what renders them social.

But, what constitutes an interaction, and what does not? Where do we draw the line? If a politician is giving out a speech in front of a crowd, for example, does the interplay between the speaker and the listener stop being social, because it does not involve the two parties’ mutual recognition of each other? Yet, the biochemical machine that is the human body of the listener still does the looking and the seeing, the hearing and the listening, the receiving and the perceiving, the feeling and the bonding. If so, may the tie between the famous figure and the fanbase be dealt with from a sociological perspective?

That's Chapter 2: Following this question, I review the relationship between the virtual representation of the band members and the fanbase through a quasi-dyadic structure. I was influenced by Robert K. Merton's *Mass Persuasion* (1946) while building this structure, particularly by the book's bifocal perspective which takes both the famous figure and their listeners into account while exploring their relationship. In this chapter, I dive deep into the band's brand to really grasp their alluring power. Then, I review the demographic profile of their fanbase, ARMY. Finally, I visit Weverse, a virtual platform frequented by the fanbase to explore the ways the fanbase bonds with the band.

The 2nd thing I want to do with this study is to wring out the fan books written by the fanbase about the famous figure and to extract the clues they shelter inside about how the authors perceive the rules of their social surroundings. These books provide a rare opportunity: Fan fiction authors typically do not make financial profit in exchange for their labor, and therefore are somewhat absolved from "the market incentives that drive commercial novels." (Fast et al., 2016) I expect to find raw, unfiltered expressions in these books that will allow me to deeply understand the fictional worlds the fan fiction community prefers to create and prefers to devour.

That's Chapter 3: I study a selection from the fan books written by Turkish fan fiction writers about the band members. In these books, fan fiction writers borrow 'the boys' from the fandom, break the famous figure down and build him back up as a fictional character. While reconstructing the characters, however, the writers filter out several features of the band member and fill him up with new features. I am interested in what this transformation entails, and my 1st goal is to have a grasp at that fantasy. My 2nd goal is to review the romantic relationships the authors build in their fictional universes and the social rules that they are bound with.

Lastly, my 3rd goal is to reveal the correlations between these fictional choices and contemporary Turkish daily life.

CHAPTER 2

SOCIO-TECHNOLOGICAL BONDS OF BTS

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 A Call, An Answer

It was a day out of the ordinary at Columbia Broadcasting System. Kate Smith, a famous radio personality of the time was at the booth that day for 18 hours, and in repeated intervals, she asked the listeners[6] to buy war bonds. She spoke briefly about this subject 65 different times throughout the broadcast. At times with a voice of honey, at times with a voice of fire, she repeated and repeated the same message. People listened. On September 21, 1943, Kate Smith's drive collected a groundbreaking 39,000,000$ of bond pledges. (Merton, 1971)

What happened that day, according to Robert K. Merton, was a very obvious and a very effective example of 'mass persuasion.' In the book of the same name, Merton unloaded everything documented about that day on the table: He collected Kate Smith's monologues, lead detailed interviews with 100 people who listened to the broadcast that day and supported the study via 978 polling interviews. In dissecting the correlations between the three types of raw material, the book hounded the answer to a very straightforward question: Why was the broadcast of Kate Smith so persuasive?

Albeit some of the earliest examples of sociological research in the field, *Mass Persuasion* (1946) ended up changing the course for mass communication studies. It was a very neat, very sturdy study, indeed; yet, the reason why it became a

[6] At the time, Kate Smith weekly attracted an estimated group of 21,000,000 listeners with a daytime program, and 23,000,000 with an evening program.

landmark lied in the novelty of the perspective it was written from: Previously, sociologists viewed mass media to be a delivery system of messages from the powerful to the powerless, and solely took interest in the content of propaganda. (Morley, 1992) While Robert K. Merton was also interested in propaganda, he did extend the perspective and tilted the lens back to the receivers for the very first time, asking: What is the effect of the message? To properly study the process of persuasion, Merton concluded, a bifocal perspective was needed in which the messages and the effects of mass media were simultaneously attended to.[7]

2.1.2 The Moving Power of the Band

Let's travel forward for about 70 years, to a different day, with a different speaker. This time, the event is not a radio broadcast, but a livestream. In front of the camera, this time, is a young man in an oversized t-shirt, comfortably sitting in front of a bed by himself. (BTS, 2019) For almost an hour, Jeon Jung-kook speaks of daily things, smiles, makes jokes and answers a few messages from the viewers.[8] In the passing, the youngest member of BTS grabs a bottle, uncorks it and pours himself a glass of red wine. The very next day, that particular brand of Merlot is sold out for the entirety of South Korea. (Koreaboo, 2019b)

This is not out of the ordinary for any member of BTS. The band possesses some kind of a moving power, and it has long been reflected in the financial effects of the band: Sometimes, this power is exercised, like the time BTS endorsed Hyundai's new vehicle, and Hyundai was left "literally struggling to keep up with demand" following their support. (Koreaboo, 2019a) Other times, this quality

[7] Interestingly enough, Merton's influence overtook his advice, paving the way for a tradition that was exclusively interested in the receivers of mass media. (Morley, 1992)

[8] Currently, there are more than 188,000,000 views on the livestream.

proclaims its independence from the band's will. Just like bottles of wine, BTS members have accidentally sold out lip balms, sunglasses, t-shirts, trunks, shoes, and even fabric softeners just by simply using the products. (Lyons, 2021) Their donation to the Black Lives Matter movement worth 1,000,000$ was matched by the fandom in the following 24 hours. (Rolli, 2020) BTS brought in 4,650,000,000$ to South Korea in 2018 alone, and the revenues are expected to only grow in the years to come. (Buchholz, 2019)

2.1.3 The Parallels Between the Two Broadcasts

There exist several parallels between the 21.09.1946 broadcast of Kate Smith and the 16.06.2019 broadcast of Jeon Jung-kook. Both days are well-documented, real-life events in which a single individual speaks to millions and millions of people with the facilitation of technological devices and out of which an observable effect crystallizes. Yet, there is a fundamental difference between the two broadcasts: While Kate Smith was actively trying to convince people to do something, Jeon Jung-kook was not. While the former broadcast conveyed a message, irrefutable and clear, the latter broadcast did not. The broadcast of Jeon Jung-kook was not at all an attempt at persuasion. Yet, albeit accidental and directionless, it did lead to a very obvious and a very strong effect.

Why?

Let's leave this question on the table, and let it breathe for the while.

2.1.4 The Gifts

Let's travel back to a different day: It must've been a busy season for the workers at the postal services at Seoul, with gift boxes raining from all across the country,

overflowing to the same address. The first box on the move nests an expensive Rolex watch inside, and the latest Apple phone is hiding in the other. Some boxes are filled with designer clothes and shoes; and in the last box, there is a bar of gold. (Koreaboo, 2018b) It's September 1, 2017, Jeon Jung-kook's birthday; and his admirers have certainly pushed the boat out to spoil their beloved idol.

Again, this is not out of the ordinary for any member of BTS. A lot of people devote their personal capital, be it time, money, or effort, in the name of being a fan; this fact is illustrated in the various things ARMY do for the band members: Some members of the fanbase buy thoughtful birthday presents for the band members, for example, while others form flesh barricades at the airport to protect the band members from being trampled. (Koreaboo, 2018a)

Why?

Now, there are two questions on the table. And perhaps, the two questions cross paths, leading to the very same answer.

2.2 The Theoretical Structure of the Chapter

It's clear that a lot of people do not solely follow the band, but are also invested in the band members at a personal level. This relation, this 'relationship' holds the key to the questions on the table. Therefore, a theoretical construction that highlights this very relationship is vital to the project. Let's rewind back to the very beginning and build it from scratch.

2.2.1 The Persona

At first, there is a virtual being that is the 'broadcasted' version of the band members. It is essential to separate this being from the flesh and bone human beings

who take on the idol profession. This is not to imply that the broadcasted versions of the idols must be deeply fake, but to account for the interventions inevitably altering the public representations of the band members: It's humanly impossible for seven individuals to make the personal acquaintance of every person in their massive, massive fanbase. So, the band members 'speak to' their fanbase mainly via technological devices. This facilitation, mediation and the inevitable intervention of the technological devices have several consequences for the public representation of the band members. To begin with, it makes the public representation of the band members intermittent: The band members write a message, post a photograph, give out an interview, appear on a variety show, tape a live performance, do a livestream, and go back to their days. The virtual version of the band members, on the other hand, cuts off exactly then and there when the particular media performance comes to an end. Furthermore, the band members, and by extension, their company chiefly determine what to present to the public eye, and what not to. Therefore, the public representation of the band members lacks a lot of the original features of the band members. Lastly, technology possesses the ability to 'frame' the idol in a certain way: A skilled videographer, for example, may light and place their subjects in a certain way to capture their most attractive selves; or, a skilled video editor may add a slow-motion effect and the perfect sound bite to amplify the entertaining value of a funny video. These choices highlight some features of the idols while obscuring the others; they 'heighten' the public representation of the idols. In short, the public version of the band members is a different being from their flesh and bone selves. Instead, it's a pile of virtual bits and pieces from the band members for the fanbase to

patchwork back to whole individuals. Moving forward, I will refer to this virtual being as *The Persona*.[9]

2.2.2 The Fanbase

> "Come here, I'm your paradise."
> "Just close your eyes."
> "Follow the sound of the pipe."
> "I'm here to save you, I'm here to ruin you."
> "I'm taking over you."[10]
>
> —"*Pied Piper*," BTS

In and of itself, *The Persona* of BTS is highly captivating. It possesses the ability to not only attract, but also to keep millions and millions of people in its gravitational field. Around *The Persona*, a fanbase forms.

In essential ways, a nation and a fanbase are kindred spirits. Just like a nation, a fanbase is also 'an imagined community,' as the members "will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (B. Anderson, 2006) The fanbase is not surrounded by borders, it's not ethnically homogenous, the members of the fanbase do not cohere through a sole language, either. However, they are, in fact, communized over the fact that they like the same band.

---

[9] I have cheekily borrowed the word 'persona' from a BTS song, *Intro: Persona*. In the opening track of BTS' album *Map of the Soul: 7*, the band's leader Kim Nam-joon explores his selfhood and the multiplicity of selves in a person's life. He gives something that feels like an honest testimony, asking: "Who the hell am I?" This, of course, is a deliberate reference to Carl Jung, just like the title of the album trilogy.

[10] In their 2017 song *Pied Piper*, BTS likens themselves to the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the lead character from the German legend of the same name. Legend says a rat-infested town hires the Pied Piper to get rid of the rats. After the Pied Piper successfully lures the pests away with his magic flute, however, the town refuses to pay up. In an act of retaliation, Pied Piper lures the children of the town away with his magic flute. In the song, BTS playfully recognizes the alluring power they have over their fandom, with the good and the bad effects of this power.

Henceforth, I will divert from attending to the group relations of the fanbase and focus on the emotive field between the band and the fandom. There, I insist, bloom emotional, 'person-to-person' attachments between the virtual representations of the band members and the members of the fanbase at the very microscopic, individual level. In hopes of properly representing these attachments, I will assemble a very simple theoretical structure expressly fitting to the focal point of this project: I will unpack the group to the smallest units involved, to nodes and ties, and hypothetically dissolve the ties between the members of the fanbase for clarity's sake. I will treat the group like a pile of individuals who are, like the nodes to a hub at the center of a star network, linked to *The Persona*.[11] Here is a very simple illustration of this theoretical structure which represents this little universe consisting of the band and the fanbase.

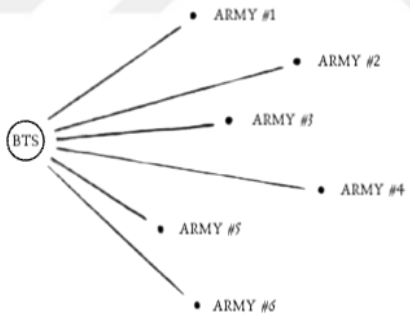


Figure 2: The relationship between the band and the fandom, illustrated.

With this slight adjustment in the perspective, the illustration took a Mertonian turn: Now, there are two focal points. At the left, there is 'the content,'

[11] The fanbase is not just the individuals that make it up, it's also the jokes, the jargon, the identity, the past, the 'way of doing things,' the belonging and the spirit. A new member always 'joins' something and 'becomes' something, here. It reminds me of the popular phrase which is adopted by the Gestalt psychologists: 'The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.' Of course, the fan 'experience' involves greater things than the summation of the individuals involved. I wanted to take a moment to recognize this, because perhaps, the way I move forward may somewhat obscure this fact.

The Persona of the band; and at the right, there is the fanbase, 'the receivers.' But, what ties 'the content' to 'the receivers?' Hence, I present you with 'the parasocial relationship.'

2.2.3 Parasocial Relationships

In 1963, a strange illness swept the United States. Some victims of the illness suffered from splitting headaches, upset stomachs; others experienced troubled eating, sleeping. The outbreak left the nation dizzy, tired and nervous for about a week. It was not a virus. In fact, the ground for the illness was not physiological, at all: It was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. (Freedman, 1965; Sheatsley & Feldman, 1964)

A gruesome murder is already a terrible thing to have happened by itself; and death of a president, it's simply prophetic of political chaos and a collective sense of safety up in smokes. However, it's clear that a personal kind of investment in the late president motivated the deeply visceral grief in a lot of people: The supporters of John F. Kennedy were revealed more likely to experience these symptoms than the people "who were politically opposed to the late president." (Sheatsley & Feldman, 1964) At the sensory level, the late president was always present in the daily lives of the whole nation. His face was on the television every day, his voice repeatedly on the radio, his opinions on the newspaper. At the sensory level, John F. Kennedy has been to every house in the United States. He must've overstayed in several houses, because clearly, he did grow on a lot of people, in a way, perhaps, a neighbor does. And one day, he was gone. This is illustrative of 'a parasocial relationship.'

'A parasocial interaction' (PSI) describes a viewer's "immediate illusory feeling of being in a real social interaction with a media character, despite knowing

that they are not." (Hartmann, 2016) A very clear example of this happens when a newscaster looks directly to the camera, and by extension, directly in the eye of the viewer and kindly greets them before the program. When the program is over, the parasocial interaction is over, too. If the viewer is repeatedly exposed to the media personality, however, they may develop a long-lasting bond with the figure. This is 'a parasocial relationship' (PSR).

The represented other of a parasocial relationship may exist in real life, or it may be a fictional character. It's currently understood that the other's facts of existence do not have a significant effect on the viewer's illusory experience. (Reeves & Nass, 1996) The idea of the parasocial relationship was first pitched in 1956 by an anthropologist and a sociologist, Donald Horton and Richard Wohl. (Horton & Wohl, 1956) Today, more than 250 studies exist on the subject. (Liebers & Schramm, 2019) In the beginning, the parasocial relationship was very clearly defined to be a one-sided, illusory experience but, technological advancements keep blurring the lines: The very popular livestreaming platform Twitch, for example, makes it possible for the viewers to write messages to the streamer, to receive actual answers, and to even converse with the person they're watching, at real-time. The availability of the represented other, here, transgresses the illusory nature of the parasocial relationship, because there are now slivers of reciprocity involved, yet simultaneously heightens the pleasantness of it, because it very often propels the dearest feelings in the heart of the viewer.

***

In the end, we're left with the molecule of this study's theoretical structure. At one corner, there's the 1st node, *The Persona* of BTS. At the other, there's the 2nd

node, the individual fan. Lastly, the two nodes are linked to each other with a parasocial relationship. This chapter is the unfolding of this quasi-dyadic structure.

2.3 The 1st Node: The Persona of BTS

Before delving into how people connect with the band, it is essential to understand what it is exactly that people connect with. That, in the structure, is the first node: *The Persona* of BTS. And to properly grasp 'who' *The Persona* of BTS is, we must review the band in the proper context: BTS ascends from the contemporary pop music scene in South Korea, a scene with indigenous practices and a unique culture that sharply sets itself apart from, say, the contemporary pop music scene in the United States. The 'know-how' of the industry heavily guides the band's presentational style. Therefore, I will begin this section by reviewing the financial, political and cultural context in which the band assumed form. Then, I will make an attempt at dissecting the 'brand' of the band: I will present you with some of the prominent characteristics of *The Persona* of BTS to hopefully illuminate why this particular band is so captivating. But, the band members do not make their way to thousands of lives unless they ooze through computer and telephone screens. Lastly in this section, I will review the prominent types of content through which *The Persona* of the band reaches the other node, and how those types of content frame the band's public representation.

2.3.1 The Band's Background

2.3.1.1 The Korean Wave: Explained

Something that defines the very fabric of the band is the fact that it is South Korean: The members are South Korean, the entertainment company they're affiliated with is

South Korean, the band has trained and debuted in a properly South Korean scene. BTS originated in Seoul, they have thrived in Seoul, and they still operate from Seoul. Thus, laying out the South Korean context, particularly the contemporary context of the South Korean pop music industry is an important step in depicting the brand of BTS. In order to do just that, however, we must wind the tape back by a few decades.

Following the World War II, Korea was amongst the most impoverished countries in the world, and the economy was only further wrecked by the Korean War (1950-1953) to come. (S. M. Lee & Yoo, 1987) The following years were a time of healing and rebuilding for the country, and in a remarkable fashion that is now remembered as 'the Miracle of Han River,' (S. M. Lee & Yoo, 1987) the economy of South Korea rapidly grew to become a leading example for the developing countries all across the globe. Today, it is the 10th largest GDP in the world. (*World Economic Outlook Database*, 2021) The steady growth of the South Korean economy is attributed to a variety of things, from strong leadership to hard work of the people, from diligent financial planning to the massive contribution of family-owned conglomerates.[12] (S. M. Lee & Yoo, 1987) This chapter, however, solely focuses on the contributions of the lucrative exportation of South Korean cultural content to the world.

1994 marked a revelation that changed the game for the South Korean government: In 1994, a report was submitted to President Kim Young-sam that advised the government to support the production of media, noting that the "overall revenue from the Hollywood blockbuster *Jurassic Park* was worth the foreign sales

[12] These corporations are commonly known as 'chaebols' (재벌) in South Korea. Notable examples include LG, Hyundai and Samsung.

of 1,500,000 Hyundai cars," which were "considered the pride of Korea" at the time. (Shim, 2011) The striking comparison motivated breakthrough change in government policies: The same year, the government established the Bureau of Cultural Industry as a part of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. (Yang, 2012) In 1995, the Motion Picture Promotion Law was enacted, promising tax incentives to entrepreneurs who invested in film production. (Shim, 2008) At the time, Samsung, Hyundai, Daewoo and LG were already interested in the market, borrowing from the example of Sony Entertainment of Japan which acquired Columbia Pictures just ten years earlier, and were slowly dipping their toes in the waters. (Shim, 2008) Most of these businesses folded in the following years, but heavily influenced the industry before exiting the market: In the five years that they were active in the field, chaebols supported young filmmakers via opportunities and prizes, diverted "competent staff members from diverse lines of business" (Shim, 2008) to film business and revived the industry through the contributions of these competent and gifted professionals. The last movie Samsung funded before exiting the market, *Shiri* (1999) was a big success that sold 6,500,000 tickets nationwide, surpassing the record previously set by *Titanic* (1997) with 4,300,000 ticket sales. (Magnan-Park, 2020)

Meanwhile, South Korean television was undergoing parallel changes. 1991 marked the establishment of Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), the first commercial television station to be established since 1980.[13] (Shim, 2008) In the years to come, SBS remained at the forefront of the cut-throat competition that was ignited by the introduction of cable television services for the whole country (1995) and the proliferation of private television channels. (Shim, 2008) Television series, popularly

[13] In the presidency of the military strongman Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988), 29 commercial television stations were forcefully gifted to the public television stations, Korea Broadcasting System (KBS) and Munhwa Broadcasting Company (MBC).

known as ‘K-dramas’ by the international viewers, were vital chess pieces for the game, as they attracted the most copious ratings. (Shim, 2008) At this time, broadcasters put a lot of thought and effort into producing captivating television series to prevail in the “drama war.” (Shim, 2008) The quality of the shows steadily improved at a time in which the market conditions overseas worked in the favor of South Korea: At this time, Japanese television series were losing their popularity in Taiwan; and Taiwanese importers not only diverted to cheaper South Korean television series to revive the small screen at home, but as middlemen, they also helped K-dramas infiltrate the markets in Hong Kong and China. (Shim, 2008) In 1997, the South Korean television series *What Is Love?* (사랑이 뭐길래) (1991) was broadcasted on the national channel of China, CCTV. (Jung, 2011) It was a massive success with the Chinese spectators, and today, it is often pointed out as the beginning of ‘the Korean Wave.’ (Jung, 2011)

First kindled in a few neighboring countries in Asia, the spread of Korean culture powered by the successful exportation of Korean songs, television shows, movies, fashion, beauty products, cuisine and language to the world is often referred to as ‘the Korean Wave’, or ‘Hallyu.’ The Korean Wave has steadily improved South Korea’s brand at a global level, brought in billions of dollars and attributed a noteworthy kind of ‘soft power’ to the country, something South Korea did not previously possess.[14] The ‘K-pop’ industry unfolded in the midst of these favorable changes, being both instrumental to and bolstered by the developments.

[14] In 2002, for example, the television Show *Winter Sonata* became a big success worldwide, particularly in Japan. Large groups of Japanese women were reportedly infatuated by the show’s lead actor, Bae Yong-joon at the time. The fandom even lovingly nicknamed the actor *Prince Yong* in Japanese, and their widespread love was later dubbed as *The Yonsama Syndrome*. The show improved the brand of South Korea in the eyes of the fandom. Previously, the Japanese associated Korean men “with images of the dark, noisy, and smelly, but now Yonsama’s middle-aged fans associate(d) South Korea with beautiful things, and [saw] Yonsama as an idealized man.” (Jung, 2011)

2.3.1.2 K-pop: Explained

In one definitive way, the entertainment industry in South Korea differs from the entertainment industry in the United States, and Bang Si-hyuk explains it as follows:

> In the music business in the United States, the artist is at the center, and around that artist are different people providing services, including managers overseeing the business side, label executives releasing recording music, lawyers providing legal advice, agents managing tours, producers putting together a creative team, and stylists helping with fashion and beauty. Here in Korea, one company provides all these services to an artist. (Elberse & Woodham, 2020)

In 1961, the military strongman Park Chung-hee seized the power and implemented "cultural policies to mediate Korean people's everyday consumption of popular culture." (J. M. M. Lee, 2020) At the time, the government banned a lot of popular songs for containing 'dangerous' lyrics and attempted to create and popularize "healthy popular songs" instead. (J. M. M. Lee, 2020) In the 1970s and 1980s, censorship only became more severe. The country did take the first steps towards a democratic election in 1987; however, "the committees would take more than a decade to release their grip on recorded and live popular entertainment." (Maliangkay, 2014)

In 1992, a group of three young men under the name of 'Seo Taiji and Boys' delivered a performance on the MBC talent show. The performance channeled hip-hop, was giftwrapped in breakdancing and was very unusual for television in South Korea at the time. The group was received terribly by the judges, but somehow appealed to the public deeply. Seo Taiji and Boys became a massive hit in the early 1990s and inspired the next generation of musicians to come.

In 1996, SM Entertainment launched H.O.T., the very first 'idol group' to hail from South Korea. The "single bearers" (Elberse & Woodham, 2020) of the K-

pop industry have always been 'idols,' performers who sing and dance in overly produced ways, who are often traditionally attractive, fashionably dressed and meticulously styled individuals. Idols train under a fastidious system that takes its roots from the American label, Motown Records. (Posner, 2018) Berry Gordy established Motown Records in 1959 and was motivated to build a system that manufactures captivating artists: "I wanted to have a kid off the street walk in one door unknown and come out another door a star," he explained, "like an assembly line." (Brown, 2016) This model famously inspired the Japanese businessperson Johnny Kitagawa to establish Johnny & Associates, the talent agency which would later perfect the East Asian model for idol manufacturing, catalyze the popular music industry in Japan (J-pop) and provide 'the blueprint' for 'K-pop.' Today, the system is almost synonymous with the Korean pop music industry.

For the longest time, SM Entertainment[15] [16] (1995), YG Entertainment[17] (1996) and JYP Entertainment[18] (1997) dominated the pop music industry in South Korea. Following the extraordinary success of their main act BTS, however, HYBE Corporation (formerly known as Big Hit Entertainment) is now mentioned alongside 'the Big Three.' All four of these entertainment companies use the same "three-step talent development model" to make their idol groups.[19] (Elberse & Woodham, 2020) In a lot of ways, this system trains *The Persona*.

The 1st step is to find the talent. Sometimes, the scouts find promising, young candidates for the company; other times, hopefuls participate in open auditions

[15] The first businessperson to bring the idol model to South Korea was Lee Soo Man who founded SM Entertainment in 1995.

[16] SM Entertainment produced EXO, Red Velvet.

[17] YG Entertainment produced BIGBANG, BLACKPINK.

[18] JYP Entertainment produced 2PM, TWICE.

[19] While the corporations congruently follow the same blueprint to develop their talent, I believe the expression 'three-step development model' is not an official term and was ascribed to the system by Anita Elberse and Lizzy Woodham in their case study about Big Hit Entertainment.

themselves. Before their audition, many applicants put a lot of time, money and effort to improve their looks, vocals and dancing skills. There even exist K-pop academies that train the candidates for these auditions. (Asian Boss, 2019)

The 2nd step is to train the talent. In HYBE Corporation's case, for example, for every 20,000 applications the company receives a year, approximately 30 trainees are selected and signed. (Elberse & Woodham, 2020) The trainees keep attending their school and do their training in the after-hours. They receive "intensive instruction and coaching across a broad spectrum of skills, including singing, dancing, modeling, acting, and media training" six days a week. (Elberse & Woodham, 2020) The program is rigorous and may "cost up to 100,000 dollars per year per trainee" to the company. (Zaugg, 2018) Bang Si-hyuk, the founder of the company and the mastermind behind BTS, takes pride in the way HYBE Corporation trains their talent: "Our system at Big Hit is costlier and slower than that of most other companies," he says. "In addition to training our candidates as singers, we teach them socialization, mental care, and physical care, and we offer a mentorship program. Even if it's not a formal education system, we try to imbue them with the qualities they need in our society." (Elberse & Woodham, 2020) The emphasis on their artists' well-being in these words poses an interesting juxtaposition with the K-pop industry's notoriety of being exploitative and abusive.[20] (Romano, 2018)

The bankability of a K-pop group has traditionally been dependent on the squeaky-clean image of its members, as the leading markets of the K-pop industry, like South Korea and Japan, have predominantly been 'conservative' countries. (Campbell & Kim, 2019) Plus, the up-and-coming market in China frequently

[20] There exists the expression slave contract, for example, to specifically represent the unfair deals some idols sign with their respective agencies.

prohibits foreign groups if they are found to be "negative influences." (Campbell & Kim, 2019) Because the industry does a brilliant job at keeping up the front end spotless, it is always deeply shocking when 'unbecoming' things about a K-pop idol unravel before the eyes of the public: In 2019, a nightclub named *Burning Sun* was caught in a crossfire of "allegations related to sex trafficking, date rape, spy-camera recordings, and bribery;" and Lee Seung-hyun (Seungri) of the massive idol group BIG BANG who was an investor at Burning Sun was subsequently put under criminal investigation along with several other idols. (Campbell & Kim, 2019) The same year witnessed the deaths of two idols, Choi Jin-ri (Sulli) and Goo Ha-ra (Hara) by suicide, only two years after Kim Jong-hyun (Jonghyun) of SHINee took his own life. Meanwhile, several idols kept filing lawsuits against their management, "claiming to have been deprived of almost all the financial gains they generated." (Campbell & Kim, 2019) This is the reason why, occasionally gilded with Orientalist undertones, 'The Dark Side of K-pop' frequents the titles of tabloid news.

The 3rd step to this talent development system is to launch the talent to the market. Typically, after a few years of training, the company selects a handful of trainees to build a new idol group.[21] The selected few sign a new contract that lasts typically for seven years, elevating the status of the trainees to idols. These contracts have a notoriety of being very strict and may include clauses against drinking and dating from time to time. The candidates who were not selected for the group usually do not make it to the market launch.

[21] Sometimes, K-pop groups consist of only a few people; other times, the members of a group are more than two hands can count. The groups are often same sex.

2.3.1.3 BTS: Explained

After working for JYP Entertainment for over a decade, renowned music producer Bang Si-hyuk founded Big Hit Entertainment in 2005. The company was able to start the engine with the help of Park Jin-young of JYP Entertainment who maintained a good relationship with Bang Si-hyuk and who supported Big Hit Entertainment through collaborations. A few years in, however, Big Hit Entertainment landed in taxing financial struggles. In 2011, the company had to take a step back and rethink their strategies. Lenzo Yoon, currently HYBE Corporation's chief executive officer, explains these months of 'brainstorming' as follows:

> In 2011, we stopped our ongoing activities to analyze what we were doing wrong, and what we needed to do to improve. We posed ourselves a few key questions: What is an idol? What is this business we are in? Who are the fans, and what are their characteristics? We wanted to figure out the formula we needed to get the success we wanted. (Elberse & Woodham, 2020)

After hearing a recording of the then fifteen, sixteen-year-old underground rapper Kim Nam-joon, Bang Si-hyuk was determined to launch this skilled and passionate kid to the world. The company decided to find like-minded musicians who would complement Kim Nam-joon and build a hip-hop group around the rapper. They did follow this game plan for a while, selected and trained a few other young men for the upcoming group. However, following 'the brainstorming,' the company pivoted their strategy and decided to switch to a revised version of the traditional 'three-step development model.' From the original vision were left three members: Next to Kim Nam-joon (RM, formerly known as Rap Monster), there remained the underground rapper Min Yoon-gi (SUGA) and the underground dancer Jung Ho-seok (j-hope). These three members are often referred to as *the rap line* of the group. The other four members, Kim Seok-jin (Jin), Park Ji-min (Jimin), Kim Tae-hyung (V) and Jeon Jung-kook (Jung Kook) were selected after the strategical pivot with

the traditional idol in mind. These four members are often referred to as *the vocal line* of the group.

After their training was over, the seven boys debuted in 2013 as the idol group, BTS. Their beginning was modest, but BTS did attract a solid fanbase throughout 2014, even finding an official name for their fandom: ARMY. By 2015, BTS were full-blown stars in South Korea. In 2016, their album *Wings* peaked at 26th in the Billboard 200 Chart, which was "the best week ever for a K-pop album." (Benjamin, 2016) In 2019, BTS was a worldwide sensation that sold out Wembley Stadium, which has 90,000 seats, in only ninety minutes. (Liu, 2020) In 2021, the band was nominated for a GRAMMY award. BTS is currently the most followed music group with over 35,000,000 followers on Spotify.

2.3.2 The Anatomy of a Brand

2.3.2.1 Visuals



Figure 3: BTS for TIME Magazine (2020)
Retrieved from https://www.time.com

> Men act, and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: The surveyed

> female. Thus, she turns herself into an object, and most particularly, an object of vision: A sight.
>
> —"*Ways of Seeing*," John Berger

If the K-pop industry is a master of something, it is probably making great objects of vision. Idols 'appear.' A lot of famous figures appear, of course, but the contemporary popular music industry in South Korea does a particularly brilliant job at making attractive sights. Although, the boy groups of K-pop present John Berger with a challenge: Boy groups of K-pop chiefly attract female attention. This time, the man becomes the object of vision, and the surveyor, for the most part, switches to female.

The band consists of seven young, well-groomed, good-looking individuals who have Asian features and fit physiques. The members have their own personal styles, but they are also frequently styled by professionals as a cohesive whole. The band's wardrobe is deeply diverse: In a live performance, the members sport baggy sportswear, chunky gold chains and thuggish expressions; in the other, they wear pink, satin suits combined with bejeweled earrings and delicate smiles. The band's fashion, and by extension, their visual representation possesses some kind of plasticity in terms of gender expression; it contains traditionally feminine expressions, as well as traditionally masculine expressions. The band members frequently change their hair colors, from brown to pink, from blue to black; and like any other K-pop idol, regardless of their gender identity, they perform in make-up. The band very often receives homophobic and xenophobic backlash because of their visuals; yet, it is clear that their soft, yet versatile expression of masculinity appeals to a lot of their followers. (Tozlu, 2020)

2.3.2.2 Behavior

What is “culturally odorless?” (Iwabuchi, 2002) What products lack the essence of the very society they were born out of, what products travel the world without carrying their origins along? Chopsticks are definitely not culturally odorless, neither is a jar of wasabi, or a bonsai tree. These commodities have strong connotations of definite places and definite societies; every single one of these products immediately evokes the idea of East Asia. In that way, the band is also culturally fragrant, not only because it consists of seven, unmistakably Korean bodies, but also because the band consistently references Korean culture in their work, and because the members personify traditional Korean values in their brand: The band members strike the viewer to be very hard-working, well-versed, respectful individuals who highly value family and friendship. These traits match the description of “a specific type of South Korean traditional masculinity” (Jung, 2011) passed down from the virtuous scholars/officials of the kingdom, a type of masculinity defined by Confucian values.

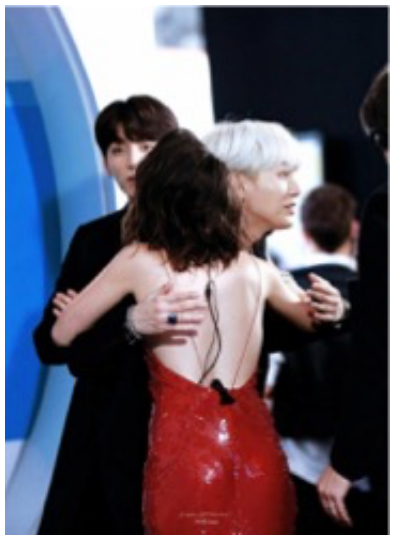


Figure 4: SUGA of BTS avoids establishing physical contact with the reporter’s bare back. This gesture is known as ‘the manner hands’ in the subculture of K-pop, it’s considered a respectful act. Retrieved from https://www.twitter.com

Meanwhile, there is also a certain kind of softness embedded in the way the band members carry themselves: They are openly affectionate with each other; they put their heads on each other's shoulders, pat each other on the butt, hug and say loving things to each other. They openly cry, express vulnerable emotions; the members behave visibly kind and attentive while they are speaking with their fans. In other words, the band's behavioral representation is also defined by softness and "versatility." (Jung, 2011)

2.3.2.3 The Bachelor's Status

> "What kind of girls do you like?"
> "Uh, I like music and my fans. You know why, Peter?"
> "Why?"
> "Because I'm in K-pop." (Park, 2020)

It is not very typical for a K-pop idol to publicly reveal that they are in a relationship. As an unspoken part of their job description, idols have traditionally been expected to maintain a "monogamous" relationship with their fanbase. (Griffiths, 2018) When Kim Jong-dae, a member of the sensational idol group EXO announced that he was marrying his girlfriend whom he expected a child with, for example, the idol received severe backlash from a small, but stubborn fraction of the group's fanbase. Did the fans feel lied to, because the idol had hidden his girlfriend from his fans for a long time? Or, were they simply having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that the idol was no longer an eligible bachelor? The reason behind the undying anger remained unclear. However, they did send boxes worth of merchandise they have purchased back to the SM Entertainment building and organized a very small protest in front of the company building, asking for the removal of the idol from the band. (Kang, 2020)

Accordingly, the members of BTS have never publicly admitted to being in relationships, at least not to date.

2.3.3 BTS: On the Platter

In this section, I review the audiovisual content the band presents to the public eye. I divide the material into three different classes. I do not define these classes to perfectly represent the texture of these 'virtual encounters.' I also do not review every single mode of content created under the band's brand. Instead, I pull handy examples. I believe reviewing these diverse types of content in the following, relaxed way will suffice in highlighting the fact that they, intentionally or not, convey different 'facets' of *The Persona*.

In the titles of the classifications, I borrow the term 'fidelity' from the music industry. I review the 1st group in the classification under the title *High Fidelity,* which is an expression that hints at "higher standards of sound reproduction" in the field. (Harper, 2014) I choose this expression to represent the kind of media I examine in the first group because of how they go above and beyond in terms of productional effort. I make up the title *Medium Fidelity* for the 2nd group in the classification to represent a middle ground between the other two groups. Finally, the 3rd group in the classification is reviewed under the title *Low Fidelity*, because the expression refers to an "unpolished, amateurish, or technologically unsophisticated" sound that is "a deliberate aesthetic choice" (Harper, 2014) in the field, and I observe these characteristics to be intrinsic to the kind of media I review in the 3rd group.

2.3.3.1 High Fidelity

Franz Liszt was undoubtedly a brilliant musician; however, it was something else that he possessed, something that explains why he was the one to drive crowds to a state of frenzy, and not his fellow contemporaries: Liszt was exceptional at presentation. The young virtuoso was the first person to place the piano sideways while performing, allowing the spectators to view his attractive profile; he played with movement, arms whipping, head spinning, and in an act of rebellion, he played from memory. (NPR, 2011) Liszt brought theatricality to the performance, an inflammable passion; he transformed to a version of himself on the stage, to a heightened spectacle, to a proper 'simulacrum.' (Baudrillard, 1981) In return, the viewers awarded him with all the love and the adoration in the world. The key to the frenzy surrounding Liszt definitely belonged to this almost libidinal, moving presence he brought to the table. In similar ways, BTS has very strong presentation on the stage.

BTS films most of their concerts and makes them available[22] on the Internet. These shows are objectively, very big: BTS frequently performs at stadiums, and the production keeps up with the size of these giant venues. The show is supported by lots of musicians and dancers; it is embellished by lights, everchanging stage settings, miscellaneous props, confetti and smoke. Every song is performed with a distinctive texture; the stage design, the color palettes, the costumes constantly switch. The members do an immaculate job sustaining this high-key atmosphere: They sing and rap with extreme rigor, execute very difficult choreographies flawlessly, constantly change costumes, give emotional, sometimes even tearful

[22] On the 3rd weekend of April 2020, BTS has streamed a total of 24 hours of their old concerts on YouTube for free. The two-day event fetched about 50,500,000 viewers in total, and 2,240,000 concurrent viewers at one time. As of this moment, some of these concerts are also available for purchase on the South Korean broadcasting service, VLIVE.

speeches at the end of the show. The performances last for about three hours. In other words, BTS shows are immaculately designed, highly sensory, stimulating events.

A significant consequence of this mode of production is that it highlights the band members to be very passionate and proficient performers. There are seven members, and the workload is usually divided amongst the members in a way that highlights their individual strengths and conceals their individual shortcomings. The flamboyant production heightens the member's skillful performances, and the atmosphere is already very vibrant. Thus, the 'vibe' the members give off on the stage, whether it be sexy, cool, savage, sweet or deep, always comes off blatant and intense. Everybody's eyes glued on the members, their names dripping of thousands of lips, the boys stand up there on the stage, under blinding lights, looking like Greek sculptures, performing with little to no flaw. This is the 1st prominent facet of BTS: On the stage, they are, in every sense of the word, idols.[23]

2.3.3.2 Medium Fidelity

The fact that HYBE Corporation produces consistent and plentiful content which features the band members is something that distinguishes BTS from the average boy group in the West.[24] The company has produced plenty of shows that feature the band members for television and for the Internet. There is *Bon Voyage*, in which the band members travel around the world and document their journeys, there is *BTS RUN* in which the band members complete missions, do challenges and play games,

[23] I am referring to the job descriptions of the band members, and not the walking tour I have presented in Chapter 1.

[24] Having a plump filmography is not exactly a feature unique to BTS. In fact, there exists a lot of variety shows revolving around different idol groups in South Korea. However, this practice is particularly embedded in the Korean pop music culture, I observe, and is a rather foreign concept in the mainstream Western music industry for the time being.

there is *In the Soop* in which the band takes a week off to stay at a lake house together to explore their hobbies. Making television is a very efficient way for the company to make further use of their talent, to create diverse products out of them which not only makes financial profit the company, but in the meanwhile, attracts attention to the band.

A significant consequence of this mode of production is that it highlights *the Persona*'s humorous and friendly personality. The brotherly interplay of the band members is mostly at the focus of these programs; 'the individual personalities of the members' prosper above their identities as performers. They talk, they laugh, they behave silly and funny. This is the 2nd prominent facet of BTS: The members are joyous, loving, playful people who are highly affectionate with each other.

That being said, the variety shows are still, very much produced.

2.3.3.3 Low Fidelity

The band members occasionally hold livestreams on the Internet. The members broadcast from their personal studios, from rehearsal rooms, from hotels, from spaces in their complex. Sometimes they film alone, sometimes a few members are there, sometimes the whole band gathers in front of the camera. There are livestreams in which they do low-key activities: They eat, they paint, they dance. There are also livestreams in which they simply talk to the camera and answer questions from their viewers. These broadcasts come off raw. The members are not 'hyped' here like they usually are in their shows, there is a certain spontaneity to the

nature of this form of content-making, and there is the occasional blooper in the livestreams which highlight the unfiltered texture of the content.[25]

Although the screen is standing between the idol and the viewer as a very clear mediator, although the idol does not know and address every single viewer individually, this mode of content is somewhat *intimate* in the following, narrow, sensory sense: In the livestreams, the members often talk directly to the camera, tell things to their viewers, answer questions which come from the viewers, live. The videos are one-take, thereby the temporal and spatial continuity of the experience is sustained throughout the video. The settings are usually very casual, very simple; the members wear casual clothes, often broadcasting in loungewear. It does not matter whether these videos are being screened or managed by the staff or not, because there is not a mediator on camera, no interviewer, no talk show host, nobody: It's just the idols, talking directly to their viewers.

A significant consequence of this mode of production is that it highlights the band members to be, simply, human beings. This is the 3rd prominent facet of BTS: The members are just seven, everyday people.

2.3.3.4 A Feeling, Justified

The band frequently releases diverse content for their followers to enjoy; and in the content, albeit from different viewpoints, the band members always beam a positive impression: The idols are the world-renowned musicians, yet also the boys next door. They are the men in high-end tuxedos, yet also the men in pajamas. They entertain

[25] A quick example of these bloopers may be found in the livestream j-hope held on June 5, 2020 on YouTube. In the broadcast, j-hope is at the studio, wearing headphones, working on something on the computer. A while later, there is a knock at the door. j-hope answers, receives a note, mutters "Oh, shit." He then lowers the volume of the computer. It is presumed that j-hope was working on an unreleased song at the time, accidentally spoiling bits of it to the viewers via the sound coming off of his headphones.

millions of people, yet also do the dishes. They are cool, yet silly, savage, yet humble. The idols are jacks of all trades and, perhaps, masters of some. Collectively, the favorable facets of the band form up a strong, bright, attractive representation of the band members. The constant flow of content from the band's world not only sustains the attention of the fanbase, but also repeatedly assures the positive representation of the band in the very heart of the fandom. The fandom receives these bits of information, collects and pieces them back together, building a sense of knowingness towards the idols over time. The flow of content allows the fans to 'update' their beliefs about the band members regularly, beliefs that sustain the parasocial relationship between the two nodes. If the messages always beam a positive light on the band, then the probability of the band members being, in fact, individuals that are worthy of love becomes higher and higher. Just like it would in any other interpersonal relationship, the uncertainty about the band members reduces over time, and the personal bond grows stronger and stronger.[26]

2.3.4 Concluding Remarks

In this heavily descriptive section lie a few determinative details. Firstly, after reviewing the background of Hallyu, it becomes perfectly evident that BTS has built their massive success on a worldwide interest in Korean culture that has been slowly awakening for the twenty years that precede the band's debut. BTS has achieved unmatched success through hard work, perseverance, interesting music, watertight presentation, bright personalities, a bit of luck and a lot of clever planning on their label's part; however, the fact that K-pop was already a steady subculture worldwide

[26] I would like to take a moment to recognize the powerful, complex relationship between music and human emotions. Without a doubt, the band's music plays a substantial role in the formation of their fanbase's devotion. (J. H. Lee et al., 2021) However, I feel more comfortable leaving the task to study this particular relationship to psychologists and to neurologists.

at the time clearly provided the favorable environment for a band from South Korea to take over the world. Thus, the rise of BTS is not a singular moment in time, a mysterious story to be unpacked, but rather is supported by calcification of various factors.

Secondly, although BTS bends the traditional ways of the K-pop industry from time to time, although the idol system in South Korea is reportedly evolving towards a more relaxed direction, the band is still a fruit of the South Korean idol system. Plus, the fact that everything is gathered under a single roof gives HYBE Corporation a noteworthy amount of control over how and through what means their idols will be presented to the world. In that sense, the BTS brand really is refined by this system that is designed and perfected over the years to manufacture attractive idols and gives an overproduced quality to the brand of the band.

Thirdly, the band possesses a very strong and consistent presentation. Yet, this is also where a puzzling juxtaposition comes to being: Although their kind ways are often credited as some of the band's primary appeals, in the type of fan fiction that I study in Chapter 3, the boys are often portrayed to be rough, violent, sometimes extremely destructive characters. Fiction is fictional, and one must be careful attributing meaning and suggesting causality while studying something that is as volatile as fiction, of course; however, there exists a strong pattern, here. It is worth posing the question: Why borrow from a source text that is characterized by softness, only to wipe it completely out and replace it with violence?

Alas, this is a question for Chapter 3.

2.4 The 2nd Node: ARMY

The 2nd node in the structure involves the individual members of the fanbase. ARMY consists of millions of people from all across the world; and therefore, it is an impossible task to grasp and represent every single person who identifies as an ARMY. Instead, I will attempt to highlight the most relevant properties of the fanbase and borrow the following information from the 2020 ARMY Census. Although this fan survey consists of about 400,000 responses, it still merely provides "a snapshot" of the fandom.[27] (*The ARMY Census*, 2020)

The survey reports that about 50% of the participants are under the age of 18 and 43% of the participants fall between the ages of 18 and 29. Although the remaining 7% exhibits some generational diversity to the fandom, it is quite safe to say that the majority of the fandom belongs to the younger generations. 86% of the participants identify as female, 11% as male, and there is some non-binary representation in the sample with 0.74%. The survey also mentions that the participants have responded from over a hundred different countries. In other words, the fandom is predominantly young and female, and the members of the community come from all over the world.

Let me open up a parenthesis, here: In the following chapter, I will study a selection of fan novels published on Wattpad Turkey, and these novels are written by the Turkish ARMY members who also belong to the fan fiction community. Therefore, I would like to briefly, separately speak of the Turkish ARMY. Currently, there's not a survey or a report which extensively, conclusively reveals the exact demographic profile of the Turkish ARMY. Yet, previous research projects on the

[27] It is evident that the survey only reached so far and underrepresents certain geographies. The survey recognizes this, saying that although it is a known fact that BTS has a lot of fans in their homeland, responses from South Korea make up only 4% of the total number. The survey was mainly advertised via Twitter, which likely determined the networks the survey circulated in.

subject have always illustrated the Turkish K-pop fanbase to be consisting of young girls and young women, coherently with the global profile of the band's fanbase.

I would like to highlight two salient details about the Turkish ARMY. To begin with, BTS' success with the Turkish listeners points out to the search and the fulfillment of an alternative 'foreign' in the country, with a different culture and different values than the West: Brotherhood, kindness, hard work are the highlights of the band's brand, and these values have been reported to be highly appealing by the K-pop fans in Turkey themselves. (Tozlu, 2020) Yet, Korean culture is not exactly foreign to the Turkish spectators: Turkey was, in fact, the first country from Europe to buy a television serial from South Korea in 1992. (Shim, 2008) Ever since, Korean television serials have been a subtle, yet steady part of daytime television, a block in which housewives and young students were the occupiers of the living room, and the commander of the remote control. Before it became a mainstream form of entertainment, Korean television was dearly enjoyed by a lot of people in Turkey. Off the limelight, a certain interest towards the culture has subtly thrived and became a subculture. In the past, Hallyu was mostly associated with young, Muslim girls who spearheaded the subculture. Today, 'K-pop' is a mainstream hobby for thousands and thousands of people.

2.5 The Bond: The Parasocial Relationship

Some fans enjoy two songs by the band and call it a day. Some fans dedicate several hours catching up with the band on the daily. It's truly impossible, again, to grasp and to represent every single person's experience as an ARMY. It's deeply diverse. Weverse, a social media platform developed by HYBE Corporation, is quietly displaying the deep variety of the parasocial relationships weaved between the band

members and their followers. Weverse posts, I observe, reveal that a lot of people form parasocial relationships with the band members, and these relationships exist in a broad spectrum, from a mild sense of knowingness to worrying about the well-being of the idol, from feelings of friendship to feelings of love.

Currently, BTS' Weverse profile has 13,136,032 followers. Here, the band members post photographs, write personal updates and seldom answer fan messages. The followers of the band leave messages to the idols' updates, and these comments are particularly illustrative of how they view the idol. As they are written in reply to the band members' updates, they mostly address the idols personally. I have reviewed 2000 of the Weverse messages written by ARMY. They are written in English and in reply to the band members' June and July 2021 updates. This collection is not, by any means, a representative sample of the whole culture of the website; it is simply piled together for illustrative purposes. I will not identify the whereabouts of the exemplary comments, because they contain vulnerable expressions. Here, however, several patterns prevail.

Some comments celebrate and cheer on the band and the band members.

"I am very proud of you, please keep up the good work!"
"Hi, Tae! Just always remember, no matter what you do, we are happy for you."
"You are the strongest man I have ever seen and the best role model for me!"

Some comments worry about the well-being of the idols.

"Taehyung, are you okay? Your smile is not the same as always."
"Have you eaten?"
"Sleep on time and don't stay up late."

Some comments simulate daily, friendly conversations:

"I did a lot of things, today, this is why I'm so tired. I hope you're doing well, Mr. Kim. I will sleep now. Wish me sweet dreams, and see you tomorrow, mister! Bye!"

> "Taehyung Oppa, this year I will take the biggest exam in my country for high school students. Can you give me some advice?"
> "I went to have lunch with my parents, today. Hope you are able to see your parents, as well?"
> "Going to get my vaccine! Goodbye, bear."

Some comments express parasocial crushes. Some of these comments are obvious jokes, some involve light-hearted, flirty expressions, while others convey a 'limerent' message.

> "Do you have a Band-Aid? Because I just scraped my knee falling for you."
> "I love you so much that I cannot think of anything else."
> "I need you to know that here on the other side of the world, there is a person who loves you unconditionally and who dreams of being able to hold your hand."
> "You're my everything. I'm sorry, I love you, forgive me. Why do I fall in love and say goodbye alone?"

Lastly, some comments bear out deep and dark thoughts, like lines written to a diary, or like a confessional.

> "I'm really lonely. I don't have a friend who strengthens me. I don't have the courage for the world. Nothing here is okay. I'm dying. I don't have the strength to talk about my sadness."
> "My soul is very tired, how can I rest in this intensity, is there a way out? In a week or two, there will come a day when I'll beg for death, I'm so scared. Tae?"

2.6 Concluding Remarks

> The Internet is not something we use, it is a limb of our body we're constantly aware of. The universally, intuitively understood immaterial experience of self doesn't understand the difference between your eyes being the wall through which you hallucinate the universe, and your phone screen being the wall through which you hallucinate the universe.
>
> —"*Bo Burnham vs. Jeff Bezos*," CJ THE X

I have written this study in the midst the COVID-19 pandemic, a global catastrophe in which daily life was mainly constrained in between the walls of personal homes, in which social life escaped to the Internet. Instead of being in physical proximity with other human beings, we sustained social relationships

virtually. Technology translated us to pixel people, looking at other pixel people; we became soundwave people, listening to other soundwave people. At the sensory level, the experience of being in a real social relationship and a parasocial one abruptly evened out at this time. In the meantime, BTS' following almost doubled. Perhaps, the band's organic path to worldwide success simply correlated with the event. But perhaps, it was the blurring of the sensory lines between a real social relationship and a parasocial relationship at a time of fear, uncertainty and ambivalent social needs which propelled the band's unmatched rise to the very top.

This chapter was an exploration of how famous figures pervade the lives of their viewers and a demonstration of the very significant, very intimate role they may play in their viewers' lives. For exploratory purposes, I have selected and studied BTS, the devastatingly successful boy group hailing from South Korea. I have illustrated their relationship with their massive and devoted fanbase, ARMY, at the individual level in a quasi-dyadic theoretical structure evocative of a 'real' social relationship. In order to thoroughly understand this relationship, I have reviewed the professional context in which the band was assembled. Then, I have investigated the band's 'brand.' I have proposed a correlation between the band's ever-available, infallible public representation, from killer looks to comforting personalities, from captivating talent to great humor, and the strong devotion on their fanbase's part. Next, I have briefly given out the demographical information about the fanbase. Lastly, I have displayed the variety of the ways the followers of the band may view the virtual representations of the idols by reviewing the comments left under the band members' Weverse updates. Several patterns have prevailed: The band members were depicted to be role models in the messages to the ARMY, to be friends, to be love interests and to be confidants.

When Donald Horton and Richard Wohl first pitched the idea of the parasocial relationship in 1956, their essay was an explicit call for social psychologists to study and to situate the phenomenon in "the usual matrix of social activity." (Horton & Wohl, 1956) Sixty years later, this study simply reverberates to their fallow message. Currently, there's still very little interest from psychologists to the concept of parasocial relationship, yet, being a highly sensory and a highly prevalent[28] phenomenon, the subject desperately craves it. Currently, it is widely acknowledged that while communicating, be it interpersonal or mediated, human beings take on the same cognitive processes; (Bargh, 1988) but how about a parasocial 'communication?' We know that the "mediated representations of the social others trigger immediate social responses" (Hartmann, 2016) in the viewers, but how? Does the human brain process the 'spatiality' of a parasocial relationship differently from a 'real' one? How does the phenomenon relate to human attachment? From a psychological point of view, how does a parasocial relationship develop? Why? Are there groups of people who are more likely to develop parasocial relationships? Why?

But, the parasocial relationship does not only summon odd questions relating to the human mind; it also meaningfully challenges what a 'social tie' is. Before the ubiquity of the Internet, we have almost never questioned the following two 'prerequisites' of the social tie: It was mostly taken for granted that the social tie formed when people, at least for the first time, interacted with each other, and that every social interaction had to come about at "a physical space." (Small & Adler, 2019) The latter statement, simply, does not apply anymore. Technological devices

[28] A Google-commissioned study, for example, reveals that 40% of YouTube subscribers between the ages of 18 and 34 "say their favorite creator understands them better than their friends." (O'Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016)

of different kinds bring individuals from different physical spaces 'together,' all the time. The former statement, on the other hand, firmly stands its ground. But, perhaps, pushing the envelope with this statement just a little bit, simply for a thought experiment, may just excavate a whole bunch of novel, vital questions for the discipline.

Let's follow the act of confiding, for example. It's a fixture of the social matrix, "a human necessity," and plays a fundamental role for the physiological and psychological well-being of the human being. (Small, 2017) For the longest time, thinkers from various fields have taken it for granted that human beings mainly confided in a small, but steady network of close friends and family members. When Mark Granovetter published *The Strength of Weak Ties* (1973), for example, the assertion that human beings relied on their acquaintances for novel information quickly became a pivotal point for the discipline, and "mutual confiding" was assigned the maker of the strong tie. (Granovetter, 1973) Years later, Mario L. Small exposed a different, more personal function to the weak tie by pointing out that human beings very frequently turned to acquaintances when they felt the need to confide in somebody. (Small, 2017) On Weverse, however, we have witnessed the followers of the band confiding in the virtual representation of the band members, to a being that does not exist in the social matrix, at all. The followers could easily write these words to a diary, or to a personal blog, but no. This is a different act. This is a different tie: Just like a strong tie, (Granovetter, 1973) the parasocial relationship solidifies over time, involves very strong and intimate feelings, and there really is a reciprocity of services between the two nodes. Yet, it also "makes few demands" (Collisson et al., 2018) and risks relatively little. So, how are we going to make sense of it in the social matrix?

CHAPTER 3

BTS IN TURKISH FAN FICTION[29]

In this chapter, I investigate how the fan fiction community in Turkey repurposes the BTS members in their works. I study twenty books written in Turkish about the BTS members from the popular storytelling website, Wattpad. I employ Max Weber's 'ideal type' to profile the stereotypical characters that are repeated throughout the sample, Georg Simmel's differentiation between social 'form' and social 'content' to depict the stereotypical form of relationship that is repeated throughout the sample, the forms of 'capital' from Pierre Bourdieu to make sense of the social rules of these fictional worlds and 'the sexual script theory' from John H. Gagnon and William Simon to make sense of sexual rules of these fictional worlds. I distill several patterns from the sample in carrying out a reading informed by these conceptual frameworks that allow me to deeply understand and examine the contexts of the books and excavate the hidden ongoings in the sample. The revealed patterns are later discussed in relation to gendered power relations, to the meanings surrounding sex and to the idea of consent. The goal of the chapter is to unravel what these books might be reflecting about contemporary society.

3.1 Fan Fiction

In the broadest sense, fan fiction is any work of fiction that is inspired by source texts or by famous people. It comes in different forms, in illustrations, in songs, in short videos; however, fan fiction is mainly associated with written work. This

[29] Trigger Warning: This chapter involves descriptions of and conversations about self-harm and sexual assault.

blanket description subsumes several classical works, a notable example being Dante's *Inferno*: The book takes the Bible as a point of departure and narrates the fictional adventures of two famous men who exist in the real world: The Roman poet Virgil, and Dante himself. It is possible to extend the definition and view fan fiction as a way of "collective storytelling," which makes *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* some of the earliest examples of fan fiction. (Hellekson & Kristina Busse, 2014) The history of fiction, however, is riddled with intertextuality: William Shakespeare, for an obvious example, borrows some of his most famous characters from folk tales and poems. Thus, most scholars build narrower definitions of fan fiction around specific limitations, such as the "development of authorial copyright," or the existence of an interested community, a fandom surrounding the source text. (Hellekson & Kristina Busse, 2014) This perspective places the beginnings of fan fiction to the 19th century: Readers of Jane Austen have started writing unofficial extensions to the author's fictional universe around that time, and it was also around that time that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle enthusiasts sent Sherlock Holmes off to their own homemade adventures. However, the contemporary practice of fan fiction owes its idiosyncratic character, infrastructure and jargon to the *Star Trek* fandom of the late 1960s. (Hellekson & Kristina Busse, 2014)

The television show *Star Trek* was a giant success with the public, attracting large groups of passionate followers. The fandom rapidly grew upon the infrastructure of the long-established tradition of science fiction fandoms, (Hellekson & Kristina Busse, 2014) and thousands and thousands of enthusiasts connected at this time via conventions and fan magazines. It was in these publications, these fanzines that derivative fan works came to fruition. The very first fan creation inspired by the Star Trek universe was a song named *The Territory of Rigel*, and it

was published in "the very first Star Trek fanzine," *Spockanalia* in 1967. (Coppa, 2014) In the following twenty years, fan fiction grew prevalent in a variety of other fandoms, circulating via fan-made magazines, newsletters, publications and eventually became a true staple of the contemporary fan culture.

The Internet has infiltrated daily life and deeply transformed fan fiction culture in the last 25 years. Previously, physical fan publications traveled from individual to individual at conventions, or were distributed via post; however, the Internet, to an extent, removed these "physical and geographical boundaries." (Hellekson & Busse, 2006) It also allowed younger generations to participate in the fandom and was free. Although the first examples of fan fiction on the Internet were mainly transmitted via "electronic correspondence," websites dedicated to fan fiction were developed soon after: 1998 was the year that www.fanfiction.net (FFN) was launched, which quickly become the most influential fan fiction archive of its time. Fan fiction simultaneously spread to the blog space, making www.livejournal.com (LJ) a meeting point for fandoms. Although FFN remains a popular website to this day, a lot of fandoms migrated to other places, notably to www.archiveofourown.org (AO3), Tumblr and Wattpad, because of FFN's restrictions[30] surrounding real person fiction (RPF), sexual content and copyright.

Today, fan fiction is a mainstream hobby for millions of people all around the world.

[30] In 2002 and 2012, FFN abruptly removed works that were rated +17 (NC-17) from the website. These 'purges' were not well-received by the fandom.

3.2 Snapshots from Wattpad Turkey

Currently, Wattpad[31] is the foremost website for fan fiction in Turkey. It's a free "storytelling platform" that allows its users to publish their own stories and share them with millions of people who visit the website every day. Wattpad is widely visited in Turkey,[32] especially by the younger generations.[33] While it is not solely a platform for the genre, Wattpad does have a very ample category for fan fiction. And for the past 2-3 years, books featuring the members of BTS have dominated the fan fiction category of the website. This is where I borrow the books for the sample of this study.

Books written about the band members on Wattpad Turkey are almost exclusively love books, and they pretty much fit a matrix with two axes: The 1st axis attends to the main pairing of the book: Are the two main protagonists of the book in a heterosexual relationship, or in a queer one? Meanwhile, the 2nd axis attends to the rating of the book: Is the book suitable for everybody, or is it exclusively suitable for adults? Therefore, four quadrants prevail. In this study, I am particularly interested in 1 of the 4 possible combinations; namely, books that feature heterosexual relationships with adult themes.

[31] Interestingly enough, the Toronto-based platform has just been acquired by the South Korean conglomerate, Naver.

[32] In 2015, Allen Lau, the co-founder of Wattpad told Gülden Öktem of *Milliyet Sanat* that 2,000,000 people from Turkey visited Wattpad monthly. Every month, people from Turkey reportedly uploaded 7,000,000 books to Wattpad and collectively spent 14,000,000 minutes on the website. At the time, Turkey was one of the biggest markets for Wattpad, following the United States, India and the Philippines. Lau also reported to Edward Nawotka of *Publishing Perspectives* in 2015 that 10% of the website's traffic was in Turkish. (Öktem, 2015)

[33] In 2017, Ashleigh Gardner, head of partnerships at Wattpad Studios, reported to Porter Anderson of *Publishing Perspectives* that the website demographics were 70% female, and %80 of Wattpadders belonged to Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z. (P. Anderson, 2017)

3.2.1 The First Axis

Queer pairings, especially pairings of two men, have been a staple of fan fiction culture from the very beginning. (Green et al., 2006) A noteworthy fraction of the fandom 'shipped' Kirk and Spock of Star Trek at the time, in other words, rooted for the two characters to be in a romantic or sexual relationship. Their enthusiasm paved the way for 'slash fiction,' which means fan fiction written about two people of the same sex. Slash fiction quickly became a honeypot for academic interest, as these stories were mainly written by women at the time. For the longest time, the central question remained, why were women, as writers and as readers, deeply interested in the love between two men? Was it some kind of fetishization? Why would "straight women be interested in the intimate relations between two members of the same sex, or why [would] lesbians be interested in the sex lives of men?" (Green et al., 2006) Henry Jenkins offered his perspective on the appeal of the genre, saying that slash takes away the barriers that "prevent emotional expressiveness or physical intimacy between men, which block the possibility of true male friendship." (Jenkins, 2008) Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith, on the other hand, viewed slash as a projective attempt at "a love between true equals of equal power," something that the authors did not deem possible for straight relationships in their 1986 essay. (Lamb & Veith, 2014) Constance Penley highlighted "the difficulties of writing female characters for women hyperaware of and steeped in patriarchal culture" and suggested that the female authors gravitated towards male bodies as opposed to female bodies that were "a legal, moral, and religious battleground." (Penley, 2014) Meanwhile, Joanna Russ celebrated slash as a type of "noncommercial pornography produced specifically by and for women." (Russ, 2014)

Indeed, the website is currently overflowing with slash fiction written about the band members. In this study, however, I choose to focus on the books which revolve around a heterosexual pairing, because I specifically wish to excavate how authors build the relationship between 'the man' and 'the woman.' Slash fiction is a very broad subject that deserves a comprehensive study of its own. Thus, I delineate this study around straight pairings, leaving books with queer pairings to future endeavors.

3.2.2 The Second Axis

The website expects their writers to rate their books accordingly with the Wattpad Guidelines.[34] There are two possible options. If the book involves explicit descriptions of sexual activity, self-harm, or violent behavior, the writer must mark the book with the 'Mature' rating. If not, the writer must mark the book with the 'Everybody' rating. I observe that the rating of the book deeply determines the tone of the book. Books with the 'Everybody' rating are more likely to be 'Fluff,' a popular type of fan fiction which mainly explores bliss and sweetness in the relationship and avoids sexual themes; or to be 'Angst,' a popular type of fan fiction which mainly explores the frustrations of a torrid relationship. Meanwhile, books with the 'Mature' rating are more likely to prioritize sexuality.[35] This is the type of books that I want to study, because I specifically wish to grasp how the authors write about sex.

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[34] According to the Wattpad Guidelines, pornographic content that "exists solely for the purpose of sexual stimulation" is not allowed on the website. Wattpad also claims to remove books that glorify sexual violence, that contain "illegal sex acts including, but not limited to, bestiality, necrophilia, or incest," or that transgress the age of consent, which is sixteen on Wattpad. (*Content Guidelines*, 2019)

[35] I suspect that these two options attract different readership, because a lot of the readers are actively avoiding the books with Mature themes. In the fan fiction category of Wattpad Turkey, the comment sections of the books which fail to disclose the sexual nature of the book are always riddled with comments expressing disgust and disapproval.

3.3 The Sample of the Study

I have a sample of twenty 'Mature' books featuring the band members which narrate the adventures of a straight pairing. The number does not hold particular significance, other than being a simple compromise: I claim there exist patterns in the kind of fan fiction that I study, and confirming the recurrence[36] of the same fictional elements in twenty individual books strengthens my hand at that claim. At the same time, the way I study these novels requires a lot of human effort, and twenty books were barely a reasonable cut point for the scope of the study. I have delineated a few more conditions before selecting the books: I wanted the books to be completed, because I wanted to review whole, uninterrupted structures; and, I wanted the work to have at least 100,000 clicks and at least 10,000 stars, because I wanted a tangible manifestation of the readers' engagement.[37]

My computational skills were humble at the beginning of this study, and I was not able to generate a random sample from the website via computational techniques. Instead, I collected the books by hand. I listed every book I was able to find that fit the conditions and assigned them numbers from 1 to 100 respectively. I have found the books via Wattpad's *Explore* page and via reading lists prepared by the readers. After discovering 100 books that fit the description, I put the assigned numbers to www.randomizer.org and generated a set of 20 books. Although the sample of this study is not random by any means, I did try to eliminate potential research bias by adding this non-human intervention. Thus, it must be once again

[36] Not every book contains every single element that I introduce in the following pages.

[37] Every chapter in the book receives its own clicks on Wattpad, and the total number is cumulative. Thus, these numbers do not represent individual readers. However, I did not borrow a book that has less than 5,000 clicks on the final chapter.

noted that the sample of this study is not reflective of the fan fiction community on Wattpad as a whole, but merely offers a snapshot.

In the two years that I have researched for this study, I have come across hundreds and hundreds of comments on Wattpad stating or implying that the authors and the readers identified as female; however, I am yet to encounter a single indication of male presence in this space. I unfortunately do not have conclusive information about the exact gender analytics on the sample, except for a few books; however, I do feel pretty confident that BTS fan fiction mainly circulates between female readers in Turkey.

While the books that are featured on the sample are publicly available on Wattpad, I choose not to identify them individually. Sensitive subjects are explored in these novels, the novels are published under pen names and the website has a notoriously young demographic. Considering these facts, I have deliberated to assign numbers from 1 to 20 to the novels and not disclose their titles.

3.4 The Stereotypes

All the books in the sample create the female lead from scratch and borrow a BTS member as the male lead. Although two leading characters are fruits of individual minds, I observe that they always fall in the gravitational area of a distinctive stereotype. If I were to lay them on top of each other, they would all fit into a single chalk outline. In other words, the twenty leading characters of this sample all take after a distinctive ‘ideal type.’

I borrow the sociological tool that is the ideal type from Max Weber. Although the way Weber defines ideal type is at times nebulous,[38] the core instructions themselves are pretty straightforward: In the sociologist's own words, "an ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct." (Shils & Finch, 1949) Ideal types are not perfect representations of the world, instead, they are exaggerated abstractions. It is not employed to deliberate sociological verdicts, but to make the complexities of the social world easy to handle. I use ideal types in a relatively relaxed way to have a better grasp at a sample that is composed of thousands and thousands of pages worth of fiction. I put the focus on 'meaning' and 'behavior,' as Max Weber builds the concept of the ideal type mainly on these two objectives. (Swedberg, 2018) I build two ideal types, one for the male leads and one for the female leads of the sample. Accordingly with the definition of the ideal type, however, there exist exceptional characters in the sample that do not conform to the following ideal types.

3.4.1 The Male Lead

The male lead wears the body of the selected band member and therefore is a visual replication of the real person. Although the authors sometimes make interventions to

[38] Alfred Schutz mentions that Max Weber was preoccupied with the theory of history at the time he developed the concept of the ideal type. However, his thinking later transitioned to sociology, which also profoundly modified the concept. According to Schutz, this new version was never properly explained by Max Weber himself. (Schutz, 1967)

the bodies of the band members,[39] the male leads are mostly described in ways that are consistent with their visual references: They are Asian, young, fit, well-groomed and good-looking individuals. The books frequently intimate that the male lead is very attractive and often support it with the sexual attention he receives from the eligible women of the book.

> "Oppa,[40] you're so handsome, as always."
> "God, I have heart-eyes!"
> "I get horny just by looking at the scuffs on your jeans."
> "Stop it, my heart can't take it."
> "I spend all my day in the toilet because of you."
> "I can show you a good time, Jung-kook-ah."[41]
>
> —Book 5, Chapter 1

In other words, the male lead of the sample possesses 'erotic capital.' The idea of 'erotic capital' was introduced by Catherine Hakim as the fourth addition to Pierre Bourdieu's revolutionary distinction between three different kinds of personal assets. (Hakim, 2010) It is these three types of capital, according to Bourdieu, that allow the individual to "be successful in capitalist societies." (Hakim, 2010) There is 'economic capital,' which refers to the resources that are "immediately and directly convertible into money," 'cultural capital,' which involves knowledge, skills and behavior that are highly valued by the society, and 'social capital,' which consists of the beneficial social connections the individual possesses. (Bourdieu, 1986) Catherine Hakim adds 'erotic capital' to the original typology in her work, asserting that "a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness"

[39] *Book 3*, for example, borrows Min Yoon-gi from the real world, who has a very slim figure and adds a prominent set of abdominal muscles to his body. These interventions, to my observation, do not have a particular purpose other than making the character sexually attractive in the most stereotypical, the most heightened way possible.

[40] The Korean word *oppa* (오빠) is used by girls and women to address the boys and men who are older than them. It roughly translates to *brother*, but it also means *boyfriend*. There are a few daily Korean expressions that frequently appear in fan fiction written in Turkish, which creates a very interesting cultural amalgam throughout the books.

[41] I have translated the quotations I borrow from the books of the sample from Turkish to English.

may pave the way for success in similar ways. (Hakim, 2010) The male lead definitely possesses these qualities; however, 'erotic capital' is not the only type of capital he has in the arsenal.

The male lead is an exceptionally successful person. Some of the characters retain the jobs of their eponyms and live their lives as world-renowned K-pop idols, while others transform into actors, businesspeople and mafia bosses. The job titles of the boys often come with recognition, with respect, with social connections and a lot of money. If the male lead is not yet an adult and is portrayed as a student, the power is compensated in the form of popularity and occasionally, a wealthy family. In every case, the male leads always possess excessive amounts of social and economic capital. Although the male lead is never a daft individual, the only kind of capital that is not particularly highlighted throughout the sample remains cultural capital.

> "Being rich is really nice, isn't it, Park Ji-min? You can buy anything you want. You give out the order, and it gets done. You have the job you want, you live in the house you want, you drive the car you want, you eat the food you want. But, can you sleep with the person you want?"
>
> —Book 2, Chapter 23

In the realm of traditionally attractive qualities, the male lead is always a collection of surpluses: He is excessively attractive, excessively successful, excessively wealthy, excessively powerful. Yet, none of this should come off as particularly puzzling. The intersubjective fantasy embedded in the books and films about love, I observe, have traditionally been 'excessive.' The male lead of the massively successful *Twilight* books is a wonderful example to my point and is particularly relevant to this study, because of his popularity with the fan fiction community: Edward Cullen is not only described to be devastatingly attractive in the original books, but being a vampire, his beauty consists of humanly impossible qualities, like having a skin that sparkles "like thousands of tiny diamonds were

embedded in the surface." (Meyer, 2005) He is not only described to be rich, but his adoptive father Carlisle Cullen is ranked #1 in *The 2010 Forbes Fictional 15* with a net worth of $34.1 billion. (Noer, 2011) Edward Cullen is strong, protective, cultured, devoted, attentive, loving in ways that are impossible for human beings,[42] and embedded in his immortal existence lies the promise of forever. The watertight fantasy of Edward Cullen overflows with eternity, with invincibility, with gargantuan love. As *the Twilight Saga* attracted an unmatched, massive, pious fandom at the height of its fame, it is quite obvious that this dense fantasy appealed to a lot of people very strongly at the time. It is safe to say that the 'lavishness' of the fantasy surrounding the male lead is not unique to the practice of fan fiction, albeit very much embraced by the community.[43]

On the other hand, the male lead possesses a lot of negative traits, most of them traits traditionally associated with masculinity: He has a cold, unfriendly and aggressive demeanor at the beginning of the book, sometimes bordering on hostility. He gets angry pretty easily, and when he gets angry, he gets violent. He is jealous and overbearing. His unpleasant personality is very often explained and sometimes legitimized with a tragic childhood: It is not uncommon for male leads to have lost their parents at a very young age and have grown up in abusive orphanages.

These qualities have certain functions in the relationship between the two leads. That, I will explore later in the chapter.

[42] The book explains these traits with qualities that are inherent to having a vampire anatomy and a vampire lifestyle.

[43] Fan fiction, I observe, traditionally involves more intense fantasies compared to the material they borrow from, perhaps because it is already based upon a fantasy. Francesca Coppa identifies "surplus and pleasure" in the type of fan fiction that she studies, even describes the fan-made video she analyzes in her study as "a veritable orgy of scopophilia." (Coppa, 2009)

3.4.2 The Female Lead

Some female leads[44] are blondes, others are brunettes. Some female leads are tall, others are short. There is a bit of a variation to their looks, but there is an infallible quality to the female lead: Although she does not always realize it herself, the female lead is always a strikingly gorgeous, fashionable[45] woman that attracts the attention and the interest of the eligible men of the book. In other words, the female lead also possesses *erotic capital*. What their beauty always entails is that the female lead is described to be a thin, almost frail[46] individual. However, the subject of weight is very often depicted in anxious ways in the books.[47]

> "You would no longer love me if I were to gain weight."
>
> —Book 5, Chapter 28

> "Why are you so obsessed with your weight?"
> "Now that I am fat [50 kilograms], you will go hang out with skinny, pretty girls and have sex with them."
>
> —Book 4, Chapter 55

While the male leads express their feelings of angst via angry or violent behavior that mostly affects their surroundings, the female leads conversely express their feelings of angst via stubborn or erratic behavior that mainly affects themselves. A lot of the female leads resort to self-harm, when they feel deeply desperate or devastated: The sample includes depictions of cutting, of scratching, of other forms

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[44] While researching for the study, I have encountered a lot of female leads who are 'mixed.' The female leads who are both Korean and Turkish, I find, are optimal for feelings of kinship to flourish and for potential projective attempts on the reader's part. They also render it possible for the female lead to have a relationship with a BTS member, a Korean person that lives in South Korea.

[45] A quirky detail about the Wattpad culture in Turkey is that the authors often describe the female lead's daily outfits in great detail and sometimes borrow photographs from the Internet to help the reader visualize the look. This is not something they do for the other characters in the books.

[46] I purposefully use the word 'frail,' because the female leads are sporadically hospitalized for various reasons in the sample; however, her being weak and faint is always emphasized in these chapters.

[47] I have observed that some books contain a very vibrant energy around the issue of weight. In some books, it manifests itself as the very palpable anxiety the female lead feels towards her figure and as anorexic ideas. Other times, the female lead's unearthly appetite is contrasted with the female lead's slim figure. Perhaps, the fact that women are encouraged and expected to be skinny in the Korean society motivates this fictional choice.

of self-injury and several unsuccessful attempts at suicide on the female lead's part. A defining quality of the female lead is that she is a virtuous person. That, however, reflects a lot about the role of sex in the books, and I find it more appropriate to explore in the sample later in this chapter in better depth.

The parents of the female lead are almost always exiled from the book by the author: Most parents pass away way before the story begins, while other parents who survive the authors' wrath are villainized in quite heavy ways. The sample does not contain a single example in which the female lead has a positive relationship with their parents. The absence of the parents absolves the female lead from parental authority and creates an environment where young female leads are able to live alone, to travel, to be sexual, to behave in other grown-up ways. The parent deaths in the sample have these direct and substantial literary functions, but their plenitude, I find, also points to a latent and perhaps unconscious consensus amongst the community that characters that are parental figures are restrictive towards the fantasy that works of fan fiction often carry out.

3.5 Gender Stereotypes on Wattpad

I believe I have established at this point that the sample of this study involves a lot of patterns about gender which are reducible to stereotypes. However, this is not exclusive to the sample, or to the contemporary practice of fan fiction, or to Wattpad books from Turkey, but is the worldwide trend on all the Wattpad books. Wattpad authors, not solely fan fiction authors, but the community as a whole has a disposition towards gender stereotypes: Users more often create male characters that are 'violent' and 'sexual,' while leaning towards female characters that are 'fragile' and 'ditsy.' (Fast et al., 2016) What follows are four words clouds I have borrowed

from an extensive study that demonstrates the verbs and adjectives that are associated significantly with male and female characters in Wattpad books that are written in English:[48]



Figure 5: The study presents "verbs and adjectives that are significantly associated with male and female characters." (Fast et al., 2016)

Even at first glance, it is pretty obvious that the verbs that are associated with male characters in Wattpad make up 'manly' men: The men of Wattpad 'growl,' 'grunt,' 'roar,' 'grab,' 'thrust,' 'smash,' 'punch,' 'cheat,' 'abuse' and 'kill.' Meanwhile, the verbs that are associated with female characters in Wattpad make up 'girly' women: The women of Wattpad 'squeal,' 'shriek,' 'screech,' 'gasp,' 'sob,' 'cry,' 'whimper,' 'faint,' 'giggle' and 'blush.' The adjectives that are mostly associated with male characters mostly emphasize their physical features with the words 'masculine,' 'muscular,' 'bulky,' 'sculpted,' 'toned,' 'burly,' 'husky,' 'handsome,' 'hottest' and 'dreamy;' while the adjectives that are mostly associated with female characters depict women with both their physical features and their (mostly negative) behavioral traits: Women of Wattpad are 'beautiful,' 'manicured,' 'prettier,' 'prettiest,' 'curvy,' 'delicate,' 'dainty,' 'elegant;' and they are also 'slutty,' 'bitchy,' 'meanest,' 'insecure,' 'naïve' and 'fragile.' The words 'bridal,' 'motherly,'

[48] The study collects 1.8 billion words from a random sample of 600,000 books from Wattpad.

‘pregnant’ and ‘baby’ are also featured in the cloud, which highlight the maternal quality ascribed to the female characters of Wattpad. The study also asserts the following deductions:

> We find men are more often ‘strong’ (2.02 odds), ‘arrogant’ (1.30 odds), ‘sexual’ (1.22 odds), ‘active’ (1.17 odds), ‘dominant’ (1.15 odds), ‘violent’ (1.10 odds), ‘beautiful’ (1.06 odds), and ‘angry’ (1.05 odds). Women are more often ‘weak’ (1.73 odds), ‘submissive’ (1.66 odds), ‘childish’ (1.54 odds), ‘afraid’ (1.46 odds), ‘dependent’ (1.43 odds), ‘hysterical’ (1.25 odds), ‘domestic’ (1.16 odds), and ‘emotional’ (1.03 odds). (Fast et al., 2016)

Clearly, the leaning towards gender stereotypes[49] in the sample of this study is not a symptom of local sociocultural traits in Turkey, but is representative of the dispositions that exist worldwide. They also reflect the worldwide demand: “Sexual and arrogant men are the strongest predictors of a high rated story,” while “strong women and domestic men are the strongest predictors of a low rated story.” (Fast et al., 2016)

The clear division of behavioral traits between the male and the female leads of this sample is definitive of the relationship between the two lovers.

3.6 The Two Leads, Intertwined

There exists a very particular way the two leads, the two ideal types interact with one another in the sample, and to better depict the nature of this relationship, I would like to revisit the writings of Georg Simmel at this point of the book. Although their works were in the same gravitational area as Max Weber, Georg Simmel was knee-deep in the idea of interaction and provides a much more precise perspective while reviewing relationships. I borrow the distinction between ‘form’ and ‘content’ from

[49] The study builds categories of stereotypes based on prior literature and then makes up “lexical categories that capture this list of stereotypes by mapping the 2000 most commonly occurring verbs and adjectives in [their] dataset onto the set of categories through a series of crowdsourcing tasks.” (Fast et al., 2016)

Georg Simmel to properly contextualize the thousands and thousands of interactions that take place between the two lovers.

Georg Simmel quarrels with the idea of society as "an absolute entity" (Frisby, 2002) quite frequently in his works. "I see society everywhere," he notes, "where a number of human beings enter into interaction and form a temporary or permanent unity." (Frisby, 2011) Instead, he conceptualizes society like a massive pile of microscopic interactions. The sociology of Georg Simmel is mainly interested in the forms these social interaction takes on. In the groundbreaking essay, *The Problem of Sociology* (1895), Georg Simmel offers a distinction between the form and the content of sociation:

> Society, in its broadest sense, is found wherever several individuals enter into reciprocal relations. From a purely ephemeral association for the purpose of a casual promenade, to the complete unity of a family, or a guild of the Middle Ages, one must recognize socialization of the most varying kind and degree. The particular causes and aims, without which socialization never takes place, comprise, to a certain extent, the body, the material of the social process. That the result of these causes, and the pursuance of these aims call forth, among the persons concerned, a reciprocal relationship, or a socialization, this is the form, in which the content of social organization clothes itself. The entire existence of a special science of society rests upon the isolation of this form by means of scientific abstraction. (Simmel, 1909)

What Georg Simmel implicitly suggests with this paragraph is that social interactions, albeit infinitely various in content, assume a handful of forms defined by human objectives. The form of 'conflict,' for instance, is assumed in the relationship between two feuding families, between two rival companies, or between the troops at two opposing fronts. I wanted to see what forms of social interactions were prevalent in the fictional relationship of the leading couple. I find it particularly telling, because although the authors may technically write whatever they want to in these books, once again, a distinctive mold of a relationship prevails.

3.6.1 The Relationship

The occupations of the two leads often lock their relationship in a distinctive form: The asymmetry of power in the relationship between the teacher and the student, the boss and the employee, the client and the sex worker permeate the books. These fictional 'molds' are well-loved by the Wattpad fan fiction community and also are employed in several of the books in the sample of this study. By assigning the former titles to the male lead and the latter titles to the female lead, the authors create a dynamic of domination/subordination right off the bat between the two lovers. Throughout the story, this form is often supported by other fictional choices.

> Suddenly, he (Min Yoon-gi, a band member) climbed up on me and wrapped his hands around my neck. "Do you realize who you are rebelling against?" He slapped me and I set my tears free. He got off of me. "You must've forgotten that you are just a whore."
>
> —Book 3, Chapter 7

A fictional element that consolidates this form is the excruciating wealth the male leads possess. Occasionally, the female lead matches the wealth; however, other times, the wealth gap promotes the power asymmetry between the two lovers. Money also heightens the charm of the male lead: It sustains the exciting trips the couple takes, the services and the respect they constantly receive, and solves distressing situations. This "Cinderella" type of formula is quite the widespread structure in traditional publishing, as well. (Cawelti, 1976)

Most books in the sample assign the male lead the role of a savior. The aggressive and sometimes violent behavior of the male lead comes in handy in the fulfillment of this role: The books often leave the female lead in distressing and dangerous situations, and the male lead always comes in and saves the day. These troublesome situations are almost always created by other villainous men featured in

the book, and vary from mild inconveniences to kidnappings, to sexual assault, to attempted murder.

> One of the guys came up to me, grabbed me by the arm and dragged me out from the dark alley. I grimaced at the revolting smell of alcohol. “Let me go!” I yelled, but, as always, I was on my own. “Don’t worry, sweetie, I won’t hurt you.” While one of them was holding me down, the other was trying to touch me. When he grabbed my ass with his disgusting hands, I screamed: “I said, let me go!” “Take your hands off of my woman right this second!” I turned my head to the side, and it didn’t take much time for me to realize it was [Jeon] Jung-kook.
>
> —Book 1, Chapter 3

In return, the female lead takes on the role of the healer, attending to the wounds of the male lead.

However, implicit to the savior trope lies a certain entitlement, a certain possessiveness the male lead feels towards the female lead. Combined with the fact that he is an aggressive person and a jealous boyfriend, the male lead often behaves in ways that are restrictive of the female lead: He gives attitude about her revealing clothes, about her male friends, at times manhandling the female lead, or physically confining her to places. The books often take away the agency of the female lead via popular fictional elements: Additional to the previously mentioned motifs of kidnapping and various forms of assault, popular tropes in Wattpad fan fiction include ‘forced marriage,’ ‘blackmail’ and ‘the purchase of the female lead.’

3.6.2 The Sex[50]

I have previously mentioned that I deliberately selected books that involved sexual elements for the sample of this study, because I wanted to explore how sexuality was

[50] According to the Wattpad Guidelines, pornographic content that “exists solely for the purpose of sexual stimulation” is not allowed on the website. Wattpad also removes books that glorify sexual violence, that contain “illegal sex acts including, but not limited to, bestiality, necrophilia, or incest,” or that transgress the age of consent, which is sixteen on Wattpad.

depicted in popular books written by young women and for young women. Indeed, every book of the sample of this study contains sexual elements, and, with a single exception, every book in the sample of this study contains descriptions of sexual encounters between the two leading characters. In these encounters, I find, prevail particular sexual scripts.[51]

The theory of sexual script assumes that "most of social life operates under the guidance of an operating syntax, much as language becomes a precondition for speech," (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) and that human beings carry around "cognitive models" in their heads to "guide and evaluate social and sexual interactions." (Rose & Frieze, 1993) In other words, the sexual script theory assumes that human beings behave in the ways they do and judge their social surroundings in the ways they do, partially because they are advised by the metaphorical guidelines in their heads. According to the theory, the scripts have three levels to them: Individuals pick up scripts from the cultural and historical heritage that surround them, from social interactions and solidify scripts in their personal thoughts. Albeit fictional, there exist prevalent sexual scripts in the sample of this study.

Since the books are written from the female lead's point of view, the most obvious manifestations of the sexual scripts embedded in the sample of this study crystallize in the inner thoughts of the female lead. This is the reason why it is a defining quality for the books that the female lead is a virtuous person: The female lead is highly opinionated about values surrounding sex and explicitly judges other people, particularly other women who do not live according to these ideals. The female lead typically judges women who are sexually forward, who dress

[51] In *One Direction Real Person Fiction on Wattpad: A Textual Analysis of Sexual Consent* (2020), Ashley Hedrick employs the theory of sexual script to study the levels of consent featured in 1D fan fiction in similar ways to this study. However, Hedrick solely focuses on the idea of consent, while I review a variety of sexual motifs.

promiscuously, who have sex without falling in love, who have one-night stands and who are sex workers by choice. It is possible to profile the ideal 'sexual' woman of the books by assembling the negations of these judgments together: The ideal woman, according to the books, does not actively chase male attention, looks for emotional connection in her sexual encounters and practices sexual monogamy. While the books explore the idea of female pleasure vicariously through the female lead, the character does not consciously prioritize sexual pleasure herself.

> I don't know about anybody else, but I consider these things very important. Even if my first could not be with the man I marry, I would have at least wanted it to be with the man I loved.
>
> —Book 2, Chapter 1

The idea of virginity[52] is a vibrant element in the sample and is often a focal point in the story. It is explicitly stated at the beginning of almost every book that the female lead is a virgin, and with a single exception in the sample, the female lead is always contrasted with a male lead who has not only had sex before, but also is very, very 'experienced.'

The idea of virginity is an anxious subject for a lot of the female leads. Having premarital sex, or being raped for that matter, is often depicted as deviating from 'innocence' in their inner thoughts, which is something they uphold highly. However, at the same time, virginity is depicted as a burden. The female leads are equally interested in being sexual, being perceived as sexual, and 'performing well' as much as they feel anxiety over losing or fear of losing their virginity. Such contradiction, I observe, renders a Gordian knot.

> I wonder if he would stop taking an interest in me if he knew that I was a virgin.
>
> —Book 4, Chapter 11

[52] I would have loved to rid the word 'virginity' from the study and to just directly speak about the characters' sexual experiences without giving it a label, especially after witnessing through this study how much anxiety the idea of it creates for young women. However, the label felt way too heavy throughout the sample that I felt the need to employ the word as it is.

Sexual scripts surface in the descriptions of the sexual encounters between the leading couple, as well. Most sex scenes in the books consist of penile-vaginal intercourse. In these sequences, the books often assert that the male lead has a "big" penis, and the female lead has a "tight" vagina. The books refer to the genitals of the leading characters with the words *penis* and *vagina*, but also with euphemisms, notably with '*alet'* (tool), '*erkeklik'* (manhood) and '*kadınlık'* (womanhood). Very rarely, there pops up an oral sex scene. In these scenes, a certain combination of shame and disgust[53] intensifies with sequences of female leads refusing to receive oral sex, or male leads expressing opinions in the same realm with the following sentences:

> I would never want the woman I love to give me a blowjob when I could instead feel her lips on my lips. Maybe it's weird, but it does not sit right with me.
>
> —Book 2, Chapter 43

Although there exist a lot of scenes in which the leading couple communicates their willingness and consent to have sex, there are still a lot of scenes in which the idea of consent is quite blurry. Rape, be the assaulter the male lead or a different male character from the book, is a very prominent motif in the sample.

> The man [who is not the male lead] caressed the girl's bare legs. Suddenly, he pulled down her shorts and started to stroke her womanhood. "Oh, you are an untouched flower." The girl tried to scream, but her voice was muffled by the rag shoved up in her mouth. There was nobody to save her, but she did not want to accept it. "Don't try to scream, just enjoy it, my dear." … The girl kept struggling, but nobody heard her muffled screams. The man had just taken the virginity of the girl who had just turned seventeen.
>
> —Book 1, Chapter 6

[53] The comment sections of the books are riddled with expressions of disgust, as well, especially in the scenes where the female lead is at the receiving end of oral sex.

This is exactly where it gets quite tricky, because as the template of the sexual relationship in the sample becomes clearer and clearer, it brings a certain kind of 'feminist' critique alongside. Women are transgressed in these novels, in various, often gnarly ways. But these are not books written by outside perspectives, they are novels written and read by women. Thus, a blanket critique of misogyny would simply fall short, here. So, what now?

3.6.3 Schrödinger's Rapist

It is quite the difficult task to bring sociological verdicts on why these books are so gnarly towards the female lead by solely looking at the sample. A comparative approach with the worldwide trends might have offered a bit more luck perhaps, but at the same time, we already know that the elements of sexual violence are not endemic features of Turkish fan fiction, but widely exist in Wattpad fan fiction written in English, as well. (Hedrick, 2020) So, while a comparative attempt might have given an idea about the different levels and idiosyncrasies of local and worldwide trends, it still would not excavate a clear relationship of causality. One thing is certain, however: The books in the sample are obvious fruits of intersubjectivity. For one reason or the other, the authors more or less write about the same anxieties, take on perspectives of the same realm, express the same value judgments and gravitate towards the same conflicts.

To offer one perspective about the plenitude of rape motifs in the sample, I would like to draw attention to an interesting parallel between the sample of this study and the American historical romance novels written in the 1970s. These books,

just like the sample of this study,[54] were predominantly written by women and for women, (Radway, 1991) which makes it particularly interesting that sexual assault unfolds in these books in analogous ways. Susan C. Brantly points out a particular function of rape in this decade-long corpus. “From a puritanical perspective on sexual morality,” Brantly notes, “the friendly rape absolves the heroine from the moral slur of consenting to have sexual intercourse before marriage.” (Brantly, 2017) Brantly also contrasts the books with the historical novels written by Swedish female writers, in which friendly rape does not exist. (Brantly, 2017) “Perhaps the phenomenon stems from different cultural attitudes toward sexuality,” Brantly points out. (Brantly, 2017) This insight, I find, sticks very well with this study, as well. Sexual assault, perhaps, is an indeliberate fictional device in this sample that allows the female lead to experience sex without undertaking the burden of being a ‘slut,’ that places the female lead to an “unliberated position,” thereby excusing her “from responsibility for what happens to” her. (Wallace, 2005) Hence, the female lead remains innocent in the eyes of the readers who might share the same value judgments about sex, but still carries out a sexual fantasy. These male leads are Schrödinger’s rapists: They’re only assaulters if the witness in the reader observes them to be as such.

Yet, there is clearly more to the story. The female lead is assaulted not just by their lovers, but also by random men on the street, by their employers, by the enemies of their boyfriend, and none of these experiences are resolved into pleasurable outcomes for the female lead. Perhaps, these books are, in ways,

[54] In the two years that I have researched for this study, I have come across hundreds and hundreds of comments on Wattpad stating or implying that the authors and the readers identified as female; however, I am yet to encounter a single indication of male presence in this space. I unfortunately do not have conclusive information about the exact gender analytics on the sample; however, I do feel pretty confident that BTS fan fiction mainly circulates between female readers in Turkey.

shadows and reworkings of real life. Perhaps, the intersubjective fear[55] of being raped permeates the way young women reconstruct the world in their fiction. Perhaps, sexual assault is the thing that the authors are predisposed to write about, because it is the thing that they are predisposed to worry about. The following conversation takes place between a reader and the author in the comment section of *Book 3*, in which the female lead and two other female characters are kidnapped, tortured and forced into prostitution. The conversation, I find, reveals how deeply the sexual scripts of young women are entrenched with anxieties over rape:

> "Is it that easy to kidnap a girl in the middle of the street and throw her into the dirt? Can't a girl stand on her own, give a shot at survival by herself? Should she always require the protection of a man? I don't understand. Human beings are really terrible creatures. Even a lion does not eat its prey before killing it. But human beings, they torture the people they deem their prey. Without the evil, the goodness of the good would not be evident, but, what about the injustice evil people exercise over good people? I even felt suicidal over this, just now. One must contemplate ten times before bringing a baby into this world. I would personally never bring a child to this world. It would mean throwing my own child into the dirt, with my own two hands."
> "Relax, aw, you're really welled up, aren't you?"
> "Your writing is captivating, that's why."
> "Thank you! But unfortunately, these things happen in real life. Just like you said, we live in a terrible world."

However, at the same time, the fact remains: While it is very likely that the books in the sample are heavily influenced by the culture that they bloom in and by the personal values of the authors, they are still completely fictional. By themselves, it is impossible to identify how much they reflect about the authors, about the readers and about the contemporary society. One must be wary while studying works of fiction and inferring causal relationships about the contents. After all, "violent fantasies do not necessitate action, nor precede violence." (Lamstein, 2017)

[55] I recognize that there exist contexts in which the idea of rape does not adopt the terror I ascribe to it, an obvious example being the rape role-plays consensually practiced by the BDSM community; however, the fact that this is a quotidian horror for the readers of the sample is made clear in the conversations that take place in the comment sections of the books.

3.7 Concluding Remarks

Fiction bleeds in our vision, all the time. It runs under our skin, overflows and starves our brain; it's etched to what we perceive to be 'reality.' High-fashion, prestige, self-worth, human limits and human limitlessness; our doxas are mostly determined by the fictions we collectively make up and stick to. But, how we rebuild life in our minds based off of sensory input is rather mysterious, and often contextual: Forty soldiers die at the front, and sorrow permeates in memories; forty civilians die in the hands of a deathly virus, and they fade into statistics. It's elusive, at times, very difficult to grasp.

Luckily, two can play at that game. Our doxas bleed back to the perfectly palpable fictions we make up, to books, to plays, to films, all the time; fan fiction vividly testifies for it. In this chapter, I have followed this osmotic flow of fictions between the real world and the works of fan fiction to learn about how young people build the social life back up in their fictional landscapes. I have begun by presenting the field, the past and the present of the tradition of fan fiction. Then, I have presented a sample of twenty books with a 'Mature' rating featuring straight relationships. The sample was selected from a website heavily visited by young women, Wattpad, because I wanted to extract how young women wrote about relationships and sex. I have reviewed the leading characters of the sample under two 'ideal-types,' to convey the stereotypes favored by the books in the sample. A very clear juxtaposition between the ideal type of the male lead and the ideal type of the female lead revealed before the eyes. However, upon reviewing the linguistic signals employed throughout the whole bibliography of the website, it was clear that this binary division of roles and attributes between 'the man' and 'the woman' was not a

foible of the sample, but was heavily prevalent throughout the whole of Wattpad, at a global level. Then, I have reviewed the love, the relationship between the two leading characters of the books in the sample. A particular ‘social form’ of domination/subordination quickly prevailed, here. The violence embedded in the relationship extended to the leading couple’s sex life and manifested itself in the very vivid descriptions of sexual assault. But, the relationship did not only place ‘the woman’ in the disadvantageous position; things got violent. In these encounters, the very vibrant anxiety over first-time sexual experiences and the blurry depictions of consent throughout the sample was also highlighted.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

> "A suspicion that lightness is not deeply serious pervades aesthetic discourse. But, what if lightness is a philosophical choice to temper reality with strangeness, to temper the intellect with emotion, and to temper emotion with humor?"
>
> — *"100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write,"* Sarah Ruhl

> "They don't take no teenage angst at no banks."
>
> — *"We Go High,"* Chance the Rapper

This thesis has explored a phenomenon from the field of entertainment, from the landscapes of the light-hearted and the frivolous; however, while tackling different features of the socio-technological bonds between the South Korean boy group BTS and their fandom ARMY, it did progressively uncover a lot of tricky questions along the way, demonstrating how informative and relevant the field actually is. A good deal of these questions was left without clear answers. As the book is coming to an end, it's time to go over the previous chapters, revisit a particular question and tie up the loose ends.

The 1st of the two main chapters of the thesis was an exploration of the emotional field between the virtual representations of the band members and the individual members of the fandom. At the beginning of the chapter, I built a simple theoretical structure to represent the emotional bonds that develop in that very field. The goal of the chapter was to highlight and explore the relationships which occurred at the very microscopic, person-to-person level. Thus, I reviewed the phenomenon through a quasi-dyadic structure with two nodes and a tie, namely, the virtual representation of the band members, the individual member of the fanbase, and the parasocial relationship which links the two nodes together.

After reviewing the historical context of ‘K-pop,’ it quickly became clear that the product is not solely the albums in the contemporary South Korean pop music industry, it’s also the video clips, the television shows, the mobile games, the fan service, and the idols themselves. And, the BTS brand does a particularly successful job at making their product as diverse and as attractive as possible: The band’s music, which is their main product, is heightened to this entertaining, comforting, engaging, deeply diverse and thoroughly positive being through the availability of the virtual representation of the idols, their looks, their personalities and their values.

The band mainly attracts a female fanbase who belongs to the younger generations; and, a lot of times, parasocial bonds do accompany this attraction. This fact is consistent with the history of female excitement towards boy bands. However, there are details about the example of BTS and ARMY which makes it particularly significant: It’s significant, for example, that a group hailing from South Korea has achieved massive success in the United States simultaneously with the peak of the Stop Asian Hate movement. It’s significant that the ‘hybrid’ manliness of the band, which contains both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine traits, appeals to a massive crowd from all across the world. It’s significant that the band gives comfort to their fanbase, that it entertains, provides a sense of belonging and an opportunity for self-exploration. It’s significant that communities are built around the band, it’s significant that charity organizations are motivated by the band. It’s significant that their devotion to the band motivates young people to learn new languages and develop new skills. Yet, it is also significant that ‘K-pop’ is a giant industry that depends on the affective investment of fandoms while granting a unique power and a unique vulnerability to a handful of individuals. But, perhaps most importantly, it’s significant how technological advancements bring people together

with virtual representations of famous figures who don't personally know their viewers, how these figures grow on their viewers, infiltrating their lives. Although this study selects and follows a parasocial bond from the field of entertainment, parasocial relationships may develop in a variety of different fields, from religious to political contexts. Thus, this ubiquitous experience must be researched in better depth through transdisciplinary efforts in the future.

The 2nd of the two main chapters of the thesis explored the very vivid subculture of fan fiction. A digital library is born out of the socio-technological, parasocial bonds between BTS and ARMY. On the Internet, a smaller group from the fanbase who also belong to the subculture of fan fiction produce and consume books about the band members. In the landscapes of fan fiction, the band members assume a purely fictional state and become 'signs' almost, traveling between the members of the fan fiction community and building fictional worlds. For the case of contemporary Turkish fan fiction published on Wattpad which features a heterosexual couple and sexual themes, the fictional worlds of the books revealed a lot of patterns. This study followed 'the male lead' and 'the female lead' of these books through Max Weber's concept of 'the ideal type' to grasp what kind of 'men' and what kind of 'women' the fan fiction community in Turkey preferred to write about and preferred to read about. It was revealed that attractive, powerful, dominant men ruled the corpus, while beautiful, self-destructive, submissive women accompanied them in their adventures. A very particular form of a passionate love intertwined the two leads, and this study explored their relationship through Georg Simmel's concept of 'the social form:' Often violently, the dynamic of domination/subordination defined the relationship between the two lovers. This violence was deeply tangled with the sex featured in the books and manifested itself

in the form of sexual assault throughout the sample. At times, sexual assault strategically allowed the female lead to experience sex while absolving her from the responsibility of giving consent. Other times, it did not have a palpable purpose, likely because it was the real-life anxiety over rape spilling to the books which is experienced by the young women who produce and consume this corpus of fan fiction, in daily life.

In the passing, I asked a question: Why borrow from a source text that is defined by softness, only to wipe it up completely and replace it with violence? I believe the answer to this question not only beautifully ties the two main chapters together, but also clearly highlights the fundamental problem of this thesis. After reviewing the supportive role the band members take on in the lives of their fanbase, I believe, a key word that has been quietly accompanying the progress of the thesis clearly appears before the eyes: Safety. The soft and kind features of the band's brand allow the fanbase to build trustful and dependable relationships with the figures. These relationships likely provide the safe space in the psyches of young girls, in which they feel safe enough to experiment with themes of love, sex and relationships. Perhaps, it's through fan fiction that young girls explore the realms of sexuality, of desire and of boundary, digest the belief systems that surround them and reorganize their own beliefs along the way. But, the key is that they take on this journey with virtual figures they already trust and are comfortable with. In that sense, the metamorphosis of the band members from kind, parasocial acquaintances to violent boyfriends becomes deeply meaningful.

This brings me to the fundamental statement of the whole thesis. While having fun, I believe the young girls who participate in the fandom and the subculture of fan fiction are doing something deeply serious: Through these

seemingly frivolous practices, young girls are implicitly coping with the hardships of adolescence and with their vulnerable position in society, together. Indeed, they are doing something deeply important to them. But, at the same time, sexual and violent themes which may not be suitable for the younger readers keep circulating on the website. So, I leave you with a question: What may be done to give these young girls the space to explore themselves while protecting them from being exposed to unsuitable material?

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