



# **We Are Not Robots: A Preliminary Exploration into the Affective Link between BTS x ARMY**

ACADEMIC ARTICLE: ESSAY

**Lady Flor Partosa**

*Teacher and Graduate Student (Philippines)*

## ABSTRACT

Fans and artists in pop culture are usually seen condescendingly as “robots” with no agency; on the other hand, some scholars also view them as having limited autonomy because their labor and investment is co-opted by cultural industries in the global economy. I argue, however, that the production of affect through affective labor (Michael Hardt) and affective investment (Lawrence Grossberg) produces subjectivities and sociality – an affective space – where BTS and ARMY critically examine their identities as informed by their place in the cultural industry and inspire each other toward transformative action, from self-awareness to solidarity with others. Through a close reading of the lyrics and music video of RM’s “Persona” as well as brief references to fan discourse and activities, I aim to show how both artists and fans – connected through affect – critically examine their thought process and participate in shaping the social conditions they inhabit. In citing fan experience to further understand this affective link, I refer to the notion of “transnational fandom” (Chin and Morimoto), where affinities are established beyond national or cultural boundaries, as I interact with BTS and ARMY on social media. I hope that this preliminary exploration will add to the discourse about the cultural agency of artists and fans in changing – or attempting to change – ourselves and our specific corners of the world.

## KEYWORDS

*affect, pop culture, song analysis*

When I watched James Corden’s “Carpool Karaoke” featuring BTS on *The Late Late Show* in March 2020, the Korean idol group by then had already become world-famous for their chart-topping music, stadium concerts, and inspirational message. Although I was vaguely familiar with their achievements, I remember hearing about BTS as a K-pop boy band from a friend’s daughter, and even bought posters and merchandise for her when I went to Korea in 2018. Watching “Carpool Karaoke,” however, I was struck with their easy laughter and the candid way they joked around and sang along with each other. They looked *real*. I wanted to know their names.

I began reading stories about fans whose lives were changed because of BTS and their songs. I was even more curious to find out how the band could exert this profound, intimate influence at such a massive and diverse scope. This inquiry first led me to casually skim through fan-compilation videos on YouTube, which introduced me to the band members’ endearing personalities and eventually to their music. Although I have not fully explored their discography, some songs have left an indelible imprint. For instance: “Paradise” critiques the neoliberal system that pressures people into mindlessly chasing after future goals. However, the refrain “Stop running for nothing my friend” sounds like a personal wake-up call, a gentle but necessary reminder for me to embrace the present moment. I resolved: I will never run for anything meaningless. These are truths and virtues I already know, certainly, but I received them again wrapped in another package when I realised that their songs are an oasis of comfort. The pandemic might have made me ache for assuring messages, or perhaps reading fan accounts about the band’s positive impact might have prepared me to embrace them with open arms. Regardless, I am an ARMY. I am in love with them: Kim Namjoon, Jin Seokjin, Min Yoongi, Jung Hoseok, Park Jimin, Kim Taehyung, Jeon Jungkook! BTS!

## Exploring the Affective Link between BTS x ARMY

Being an ARMY is an exhilarating experience. As I listened to BTS’s songs and watched their videos on social media, I was struck with their vulnerability and transparency in sharing their life experiences and thoughts with their fans. In their songs, not only do they reflect about their lives, they also adopt a reflexive stance when examining their experiences — seemingly from an “observer” perspective — and commenting about their identities in the course of formation. *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines “reflexive,” in one sense, as “directed or turned back on itself.” In contrast to reflectiveness, reflexivity demands not only a reflection of one’s thoughts but also an awareness of this thought process.

Their extended play album *Map of the Soul: Persona*, released in 2019, is a journey of self-exploration based on concepts from Carl Jung, sharing the title with Dr. Murray Stein’s classic introduction on Carl Jung published in 1998. As the sixth mini album from an extensive discography which includes four full-length albums, the E.P — according to Big Hit’s website — tells “a beginning of a new story” of BTS as “[looking] to shape the future reflecting on and using the power they have gained while embracing its shadows” (Big Hit, 2020). The mini album features the track “Persona,” which rapper RM collaborated on with Pdogg and Hiss Noise. The music video of the song particularly caught my attention: the song, a product of the entertainment industry itself, seemingly critiques mass-produced artificiality by featuring animated, machine-generated images of the rapper in the music video and promotes analysis of self as struggling to be whole. The song lyrics and video reveal, in this particular

instance, the rapper's awareness of the self in the process of *becoming* as influenced by various social conditions of the culture industry. I believe that the rapper is in the process of struggling to understand this celebrity persona as part of the self. The artist's awareness of his own subjectivity in consumer culture indicates the cultural agency of the artist as he peels these layers of questions, implying an "identity" that is not manufactured or polished but one that he articulates as conflicted and dynamic.

Such intense and aggressive self-analysis struck me because I felt like I was listening to another person, who, like me, is confused with the same questions about the self. I did not expect to connect on a deeply personal level to a song from an extremely popular and commercially successful group; however, watching the robots and computer-generated images collapsing to a pile of metal scraps at the end of the music video, I felt that the song was challenging my preconceived ideas about pop culture, or more specifically BTS, as merely mechanical. With my experience of the song, I began to think about the intimate link between artists and fans, which is forged within the terrain of capital. This intimacy is established through the strategies of the cultural industry to promote commercial success globally. This is reflective of what Hardt (1999) calls the shift toward "immaterial labor" emerging from a "postindustrial and informational" global economy that seeks to produce information, knowledge, and affect. We see this with fan and artist interaction on social media, the artists' labor — such as a tweet, a song, a choreography behind-the-scenes practice, among others — produces feelings of ease, comfort, and community, a sense of belonging together. However, as Hardt argues, even though this affective labor falls within the mechanisms of capital, it holds great potential since it produces collective subjectivities and sociality. I thus extend this argument further to preliminarily grapple this "collective subjectivities" shared between BTS and ARMY through their affective labor and investments, which can possibly be liberating and empowering.

To further grasp affect and agency, I find Grossberg's conceptualization of affect (1992, p.56) — as investment to things that matter which he frames as "a socially constructed domain of cultural effects" — to be particularly relevant. Discussing fans' investment to pop culture as a site of constructing "mattering maps" to form identities and organize modes of investment, Grossberg differentiates fan from consumer — the former as having the ability to transform his or her perspective and experience, such as renewing one's passions or gaining a sense of control in their lives. The fan then can be empowered through affective engagement with pop culture, defining empowerment as "the generation of energy and passion, to the construction of possibility." Fan engagement is a site of renewal and optimism, and such experience of joy leads to further investments that transform one's life and others, including the possibility of struggling and resisting against oppressive power structures. With this, extending Grossberg's discussion of affective experience of fan to include artists, I will attempt to explore what I call the *affective* space between BTS and ARMY — connected together through affective labor and investment — as constituting multiple possibilities to "struggle to make a difference" (Grossberg, 1992, pp. 64-65).

*Time Magazine* wrote about BTS as its entertainer of the year, mentioning how its behemoth success indicates the shift in relationship between fans and music: "From propelling their label to a \$7.5 billion IPO valuation to inspiring fans to match their \$1 million donation to *Black Lives Matter*, BTS is a case study in music-industry dominance through human connection" (Bruner, 2020). With this essay, I seek to understand this "human connection" that is produced and received by BTS and ARMY which binds them together in an affective space within the cultural industry. Professor Lee Jiyong (2019) of Sejong University in Korea and author of the book *BTS, Art Revolution*

introduces the concept of “horizontalty” in the article “BTS: The Odyssey of Seven Young Artists” to explain BTS’s engagement with media platforms as one of the factors – aside from the band’s prowess as performers and musicians – which contributed to their phenomenal success. With the use of various online platforms and mobile technology (video clips, music videos, BTS Universe, etc.), BTS and ARMY inspire each other to action and creation (compilation of video clips, for instance) along a mutual and equal position instead of a vertical or hierarchical relationship where actions are imposed from a certain authority to the fandom. Lee specifically calls this mode of video art production “network image,” where the lines separating artists and fans blur as they share content in the digital space. I would like to probe this space of affect and affinity – that connects BTS and ARMY in a relationship of horizontalty inherent in the digital realm – through the artist’s expression and interview excerpts as well as fan discourse.

Taking a cue from Chua (2012, p.9), I use the term “pop culture” to refer to mass entertainment produced mainly for profit, a segment of popular culture which Hall (as cited by Chua) frames as a broader category referring to the dialectical process of opposition between specific classes perceived as popular vis-à-vis the “dominant culture” (Hall, 1994, p. 189). In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, John Storey (2001, p. 85) introduces us to debates regarding pop culture which could be traced to critics of the Frankfurt school (intellectuals based in Germany known for combining Marxism and psychoanalysis). For instance, Storey (p. 91) cites Horkheimer and Adorno who formulated the terms “cultural industry” and “entertainment industry” referring “to the products and processes of mass culture” which produce this perceived “standardized” content for the market. He continues to cite Frith (p. 92) who points out that contemporary debates about pop culture reflect the opposing views between Horkheimer and Adorno (who focus on the means of production) and Walter Benjamin (who shifts the focus to consumption as site of meaning-making processes), with studies of power and economic relations of cultural industry reflective of the former while studies about fan experience engagement indicative of the latter.

Studies about fan engagement now provide an in-depth look at fan agency, as in the case of Chua’s chapter (2012) on “occasional” and “transnational” fan communities; however, according to the author, fans are still trapped within the logic of capital since their affective labor is appropriated by production companies for profit. Olivia George (2020, p. 40) also argues the same way in her thesis, analyzing the promotional strategies and fan-made videos of BTS’s pop-up store House of BTS in light of Big Hit’s marketing strategy to develop intimacy between fan and artists through “mediated intimacy” (social media technology), encouraging more affective labor (fan content and production) that would be appropriated by the company to further the commercial goals of the company. While she acknowledges that although the House of BTS video series frames the venue as both “store” and “home,” she argues that affective labor of fans can still be exploited within capitalist machinations. Building from George’s analysis, however, I would argue differently: the affective space inhabited by both BTS and ARMY is both “store” and “home.” The two are not mutually exclusive, since a sense of comfort and connection can still exist within commercial spaces.

In citing fan experience to understand the affective link between ARMY and BTS, I refer to Chin and Morimoto’s concept (2013, pp. 104-105) of the “transnational fandom.” Drawing from Matt Hill’s concept of “transcultural homology,” Chin and Morimoto developed a framework to investigate “border-crossing fandoms,” who identify with certain forms of popular cultural forms beyond national or cultural nodes of difference or similarities “but because of a moment of affinity between the fan and

transcultural object.” Chin and Morimoto’s argument of situating the analysis beyond specific geographies such as regions and nations resonates with my essay since I do not anchor my analysis to a specific geographical area. Instead, I refer to my own fan experience, engaging with fans in the digital realm on certain topics about BTS regardless of our country of origin. While underscoring the importance of analyzing political economy and transnational media, Chin and Morimoto also argue that understanding how the “the contradictory, chaotic forces of globalization play out in fandom should proceed not only from such contexts, but equally from our informed understanding of fan behaviors, motivations, and processes of meaning-making as driven by affective pleasures of investments” (p.98). Even though I only briefly refer to the socio-political aspects of the K-pop industry, I acknowledge that such material conditions are integral in shaping the affective link between BTS and ARMY. I anchor this analysis through Raymond Williams’s insights on cultural materialism (1977), who argues that our thoughts and expressions are always shaped by social conditions. However, consciousness, according to Williams, is “part of the human material social process, and its products in ‘ideas’ are then as much part of this process as material products themselves” (p. 60). Departing from other Marxist critics who see the individual as subject to the determining social forces, Williams retains the individual’s role and participation in the social process or the individual’s agency in changing and resisting these social conditions (Turner, 2002, p. 23).

While I do not engage in a comprehensive analysis of the power structures and the modes of production that inform the affinities shared by BTS and ARMY, I do acknowledge such examination as necessary. However, my purpose is to preliminarily investigate this “affective space” between BTS and ARMY, where both artists and fans articulate a mindful and critical engagement with each other and the world around them. By analyzing a song and music video (“Persona” by RM) and referencing artists’ interviews as well as citing twitter discussion and fan activities, I aim to show how the affective space between BTS and ARMY provides transformative and empowering possibilities within power structures of a global economy through their reflexive perspective – an awareness of their place in the cultural industry – and their resolve to “make a difference” in their own lived experience. I also use the word ARMY to refer to BTS fans collectively, mindful that ARMY is not a monolithic entity. The references to fan discourse that I mention here do not speak for ARMY in general. I see myself, instead, looking at certain affective moments that connect certain fans to BTS. In accounting for this affective space, I do not, of course, argue that economic subjugations and exploitations do not exist; rather, I argue, as I mentioned earlier, that while BTS and ARMY inhabit a “store” as consumers and producers (although consumers could also be producers of content), this does not nullify the instances of BTS and ARMY sharing a space of “home” through their labor of producing intimacies, which form their collective subjectivities, where they draw meaning, comfort, and support from each other. I hope that this preliminary exploration will add to the discourse about the cultural agency of artists and fans in changing – or attempting to change – themselves and their specific corners of the world.

## Analysis

### Re-examining BTS as K-pop boy band

Despite conversations about popular culture moving toward studies that examine fans as empowered and not passive individuals, prevailing notions about fans and artists being robotic still exist, especially around K-pop. I know this because, admittedly, I had once a narrow perspective of K-pop as solely an intricate celebrity-producing machine. I did not particularly dislike the music, but only felt uninterested or indifferent. Although I value popular culture as a nexus of potentially transformative interactions and interrelations to the extent that I have studied Original Pilipino Music and civic festivals in the Philippines, I seemed to accept that K-pop was all picture-perfect visuals, impeccable dancing, and catchy repetitive tunes.

Imagine then my surprise when I listened to RM's "Persona" while I was still trying to get to know the band post-"Carpool Karaoke." In the BBC article about the Carl Jung-inspired BTS album (Savage, 2019), Mark Savage cited professor of Asian music Dr. Haekyung Um (from the University of Liverpool) who mentioned that although BTS is "quite unusual" in the way they engage with philosophical and psychological themes, this wouldn't be a "big issue" if Western artists such as Joni Mitchell were to reference the "map of the soul." Um further pointed out that the perception of K-pop, in the West particularly, is that the artists do not have autonomy, with everything as "manufactured and artificial" – a view that I had unfortunately shared during my pre-BTS days. In the next section, I attempt to unpack – although briefly – networks of thoughts and assumptions regarding this cultural industry that mediate through our consciousness.

Choi and Maliangkay's introduction to their book *K-pop—The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry* (2015) draws attention to the political and cultural infrastructures that led to the global rise of Korean popular music. Hallyu (or Korean Wave) – the global distribution of Korean popular cultures – is seen as a spectrum: "Hallyu 1.0" as the period from the 1990s and mid 2000s with a few successful international debuts of idol groups and later "Hallyu 2.0" (late 2000s) with the popularity of Korean dramas around the world. The latest K-pop craze has thus emerged from this continuum and in the intersection of national interests (for diplomacy and economic benefits) as well as culture industries which include – aside from music – film, TV, and advertising among others. Likened to a "mosaic" in the way it augments or amplifies entertainment, K-pop weaves various elements in terms of the following: medium (e.g. dance, storytelling, music, etc.); genres (e.g. techno, hip hop, grunge, etc.); various kinesthetic expressions, choreography, and the like; and lyrics (a combination of words from English or sometimes Japanese and Chinese as well as new words or technology-based terms). For Choi and Maliangkay (2015), "hybridity" as a term would not suffice to capture these multilayered dimensions of K-pop as an "integrated popular culture *sui generis* – an entertainment of its own class." Thus, the authors argue that K-pop is more than a "subgenre of popular music" but a "nascent form of augmented entertainment with substantial impact on public/state affairs for the cultural parvenu that South Korea is."

However, with the massive popularity of BTS, people start to assess whether they belong to K-pop or transcend it – a debate that continues as of this writing and will continue in the future. For instance, during an interview for *Time Magazine* (2020) as their Entertainer of the Year, RM addresses those who might ask whether the massive hit "Dynamite" is K-pop since it is written in English, by interrogating and challenging

the label itself: “But what is K-pop? We just don’t want to limit this music or our hearts to this boundary called K-pop.” Even the group feels that the label “K-pop” puts them in a box and thus seeks to go beyond this category.

For its first issue published in September 2020, the *Rhizomatic Revolution Review* [20130613] — an open-access, online, peer-reviewed journal organized by ARMY — featured an article “Roundtable: K-pop — What’s in a Name?” (@alapadma2 et.al., 2020) which gathered insights from six scholars and journalists who responded to a Twitter group chat transcript on a discussion of nine ARMYs about the statement “BTS isn’t K-pop.” Based on the chat, two prevailing questions emerged: what is the definition of K-pop and why do fans want to differentiate BTS from K-pop. Following the responses on these two questions, I noted the common points about K-pop: the label refers to the product — idol music (a label used in Korea instead of K-pop) — and/or process of the entertainment industry intended to be exported to advance national interest. Ethnomusicologist Stephani Choi (@alapadma2 et. al., p.10), on the other hand, argues to further complicate K-pop beyond its definition as industry, framing it instead as “cultural process” involving fan experiences, including those beyond Korea. All agree to an extent that BTS is part of K-pop, with the band emerging and existing within the system of production and distribution of content as well as sharing features of what is called “idol music” in Korea.

However, @alapadma2 (@alapadma2 et. al., p.5) — a medical student who majored in musicology and biology — explains that the reason (mostly Western) fans want to separate BTS from K-pop is because of the bias against K-pop as derivative and imitative of Western pop, which as Choi (@alapadma2 et. al., pp. 8-9) further points out stems from the West’s othering gaze to perpetuate the dominance of its cultural industry, dismissing potential for artistry emerging from K-pop and instead relying on stereotypes — K-pop as superficial and excessively commodified — an observation raised by Dr. Jeeheng Lee (@alapadma2 et. al., p. 11) of Chung-Ang University, Korea. @alapadma2 (@alapadma2 et. al., p.5) and New York-based journalist and musician Eliot Sang (@alapadma2 et. al., p.20) argue that labelling BTS as K-pop to frame the band within these stereotypes undermines the group’s abilities, since BTS is different from most of K-pop through their socially conscious message and combination of genres.

While @alapadma2 (@alapadma2 et. al., p.6) sees the merits of dissolving the K-pop label for BTS to dismantle this othering framework that exoticizes non-Western musical forms, Choi (@alapadma2 et. al., p.8) and Professor CedarBough T. Saeji (@alapadma2 et. al., p.18) — who specializes in Korean studies as well as culture and performance — feel that removing BTS from K-pop perpetuates the orientalist discourse by exceptionalizing BTS and undermining the rest of K-pop groups and artists as falling into the same stereotypes. Following Lee’s suggestion, I agree that it is important to be mindful how the label K-pop is used, whether it perpetuates biases and stereotypes that exoticize artists as no more than a novelty act. I find myself agreeing with K-pop music critic and writer Randy Suh (@alapadma2 et. al., p. 26) that although it is important to situate BTS within the context of K-pop — an “augmented form of entertainment” primarily made for cultural export (Choi and Malangkay, 2015) — it is also necessary to see how the band goes beyond K-pop and unsettles the label, which for me serves as a starting point for productive discussions about how the term is used and circulated, whether it is used condescendingly or impartially.

Aside from BTS’s challenging the K-pop category, their enormous popularity also complicates the “boy band” label. When BTS cemented its global reputation as the “world’s biggest boy-band,” Park and Kim, in an article for *Vulture* (2018) about BTS’s success, explain that the boy band label for BTS is an “understatement” when closely

examining the group's discography. According to them, the term "boy band" originated from "Anglophonic pop music history" pertaining to a group of "good-looking young men" assembled by a producer, whose songs are about love and romantic relationships targeted to young women as their primary audience. Although this format was adapted by Korean producers as basis for the "trainee system," with K-pop idols bands also relying on good looks, the authors argue that K-pop groups today experiment with music and performance, likening them instead to Michael Jackson, who impressed audiences with his heightened musical production combining impeccable choreography and on-stage charisma. Since BTS has been successful in combining all these elements as a "multi-faceted group" with four singers and three rappers, the boy band label — in the Anglophonic use of the word — will not apply to them.

It is interesting to note that Michael Jackson greatly influenced one of the bands considered as the "fountainhead of modern K-pop," Seo Taiji and Boys (Park and Lee, 2018). In 2017, for a concert celebrating his 25th year anniversary, Seo Taiji — who was joined by BTS as backing vocals and dancers — apparently referred to BTS as his "successors" when he reportedly said: "This is your generation now" (SBS PopAsia HQ, 2017). In the article "What is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity," Lei (2012) gives us a historical overview of popular music starting from the late Choson-dynasty period (1392-1897) to the "Rise of K-pop" and locates the popularity of Seo Taiji and Boys in 1992 (within the popularity of MTV and Michael Jackson) as a "quantum leap" that predicated the emergence of K-pop decades later. Combining rap music and dance for their performance, Seo Taiji and boys revolutionized South Korean popular music by departing from the "traditional pentatonic" sound (which had been an element of popular music since the late Choson-dynasty period (1392-1897)) for the "contemporary diatonic." Prior to this, however, despite the presence of American music such as jazz and blues in the 50s and 60s via U.S. occupation, the author notes that traditional folk songs were dominant in the rural area, while "trot" ("a Korean variant of Japanese *enka*") was popular in the urban setting during the 70s, which he characterized as a period of "rapid economic growth, authoritarian politics, and considerable social dislocation" (Lei, p. 343).

Eventually, the "South Korean enrichment" ushered changes in the entertainment landscape (variety shows on TV) and in technology (popularity of the karaoke machine and the Walkman), paving the way for bands like Seo Taiji and Boys (Lei, pp. 348-349). Lei (p. 354) credits the role of "music entrepreneurs" — who organized a training system for talents and tapped internet technology in producing pop stars — as integral to the accelerated ascent of K-pop. With societal transformations brought about by globalization and technological changes, these entrepreneurs harnessed the wind of Hallyu: "[they] surfed the coming wave or perhaps helped generate the wave in the first place." Highlighting the commercial enterprise of the K-pop industry in exporting quality products, in this case, well-trained performers, Lei (p. 362) argues that K-pop is "naked commercialism." With this seeming indictment of K-pop, I recall Lee's response from the roundtable discussion, who suggests that we get to know the artists (and if I may add also their relationship with their companies) beyond the K-pop label. According to Lee (@alapadma, et. al., 2020, p. 11) the K-pop industry is complex; while certain oppressive conditions exist particularly in the past, reforms and changes have been achieved, with some companies supporting creative autonomy of their artists.

Looking at K-pop as product, thus, would be only half of the story. Park and Kim (2018) as well as Aja Romano for Vox (2020) attribute BTS's success — among others — to their radical approach to musical production by focusing on the band's



personal involvement and expression as well as their powerful and extremely diverse international fan base. Big Hit producer Bang Shi hyuk considers as paramount the artists' autonomy and participation in the music-making process; and hip-hop culture, the foundation for the group's artistic direction, is linked to this expression of "authentic" narratives (Park and Kim, 2018). In an interview with *Time Magazine* (Bruner, 2019), Big Hit producer Bang Shi hyuk talked about his experience in what the article describes as "making a K-pop Juggernaut." Bang highlights the importance of sincerity and artistic freedom in his production company, where he established a "liberal trainee system." In the interview, Bang emphasizes the freedom of the artists in choosing their message for their songs and argues against the common "misconception" that K-pop producers dictate their artists' message. He says instead: "When the artist wants to express something, I believe my role is to refine the message in a way that expresses their sincerity and has commercial value" (Bruner, 2019).

This sincerity is central to the business direction of Big Hit. Romano (2020) cites a 2018 interview of the producer Bang Shi hyuk when they were considering the company's idol group as someone who will be a "hero who can lend them [listeners] a shoulder to lean on, even without speaking a single word." This vision is also seen in the phrase that appears under the company logo for every video: "Music and Artist for Healing." Collete Bennett (2020) — a journalist and ARMY — writes about BTS's already groundbreaking success only three years into their debut. She cites BTS's involvement with production and their openness about their own struggles, "in creating the true self," as changing Kpop. The production of affect — as the goal of every entertainment industry — is central to the vision of the company. Through the artists' labor, they are able to successfully build an emotional link between their fans.

### **Studying the link between BTS x ARMY**

BTS's sincerity — through their compassionate lyrics and camaraderie — is a major factor that has charmed fans and fostered loyalty between BTS and ARMY, as mentioned by Dr. Jeeheng Lee in the book *BTS and ARMY Culture* (2019). Exploring the intricacies of the intimate and powerful connection shared between the band and their fans collectively known as ARMY ("Adorable Representative MC for Youth") in achieving their goals and aspirations, the book also chronicles the struggles of BTS and ARMY in their early years. Even though BTS is seen to be the forerunner in the K-pop industry today, Lee recalls how BTS started at the periphery of K-pop when they made their debut as Bangtan Sonyeodan (or Bulletproof Boy Scouts) in 2013 from then-small talent agency Big Hit, experiencing limited TV coverage and an onslaught of attacks, rumors, and hate comments. However, these struggles have made both BTS and ARMY stronger; since then, with various achievements shared by BTS and ARMY, Lee contends, "Coming from humble beginnings at the farthest edge of K-pop, BTS and ARMY have sailed all the way to the top and became the most famous boy band and most famous fandom in the world, side by side." Lee's choice of the word "boy band" to refer to BTS alerts us to how it could be used in this case as a convenient label for a group or how in some scenarios it could be used as a way to undermine BTS's success by fitting them into a boy band mold that comes from an Anglophonic paradigm which sees the boyband group as relying on good looks and visuals (Park and Kim, 2018).

BTS and ARMY are undeniably changing social and cultural structures. Chang and Park (2019, p. 266) examine how ARMY as an "intensified tribal fandom"— which emerged from social media communities driven by shared values and feelings — is creating "tectonic sociocultural change on a global scale." These dimensions of the

global fandom such as fluid, spontaneous organization of activities would be seen at work when ARMY gathered to show support for the Black Lives Matter movement (Sang, 2020), with ARMY raising a total of \$ 1.2 Million as of June 9, 2020, through “One in an Army” — a group within the fanbase that has organized charity organizations (Yuan, 2020). Writing about how K-pop fans, including ARMY, who raided police apps (which sought to solicit pictures from the BLM protests) with fan cams of their idols, Sang further argues against the conception of K-pop and its fans as robotic, functioning as mere producers and consumers respectively in the order of things. On the contrary, he adds that ARMY know very well the mechanisms of the entertainment industry, as seen in how they find ways to support BTS. Aside from “[knowing] their value,” as Sang (2020) argues, “BTS ARMY played a great part in creating their labor system in the first place.” Realizing that they didn’t have entertainment industry support, ARMY relied on themselves through a dispersed grassroots form of labor, with various groups coming together for tasks such as charting, streaming, purchasing, or creating fan content. This awareness of the means of production-consumption and their role in this process is also shared by the members themselves, particularly in RM’s “Persona,” which I believe further enriches and complicates this affective space between fans and artists. They not only give and receive these positive feelings, but also reflect and commune about the formation of the self as subjects shaped by and shaping the social conditions which they inhabit.

### **Closely Reading the Song and Video**

The references to the lyrics for this section are based on fan translator Doolset’s (n.d.) translations on their Wordpress blog, which also includes a few additional notes on the lyrics. I use Doolset’s translation because I’ve seen some fans on Twitter suggesting them as a good resource since they add notes into their translation. Although aware of the limitation of fan translation, which happens to be my sole resource for this essay, I also want to reconnect to other fans’ labor. There will be instances, however, that I also refer to the YouTube subtitles as a way to complement the fan translation.

Opening with a sample from the song “Skool Luv Affair” in their previous album of the same title (Lazore, 2019), the video finds RM in a graffiti-covered classroom — a setting that references the schoolboy motif of their early years. He plunges right into the existential question — “Who am I”— and the uncertainty of finding the answer. I briefly reference Jung’s concepts in this section to follow how the rapper articulates his understanding of the self, especially that he clearly presents Jungian concepts and diagrams such as “ego,” “self,” and “shadow,” which are scribbled all over the chalkboard in the classroom scene of the music video. From a Jungian perspective (Fischer, 2010, p. 375), the song seems to present an individual on a journey of “self-realization” or “individuation,” where the individual confronts the persona (“conscious ideal of the personality”) and shadow (“unpleasant qualities”). In the song, the singer examines his public “persona” as an idol — the image he creates for the public and people’s concept of him — and the “shadow” or the fears emanating from the detachment he feels from the success of the persona: “Is this me? Do I deserve all this praise?” He reveals his own self-doubt regarding his worth: “I’m still not sure if I’m a dog, a pig, or whatever, / but then others come and put a pearl necklace on me ptui!”

For instance, translator Doolset points out how the labels “dog and pig” are used as derogatory remarks by the general public as well as to the allusion of “casting pearls before swine.” The rapper thus expresses his discomfort in receiving accolades he feels he does not deserve (“pearl necklace”), especially when he voices his uncertainty and even spits (“ptui!”), seemingly at this celebrated image before transitioning to the next

verse and music video scene.

The video continues with this montage of scenes as the rapper sings about the “shadow,” which he calls “hesitation,” indicating that this fear has persisted and followed him “whether it is under the stage or under the light, he keeps appearing, / and stares at me fiercely like heat haze (Oh shit).” The next few lines reveal his shadow talking, according to Doolset, which unveils the singer’s uncertainties about his own persona as an idol. The singer asks himself further, demanding that he look back at his own roots and even doubting the meaning, perhaps, of success: “Hey, have you already forgotten why you started this? / You were just loving it that there’s someone listening to you / Sometimes, everything feels like total nonsense.” The fear has now taken control:

*Someone like me isn’t good enough for (doing) music*

*Someone like me isn’t good enough (for delivering) the truth*

*Someone like me isn’t good enough for (answering) the calling*

*Someone like me isn’t good enough to be a muse*

*My flaws that I know, maybe those are really all I’ve got.*

In the BBC article (2020) about the band’s exploration of Jungian psychology, Dr. Stein – the author of *Jung’s Map of the Soul* – mentions that the persona is tied to a performance of self in the public sphere: “Persona is a reference to the theater . . . It’s the Latin word for the masks that actors wore on the stage – and we all put on masks, in a sense, when we go out into the public.” It is indeed very telling that the video features the stage and the lectern which highlight the public self that the individual performs. However, the rapper not only performs his “persona” as idol but shows the complexities in performing this “persona,” thereby showing an awareness about how he constructs this celebrity image as well as the discomforts and uncertainties that go along with this process.

As the rapper appears on stage in front of the theater curtains, the voice of uncertainty is starting to disappear in place of a more calm and subdued monologue: “How about you? / I don’t know man / But I know one thing.” Interestingly, within the monologue, the video shows a computer-generated image of himself – a doppelganger – who appears to be waking up, becoming slowly conscious of its existence.

Also, when the rapper starts to answer these questions, the video gives us a scene with the artist flanked by hordes of cyborgs who are also wearing suits and ties just like he is. At this point, the video gives us a montage of the classroom, the stage, and the robots while the rapper sings:

*Yeah my name is R*

*The “me” who I remember and who people know*

*The “me” who I created by myself to speak my mind*

*Yeah, I might have been deceiving myself, I might have been lying*

*But, I’m not ashamed of it, this is the map of myself.*

Doolset interjects to add that “R” encompasses his stage names – from an underground rapper (Runch Randa) to idol (Rap Monster from 2013–2017 and RM currently). Denny Directo’s interview with BTS for *ET* (Drysdale, 2017) included a question about RM’s name where the rapper reveals that RM – instead of Rap Monster – could indicate more possibilities and “spectrums.” When asked about the meaning the name holds to him, he responds, “I don’t know, like ‘Real Me’ or something.” This articulation in the song and interview prompts me to go beyond the Jungian framing of an individual who is on a journey of finding the self, since the rapper seems to celebrate the fissures and fragmentations constituting what he understands as the self. A scene in the music video with broken glass reflecting the multiple and fragmented images of the rapper captures this assertion. Without giving any finality to what the name means, he embraces his identity as a process of becoming instead of certainty and finality. As the singer continues to walk us through the “map of the soul,” the music video takes us to another montage of scenes featuring the previous classroom scene, the stage, and various machine-generated images including the one where RM confronts a giant image of himself – a persona that has become “larger than life” (Lazore, 2019).

Following Raymond Williams (1977), who sees consciousness embedded in material conditions, we can also see RM’s struggle with his identity as rooted in his performance of the persona as celebrity or idol, who can perfectly deliver choreography and exude a perfect or desirable image. This is particularly relevant when the video offers a juxtaposition between RM and the machine-generated images in three scenes to highlight and challenge the construction of the persona as a product of his place in the entertainment industry: the dancing robots in suits and ties, the giant doppelganger CGI, and the stiff robots with crossed arms.

Interestingly, we start to see the computer image in the later part of the video, opening its eyes into consciousness, especially after RM asks himself, “Do you think you’re alive?” The robot imagery in the video is significant if we consider the discourse about K-pop, which perceives the idol as a robot with no autonomy, controlled by expectations of the company and the fans. Whereas idols are expected to be extremely synchronized, RM in the video is seen dancing with the robots freely and out-of-synch or sitting on a raised white platform distinct from the crowd of robots bobbing their heads to the beat. However, even though the song is predicated on that struggle to find the answers about his identity, he seems to make an important stride not toward a realization of static essential wholeness but in reconciling and negotiating his multiple selves including claiming the persona as part of the self. The rapper’s confrontation of the persona is symbolized by the giant computer-generated image who looks like RM and whom the rapper meets face to face. This giant digital image is RM’s constructed celebrity persona that has become too overwhelming. In the English translation for the YouTube video, the singer encompasses the following aspects of himself as his “map of the soul”: “the me that I want myself to be / The me that people want me to be / The me that you love / And the me that I create.” I lean toward the word “create” as used in the subtitles, instead of the word “craft” as used by Doolset, which to me appears more straightforward. The self that he performs as persona – that is also RM.

In the last verse of “Persona,” RM apparently asserts this responsibility or the “calling” that in the earlier verse he was uncertain about. “I just wanna give you all the voices till I die / I just wanna give you all the shoulders when you cry.” He wants to share and offer the self in all its multiplicity to the “you” – the listeners. While RM is singing the last few lines, we see him dancing with the cyborgs and then another scene with him standing on a podium behind a lectern while surrounded by another set of stiff robots with markings on their bodies. It is noteworthy, however, that when

the song ends with the last word “cry,” the stiff robots around him crumble, leaving the rapper alone standing behind a lectern. At this point, the rapper affirms his realness even as he performs this realness, shattering the notion of idol as product or robot.

It would appear, for some, that I might be belaboring the obvious. Popular performers have always sung about their real lives and their stories, and this expression – regardless of their popular or commercial nature – is nonetheless real in a sense that they are received as *real* by listeners. However, the sincerity that BTS exudes, both in their social media engagement and in their songs, becomes remarkable because of the assumptions people have about K-pop groups and boy bands as robotic. However, BTS has always looked into their “true self” as they create their own music (Bennett, 2020), even playfully jabbing at no less than their image as idols, as seen in the anthemic song “Idol,” where the band proudly claims labels conferred to them – “idol” or “artist,” and even boyband if I may add – because they know their value and worth as individuals: “You can’t stop me loving myself!” This acknowledgement of the dynamic self in “Idol” is seen in RM’s “Persona,” where the rapper shows an awareness of his role in the cultural industry as someone who has to perform an idol persona, examining his place in the cultural industry by taking us right to the map of the soul, where we see various aspects of the self as mellifluous, fluid, and dynamic. For me, performing sincerity through his idol persona – laboring toward affect – is still RM.

### **Going beyond RM’s Persona: some insights from artists and fans**

We also see the band’s keen introspection of their own value and celebrity personas in their documentaries produced by Big Hit, featuring interviews and behind-the-scenes footage. In the recent *Break the Silence* documentary (Soo, 2020) that chronicles the group’s world tour in 2019, RM examines BTS as a social construct, likening it to an “imaginary momentary rainbow that’s been created by ourselves and the people who help us.” Certainly, it is also noteworthy that the company Big Hit produces these documentaries that peer into the thought processes of the artists, reinforcing their intent to express the artists’ *true* self – even when the self questions these truth claims by highlighting the constructed nature of the celebrity persona.

Through social media content, documentaries, and songs (in this case, RM’s “Persona”) that the singers and the production team choose to present, we see how these mechanisms aim to produce intimacy, establishing an affective community or space between fans to show them the process of production and collaboration as well as the artists’ participation in this process. In this space, fans also show awareness of their power and value in securing the group’s success, which artists themselves also acknowledge when they extend gratitude to their fans. As mentioned by Sang (2020), for instance, ARMY have formulated their own “labor system” to achieve success for BTS, with different ARMY accounts on Twitter emerging organically to mobilize certain tasks such as streaming, charting, and fund-raising to buy records.

However, my interaction with fans on Twitter has reminded me that ARMY is not a homogenous mass of people, not a singular entity uniformly moving in a singular direction. We are, after all, a diverse group, cutting across cultural, religious, gender, generation lines, among others. My Twitter timeline for instance is only a tiny corner of the whole ARMY universe. Prior to BTS’s statement in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, I saw various debates about fans’ expectations of BTS as global artists, an area where identities clash. One interesting thread is by user G.M. Cantave<sup>7</sup> with the handle @gmcantave1 (2020), when she posted a series of tweets about her own views, by prefacing her statement with what ARMY as a group means, which she differentiates from an ordinary fan:

*...ARMY are BTS fans but not all BTS fans are ARMY, let's make that distinction before we even start. It is a FACT. Because our name stands for Adorable Representative MC for Youth and that this name was +*

*given to us by BTS themselves and they chose it because they wanted ARMY to be their armor and their support and for ARMY to always be there for them, support them in their mission. And if you can't do that or are not willing to do that then you are not ARMY, you are just +*

*a BTS FAN.*

*If you are racist, you are not ARMY. If you are a BIGOT, you are not ARMY. If you are HOMOPHOBIC or TRANSPHOBIC, you are not ARMY, If you are a bully, you are not ARMY. If you enjoy oppressing people, and diminishing their worth and their value YOU ARE NOT ARMY. +*

*Because BTS does not stand for BIGOTRY, RACISM, OPPRESSION, and INJUSTICE. I said*

*I SAID.*

*As ARMY we represent them, just as much as they represent us whether we want to or not. Our actions as ARMY reflects on their image, and so do theirs on ours. +*

Based on her own interpretation, GM Cantave defines ARMY identity in line with what she perceives as the message and position of BTS regarding social issues. She further acknowledges that people come from different contexts and have different ways to show concern and solidarity for the movement. For her, however, she reflects about her own identity and feelings toward the movement:

*I'm a BLACK WOMAN and I live in the U.S., racism hurts me and endangers my well-being and my life. I'm gonna support the BLM movement because I have to, because it pertains to my well being and that of those around me. If I don't speak up and if I don't do something +*

*I would be doing myself a great disservice that's MY situation, that's MY circumstance...*

Even though she wanted to hear an official statement from the group, she also understood if this were not possible. Still, she is reminded how BTS and ARMY have always shown concern for her even before the movement: "They have always stood for me . . . Because they have always spoken for and supported ALL LIVES and always spoke against RACIAL discrimination and discrimination of ANY KIND. And I knew as a black person that they were with me." She also goes on to say how BTS have always advocated for her.

As a Filipino fan who also got to know further about Black Lives Matter through the awareness campaigns on stan Twitter, I agree with GM Cantave in the way that I

expect ARMY to act in respect and understanding of other people regardless of race, gender, and class, etc.; however, fans come from different contexts which shape our own perspectives, thus we vary on how we approach and engage with social issues from around the world like the Black Lives Matter movement. Like RM's "Persona," G.M. Cantave also explores the multifariousness of her identity, as rooted in social conditions, which affect the way she sees ARMY and BTS and how she responds to social issues around her. In this thread, we see how affect – engagement with BTS and ARMY – organizes “mattering maps” (Grossberg, 1992, p.59) in the way this particular fan navigates through nodes of involvement that inform her articulation of the self.

### **In the end, or how I try to provide closure for this essay**

Despite articles showing how artists and fans are moved by each other as individuals with feelings and an awareness, the perceptions still exist that fans and artists are robots. In a tweet, journalist Lenika Cruz (@lenikacruz, 2020) responds to articles that are perceived as condescending to BTS:

*the kpop writing bingo board: talk about humans like robots/creatures with zero agency, poke at their clothes, talk about them 'expiring' as if they are a carton of milk, describe fans as rabid/possessive in some way*

With my observation and engagement in this affective space within the “transcultural fandom” (Chin and Morimoto, 2013), I find it amusing but also exasperating to prove over and over again that we are not robots. Perhaps, other scholars might feel that the mechanisms and structures of the global political economy are too colossal to be overcome that render fans and artists as helpless. However, even though affect is produced to achieve the end of capital within the cultural industry, it slips through the cogs of the machine and into the heart of artists and fans. Affect produces life, a dynamic, questioning self, stubborn enough to resist and hope amidst dehumanizing forces around us. Writing about the optimism and hope shared between BTS and ARMY through their involvement with social movements and causes, Nika (2020) writes about this connection: “A band who acknowledge that our future sometimes feels stolen. The generations who connect to that reality. Both uniting within the promise that music, empathy and activism can, somehow, still win.”

However, fans' empowering experiences are varied, and take other forms other than activism. For instance, in the past few months, I have become part of a small community of fans across the world, connected by our mutual admiration of a particular sub-unit in Bangtan as well as the group dynamic in general. Sharing joy and laughter as well insights about art by both BTS and ARMY, we are learning together through BTS about ourselves and the social implications of performance, such as the configurations of masculinities, to become a more critically aware fan and individual.

In this initial exploration, I hope to join the “collective creation” of ARMY as inspired by BTS through the pages of a journal organized by fans themselves as labor of love. While writing this, I am also navigating through various identities: as fan, teacher, graduate student, Filipino, among others. I write this as well from my corner of the world in the Philippines with our own share of problems, the curtailment of human rights, for instance, which is feared will worsen with the Anti-Terror Law.

However, seeing ARMY from all over the world moved by the music and message of BTS gathering resources for various social causes or learning from each other about how to be a better human being gives me hope that I have allies with ARMY and BTS not only in spreading joy and love, but also in working together to affirm what is good and just in our communities.

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