Beyond Parasocial: ARMY, BTS, & Fan-Artist Relationships

ACADEMIC ARTICLE: ESSAY

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ABSTRACT

The term "parasocial relationship" (PSR) is frequently used to describe the relationship between a fan and an artist. Key traits are that the relationship is "one-sided," and the interactions are "mediated." The term is often used in a judgemental way, but even when used positively or neutrally, it is frequently used along with terminology that stigmatizes the relationship in question. I believe this stems from a few things: leaps in logic about the purpose of PSRs, a misunderstanding of what is possible within them, and a lack of more suitable language to describe the phenomenon with nuance. One case that illustrates this well is the relationship between the popular group BTS and their fans, who are called ARMY. In examining the nature of this connection between BTS and ARMY, this article attempts to illustrate what is possible within a PSR, how BTS and ARMY are at the forefront of new developments in these relationships, and how the use of more accurate language could be helpful to fans. It ultimately calls for the creation of new terminology to broaden our understanding of fan-artist relationships. Further, it expands this logic and calls on us all to be mindful of relationships that defy accurate description using our current language.

KEYWORDS

Parasocial, relationships, BTS, ARMY, rhizomatic

Introduction

If you're part of a fandom, you may be in the habit of hiding or downplaying how much you love your favorite artist. There is a stigma attached to being too much of a fan, and BTS and ARMY are not strangers to this. You can see it in almost every media portrayal, from descriptions of swooning fangirls to "crazy" fans. You can see it in accounts from ARMY who hide their interests from friends and family or who get a cringe reaction when they do tell someone they're a fan. And yet, these fan-artist relationships have had massively positive impacts on ARMY, like they have on fans of other artists. Such stories are cataloged on social media, in journals like this one, and even in books. In the BTS fandom, we have publications like Revolutionaries Press's *I Am ARMY* that capture some of the effect of this connection. BTS as artists have spoken directly about the positive impact of fan-artist relationships on their own lives. It is hard to enter the media space without seeing evidence of how world-shifting this connection is for fans and artists alike.

These connections are commonly referred to as "parasocial relationships" (PSRs) and often judged as being juvenile, immature, or in some way not respectable. They are described as being one-sided, and some call them delusional. Even when PSRs are regarded as healthy and positive for development, the language used around them still creates stigma. Those authors who support PSRs still often regard them through a lens of inadequacy.

In this way, there is a gap between how we talk about PSRs in popular culture and how fans experience them. Therefore, I want to examine these relationships more closely in order to bring greater nuance to the way we understand and discuss them. What I want to demonstrate can be split into three branches: that PSRs are as "real" as any other relationship, and the key is to define what "real" actually means; that BTS and ARMY in particular clearly illustrate creative connection; and that we should be open to creative connections in our lives whether they fall into socially recognized categories or not.

Part 1: Parasocial Relationships & Stigma

The term "parasocial relationship" was coined in 1956 to describe a "seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (Horton & Wohl, p. 215). It originally focused on television performers but now commonly refers to fan relationships with any artist, celebrity, or character. Parasocial relationships (PSRs) "may be governed by little or no sense of obligation, effort, or responsibility on the part of the spectator," and the relationship is described as "one-sided" because the famous figure does not know the fan on a personal, individual level (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). With the rise of entertainment options, the phenomenon is now extremely common. These kinds of relationships have become part of the mainstream. Arguably, being a fan of anything means you're in a parasocial relationship (Bond, 2023, ch. 3).

Appropriately, this very common experience is under frequent study, and many sources have found that PSRs are positive, carrying many benefits. Liebers & Schramm (2019) published an overview of 261 studies within 60 years on the topic of parasocial phenomena. They emphasize that it is "one of the most popular research fields in media reception and effects research" (p. 4). Even though results on the positive effects of PSRs are not unanimous, many studies indicate that PSRs show connections to higher self-confidence, a higher self-efficacy expectation, a stronger perception

of problem-focused coping strategies, and a stronger sense of belonging (p. 15). The stated negative effects in the results are unrealistic body image and reduced self esteem, and increased media consumption and addiction (p. 16).

Popular articles echo these sentiments and, in doing so, bring them to mainstream culture. As Tukachinsky (2023) says, "scientific jargon rarely escapes the ivory tower to become a pop culture buzzword," but this has happened with PSR (p. 1). For example, an article in Refinery29 states that "Parasocial relationships are actually perfectly normal and in fact psychologically healthy" (O'Sullivan, 2021, para. 4), and *HuffPost* reports that "these one-sided bonds can help put people at ease, especially in the case of young people figuring out their identities and those with low self-esteem" (Wong, 2021, para. 14), positioning them almost as training wheels in the development of other relationships.

However, even while arguing their benefits, many of these same sources use language that stigmatizes these relationships. For example, Liebers & Schramm (2019) contrast parasocial relationships to "*real* social relationships" (p. 5). (All emphasis through underlining is mine.) They suggest a few questions that research currently cannot answer, including "Does a PSR become weaker when the recipient finds a *real* new friend?" (p. 16).

Again, popular articles do this too, both reflecting and influencing public perception. PSRs are contrasted with "*actual* social relationships" (O'Sullivan, 2021, para. 5); they explain that individuals in PSRs do not necessarily "believe the interaction is '*real*'" (O'Sullivan, 2021, para. 4). They say that people can benefit from them "much like people with high self-esteem do with their '*real*' social relationships" (Wong, 2021, para. 15). By way of comparison, the language directly and indirectly questions the "reality" of a PSR.

With limited adequate language to contrast them to non-PSRs, this is, in some ways, understandable. Like I said, the same authors who contrast PSRs to "real" and "actual" social relationships also extol their benefits, and they often "admit" to experiencing PSRs themselves. Sometimes they even use that very word, "admit" (Wong, 2021, para. 53), which stigmatizes them further: it frames it as a confession, which implies the activity is undesirable in some way. I believe that these things are said with good intention, and in service of understanding the phenomenon of PSRs. However, I also believe that such language further stigmatizes PSRs and consequently stunts our ability to understand them.

There is a tendency to speak about new, unconventional experiences as being in some way fake. I see this often in reference to digital interactions: friends made on the internet aren't "real," nor is currency owned in a video game, nor are arguments with strangers in online comment sections. But all of these are real. They are experiences that we have, which influence us in real ways, and provide real joy or disappointment, as the case may be. Friends made online are friends with whom we can share and spend quality time, regardless of whether or not it's in person. In-game currency functions within the scope of the game as a commodity that is traded for goods valued by users, and even when we log off, the emotional effects remain. Arguments with strangers online can have psychological effects on us and the other person, whether that's emotional damage or the changing of an opinion, regardless of the medium of the debate. I believe that language questioning something's "reality" is often used to compare it to situations that are in some ways similar but also better understood. But what it does is oversimplify and minimize these experiences, even going as far as to dismiss them. Faced with language like this and the viewpoints that they reflect, it is clear why a person may question their relationship with a performer, or their online

friendship, making them second-guess their own reality and identity. After all, they're being told that those things aren't part of reality.

In contrasting PSRs to "real" relationships, we are sometimes implying that they are insufficient substitutes for friendships, or even for romantic relationships. And yet, there's an implicit leap in logic in this judgment. What if we looked at them simply for what they are, rather than failures to be something else? Consider instead the idea that PSRs are real experiences that can have immense value, and they aren't intended to replace other relationships. This idea is likely easy for ARMY to understand, due to our connections with BTS. ARMY are accustomed to the intimacy that can form between fans and artists; the security that comes from being seen by someone who specifically *doesn't* know you; and the genuine affection that can form for a person who does so much for you, even when it's not *just* for you: it's for an entire community.

In Part 2, I seek to argue not only that BTS and ARMY are a prime example of the *reality* of fan-artist relationships, but that they help push us beyond popular understanding of PSRs. In order to do so, I will draw on works published by ARMY around the world, statements made by BTS themselves, and my own personal experience as an ARMY. From there, I will examine new approaches we can take that respect and harness the benefits of these relationships.

Part 2: Diving Deeper into BTS and ARMY

Thankfully, there are already some very good books and articles about BTS (although I still yearn to see more activity in BTS publishing) and I'll be drawing primarily on the works of other fans publishing about them to illustrate my view of the unique relationship between BTS and ARMY, before drawing on the group's own words, followed by my own experience.

Jiyoung Lee's excellent book *BTS, Art Revolution* (2019) shares insight about the BTS phenomenon, especially the way that they lead in a new era of the "democratization of art" (p. 132). Lee explains that historically, in order for an artist to share work with an audience, there were many barriers: for example, a painter's work would only be shown in an art gallery if they had received an "advanced art education; received awards… good reviews… or had numerous gallery exhibitions" (pp. 132–133), limiting what art was made available, and that even then, only a select few would get the chance to see it in the gallery. However, things are different in the digital age, in part due to new platforms. On YouTube, for example, "anyone can upload a video that they produced" (p. 133). Consequently, "the boundary between user and producer is dismantled" (p. 133). Audience can easily become artist, now that these practical barriers have been removed.

This is relevant to the relationship between BTS and ARMY, and it informs the kinds of parasocial relationships we develop. While many definitions of PSR describe it as "one-sided," a BTS-ARMY relationship is only one-sided at the individual fan level (and even then, that's an arguably simplistic way to describe it). At a collective level, ARMY as a fanbase are collaborators in the art that BTS produces—and that is not one-sided at all. The idea of PSR evolves within the many examples of ARMY's collaboration, influence, and interactions at the community level.

There are many ways to be a fan of BTS, none more valid than another, but a common way is in following not just the music of BTS, but the entire multimedia experience. Song lyrics and videos connect to ongoing themes, to the ongoing fictional story of the Bangtan Universe, to concert VCRs; there are variety shows, travel shows, documentaries; there are interviews, live video logs, choreography videos, "Bangtan

Bombs"; "Connect, BTS" artwork; mobile games; social media including Twitter, Weverse, fancafé, and Instagram. For many, being a fan means being in a web of content that feels interconnected and never-ending.

This consistent stream of content is one thing that distinguishes BTS as an artist. As explained in *Beyond The Story*, the group's first official biography, they began to incorporate series concepts into their albums in 2015, allowing multiple interpretations of their storylines, and this became a new standard in the industry. Additionally, "by focusing on online platforms rather than the ordinary TV channels, they were hailing a new generation" (BTS & Kang, 2023, p. 157). The use of V Live, where "artists could communicate instantly with fans" (p. 157) was the start of the "'self-produced content' era" (p. 158)—and *Run BTS!*, their variety show, "was the final piece of their new ecosystem of activities" (p. 158). Of course, since that time, they have launched even more activities, as detailed above.

Even in this ecosystem, fan-made content can contribute as much to the experience of fandom as official content does. In the midst of the previously mentioned content, fans produce lyric videos, lyric analyses, reaction videos, remix videos, dance covers, song covers, BU analyses, fanart, fanfiction, merchandise, fancams of live performances, theories and speculation on new music and concepts, books, articles (like this one), in-person events, and social media conversations. These are all part of the same web of content, and fans can choose which ones to participate in, whether from a spectator's or creator's standpoint.

I myself contribute in only a few ways: via articles, social media with circles of friends, lyric analyses, and in-person events. However, I'm also a frequent consumer of reaction videos, lyric videos, fancams, merchandise, social media, and fan publications like books and articles, and these things are essential to the fabric of my fan experience. Watching a reaction video may inspire me to watch a lyric analysis of the same song, which leads to rewatching the original music video, and then a fancam of the song being performed live, reinterpreting the themes in connection to newly gained knowledge of BTS, and reincorporating the song into my life in new ways. For example, after doing this, listening to the song on a drive carries with it these new associations I've gained, and I find myself thinking about the song in relation to all of these points of reference. All pieces of related content, whether they were produced by BTS or ARMY, have enriched my experience of the art. Therefore, the interconnectedness of BTS content and fan content is essential to my experience as ARMY, as it is for many.

For that reason, fans as a collective are not just consumers, but collaborators. The BTS-ARMY relationship is not just a one-sided creator-spectator relationship. If you were to argue that their primary art form is music, and that therefore ARMY's collaboration doesn't influence their primary art form, you would run into issues: first, you would be overlooking the fans' influence on the music that BTS makes, and second, you would run into disagreements from ARMY about how essential those other forms of media are to the art of BTS. For example, in the words of Michelle Fan (2020),

> *BTS' creative brilliance is reflected not just in their music, but also in their ability to build ecosystems of connection that invite other 'outsiders' to claim authorship. For them, art is not only in what is created, but also what their creativity enables. (para. 10).*

We may all prioritize different facets of that art, but rarely is the fan experience as simple as only listening to their music.

The key to understanding ARMY as collaborators is that the experience of the collective fandom cannot be fully extricated from the experience of the individual fan, if that fan participates in the community. This is well illustrated symbolically by the language of BTS fans, who are referred to using the singular "ARMY" collectively but also "ARMY" individually. That is to say, I am ARMY, but I am also one part of ARMY. The same term applies whether it refers to the community or the individual. Likewise, a fan's experience is mediated through both levels. When BTS thanks ARMY for their support, for example, I interpret this as both the support that my peers in the fandom have shown and the specific supportive actions that I have taken. In this way, there is a natural conflation of the two, which complicates the supposed one-sidedness of a PSR. Although this linguistic phenomenon is specific to this fandom, I believe that the conflation of individual fan and collective has applications to other fandoms as well. For the purposes of this article, I only consider fans who also participate in the collective fandom, as this is the source of my fandom knowledge.[1]

If the fan-artist relationship is not one-sided from the perspective of the collective fans, and if being part of the collective is part of an individual fan's experience, then already we've complicated the application of the term "parasocial relationship" to BTS and ARMY. In addition, there is another factor complicating the "one-sided" aspect. The BTS-ARMY connection is notable not just for its structure, but for the immense value it provides to both sides. You only need to spend a minute reading accounts from ARMY to see the gratitude we have for the ways in which BTS's values, sincerity, and compassion have impacted our lives. Similarly, you can witness BTS's gratitude in countless songs, speeches, and interviews: it's woven into the fabric of everything they do.

Several examples of ARMY's gratitude for BTS can be seen in the book *I Am* ARMY, a diverse collection of essays written about ARMY experience, edited by Wallea Eaglehawk and Courtney Lazore. The profound impact of the artist on the fan can be found on every page. For example, Lily Low's (2020) essay "How BTS contributes towards an awareness of myself" details how the artists have helped her better understand her own mind through lyrics, speeches, and broader messages. One such case brings the essay to a close:

> *emphasized the importance of befriending our shadows, I have been learning to not hate myself so much for the emotions I feel. Instead, I accept them when they arrive, give myself the time to process or rest, and bid them goodbye as they eventually pass. (p.* 107*).*

This impact is significant because the author identified a problem—denying her own emotions—with the help of BTS's music and was then able to change her approach. As an ARMY myself, I can easily understand how SUGA's "Interlude: Shadow," as well as the entire Map of the Soul series, with its basis in Jungian psychoanalysis, could lead to such a conclusion.

In the same collection is "From fake love to self-love" by Manilyn Gumapas (2020). The essay tells the story of a toxic love in the author's life, with three key stages mapped against BTS's Love Yourself series. She provides examples of how the series helped her during that time, including the moment she heard Jin's song "Epiphany" again and was

1 Some fans do pluralize "ARMY" (i.e. "ARMYs") when referring to more than one fan—and this appears in some quotations in this article—but as an author I follow the convention of using the singular for both cases.

"stunned by how within the first verse alone, BTS had managed to capture exactly what [she'd] been experiencing for the past few months" (p. 84). In the months that followed, she found comfort in psychology articles, therapy, and other resources, including "the seven men who sang not only about self-love, but everything in the journey leading up to it" (p. 85). The attention that BTS has always given to mental health issues in their lyrics is of clear use to fans struggling with related issues. It can be a source of knowledge and wisdom; of comfort, in opening these conversations to the public and helping to de-stigmatize them; and of reassurance, reminding us we're not the only ones with these struggles. It is powerful to realize that people we admire are subject to the same challenges that we are.

ARMY have been vocal about the multitude of ways that BTS have influenced our personal lives, often as a reaction to systemic social and political issues. For Isabelle Rhee (2021), in Issue 3 of this journal, BTS was helpful in navigating radicalization, queerness, and depression, and she says that listening to their music reminded her that she "was living, breathing, and absorbing those melodies. It was as if they were talking back" (para. 28). For Wallea Eaglehawk (2020b), founder and publisher of the BTS-inspired Revolutionaries Press, BTS inspire and enable us to be "participatory revolutionaries" (para. 3) among so many other things. And for Michelle Fan (2020),

> *BTS also enable* ARMY *to reframe the female gaze from a cause of mockery to a source of power… Part of this is their refusal to condescend to the female gaze, instead striving to delight and inspire their audience by constantly doing and creating better in their honor. (para.* 7*).*

These examples transcend one-on-one connection. As a fellow fan, reading these articles inspires me as much as BTS does. And, being active in the community, I encounter personal stories like this on a daily basis. These are but a few examples in a sea of millions.

It's not only the effect of BTS on ARMY that demonstrates the importance of the connection—it's also the reverse. ARMY have helped BTS top charts, break records, and fill stadiums all over the world; ARMY has boosted their visibility through radio campaigns, streaming, sales, and more (J. Lee, 2019); they've run donation campaigns in their name (*One In An Army*, n.d.); they've inspired BTS as people. Returning to Michelle Fan's (2020) article for a moment,

> *It's the 'synergy,' they say—the reciprocal flow of adoration between* ARMY *and BTS, BTS and* ARMY*, that propels them towards their industry-shaking, culture-shifting achievements. And so at every turn, they thank* ARMY *for lifting them to dizzying heights. (para.* 5*).*

Indeed, BTS thank their fans so often that it's hard to know where to begin with examples. Kim Namjoon, great leader that he is, is well known for this. In his first address to the UN, he claimed, "We truly have the best fans in the world" (UNICEF, 2018), and that sentiment is expressed in every concert speech, award speech, and post-concert live video. Concert speeches often run over 30 minutes total between all the members, who take time for introspection that they convey to the audience. They creatively express gratitude in song lyrics, as early as "2! 3!" through "Answer: Love Myself," "Magic Shop," "Mikrokosmos," and the iconic "We Are Bulletproof: The Eternal," on an album overflowing with gratitude towards fans.

And ARMY has indeed lifted BTS to great heights. As Jiyoung Lee (2019) explains, ARMY used a hands-on approach to gain radio play in North America. To overcome the high barrier,

> *ARMYs scouted out radio stations whose airplays influence the Billboard Chart and repeatedly requested BTS's songs to those local stations. During the process, they created and distributed response manuals that specified 'What to do when the song is selected,' 'What to do when the song is rejected,' and 'What to do when the station does not know BTS' [...] If a radio program played a BTS song, ARMYs would put the program on Google's trending searches and send flowers and gifts to the station. (p. 58).*

Efforts like these led to greater recognition and a wider audience for their music. So, too, does the streaming of songs on platforms like Spotify and YouTube, which have direct effects on the Billboard HOT 100 chart—a chart on which BTS has now obtained #1 hits six times as of this writing (Zellner, 2023). Including solo projects, that's eight times, with Jimin's "Like Crazy" and Jungkook's "Seven" ft. Latto debuting at #1 (McIntyre, 2023; Trust, 2023). Fans communicate streaming goals on social media to coordinate their efforts and make sure the numbers count. They do this too for record-setting, notably on YouTube, where BTS has held the record several times for the highest 24-hour debut in YouTube history (Rolli, 2021). They are the current record-holders, with 108.2 million views within the first 24 hours for their song "Butter" (*YouTube Records*, n.d.).

They have also held the #1 spot for 210+ weeks on Billboard's Social 50 chart (Social 50, 2023). Before the chart's hiatus, it measured social media engagement from fans, for which BTS also holds a world record, along with records for social media followers (Pilastro, 2022). Even before BTS started to win major American music awards, they won Top Social Artist. When awards are decided by social media or fan voting, ARMY dominates—to the point where votes are sometimes overruled and chosen by the awards committee regardless of voting results (Ali, 2019).

This kind of fervent and proactive support is not lost on BTS. In their 2017 MAMA awards acceptance speech for Artist of the Year, Namjoon said,

> *ARMY! We love you! This year we went to a lot of places in the world and received warm welcomes, but everywhere we went, people were more curious about you all. [People wondered] 'What kind of fandom is it that is this passionate and loving? It's really amazing.' Without all of you, we would not have been able to receive such a warm welcome or honor. We really thank you. (JP, 2017).*

Namjoon was referring to the media, who take every opportunity to ask BTS about their passionate fanbase, with various mixtures of condescension, bafflement, amusement, and genuine awe.

But BTS appreciates ARMY on the level of personal influence too—not just for their success. As early as 2013, the year of their debut, Namjoon wrote this in a letter at an official fan meeting:

> *When I look at ARMYs, these thoughts come up. I wonder if I've ever supported and cheered on someone so passionately. Looking back, I realize that I used to live*

> *only caring for myself, and I find that really embarrassing. Back then, expressing my feelings for another person was something I wouldn't even think about doing. I knew one way or another we would get hate, but meeting our* ARMYs *truly changed and is still changing my outlook on the world and my life. I learn so many things from you all every day.* (*BTS Trans*, 2022, *para.* 1).

For Namjoon to credit fans for the motivation to change something this meaningful in his behavior is extraordinarily generous. It also tells of the deeply introspective approach he has to the relationship.

Another example of personal influence is when Jungkook expressed a desire to better himself to Taehyung on *In the Soop* (2020), season one, episode six. When Taehyung confided in him that he was feeling a kind of emptiness from not being able to perform in front of fans due to the pandemic, Jungkook told him how he copes with the same feeling: by using the time to improve himself and his skills, so that he can be a better version of himself when they perform again. He advised Taehyung to work towards showing those who love him how much he's changed.

There is a critical source, too, on both the relationship structure and its personal value, tying these points together. In a live video from April 9, 2022, Namjoon spoke directly about the connection between BTS and ARMY, giving us possibly the most relevant comment on this topic from a BTS member. He alluded to how he sees the benefits of this relationship to BTS, and also explained in his own words, in English, why the connection is unique.

> So *when you like… say the name of* BTS, *it's not just about the seven boys. It includes the industry, maybe the Korean thing, maybe Asian, and mostly the* ARMYs*—naturally we're together in our everyday lives. It's not just one way. It's the… I call it—it's mutual. (He gestures back and forth.) We give them something, they give us something—I mean you guys give us something. And I truly felt today as well seeing you guys in person [at the concert] and hearing your voices… it's something… you know, it comes from the heart. And it's about the soul. It's about sharing arts, and sharing souls. We're like… we may not know each other […] But now, through the performance and the team, we can be something, you know. We call this inyeon in Korea. I don't know what to call this in English, but we became something, you know. Relationship. (He gestures to show two fists connecting and then separating, again and again.) […] We've met each other, so… I think we're making something great. I think that's all I want to say.* (N. Kim, 2022).

There's a lot to unpack in Namjoon's words. Regarding the benefits that BTS gets from the relationship, it appears that Namjoon believes they receive a sort of energy, from the heart, or even from the soul: a type of sharing. Earlier in the same livestream he says to viewers that "you are the ones who made us" and that ARMY is "not just supporting" but "being together with us." He also speaks to the structure, implicitly dismissing the one-sided aspect of PSRs by saying it's "not just one way" and that it's "mutual." He then suggests a term appropriate to this relationship, namely *inyeon*, which is a word that doesn't have a direct translation in English: Gibson (2016) describes it as "a 'bond' or 'relationship'" but also notes that that "doesn't really cover the strength of the connection. It often carries a connotation of fate or destiny, that the bond was somehow predestined" (8. 인연 (n)). Although it's not suggested as a new

label, it is nonetheless useful as a relevant term that carries meanings not contained within PSR, and which comes from the artist directly.

Continuing with Namjoon's words, we can see this bond from another angle in an interview he did with GQ *Korea*. According to the English translation, when Namjoon is asked, "How would you like your love with ARMY to unfold in the future?" (Jeon, 2021, para. 31) part of his answer is that "I hope that love is like a parallel line, supporting each other in our own ways as we grow into adults, while maintaining our current distance" (Jeon, 2021, para. 32). Thus, when we consider these two sources, the relationship Namjoon describes is something akin to two lines running parallel, perhaps fated to do so, or at the very least bound together in a meaningful way.

It is difficult not to be effusive in my examples of introspection, gratitude, and personal impact, as an ARMY myself. My purpose is not to create an exhaustive list, but to make it clear that the devotion that artist and fan show to each other is indicative of a meaningful connection in which inspiration flows in both directions.

With that being said, the relationship comprises more than a wellspring of inspiration. Like anything with great positive potential, there is negative potential as well. It's worth addressing this as we consider the nature of a fan-artist relationship under the umbrella of "parasocial."

The ecosystem of activities produced by BTS can sometimes take over a fan's attention, to the detriment of other things. It is easy to become fixated, especially as a new fan, when so much content exists. But unfortunately, this can come at the cost of other things in a fan's life, especially other interests and passions. This can be regulated, but it can be difficult to do so before the fan knows what's going on.[2]

Aside from the all-consuming potential of their content, it's also possible to be over-reliant on the artist. This makes sense, following the earlier point about how deeply helpful they can be.

Unfortunately, though, this can turn into a dependency. Relying on any one thing alone to solve problems is risky, whatever that may be, and BTS is no exception. Over-reliance can result in symptoms that resemble emotional dependency, for example "an idealized view of your partner or the relationship," "the belief your life lacks meaning without them," or "feelings of jealousy or possessiveness" (Raypole, 2020, para. 12). In my time as a fan, I have heard many comments on social media echoing these feelings.

There are also other ways the artist's influence can be negative. Some of these are touched upon in *I Am ARMY*, notably the essay by Anna Shaffer (2020), who details negative associations she developed with BTS's music. She says, "I questioned whether or not being an ARMY was really helping; I questioned what I was without ARMY; I questioned what continued good BTS had done for me" (p. 63). In the end, it is a story about finding inspiration from BTS in her own way, but those dark moments are key to the narrative.

On the flip side, we know that the reverse scenario can be negative as well: fan interactions can be harmful to BTS. There are too many (*one* is too many) examples of harassment, stalker fans, and *sasaengs*, a term used in k-pop fandoms for obsessive fans who stalk an artist or otherwise invade their privacy (From Trainee to Bias, 2022). There has been more than one live video where a member receives a random call from an unknown number, which they don't answer, suspecting it's a sasaeng (Reign, 2019). We've heard cases where fans yell or throw items on stage that hit the artists (Sharma, 2022). And, beyond cases of individual fans, there are also ways the collective fanbase creates stress for the artist. I think of the faceless fans holding cameras in the song

2 Speaking of which, "I'm here to save you, I'm here to ruin you" (*BTS - Pied Piper,* n.d.)

"Interlude: Shadow," or Yoongi's honesty about the challenges that come with fame, in "Daechwita," or the doubt that festers in response to celebrity, in Namjoon's "Intro: Persona," and his difficulty reconciling it with himself. I see challenges, too, in their documentaries, where the members struggle with injuries, exhaustion, and self-doubt as a result of their performances.

I detail these complicating factors not as a way of arguing that the fan-artist relationship isn't worth having, but, on the contrary, to suggest that when fan and artist choose to foster this connection, it indicates that it's rewarding enough to warrant the challenges. My purpose is to show that such an enriching relationship deserves to be considered respectfully, thoughtfully, and three-dimensionally. These negative aspects are even more reason to try to understand the nuance of a fan-artist relationship, so that we can more easily navigate the challenges and harness them for good.

Such a thing would have been a great help to me during my first year as a fan. In my own experience, it was only by recognizing that I was too involved that I was able to step back, recalibrate, and find balance. By focusing on the most important ways that I wanted to be a fan and leaving the rest behind, I was able to embrace the artistry and unique connection that a BTS-ARMY relationship can offer while also leaving space for other important relationships, interests, and creative projects. My personal life has been enriched by this balance. But it was incredibly difficult to recognize the need for it in the first place. If I hadn't been working against the stigmatized "parasocial" and instead had language that resonated, then I could have used it to talk to other fans and better understand my experience. My hope is that re-examining this language could help other fans navigate their own experiences within fandom.

In Part 3, I will talk about why the language describing a fan-artist relationship is important, how it can help, and how we can use it to broaden our thinking.

Part 3: The Barriers of Language

So far we've looked at the complex relationship between BTS and ARMY, and how "parasocial relationship" is too simplistic a term to capture it. Not only that, but we've seen that the term is used with prejudice, which can be harmful to a fan's understanding of their experience as a fan. This is true generally about fan-artist relationships, but the case of BTS and ARMY illustrates this complexity particularly well.

BTS already defy labels. They're understood within the framework of "boy band" by some, called a "supergroup" by others, and "idol" by some familiar with k-pop conventions. But as Namjoon says in their 2018 single "Idol," "You can call me artist / You can call me idol / Or you can call me anything else / I don't care / I'm proud of it / I'm free" (Doolset Bangtan, 2018).

BTS actively defy labels that others choose for them, especially where it concerns their art. When asked whether their work falls within the genre of k-pop, members Jungkook, V, and j-hope answered, "The genre is BTS" (Ochoa, 2020, para. 9). Fans understand and will echo this sentiment. On one hand, genres are used to classify things for practical purposes, and I recognize that calling BTS k-pop is useful in some contexts. On the other hand, BTS pushes too far beyond the genre to be considered k-pop. Are they artists? Yes, certainly, but not only music artists. Idols? Sure, in some ways, within the convention of Korean idols. A boy band? Perhaps on the surface. But more like a deconstructed one.[3]

3 I owe a YouTube comment for this analogy; it's one of my favorite ways to describe them. Sadly, I've long since forgotten the person's username.

It is little wonder, then, that an artist pushing the bounds of genre would also push at the bounds of how artists and fans relate. Their biography says as much: according to *Beyond The Story*, the *WINGS* album "marked the moment BTS and ARMY became inextricably intertwined. They went beyond the traditional connection between artist and fandom, becoming a tight-knit unit defying precedent and definition" (BTS & Kang, 2023, p. 246). The album represents their journey and the relationship that formed with their fans when their motivation shifted. "BTS longed for success. But when that success finally became reality, what they then began to want was, ironically, love—that is, love from ARMY" (p. 247).

And it's not just relationships and genres but also traditional art forms that BTS are pushing against. Jiyoung Lee's book *BTS, Art Revolution* (2019) centers on exactly this point. She says,

> *The BTS phenomenon points to a shift in the total nature of art, which involves the spectator participation structure brought on by the transformation of the technological basis. This phenomenon cannot be described by the existing categories and concepts of art, and calls for a new concept of art. (p. 116).*

There are many reasons for this, including the multimedia nature of the art they produce, the "rhizomatic" (p. 74) relationship with fans, and the new opportunities opened by digital media. So many artists have benefitted from these opportunities, and to be clear, it is not only BTS who are pushing these artistic bounds, and not only BTS and ARMY who demonstrate a new model of fan-artist relationship. But due to their popularity[4], fan engagement[5], and notoriously passionate fanbase[6], they are cultural leaders in these ideas.

Our current language around fandom does not adequately describe the dynamic between BTS and ARMY, and others like them. Jiyoung Lee responds to this by using the philosophical concept of a "rhizomatic system" (p. 74) to understand this relationship. To summarize Lee's application of the term to this fandom, "a rhizomatic system is an acentered system, which lacks a single center" (p. 75), and in this case, "neither ARMY nor BTS is a center: rather, the two form a horizontal relationship" (p. 76). Lee's book is dedicated to explaining this connection and to arguing for "the BTS phenomenon as a specific example of rhizomatic revolution" (p. 72). Her work is the most comprehensive publication in support of expanding the language we use to talk about BTS and ARMY.

Meanwhile, critic Jeff Benjamin points to another failing in language by calling for a change in the use of the term "idol," saying that it doesn't adequately emphasize the "art, creative merit, or artists' leadership" (G. Lee, 2020, para. 2). Although the article doesn't discuss the fan-artist relationship like Jiyoung Lee does, it is nonetheless a response to the way our current language stigmatizes this kind of artist. The stigma on the term "idol" also has implications on how we understand the parasocial relationships that fans have with them.

4 One measure of popularity is album sales. They have sold the third most albums globally in the past 30 years ("BTS climbs up," 2022).

5 Again, they've held the #1 spot for 210+ weeks on Billboard's Social 50 chart (*Social 50*, 2023).

6 The passion of ARMY can be measured in many different ways, but E. Tammy Kim's article in *The New Yorker* gives many diverse examples in its study of how and why fans show their love (E.T. Kim, 2022).

Other fandom studies research has of course expanded our understanding of PSRs as well. Giles (2002) helped re-conceptualize PSRs as an extension of, rather than substitution for, real-world interactions: PSRs are social relationships that are manifested in a mediated context. Giles and Maltby (2006) distinguished three dimensions of celebrity worship, which are entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological. Tukachinsky (2010) re-conceptualized PSRs as comprising qualitatively different relationships, like parasocial love and parasocial friendship. More recently, Nguyen, Khadadeh, and Jeong (2023) introduced terms used within fandom spaces to delineate PSRs with fictional characters.

These are all examples of the potential to continuously broaden our understanding of these phenomena. Some researchers have tried to normalize PSRs as well, for example Giles (2002), who looked at them within the realm of "normal social activity" (p. 286) and cautioned against language like "imaginary" or "pseudo-social," which "pathologizes viewers who form strong parasocial attachments" (p. 286). This directly supports my observation about the stigma on the "reality" of PSRs.

The issue is that, despite these conversations between experts, the term PSR is still stigmatized and poorly understood within popular culture. Of course, there are some popular sources that help normalize PSRs, such as Jen Sookfong Lee's (2023) memoir Superfan. She considers her "intimacy with fandom" (p. 29) as being in the same sphere as memories of loved ones, in that "it's the same act of filling in knowledge and love with whatever I can, with words and fantasy and narrative" (p. 30). However, nuanced takes like this have not yet become dominant in popular culture.

I personally believe the term "parasocial relationship" itself poses challenges. Part of this stems from the difficulty of changing a pre-existing stigma. Additionally, although this is personal observation, my perception of the word "parasocial" is influenced by connotations of "parasite," especially given the emphasis on one-sidedness. What's more, "relationship" commonly means romantic relationship, which may contribute to the stigma of "delusional" fans.

In the context of the work of these critics, above, I can more easily explain my argument. Like all of them, I am calling for an expansion of our language. Specifically, I am suggesting additional terminology to describe this fan-artist relationship: the kind so easily seen between BTS and ARMY, but that so many other fandoms experience as well—that acknowledges what we know about "parasocial" but also looks beyond.

Where do we draw from? Is there something in Namjoon's use of the Korean *inyeon*, as mentioned above? In Jiyoung Lee's *rhizomatic system*? Is there something too in Wallea Eaglehawk's (2020a) understanding of *idol limerence*, as it appears in her work of the same name? All of these are useful in understanding BTS and ARMY with nuance, but they all describe the nature or components of the relationship, rather than providing a label.

What if we break down "parasocial" to what it contains? The prefix "para-" can mean several things: "beside," "alongside," "beyond," "closely related to," or "associated in a subsidiary or accessory capacity." Although the latter is negative in implying a lesser status, the majority are positive or neutral. Notably, "beyond" is appropriate in the context of BTS, who frequently use it when "BTS" becomes an acronym, e.g. their book *Beyond The Story*, their documentary *BTS Monuments: Beyond the Star*, and the extended English meaning of their name, Beyond The Scene (HYBE LABELS, 2017). In addition, the other suggested meanings of "para-" evoke another word that uses the same prefix: "parallel." To imagine an artist and fan existing "beside" or "alongside" each other is appropriate, in that they travel side by side but never physically touch. The idea of parallel lines also evokes the album and concept You Never Walk Alone.

It may even conjure the meaning of *inyeon*, with the idea that the two lines are fated to remain together and, of course, it evokes Namjoon's earlier response that he hopes "love is like a parallel line" (Jeon, 2021, para. 32).

If we relate "para-" to "parallel," rather than "parasite," perhaps we can better understand what this connection means. To enable this association, we can make this even clearer, linguistically. We can change the "s" that phonetically facilitates the connotation of "parasite," while also avoiding the label "relationship."

What we have then is a *parallink*. When artist and fan have a parallink with each other, they exist *alongside*, *beside*, or *parallel* to each other; traveling mutual paths; *beyond* our current understanding of connections; and with a *link* to each other, evoking technology as well—especially appropriate for a bond facilitated so much by technology. The term makes its relation to "parallel" clear with double "l." It is more casual, more affectionate, less onerous to say, and still familiar enough to signal what it means. It is not one-sided, nor stigmatized. It distances us from "parasocial" while still acknowledging its application.

Although I believe in the value of this new term, I believe that others could also be helpful. Arguments could be made, for example, for *rhizobond*, evoking rhizomatic connections as per Jiyoung Lee; or *ambilink*, where both sides are separate but equal; or *metasocial connection*, retaining "beyond" in the prefix and anticipating an overlap between PSRs and relationships in the metaverse, which both lack an in-person component.

Regardless of what term is utilized, I want to call on fans specifically, and to anyone with a vested interest, linguistic or otherwise, to make space for new language in this realm. We're the ones who understand not just the nature of this connection, but the importance of it. Rather than wait for others to determine what the relationship means, we need to do it ourselves.

I also have another purpose in making this argument. If we look at this stigmatized terminology, we can see that valuable things are not always understood. This lack of language does not dictate a lack of value in the thing it attempts to describe. Rather, we need to be able to recognize value even when it looks unfamiliar to us. The ability to do so requires an open mind and a compassionate heart, two immeasurably valuable traits. In this way, we can apply the example of BTS and ARMY more broadly to argue that it illustrates the value of creative new relationships, even before we have language for them.

Why is this important? On a personal level, it's because I've experienced the confusion of relationships that defy labels, and I've learned that they are often the most rewarding ones, even when I haven't known what to call them. This has been true not just in fan-artist relationships, but again and again in the spaces between friendships, romantic relationships, creative relationships, and more. And I know that if this is true for me, I can't be the only one.

When I hear about people who leave good relationships that don't fit their expectations for a label, I grieve for them. I can see that pattern in the teenager who takes posters off their wall because their friends and family make fun of them for loving their favorite band. It's in the person who leaves a partnership because it's not what they think they want, even though it's exactly what they need. It's in anyone who finds a connection to something that enriches their life, but who feels insecure about it because it's not "real" or "cool," i.e., it carries no social status, and they have no examples of others like them.

It is easy to see how this can happen. When we don't see ourselves represented in the world, we may question our reality. And without language, it is much harder to see

that representation anywhere. How do you find it in the first place? How do you search for it? How do you recognize it when you do find it?

This can be complicated when your support network doesn't recognize your experience, as you're even more likely to question it. When art and media don't show it, those aren't supporting you, either. So, beyond accepting creative connections in our own lives, we need to accept them in the lives of friends and family, and we need to be open to representing them publicly. Rather than discourage people from having relationships that aren't "real," we should encourage any connection that makes sense for the individual.

Fortunately, if we approach things with this openness, our lives become richer. I've experienced it firsthand. For ARMY, this is likely easy to understand: in BTS, we have shining examples of open minds and compassionate hearts, and we have experts at finding new avenues for creativity. To quote Michelle Fan's article once more, "the value of art is also measured in how it can foster relationships between people. The experience of emotional intimacy is the artistry itself " (2020, para. 4). Without adequate language to aid with understanding, non-fans may scoff at this idea, not familiar with what it looks like. But it doesn't change the experience of millions of fans, who all choose, for one reason or another, the little seven.[7]

I hope that we can all embrace new things, with the passion and dedication of a purple-blooded ARMY, when we find connections worth holding on to.

Conclusion

In this article of three parts, I have tried to argue a few interconnected things.

First, I've shown that the term "parasocial relationship" is stigmatized, and that it can hinder our understanding of fan-artist relationships. I've argued that we need to stop saying these connections aren't "real" and accidentally implying that they don't matter. If we succeed, more people may be able to embrace connections that enrich their lives, when they're not worried about what it says about their grasp on reality.

Second, I've illustrated the complex relationships that are possible between fans and artists using the remarkable case of BTS and ARMY. I've talked about the potential for both light and dark, and how the great positives and negatives paint a much more textured picture than popular understanding allows, demonstrating the need for more nuance.

Lastly, I've illustrated that our current language is not sufficient to represent this fan-artist connection, and I've called for the adoption of new terminology. I've argued that we should also apply this thinking more broadly, so that we can appreciate other relationships that may be nameless but no less important because they are unrecognized.

At the core of this article is one single idea: that good connections should be fostered, no matter what they look like or whether others understand them. They are rare, and wonderful, and life-changing—and we are lucky to find them in the first place.

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