

The effects of the K-pop group BTS on the mental health and well-being of their fans, a qualitative study

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explain the effect that the K-pop group BTS has on the mental health and well-being of their fans. The seven member Korean pop group is backed by an ever-growing fandom called ARMY that consists of millions of fans worldwide, of which many claim to feel happier because of the impact that BTS has on their lives. In order to explain this effect, a qualitative approach using Colaizzi's seven step method of phenomenological data analysis was used (Colaizzi, 1978). BTS fans were recruited via the social media platform Reddit, after which seven of them were randomly selected. These fans participated in an online semi-structured interview where they shared their experiences as part of the BTS fandom, specifically with regard to their own mental health and well-being. Afterwards, meaningful statements were identified and categorized using Colaizzi's method, after which seven themes emerged that help explain the effect that BTS has on their fans. The seven themes are as follows: happy and joyful content, inspiration for life decisions, a large community, hopeful and positive messages, resonating with music, BTS as real people and, lastly, feeling connected.

Key words: qualitative research, BTS, K-pop, fandom, mental health, well-being

Abstract (Nederlands)

Deze masterproef heeft als doel het effect te verklaren dat de K-pop groep BTS heeft op de mentale gezondheid en het welzijn van hun fans. De Koreaanse popgroep bestaande uit zeven leden wordt gesteund door hun fandom genaamd ARMY, waarvan veel leden claimen zich gelukkiger te voelen door de invloed van BTS. Om dit effect te kunnen verklaren, werd een kwalitatieve aanpak gebruikt met behulp van Colaizzi's zeven stap methode van fenomenologische data analyse. BTS fans werden gerekruteerd via een post op het social media platform Reddit, waarna zeven fans op willekeurige wijze werden geselecteerd. Met deze participanten werd een online semi-gestructureerd interview uitgevoerd, waarin ze vertelden over hun ervaringen als BTS fans, in het specifiek met betrekking tot hun eigen mentale gezondheid en welzijn. Achteraf werden betekenisvolle quotes geïdentificeerd en gecategoriseerd volgens de methode van Colaizzi (Colaizzi, 1978), waarna zeven thema's naar voren kwamen die het effect dat BTS op hun fans heeft kunnen verklaren. Deze zeven thema's luiden als volgt: vrolijke content, inspiratie voor belangrijke keuzes, een grote gemeenschap, hoopvolle en positieve boodschappen, zich kunnen inleven in de muziek, BTS als echte mensen en tot slot, zich verbonden voelen.

Trefwoorden: kwalitatief onderzoek, BTS, K-pop, fandom, mentale gezondheid, welzijn.

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1. Introduction

1.1. who are BTS?

BTS is undoubtedly one of the most popular musical acts of the last few years. The seven member South-Korean boyband has been steadily breaking world records and is known for its dedicated fanbase called ARMY. The group belongs to the K-pop genre, which mostly consists of all-male or all-female groups that are known for their flashy dance moves, addictive melodies and attractive performers (Romano, 2018). The genre is part of the Korean wave, otherwise known as Hallyu, which is the global circulation of Korean pop culture, a phenomenon that started in Asia in the 1990s and has been taking the rest of the world by storm since the mid-2000s. This globalization is mainly social media driven, as evidenced by Psy's 2012 hit Gangnam Style and the many YouTube records BTS have been breaking over the last few years. K-pop has effectively integrated social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter and has been releasing a growing number of K-Pop music videos online, which allows global fans to easily access this content. As shown by the popularity of K-pop music videos, this is not just a musical genre, but can rather be seen as a form of performative visual culture (Yoon, 2018). Out of all the K-pop acts, BTS has been the most successful so far and has been steadily growing in popularity since their debut in 2013, causing them to gain more and more attention from fans around the globe. They are managed by HYBE Labels (previously called Big Hit Entertainment), which started out as a relatively small entertainment agency, but is now one of the most successful companies in South Korea, with a market capital of 11,3 billion dollars (Sportskeeda, 2022). BTS themselves generate an estimated 3,54 billion dollars in economic value to South-Korea each year (Chung et al., 2018) and they are currently recognized as the most idolized music group in the world. In 2020, their single Dynamite charted at number one on the US Billboard Hot 100, as the first K-pop single to do so. This

earned them further international attention and coverage from mainstream media, including Grammy nominations and Guinness World Records for their dedicated fanbase.

The owner of HYBE Labels, Bang Sihyuk, created BTS with the idea in mind that the youth of today needs a hero who provides a shoulder to lean on, instead of someone who preaches from above (Romano, 2021). This meant that the members of BTS had to be sincere and genuine, which is why they were given the freedom to write their own songs on topics of their choosing and were allowed to discuss the pressures of stardom. Although the BTS members are known for their dance moves and looks, like many other K-pop groups, they are mostly praised for their own involvement in their music, by producing and writing many of their songs themselves, as well as their genuine and vulnerable image.

This information partly explains the immense success that BTS has achieved over the last few years, which has led to multiple studies aiming to uncover the exact success factors that underly BTS's rise to stardom. Naturally, the impressive number of sales raises the question of what makes BTS so special. Lee et al. (2019) attempted to answer this question by using a mixed methods approach to unveil their success factors. They used text mining techniques to collect and analyze key words regarding BTS on social media platforms such as Twitter and conducted interviews with BTS fans and entertainment industry experts. The eight factors of success that they identified, help create a clearer picture of BTS as a whole.

Firstly, BTS actively engages with their fans through social media. This makes for easy communication without regard for time or space. On top of that, fans themselves use social media to constantly promote and support BTS and to encourage other fans to vote for BTS during award shows. Secondly, BTS writes and produces many of their songs themselves, as opposed to many other pop artists and especially K-pop artists. This allows the group to deliver their own message and causes fans to empathize with the lyrics and the members and unites

them through music. Because of this, the group was invited to deliver a speech at the United Nations Assembly in 2018, where they touched on subjects such as self-esteem and self-love (Chang & Park, 2019). Besides this speech, they also started a campaign together with UNICEF, in order to promote self-love and to speak out against violence and bullying (Saraswati & Nurbaity, 2020). A third factor is consistent self-development. BTS were not formed by a well-known entertainment agency, unlike most other successful K-pop groups, and therefore did not have much support and popularity when they first debuted. Gradually, they managed to work their way up to where they are now, which fans see as a testament to their consistent efforts and passion for music and performing. The fourth aspect contributing to the success of BTS is strong teamwork, as the relationship between the members appears to be harmonious and brotherly. The fifth factor is attractive performance, which was derived from fans reporting that BTS have outstanding dance skills and high quality performances and concerts. A sixth factor is outstanding visual beauty, with participants reporting that they were impressed with the visuals of BTS music videos on YouTube. For many fans, music videos were their first introduction to BTS and this is what primarily caught their attention. Another factor is storytelling, as the members of BTS often write the lyrics to their songs themselves. These lyrics touch on personal experiences and socially sensitive subjects such as bullying, school violence and competition. This has resulted in fans feeling empathy with the lyrics and feeling emotionally immersed. The last factor is that of overseas expansion strategies, as BTS successfully used social media early on in their career to gain a large following overseas, before expanding their fanbase.

The subject of social media appears to be critical in the success and popularity of BTS, as is also demonstrated by Chang and Park (2019) in a study on the characteristics of digitally potentiated neo-tribalism, with a focus on social media and other digital communication media. The authors researched literature on fandom and postmodernity in popular culture studies as

well as literature on Hallyu and its fandom. On top of this, they conducted interviews with fans and experts and used online forums in order to get a better understanding of the digital field of global fandom. Using the BTS ARMY as the subject of their research, they identified four major dimensions of global fandom. The first of these dimensions is what is known as digital intimacy, which refers to the private and intimate conversations and exchanges between BTS and ARMY. As mentioned before, social media is pivotal to the success of BTS. They communicate their daily lives through social media by uploading photos and videos every day and engaging in casual dialogue with their fans through platforms such as Twitter and Fancafe (an online community where fans interact with artists and each other). The BTS members use these instances to talk about their lives, their work and opinions and to express empathy with the daily challenges that their fans face. They often discuss how the challenges of their fans are similar to their own challenges and thus create a sense of intimacy between themselves and their fans. In this way, BTS and their fans transform the “self” into an emotional and public matter, according to Chang and Park. This is often viewed as admirable, but it has also been argued that this intimacy between artists and fans is merely a marketing tactic to exploit fans. By creating content outside of music, such as reality shows and behind the scenes videos, BTS are catering to the fans desire to know them on a more personal level. George (2020) argues that this strategy is primarily exploitive in nature, by allowing corporations to generate profit through the utilization of fans emotional, affective and communal investments in K-pop idols. Related to this concept of intimacy is non-social sociality, another dimension of global fandom as described by Chang and Park. This refers to the emergence of a new kind of sociality, in which the reveal of personal experiences and reflections creates a theme of self-improvement that is converted into a social intervention with the message of “love yourself”. Members of the ARMY fan club report being positively influenced by BTS’s messages of self-love and relating to the lyrics that cover the agony and fear of youth. Fans on twitter were quoted making

statements such as “BTS is the lifeblood of my weary life” and “they are 90 percent of my happiness”. The authors argue that this sets BTS apart from other K-pop groups who are produced by ‘K-pop machines’. This refers to Korean entertainment companies that subject their artists to harsh training schedules with limited freedom, whereas BTS is seen by the public as more autonomous in their work. They are respected for their efforts to grasp themes that are important to the current generation and expressing these themes through music. Besides universal themes, they are equally respected for using traditional Korean culture in their songs and music videos, while at the same time creating a more global appeal by incorporating subgenres such as hip-hop, Latin pop and rap. This tactic of including both traditional cultural aspects while also keeping up with the latest global trends is referred to by the authors as transnational locality.

The final dimension of fandom that Chang and Park describe is that of organizing without an organization, meaning that fans are able to act as both organizers and followers through various social media activities. It is an organization in which everyone is a leader and everyone can join in on the action. In this way, ARMY manages to successfully coordinate social media initiatives and other services. For example the ‘attack team’ that was created by ARMY to increase the number of radio submissions for the Billboard Music Awards, or the hashtag #BTSLOVEYOURSELF that was trending topic on Twitter for months in 2018 in order to promote BTS’s campaign alongside UNICEF (Saraswati & Nurbaity, 2020). The unicity displayed during these kind of initiatives could even serve as an example for professional organizations or businesses.

These four dimensions describe the digital force that is the BTS ARMY and explain the relevance of this fandom in the social media driven world of today, through intimate interactions between stars and their fans and spontaneous organizations and initiatives, where everyone gets the chance to be a leader.

As evidenced by the studies mentioned above, BTS and their fandom can be considered relevant to research from a psychological perspective. The intimacy between artists and fans, the hugely dedicated fanbase, and the group identity are just some of the possibilities for research. However, one aspect that is particularly interesting and often overlooked, is the relation between BTS fans and mental health. A quick look at some of the online platforms that BTS fans are active on will immediately clarify why. Many of the fans take to social media to talk about their experiences with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and how BTS has helped them overcome these struggles. There are numerous Twitter posts and YouTube comments of fans stating that they were in a dark place but that they were able to improve their state of mind through BTS and being part of the BTS ARMY. Some examples from Twitter are:

“Battling against my depression was very hard, you felt isolated and weak. But there's a 7 people who came into my life to changed and taught me, they gave me inspiration to continued my life and face this cruel world with positivity and a smile. Thank you @BTS_twt” (@Taehyungg143, 2021).

“@BTS_twt saved me while through lockdown from depression plus gave me inspiration to live my life.” (@RaplineChick, 2021).

“Without BTS maybe Im drowning into depression and anxiety..” (@btsxdee, 2021).

“BTS to me means home. It means security and acceptance. When I was dealing with depression and anxiety, they were there to lift my spirits up. They are my safe place where I could be my true self. My family ☐” (@taegukkie_0JJ0, 2021).

1.2. The history of fandom

There are many more statements of this nature to be found all over the internet and it is clear that fans somehow find solace through BTS and the ARMY fandom. So far, there have been no studies that have explored the mechanisms behind this effect of BTS on people that struggle with mental health issues. We can, however, look at studies regarding mental health and fandom in general to gain a better understanding of this effect. A particularly useful display of the mechanism of fandom is offered by the book *Understanding Fandom: an Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*, by Mark Duffett (2013). It provides us with an extensive look at the history of fandom in general. The word ‘fan’ was first used in seventeenth-century England, as an abbreviation for ‘fanatic’. A century later, it was used in the United States to describe the enthusiasm of baseball supporters (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Movie stars as well gained a massive following and as early as the 1920s, Hollywood Studios received over 32 million fan letters a year for both their male and female stars. It would be a mistake to label this as the beginning of fandom itself though, as it is clearly an ancient mechanism, evidenced by acts such as portrait painting, portraying human faces on coins or the massive following of Shakespeare. This concept of fandom has continued to expand ever since and has particularly been influenced by the rise of the internet. Thanks to this, fans can now discuss theories on bulletin boards, play interactive games and post fanfiction for everyone to read. On the other hand, this has also enabled artists to gain a following much quicker than before the invention of the internet. Critics and broadcasters are no longer the only voices to be heard in the media, which means there are many more sources to choose from as a consumer. This continuous

changing of the media and the ways in which fandoms operate can make it difficult to create an exact definition of the word 'fan'. It may seem like they are mainly consumers, but Duffett argues in his book that they are much more than consumers alone, they are archivists, collectors, networkers, tourists and more. The economic aspect of fan culture is there, seeing as fans often purchase albums, DVDs and more, but in essence, fan culture relies heavily on its non-commercial nature and fans mostly engage in activities and exchanges that are non-profitable, for example by sharing their favorite texts. This is an opportunity for fans to help each other without any financial gain, thus playing into the sense of agency of the fan. This aspect of fandom can be seen in the BTS Army as well. Links to BTS game shows and concert livestreams are shared online, which you would otherwise have to pay for through the official BTS Weverse account.

This growing agency of fans puts them more and more in the center of attention, making fandom more visible than ever. Despite this, fans cannot avoid being stereotyped, which is made clear by terms such as Bieber-fever, referring to young fans of Canadian pop-star Justin Bieber, who are often seen as hysteric teenagers. BTS fans face the same kind of stereotypes and are often regarded as a group of obsessive young girls by the media, much to the chagrin of the fans themselves. Media scholar Henry Jenkins argues against this sentiment of fandom as simple-minded obsession in his book *Textual Poachers* (2013). Instead, he views fans as thoughtful, productive and creative, which later led to his book becoming an important guideline for discussing fandom within research communities.

1.3. Fandom and mental health

Within the field of psychology, fandom is sometimes researched within the context of mental health, especially linked to celebrity worship. It is clear that celebrities can have a significant impact on the values of their fans, as proven by Fraser et al. (2002) who studied fans and impersonators of the popstar Elvis Presley. They found that fans closely identified themselves with their idol by taking inspiration from his values and changing their own lifestyles accordingly. This effect can be clearly seen within the BTS fandom as well, as evidenced by the statements of fans who describe how they were inspired by BTS to overcome their own struggles and change their outlook on life to a more positive one.

Naturally, there are individual differences in the manner of identification to celebrities. For some fans, their involvement in fandom is limited to finding inspiration in the works of their favorite artists and making social connections with other fans based on shared interests. For others, the notion of using celebrities as inspiration, takes on an arguably more problematic form, that of celebrity worship. This term describes people with an excessive admiration towards a celebrity (McCutcheon et al., 2002). McCutcheon et al. suggest that feelings of adoration can transform into over-identification with celebrities which causes dissociation and loss of self as key aspects of celebrity worship. Several studies have found associations between celebrity worship and poor mental health, which appears to be mediated by maladaptive daydreaming and a desire for fame (Zsila et al., 2019). However, a study by Safithri et al. (2019) found that K-Pop fans with elevated levels of celebrity worship scored high on various measures of quality of life, specifically physical health, psychological well-being, social relations and environment. These findings contradict previous research stating an association between celebrity worship and poor psychological well-being. Safithri et al. speculate that the reason for the high scores on measures of well-being is caused by many celebrities having a positive influence as role models, which provides positive outcomes to the modelling process.

1.4. The research question

In summary, it is difficult to draw a conclusion when it comes to the relation between mental health and being a fan of a certain artist or celebrity, seeing as multiple studies provide different results and usually only focus on specific aspects of fandom or only view fandom in the context of celebrity worship. In the case of BTS, there are no studies to be found on the mental health of fans, even though many members of the fandom credit BTS as their source of happiness. This raises an interesting question: what factors play a role in the effect that BTS has on the mental health and well-being of their fans? Considering the fact that BTS is currently one of the most popular musical acts with millions of dedicated fans all over the world, this is a relevant question that could help explain a phenomenon that has not received much coverage before. Most studies on BTS have focused on success factors and facets such as social media presence and marketing tactics, but not as much on the mental health aspect, even though this is clearly a big talking point within the ARMY fandom. For that reason, this study will aim to uncover which factors play a role in the effect that BTS has on the mental health and general well-being of their fans. Seeing as many fans credit BTS with helping them overcome mental health struggles such as depression and anxiety and improving their well-being in general, it could prove to be quite useful to study the mechanisms underlying this effect. In order to achieve this, this study will use a qualitative approach to gain a first person perspective on the effects that BTS have on their fans with regard to mental health and well-being.

2. Methods

To gain insight into the mechanisms behind the effect of BTS and their fandom on mental health and well-being, a qualitative research method was used, seeing as the study is rather exploratory in nature and qualitative research provides a rich first person account of the experiences of individuals. This is important, considering the fact that the aim of this study is to understand a complex phenomenon which involves mental health. In order to gain insight on the effects that BTS has on the mental health and well-being of its fans, several online semi-structured interviews with fans were conducted. The aim of these interviews was to gather first person accounts of experiences that can help explain this effect and the factors that are involved in it. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the research method, mostly because this method does not strictly follow the prepared questions, but allows the researcher to explore certain topics further if that is deemed relevant.

2. 1. Participants

All fans were recruited online, through a post on the social media platform Reddit, and invited to participate in a 30 minute interview about their experiences as being part of the BTS ARMY. The only requirement to be able to participate in the study was a minimum age of 18 years old and sufficient ability to speak English. Over 30 fans responded and ultimately 7 fans were randomly selected to do an interview via Zoom. Ideally, the sample size would include more participants to increase the validity and reliability of the study, but due to time restrictions, this was not an option. All participants were female and their ages ranged between 20 and 45 years old. 4 participants had the American nationality, one was from New Zealand, one from Mexico and one from the Czech Republic. The process was made as anonymous as possible and participants were not asked to give their names, however, they were asked for their email address for easier communication. Before the date of the interview, all participants received an

email with the information sheet and the informed consent letter, which they were asked to read and sign if they wished to continue taking part in the research project. These measures are in line with the guidelines of the university's ethical committee, from which this study received approval.

2.2. The interviews

Ultimately, the duration of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 90 minutes, including a short informal conversation in which the study was explained to the participants and demographical aspects such as age and nationality were discussed. It was made clear that the participants were not obligated to answer any questions they might feel uncomfortable with and they were free to stop their involvement with the research project at any time.

During the interviews themselves, a fixed set of questions was asked to gain insight into the experiences of BTS fans, of which the first half were more general questions to understand how each particular fan first encountered BTS and what their activities as fans consist of. The second part of the interview contained questions that were more aimed at understanding what BTS means to each participant in relation to their mental health and general well-being. As per usual in the case of semi-structured interviews, some questions were skipped if the researcher decided that they had already been answered extensively enough earlier on in the interview. In some cases, additional questions were asked if the researcher deemed a certain topic of conversation to be relevant to the research question. The interview questions were as follows:

- How did you become a fan of BTS?
- What attracted you most to them?
- Why at that specific time in your life?
- Were there any stages in becoming a fan?
- Can you describe what it is you like about BTS?

- Would you consider yourself a big fan?
- Do you interact with any other fans?
- Do you feel a sense of community?
- Do you feel that being a fan of BTS has an impact on your identity?
- How does being a fan of BTS impact your day to day life?
- Have BTS helped you through any struggles? If so, how?
- Do you use BTS as a way to distract yourself from struggles?
- Does the fan community itself play a role in this?
- Do you feel happier because of BTS?
- Are you involved in any other fandoms?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

2.3 Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and saved with password protection on the computer of the researcher. Afterwards, they were manually transcribed and all recordings were deleted. To extract the key dimensions that represent the effects of BTS and its fandom on the mental health and well-being of their fans, Colaizzi's (1978) strategy of descriptive phenomenological data analysis was used. This strategy is particularly useful for extracting, organizing and analyzing narrative datasets (Abu Shosha, 2012). The method consists of the following seven steps:

Step one: the investigator read each transcript thoroughly in order to get an extensive understanding of the contents.

Step two: 115 unique statements that are of relevance to the research question were identified. These statements were saved in a different document, with reference to the corresponding participant. The participants were assigned the letters A through G for anonymous identification.

Step three: In the same document, the unique statements were transformed to more general meanings for easier comparison.

Step four: The following step consisted of clustering the formulated meanings into themes. Seven categories of closely related statements were identified.

Step five: During the fifth step, the researcher exhaustively described each theme and its relevance to the data. The collection of these themes should accurately represent the scope of the interviews and thus answer the research question.

Step six: This step entailed an extensive analysis of all themes and its relation to the data. Several statements that did not fit under any theme were removed and several themes that represented the same underlying ideas or overlapped were grouped together.

Step seven: Lastly, member checking was used to present the results to the participants and receive their feedback. They were sent a list of the identified themes and the corresponding anonymized statements via email, to which 6 out of 7 participants responded to say they agreed upon the findings. The remaining participant never replied.

3. Results

To answer the research question, seven fans were interviewed on their relation to BTS and its fandom. The participants all described themselves as being “big” fans and nearly all of them had been to a concert or were planning to go in the future.

Some returning ideas throughout the interviews were not used during the analysis as they did not present an answer to the research question, but they are useful to include in the study in order to provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon of BTS. Firstly, all participants revealed that they feel happier overall and that their lives had been positively impacted by BTS. Participant E testified to this: “The changes that I’ve seen in myself are enormous, I’m not the same person that I was six months ago”, participant C shared: “They have no idea who I am, but they’ve made a huge impact on my life”.

Furthermore, all but one participant mentioned how BTS provides an experience that is one of its kind and cannot be found anywhere else in the entertainment world. The participant that did not express this view, explained that she did not see BTS as a unique phenomenon, but rather K-pop as a whole, whereas the other participants distinguished BTS from other K-pop groups that they supported.

Participant B shared: “I think it’s really understandable that they are just way different in so many aspects. I don’t know who, the other bands just do music, but do they talk about the things that matter, do they have friendships, do they help others?”.

Aside from the differences between BTS and other artists, the participants also attested to differences between the BTS fandom and other fandoms.

Participant A explained: “It is a very interesting research topic because I don’t think any fanbase on the planet is quite as, I want to say feral but not like in a negative way, but there is not even a word to describe the way ARMY is. I truly believe that the ARMY-BTS relationship is the only relationship of its kind”.

Regarding the research question, Colaizzi's seven step method of phenomenological analysis was used to extract 115 statements from the data and cluster them into seven themes that represent the scope of the interviews. These categories should explain how BTS impact the mental health and well-being of their fans. The themes that were identified are as follows: happy and joyful content, inspiration for life decisions, a large community, hopeful and positive messages, resonating with music, BTS as real people and, lastly, feeling connected.

3.1. Happy and joyful content

This first theme was one of the most prevalent topics throughout the interviews, with 24 corresponding statements. All participants attested to feeling happier in general because of BTS, which was often linked to the fact that BTS content tends to provide funny and lighthearted moments. This is most noticeable in behind the scenes videos, reality shows and interviews, but the happy and joyful undertone of songs was also mentioned quite often. Some participants described BTS as their comfort artist or happy place to turn to when they are not feeling well. Participant A described it as: "The content that they put out, like they're almost always just like happy and playing around. So I think that's what really makes me happy, kind of like the relationship that they have with each other and also the fact that they're putting out happy content most of the time". Participant C explained: "I feel like they've made a huge difference every day, when I'm like: I'm feeling this way, I wanna feel a different way, I can go and I can watch some funny videos when I need to laugh or something like that". Another participant described how BTS helped her feel better after a car accident: "I got into a car accident after getting into them and it was a really, really bad time and just watching them kind of took everything away, seeing how happy they were just made me happy". The main idea that the participants expressed in relation to this theme is that joyfulness and the bubbly

personalities of BTS members rub off on others and that their lighthearted content provides an escape from the negativity of the outside world.

3.2. Inspiration for life decisions

This theme was perhaps the most prominently represented throughout the interviews, with 29 corresponding statements from all but one of the participants. The fans described how BTS influenced their way of thinking and made them more open minded towards others and other cultures. Some participants explained how they used BTS as a way to reassess their own values and take inspiration from them during real life situations, for example participant C:

“BTS is really important to me, what parts of their message have really resonated, like what parts have I found to be really valuable and I felt like that helped me recognize what my core values of just me are, where I felt like yes, I want to be kind and a good friend to other people or I want to recognize my own value as a human being, I feel like that’s something that they emphasize, so I think it’s been helpful to see where I see my own reflection”.

Participant G similarly mentioned how BTS gave her inspiration to actively work towards happiness: “They for sure inspired me, seeing their relationship with each other and their commitment, not only to what they wanted to do but they are committed to each other to make sure that they’re doing well, so that was like they’re following their dreams and they’re doing everything that they can to be happy, why don’t I do the same, so that’s kind of the inspiration that I had”. Many participants also touched on the hard working attitude that the members show and how this inspires them to reach their own goals and to keep going during difficult situations. Besides motivation, fans also described how BTS influenced important life decisions. One particularly powerful account is that of participant D, who mentioned how listening to a BTS song about self-love inspired her to resign from a stressful job the day after. “I was very anxious, I was actually having panic attacks at work. I came home and I was like,

I don't even know what I wanna do anymore, I was just like done with work life, not like suicidal or anything, but just like I don't know if I can carry this on, just like go to work every day and deal with that amount of stress every single day, and I remember I was getting ready for bed and I was just like ugh, I'll just listen to my BTS playlist before I go to bed and the first song that came on was Epiphany by Jin, his solo song, literally talking about loving yourself, putting yourself first, and I don't know why, I've heard that song so many times, but that time it hit me so hard, I was like yeah, why am I letting other people do this to me, I need to put myself first, I need to love myself, because at that point I wasn't and the next day I quit".

Other participants shared similar stories detailing how they use BTS as role models with regard to work ethic, core values, self-love, real-life situations and major life decisions, with several fans stating that BTS makes them want to be a better person.

3.3. A large community

Aside from the topics regarding BTS as artists, several participants also clarified how the community aspect of the fandom influences their daily lives. The fans described how they felt connected to people from all kinds of different backgrounds through BTS and how this creates a feeling of belonging. Especially during concerts, the community and family aspect becomes apparent. Participant D stated: "With the BTS concert it's like you feel like you belong in this giant group of people, it's like you're going with family and everybody's talking and it's such a different vibe from all the other concerts I've been to". This sense of belonging is increased by the fact that the fandom often organizes projects in support of BTS or to help with world problems. Participant A recalled how this made her feel a sense of camaraderie. Participant F shared a story detailing how she became friends with people from different backgrounds through BTS: "Yeah and what's cool too is here you are, you're in the Netherlands, I'm in America, they're in Korea and you can meet people from around the world and have something

in common with them and that's amazing, for example with my Korean friend who lives here, her and I have gotten really close this year and it's amazing because she's coming from Korea and she's Korean and I am like very American and we found so many things in common and I think that's so cool that you can get that close to someone, who came from half way around the world that you didn't know existed a year ago and you can be best friends". As is apparent from this statement, the community aspect is not limited to the feeling of belonging to a global family, but also translates to making friends in real life through the shared interest of BTS. Participant E shared a similar sentiment: "The fact that I've made friends in person, just goes to show how strong ARMY bond is, like how we all connected just through a group of boys. I've never had this with any other artist or celebrity at all". However, it is important to mention that two of the participants did not view the effect of the community on their lives as significant, with one of them describing BTS as a "me-time thing".

3.4. Hopeful and positive messages

Another topic that was mentioned often during the interviews is that of hopeful and positive messages that BTS send out to their fans. Fans describe this as a source of comfort and inspiration. These messages usually touch upon topics such as self-love, expressing yourself and mental health struggles and can be found throughout the music, speeches, interviews and social media livestreams. Participant C touched upon this topic: "I felt like there was just a lot of things where I was like, I just needed some positivity in my life and I felt like something was kind of lacking and I was like I need to go somewhere to get some uplifting messages and positivity". Participant G explained how she felt touched by the message that it's okay not to have a dream: "Even like having a dream, they're like "oh you don't have to have a dream and follow it, it's fine just existing and it's okay" and I think that's truly amazing and it's kind of a message that is amazing, because I don't think a lot of people thought about it, it's kind of like

follow your dreams. it's like hang out, enjoy the simple things and that's fine. I think specifically in Korea it's so competitive, so I think that's what he was thinking about but it translates all over the world right". Many more examples similar to these were given throughout the interviews, with fans emphasizing the impact of these positive messages, of which many are related to the subject of authenticity and being yourself, with BTS supporting the idea that you do not have to fit society's standards.

3.5. Resonating with music

This topic covers the effect that BTS's music has on their fans. As mentioned earlier, many of the songs offer positive and bubbly vibes, but that does not apply to all songs. Fans described how they relate to songs with a darker theme, covering topics such as mental health and societal issues. This versatility makes it so that there are songs available for every possible mood or situation, as described by participant C: "I feel like they have a song for almost every type of situation that I'm in, it's like if I'm sad or need to be comforted, maybe I'll listen to Serendipity or Epiphany and if I need to like go on a run and be pumped up I'll listen to Anpanman or Fire or something like that". The main point of this topic however, is the idea that whether or not a song is happy or sad, fans seem to relate to the lyrics and music. This was often mentioned throughout the interviews, with several fans explaining how certain BTS songs were able to voice certain emotions that they had been feeling. A clear example of this can be found in the interview with participant F, who described how she uses BTS songs as an outlet for her own emotions: "I think so, getting through all of the levels of all the things you feel after an accident, my anger, sadness, you know grief and all these things. they were a part of it, getting through everything that I was feeling and what I couldn't physically, I was really mad I couldn't physically do things and it helped to have an outlet to listen to, and sometimes I let them do the yelling for me. I let them do the physical movement for me, I let them do the shouting out when

I'm not able to do something, I let them do it for me, and I was like yeah I mean that, that's what I mean right there". Participant G shared a similar story on how she related to a certain song after going through a breakup: "I was like starting to be okay, not quite ready to be in another relationship, but there was one song that stood out to me, which was Let Me Know for some reason and then when I read it and I saw Yoongi's part, usually Yoongi's verses are what gets to me the most cause he's so passionate about how he writes about a relationship, so that part was like oh, shit, that is exactly what I was feeling like at the time, I didn't even know that there was this beautiful way of saying it, that's what moved me, because I felt this before, but I didn't know that there were words".

3.6. BTS as real people

In addition to the impact of the music, participants described how the BTS members seem like regular people, which helps relate to them on a deeper level. According to the fans, BTS show honesty and transparency and do not hesitate to talk about their real life struggles. An example of this idea was given by participant B: "The way they express themselves, you can relate to their stories, because it's real what they are talking about, every time you can feel the emotions". Participant C further explained this by detailing how she views BTS as real people: "I feel like a lot of popular music is more focused on love songs or romance or maybe like lighter topics, where BTS wasn't afraid to say like no, there's a problem in our school or there's a problem in our mental health and they're not afraid to show that they're real people or be on camera without makeup on, or share at the end of a concert something that they've really, truly been thinking about. so yeah, I feel like you're just able to see them as real people". The main scope of the statements regarding this topic is the idea that it helps to have someone to look up to who appears genuine and relatable, with several other participants praising the way BTS do "normal people stuff".

3.7. Feeling connected

The last theme that was extracted from the interviews is that of connection. Many of the participants reported feeling like BTS is part of their life, as a constant factor they can always rely on for comfort. This was explained by participant B: “I’m always surrounded by them let’s say in a way. In a positive way of course because I feel like it always makes me happy so their music is really healing”. Another example was given by participant C: “I think also just in the long run over these three years having them kind of there constantly, I love having that as part of my life”. Participant E similarly expressed this view by stating that BTS feel like her friends, with participant F describing herself as a “proud auntie” who cares about the well-being of the BTS members, even if they don’t know her personally. These statements make it clear that numerous fans feel connected to BTS.

3.8. Summary

Naturally, BTS influences their fans in different ways and not all fans share the same views regarding the impact BTS has on their lives, but nonetheless, many similarities were found throughout the interviews, with many recurring themes that fans view as influential. The participants described the impact that the community of fans has on their lives, through offering possibilities to meet new people from different backgrounds and feeling connected to others through a shared love for BTS. Besides the community aspect, the participants talked in detail about their appreciation for the BTS members as people and the inspiration they provide as role models, while remaining relatable and genuine in their motivation. Additionally, participants praised the happy content BTS offers and how this can serve as a source of comfort during difficult times, as well as the content that is darker and more emotional, which resonates with participants and helps them process their own emotions. Taking all these themes into

account, it is a logical consequence that fans feel a strong connection to BTS and find comfort through having BTS as a constant factor in their lives.

4. Discussion

By using a qualitative approach, this study attempted to answer the following research question: how does BTS affect the mental health and well-being of their fans? Seven participants were recruited through the social media platform Reddit and invited to take part in an online interview to discuss their relation to BTS and their experiences in the fandom. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed by using Colaizzi's seven step method of phenomenological analysis, through which seven themes were identified that help explain the effect that BTS has on their fans and the different factors that play a role in this phenomenon.

In this discussion, several strengths of the study will be explained, as well as the relevance to psychological research and the clinical field. Additionally, the inevitable limitations that this study entails, will also be discussed, after which several suggestions for future research will be provided.

4.1. Strengths

A first strength is that this research provides rich descriptions through its use of qualitative methods, which allows for participants to fully express their thoughts and feelings regarding a certain topic. This is important, considering the fact that this research deals with complex topics such as mental health. First person accounts are vital in understanding these topics and discovering what is important to participants and how they experience BTS and the fandom in relation to their own well-being.

In addition, this study covers a topic that has not been studied often. There are multiple studies unveiling the factors that cause BTS or K-pop in general to be successful, but the relation between BTS and mental health is usually not included, or only briefly. The relation between mental health and fandom in general is studied more often, but these studies do not cover the

positive effects that a certain fandom can have on someone's mental health or well-being. Instead, most studies focus on finding a correlation between mental health issues and being part of a fandom, thus shedding a slightly more negative light on fans and fandom.

This research project aims to study the BTS fandom in a different light than is usually done and give the fans an opportunity to be heard and taken seriously. Throughout the process, the researcher tried to remain as neutral as possible and stick to the answers the participants gave, without making assumptions or reading between the lines. As all participants are big fans of BTS, they had mostly positive things to say and were clearly enthusiastic to share their appreciation for BTS. One could argue, however, that BTS is most likely not as genuine in their motivation as their fans make them out to be, considering the fact that they are run by a billion dollar company and contribute heavily to the Korean economy. Smart marketing could be viewed as the main reason for BTS's appeal to the fandom, but in the case of this study, that discussion is not relevant to the research question, as this study covers the impact that BTS has on their fans and the lived experiences in relation to mental health and well-being, not the intentions that drive BTS and their company HYBE.

It is unfortunate that this effect on mental health within the BTS fandom has not been studied often in the research community, as this could provide useful information to better understand the ways in which people seek comfort when going through struggles, thus improving existing knowledge on coping mechanisms. Moreover, it could be useful in determining what aspects and themes are helpful in making people feel better and improving their general well-being, which is relevant to not only the clinical field but also the overall population, as BTS is a great source of comfort for millions of people around the world, which deserves and needs to be taken seriously within the research community. The fact that the recruitment post for this study was met with great enthusiasm by fans shows that fans want to be heard and want to share their thoughts and stories about BTS. Many of the participants expressed their frustration with the

way BTS is portrayed by western media and were thankful for the opportunity to talk about what BTS means to them and the impact BTS has on their daily lives. With the fandom growing bigger every year, it is crucial to give these fans a voice and take their experiences into account.

4.2. Limitations

Naturally, several limitations to this study can also be identified. Firstly, the sample size is rather limited due to a lack of time and resources, seeing as this study is a master's thesis. Ideally, the sample size would be larger to increase the reliability of the results. However, in this case, it was helpful to have a smaller group of participants in order for the researcher to be able to give detailed attention to all of them and be flexible with expanding the duration of the interviews.

Besides the sample size, the age restriction can also be seen as a limitation, considering the fact that participants under the age of eighteen were not allowed to participate. In some ways this might be a strength, seeing as BTS is often viewed as entertainment for teenagers by the general public, when there are many fans that are in the adult age range. However, it would be helpful to include teenagers in these kinds of studies as well, as they remain one of the most prominent age categories within the BTS fandom. It could be valuable to compare the differences between age categories in the way in which BTS affects mental health and well-being.

In addition to age, the fact that most participants came from western countries can also be viewed as a limitation, as there are large fan communities in Asian countries that are not represented in this study. It would be useful to include fans from these countries and make comparisons with Western countries. Moreover, over half of the participants in this study are American, even though participants were randomly selected without knowing their nationality. This can be explained by the fact that Reddit is a social media platform with a large number of American users, which means that the large American representation among the participants

could likely have been avoided by using different platforms to recruit participants, but that was deemed to be too difficult due to the small sample size. The use of social media platforms to recruit participants also means that participants have to respond voluntarily to the post, meaning that the sample might be composed of people that are more outspoken and talkative compared to the average BTS fan, which could influence the results. However, this is rather difficult to change, as most studies rely on participants to respond themselves.

On top of the limitations related to the sample of participants, it is inevitable that some subjectivity was present throughout the research process. Firstly through the questions that were asked during the interviews. These may have been slightly suggestive at times which could have influenced the answers of the participants or pushed them in a certain direction. For example the question about the impact of the community, which is not entirely neutral and could provoke participants to pay more attention to this topic during the interview than they would normally have done. However, some participants brought this topic up before the question was asked and two others did not hesitate to say that they did not feel the effect of the community. Besides this, questions may have been interpreted differently than how they were intended, which could have slightly skewed the results. In addition to the interview questions, biases most likely played a role in the way the interviews were analyzed. During the process of formulating general meanings from actual statements, the researcher may have been reading between the lines and formulating meanings in correlation with the hypotheses. The same consideration can be made for the process of categorizing the meanings into themes, as expectations and hypotheses could play a role in identifying the different themes. During both of these tasks, the researcher paid careful attention to bracket and put aside thoughts and expectations regarding the subject, but it is inevitable that a slight bias was involved during this process.

4.3. Suggestions for future research

With the strengths and limitations of this study in mind, suggestions for future research can be made. Firstly, it would be useful to widen the sample of participants, with the inclusion of people under the age of twenty and people from non-western (mainly Asian) countries, as they were not represented within this study. With a larger sample size, more attention could be given to the demographical characteristics of the participants in order to accurately represent the BTS fandom.

Furthermore, future studies could focus on what the effect of BTS on the mental health of their fans means for the clinical field. Is there any way for knowledge regarding this topic to be useful in order to improve mental health problems in general? Keeping in mind that millions of people around the world see BTS as a source of comfort and happiness, it is worth looking into the clinical use of these results. Is there any way that aspects that play a role in this effect can be incorporated into mental health treatment? This may seem farfetched at first, but considering the fact that several fans describe their experience as BTS fans as ‘therapy’, it could prove to be quite useful, especially on the topic of coping mechanisms.

Lastly, from a pop culture or marketing perspective, it would be interesting to shift the focus from the experiences of the fans to the strategies implemented by BTS and their company HYBE in order to create this effect. The fact that BTS has such an impact on the mental health of its fans, contributes greatly to their success and distinguishes them from other artists and other K-pop groups, which is why it could be useful to determine how they accomplish this and what other artists might be “lacking” in this aspect.

4.4. Summary

This study aimed to cover the experiences of BTS fans as part of the fandom in relation to their mental health and general well-being. With an ever-growing dedicated fanbase that often cites BTS as the reason for their happiness, we consider exploring the relation between BTS fandom and mental health a valuable research question to better understand why this fandom is positively associated with mental health. This study has made it clear that these people want to be heard and want to share their views on an aspect of their lives that matters to them, but is not always taken seriously by outsiders. By highlighting the experiences of the fans in an individual manner, this study hopes to demonstrate the relevancy of BTS and its fandom in the lives of fans and create a better understanding of the mechanisms that play a role in this aspect. From the outside, it may appear as though BTS fans are hysterical teenage girls that are dangerously obsessed with their idols, but this is for the most part a misconception that comes with having a huge and enthusiastic fanbase where the loudest fans are the most noticeable. The fans represented in this study described how they made genuine connections through BTS and were able to use BTS as role models in order to improve and discover themselves as opposed to blindly following BTS's examples. The fans expressed how they felt a disconnect between the representation of BTS in the Western media and their own experiences as part of the fandom, which made them appreciative of the opportunity to discuss BTS in a more serious light and share their love for BTS without being stereotyped as crazed fangirls. Hopefully, this study was able to both accurately represent BTS fans and provide useful knowledge with regard to fandom and mental health.

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