"BTS Is an Experience, Sensory and Imagined"

Theorizing as a Playful Knowledge Practice of BTS' Fandom, ARMY

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Master's Thesis

Degree Programme in Media Studies, Musicology and Art History

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April 2024

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Pages: 97, 12 (appendices)

In this thesis, I examine the knowledge practices of the South Korean pop group BTS' fandom, ARMY. Fans often refer to themselves as theorists of BTS' content, as interpreting the group's content requires fans to assume the mindset and approach of a theorist. Thus, in this master's thesis, I focus specifically on the fan practice of theorizing. Especially during new BTS content releases, fans move within a flow of interdisciplinary meanings and absorb knowledge from a variety of fields as they seek to interpret BTS' intertextual content. My aim is to understand how theorizing – both as a practice and a discourse – creates meaning and allows fans to embrace different subject positions. Furthermore, I seek to illuminate the experientiality of theorizing both on the level of the individual fan and the broader fan community.

My research questions are as follows: How do fans understand their own agency and role as the interpreters of BTS' intertextual content? How are the fan subjectivities and self-understandings constructed in the theorist discourses? Moreover, I ask what kind of experiences theorizing offers to fans. What does it feel like, and what kind of subject positions and ways of being in the world emerge through theorizing?

I collected the data for this thesis through a qualitative survey consisting of open-ended questions. In my analysis, I employ a hermeneutic-phenomenological research framework, which has not previously been used in the context of ARMY's theorizing and knowledge practices. Since hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on experiences together with their meanings and interpretations, it allows me to not only examine the lived, embodied experiences of fans but also explore how fans narrativize their experiences. In order to highlight the discursive ways in which fans give meaning to their fan experiences, I also use narrative analysis. Furthermore, thematic analysis allows me to identify the themes that emerge from the data.

Theorizing manifests as a playful inquisitive attitude, mood, and way of being in the world. It creates a "culture of discovery" around BTS' narrative content, as fans take part in intertextual puzzle-solving. Fans playfully navigate the network of recurring symbols, themes, intertextual references, and other units that show up in the group's content. However, my analysis shows that theorizing also creates transcultural online affinity spaces. James Paul Gee's concept of online affinity spaces enables me to imagine ARMY as a fluid space that each fan can use in their own ways, for their own purposes and needs. Within these spaces, theorizing often takes the form of informal learning. Furthermore, fans use the fandom spaces to connect different knowledge spheres that exist in fans' lives. Thus, my research also sheds light on the ways in which fans of BTS bridge the gap between formal education and informal learning.

Keywords: fan studies, fandom, BTS, Bangtan Sonyeondan, playfulness, informal learning, intertextuality, phenomenology, fan culture, transculturality

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background on BTS, ARMY, and resonating stories

In early June of 2019, I found myself at London's Wembley Stadium amidst an enormous crowd of 60 thousand or so cheering fans of the South Korean pop-group, BTS. The entire stadium was lit by purple light sticks that swayed—gently, and at times, more vigorously as the group performed energetic songs—in rhythm with the songs. "Forever we are young," the lyrics from BTS' song "Epilogue: Young Forever" (2016), echoed around the stadium as the audience surprised the music group with a heartfelt, fan-performed version of the song. This, I find, is an important starting point, as it helps to visualize what fandoms are often all about. They are about passion, emotions, and celebration. Fandoms allow people to take part in meaningful fan practices, to imagine different realities, and form important relationships. Even though I focus on the knowledge and meaning-making practices of fans of BTS, I find that it is vital not to lose sight of what often makes fans, fans: the affects and emotions attached to the fan objects.

Aside from passionate fans who go to BTS' concerts, an entire culture with its own fan practices has formed around BTS, or Bangtan Sonyeondan,[1] who debuted in June 2013 and have since become a global phenomenon. BTS sold out two shows at Wembley in 2019 and were, furthermore, the first Korean group to play at the stadium. Although fans interact and engage with BTS' content in various ways and form different fan attachments, I focus on one specific fan practice—*theorizing*. Fans of BTS often refer to themselves as theorists of BTS' content. As an activity or practice, theorizing is usually associated with academia. Richard Swedberg (2014, 1) describes theorizing as a process which leads to theories. In this sense, as Swedberg (ibid.) notes, theorizing is the thought process before one is ready to consider any given theory final. However, fans, too, analytically "play" with different media content. They make connections, theorize, and often discuss their theories with other fans. Theorizing has been a fan practice of numerous fandoms before BTS' fandom, ARMY, which stands for Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth. After all, today's fandom spaces, which are permeated by digital intertextual flows of meaning, often require fans to become apt cartographers or navigators of the surrounding audiovisual media landscape. It could be

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[1] Bangtan Sonyeondan is the group's Korean name. It is often translated as "Bulletproof Boy Scouts." However, in English, the septet is usually referred to simply as "BTS" or "Bangtan (Boys)."

argued that all cultural meaning-making is inherently intertextual. Thus, a fandom that theorizes and seeks to uncover the meanings carried by content is hardly a revolutionary concept. However, as Henry Jenkins (2018, 16) notes, every media consumer makes idiosyncratic meanings and associations as they navigate media, but it is when those meanings are shared by a larger group that meaning-making processes transform into something culturally significant.

Indeed, cultural activity is often spurred by stories and narratives that touch people, activate people, and generate passionate discussion around specific phenomena. That is how the seven member Korean pop group BTS' legacy first began; with stories that resonated with people, narratives that called for social change, and content that moved people and bloomed into thousands—later millions—of fans around the globe. The BTS members known as RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin, V, and Jungkook exist at the very center of this cultural phenomenon that has evolved into an immense web of diverse agencies, creative knowledge practices, and fans' affective histories and stories.

Throughout BTS' career, the septet and their management company, Big Hit Music (previously known as Big Hit Entertainment), have actively engaged with fans through various social media channels. However, aside from creating music and performances that have cultivated an enormous fanbase, the key aspect of BTS' content has always been the intriguing and engaging storytelling, which often relies on intertextuality and transmedia storytelling.[2] In fact, BTS' fictional and transmedial storyworld, "BU"—which is thought to be an abbreviation of "Bangtan Universe"—spans across music videos, short films, webtoons (digital comics), art toys, content teasers, books, and a television drama series. In this master's thesis, I will not, however, focus on the different storytelling platforms that BTS uses to construct their intertextual or transmedial narratives. Instead, I will focus on the fans who actively seek to navigate and uncover the meanings sprinkled around the grand Atlas of BTS' immense content. What, then, does theorizing mean in the context of ARMY, and what makes the knowledge gained through examining theorizing as a fan practice valuable?

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[2] By transmedia storytelling I am referring to narratives or stories that unfold on different platforms or across several different media. Henry Jenkins (2006a) first introduced and defined the notion of transmedia storytelling in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. As Jenkins (ibid., 98) explains: "In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction."

1.2   Research questions and a few words on theorizing

In this master's thesis, I examine the playful practices and the knowledge practices that take shape within the South Korean pop-group BTS' fandom, ARMY. My research questions are as follows: 1) How do fans understand their own agency and role as the interpreters of BTS' intertextual content? 2) How are the fan subjectivities and self-understandings constructed in the theorist discourses? 3) What kind of experiences does theorizing offer to ARMYs? As in, what does it feel like, and what kind of subject positions and ways of being in the world emerge through theorizing? My aim is to explore specifically the phenomenology and experientiality of theorizing. I will return to phenomenology and map its uses and benefits later, but by phenomenology I am referring to the philosophical study of experiences as they are lived and felt by individuals. Theorizing—as a fan practice and a discourse through which fans sometimes refer to themselves as theorists—will be defined and discussed by fans themselves in the survey responses collected as data for this thesis. It is, however, necessary to offer a brief description of the concept of theorizing within BTS' fandom. Furthermore, I will discuss what has motivated this research, what can be gained from it, and why it is, in this precise moment in time, important to study the activities and fan subjectivities constructed within ARMY's fandom spaces.

The fan practices of ARMY often—especially close to new content, such as song or album releases—take the form of theorizing. Fans move within a flow of interdisciplinary meanings and are often, along the way, absorbing knowledge from fields such as literature, psychology, mythology and philosophy as they seek to interpret the content put out by BTS. Some research on BTS' fictional transmedial story world already exists; thus, my aim is not to construct a general map of Bangtan Universe or define its borders and dimensions. Instead, I want to explore the ways in which fans position themselves within the theorist discourses. Furthermore, this thesis examines how fans' self-understanding intertwines with the experientiality and agency evoked by BTS' content, as the content often requires ARMY members to delve deep into the crevasses of intertextual and interdisciplinary meaning-making. In the survey responses collected as data for this thesis, many fans emphasize that interpreting BTS' content often requires fans to assume the mindset and approach of a theorist, as the intertextual references are multidisciplinary and require a deeper understanding of different fields. There are, for instance, several social media accounts, websites, Google Docs and resources that can aid fans in the process of theorizing. Theorizing

is thus often seen as a valuable skill within the fandom, as it can deepen the immersion and function as tool for meaning-making, knowledge-gathering, and self-improvement.

Although it is easy to sometimes fall into the trap of presenting a fandom as a collective or a community with entirely converging interests, all fans who identify as ARMY members naturally do not take part in theorizing. However, this research was inspired by the frequently emerging theorizing discourses, where fans call themselves—sometimes more playfully, as I will explore, and other times less so—theorists of BTS' content. Thus, talking about theorizing and the subject positions it offers has become a kind of metadiscourse[3] of the fandom: fans are not only talking about the BTS content they are engaging with, but are, in addition, also talking about the *tools* and *ways* in which they are engaging with the content. Here, fans do not view the activity of theorizing as simply a transparent, meaningless, and automatic tool for interpreting the content put out by BTS. Instead, fans often assume a self-reflective mode towards the contents they interact with. Thus, the tactics, assumed positions and agencies that are used in theorizing are often made visible and their experientiality is discussed and negotiated. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is not only to examine the theorist discourses, practices, and agencies of ARMY. I also aim to shed light on a wider and more manifold way of being in the fandom, where the fandom appears virtually unprecedented in its desire and capacity to continuously look for intertextual references and create connections as BTS keeps building up and on the other hand fulfilling fans' desire for the engaging intertextual storytelling to continue.

Fan studies scholarship that has sought to map the boundaries and define the value of fan productivity has mainly focused on fan fiction, fan art, and other forms of fan productivity that have been understood as "transformative" and generative of meaning. Thus, a discernible notion within fan studies has been one that understands traditional textual fan productions, such as fan fiction, as meaningful fannish production. However, as today's fandoms are fundamentally permeated by the digital transmedia environments, there is an increasing need for research to consider the diversity of fan production beyond its traditionally meaningful fannish dimensions. As Henry Jenkins (2018, 13) asserts, the prioritizing of specific production behaviors has overlooked the ways that active fan practices—such as curating and discussing media content—create meaning. Indeed, a common discourse concerning the

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[3] In this context, metadiscourse refers to discourse about discourse, or discussion about discussion (see, for example, Mauranen 2023)

connection between text and narrativity has been discernible within fan studies research: a focus on narrativity, linearity, and a plot as the proper features of text that is deemed worthy of theoretical consideration. Such a focus on plot and its specificities easily disregards other valuable elements of productivity and meaning-making. Fans' theorizing fills the nooks of the digital media and BTS' content. Theorizing takes the form of online discussion; it coexists alongside official contents created by BTS and Big Hit Music. Texts, in their classical sense, do not get to keep their fixed, neat, and plot-oriented status as texts are mediated and absorbed into the meaning-making machinery of active fandoms. Indeed, it is important to observe and examine theorizing as a fan practice in the specific moment of time that it inhabits. Otherwise research risks losing a large part of a fandom's practices and history—a culture with its own practices, meaning-making approaches, and ways of being in the world that could possibly serve as important material for future fan studies research.

However, ARMYs' theorizing is not only impacted by its time-sensitiveness. Moreover, the digital fandom space itself is also in a constant state of flux as fandom interests and focuses shift. There are moments in time when the fandom theorizes more and, at other times, theorizing may be a less visible activity of fans. Milena Popova (2020, 3.6) provides a useful notion: both fans and fandom spaces constantly change as fan accounts and platforms become inactive and new fandom interests emerge. It is thus helpful to embrace a methodological approach that views research as a journey rather than viewing the subject of research as a kind of motionless monument that is firmly stuck in a specific time and space (see ibid.). This thesis—with its several different phases and developmental stages—also encompasses a journey inhabited by different agencies, shifting perspectives, changing fandom interests, and experientialities.

1.3   Narrowing the scope: transmedia and aesthetics

The transmedial dimension of BTS' content is a key aspect in the construction of BTS' narratives, where meanings, images and symbols freely travel from media to another, beckoning fans to navigate the intertextual web of content. BTS' transmedia storytelling and the construction of a transmedial universe would certainly be an intriguing object of study. However, research that seeks to explore the transmedial experience of narratives and storyworlds would naturally have to describe the construction of both the technical and thematic aspects of the transmedia content. This would render the scope of my master's thesis too immense. Thus, I narrowed down the scope of this study in order to focus specifically on

the experiential aspects of BTS' intertextual storytelling. Such knowledge can only be gained through the stories of ARMYs themselves, as the theorist discourses are tied to a myriad of experiences, emotions, and subject positions.

Another important point to be made about narrowing the focus of this thesis is one pertaining to aesthetics. There is no denying that Korean popular music, which I will hereinafter refer to as *K-pop*, is fundamentally saturated by aesthetics, and the engaging multi-sensory experience is often emphasized by the visual impressiveness of the content. In BTS' content, too, there is a significant emphasis on the visual and stylistic aspects, and perhaps it could be argued that the visual spectacle of K-pop is precisely what gives it its specific aura of grandeur and immersiveness. Music videos, performances, and other visual media by BTS often construct a visual spectacle that supports the stories and narratives of the music and other content put out by the group. In the opulent "Blood Sweat & Tears" (2016) music video, the sense of visual grandeur and spectacle is achieved through impressive interiors with their monumental marble statues, the visual symbolism of abundance, and various lavish classical paintings in gilt frames. The group members themselves are garbed in satin, velvet, and embellished fabrics, and the music video makes use of radiant, atmospheric colors. The aesthetic experience is furthermore enhanced by technical choices, such as the camera work, cinematic scenes, and the variation of slow-motion and faster cuts; and, of course, the dynamic dance choreography, which often plays a central part in most K-pop content. As the aesthetic dimensions of BTS inevitably play a part in experiencing the group's content, leaving aesthetics out of the scope of research can be seen as a conscious choice.

According to Matt Hills (2017), aesthetics have been profoundly ignored in the academic study of popular culture in an attempt to distance "rational" scholarship from "naïve" and ordinary media consumerism. Hills (ibid., 62–63) explains that through this dismissal, scholars and scholarship have sought to uphold a specific standard of "imagined subjectivity," which manifests as "critical rationality, objectivity, and neutrality"; in other words, it is often clearly distanced from "the identity of the 'naïve' media consumer who proclaims his or her pop-cultural tastes." I will discuss the assumed positions and identities of scholars researching fans and fandoms later in the methodology section, as it is undoubtedly an important conversation that is also directly linked to research ethics. In emphasizing the meanings interpreted, constructed, and distributed by BTS' fandom, my thesis could, perhaps, be viewed as merely another attempt to distance media and cultural scholarship from the "frivolous" arena of aesthetic-ridden and passion-driven popular culture. However, aesthetics

are undoubtedly a vital component in experiencing BTS, as the aesthetics of BTS' content evoke—often, by fans' accounts, profound—affects and emotions. Aesthetics are discussed in fans' accounts on theorizing and do therefore also play a part in this thesis. Thus, it is neither desirable or possible to entirely isolate meaning-making and fans' theorizing strategies from the aesthetic dimension of BTS' experientiality.

1.4   Intertextuality—singular interpretations or playful multitudes?

> BTS's intertextuality will unveil itself in time to people who regularly consume
> BTS content—like the slow growth of a tree of blooming of a flower.
>
> (Sam, United States)

Intertextuality plays a central part in this thesis, as my aim is to examine the experientiality that emerges when fans interact with BTS' intertextual content. In the context of this thesis, intertextuality—broadly defined as the interrelations between different media texts—is understood as a playful form or feature of the storytelling in BTS' content. Although I will return to this notion later when I discuss the accounts of fans themselves, it is already worth noting that intertextuality constructs an inescapably playful layer that grasps storytelling further away from the sometimes rigid confines of linear narrativity and towards text that instead allows fans to engage in practices that are immersive, interactive, and playful. Before discussing how media fans in general have utilized intertextuality in their fannish textual production, and before providing an overview of how intertextuality within BTS' content is constructed, a brief definition of intertextuality itself is needed.

Philosopher Julia Kristeva coined the term *intertextualité* in the late sixties. Kristeva's first use of the term "intertextuality" can be traced back to 1966, when Kristeva gave a presentation in which she discussed literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel (Lesic-Thomas 2005). In her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1986[1969]), Kristeva (ibid., 37) writes that "the notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double." Here, Kristeva is referring to the notion that texts and their meanings, as such, are not simply neutrally transmitted from text to the reader. Instead, the reading process is impacted by all the different texts and networks of meaning that we have previously come into contact with. Indeed, Kristeva discusses the semiotic[4]

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[4] Semiotics refer to the study of how meanings are created through specific signs and other non-verbal means of communication (see, for example, Lorenz 2016).

phenomenon in which every word or cultural presentation that we encounter is associated with endless other texts, and thus reading itself becomes intertextual in nature (Elkad-Lehman & Greensfeld 2011, 261). Kristeva understands intertextuality as an all-encompassing cultural phenomenon led by a hermeneutic (as in, pertaining to the theory of interpretation) process in which "the reader's personal experience, knowledge, world, ideological and political practices are all texts creating a network" (ibid.). Following Kristeva's notion, text—whether it is understood abstractly as a cultural presentation or more concretely as written—is always an entity left open for new interpretations and connections to other texts.

In the same vein, Roland Barthes (1977) describes text as a "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (ibid., 146). Hence, it is made of multiple writings, and the reader is where the "multiplicity is focused" (ibid., 148). Intertextuality thus connects texts from the past to contemporary texts, and as texts are interpreted again and again within the massive intertextual mill of meanings, new readers bring in various new intertexts that further animate the text and expand its network of possible interpretations and relations to other texts. Within the immense intertextual web of meaning making, the reader is the main agent. Thus, intertextuality is often utilized as a component in fictional world building within movie franchises, book series, games, and other media content that thrives because of its active, interpretive fandom.

Whether intertextuality is viewed as something that has seeped into the wider cultural sphere of meaning-making (as Kristeva suggest), or as something that exists within the artistic mediums—whether written, oral, performed or painted—intertextual production is one of the key features of fan production. As Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse (2009, 200) note, media fans simultaneously exist within a variety of cultural contexts: all texts and fan creations and their reception are thus filtered through a multitude of contextual frameworks. This is particularly important to note in the context of BTS' fandom spaces, which are permeated by transcultural meaning-making. Intertextuality constructs another engaging entryway for participation and a layer for fans to grasp onto and respond to, whether the goal is to fill gaps, complete the narrative, or simply take part in creative—often communal—play, which I will explore in my thesis. Although engaging with intertextual content can remain a wholly individualistic process, intertextuality especially thrives within digital fan communities where interpretive strategies are negotiated and shared among fans who utilize—as Jenkins would call it—their "collective intelligence" and thus expand the community's productive capacity (Jenkins 2006b, 139). The collective readings of interpretive communities are, as Stein and

Busse (ibid., 198) assert, never static but instead function as intertexts that exist in constant motion.

The discussion surrounding collective interpretive strategies and fan communities built around shared readings, however, raises questions such as: if specific collective intertextual interpretations form, and if content is embellished with intertextual references left to be found, can all readers be expected to arrive at similar—or the "right"—interpretations? Are there any constraints in place for interpreting strategies, and how are these constraints negotiated within fandoms? Although I briefly mentioned Stein's and Busse's conceptualization of interpretive communities, the idea of interpretive communities was, within literary theory, conceptualized by Stanley Fish (1980), who simply proposed that interpretive communities form around shared interpretations of texts. The community of similarly contextualized readers acts as the prime filter for reading, and the community's strategies for interpretation that exist prior to reading determine what is read (Fish 1980, 171). However, interpretation is filtered through a myriad of knowledges, identities, and contexts and, thus, as Gray (2010, 33) points out, Fish's tempting theory might be an over-statement, although his theory may serve as a starting point for the study of communities comprised of similarly contextualized individuals. While it may be completely unrealistic to expect intertextuality to weave its magic onto the interpretive structures of fan communities and thus guarantee similar readings, there might certainly be strategies that guide and steer interpretation—certain contexts that work as constraints or "maps" in fans' interpretation processes.

Here it is useful to recall Fish's understanding of *context* as the guiding force in the construction of textual interpretations. In theory it is, according to Fish, possible for readers to derive a myriad of meanings out of any specific text, but in practice the contextual circumstances predetermined by communities limit the possible interpretations (Fish 1980, 268, 274). Whether interpretations are guided by context or by pre-determined strategies, fans' increasing ability to construct such textual boundaries, is, in the opinion of Cornel Sandvoss, closely linked to a wider phenomenon where the sheer abundance of readings results in the loss of inherent meaning of texts (2005b, 828). The meanings fans derive from texts, fans' interpretation strategies, and the utilization of intertextuality will be discussed in later chapters. It is already worth noting that, although the interpretive strategies of fans might result in the filling of narrative gaps, many of fans' encounters with intertextuality are more playful and thus wholly unconcerned with notions of original intent or authorship. As Stein and Busse (2009, 205) aptly note, the "creative energies of media fans showcase artistic

prototypes that emphasize intertextuality, community, and a creativity that is not invested primarily in notions of originality."

The storytelling core of BTS' multimedia content heavily relies on intertextuality, and the intertextual resonance that ARMYs have come to expect in all BTS content encourages fans to participate in theorizing. In *BTS, Art Revolution: BTS Meets Deleuze*, Dr. Jiyoung Lee (2019) provides a seminal account of BTS' fictional open structure universe as a massive, non-linear network that is constructed through the means of cross-referentiality. Lee examines the cross-referential relationship between BTS' videos and furthermore notes that fans, too, as interpreters and remixers, are part of the immense "rhizome" that constantly, organically and non-hierarchically expands. The rhizomatic structure and philosophy that Lee connects to BTS was first conceptualized by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987[1980]) in their collaborative postmodernist book *A Thousand Plateaus*. In their work, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the multiplicity or free flow of interpretations, which in turn is closely tied to the thought of nomadism as a state of being and thinking that is characterized by constant movement and change. Although Lee mainly uses the concept of cross-referentiality instead of intertextuality, these two layers of storytelling are closely intertwined. As common symbols, themes and motifs circulate in BTS' videos, the spectators continuously construct new meanings and the open structure of BTS' universe expands (Lee 2019, 111–112). Within this network, BTS' content is thus embedded with recurring images, familiar symbols, easter eggs, and intertextual references that stimulate fans' desire to look for clues, make connections and utilize their collective knowledge. Thus, as the storytelling is richly sprinkled with a myriad of intertextual surfaces for fans to engage with, there are always new meandering paths to discover and experience.

2   Theoretical and methodological framework

2.1   Researching fandoms

Fan studies as a field owes its existence to cultural studies, but has since incorporated fields such as media studies, literary theory, communication studies, anthropology, psychology, film studies, and queer theory into its tradition. The field exists at the intersection of a multitude of different traditions and approaches; thus, the most fundamental aspect of fan studies has always been its interdisciplinary nature. Tisha Turk (2018, 540) describes interdisciplinarity as an approach where the ideas from different disciplines are harmoniously synthesized in order to construct a more comprehensive understanding that would be otherwise unreachable through a single discipline. Several different fields outside the realm of strictly media studies have contributed to this thesis. Some of these are philosophy, anthropology, sociology, education, and some fields of study which have for long been part of the tradition of media studies, such as narrative studies, discourse analysis, and theories of playfulness.

In their comprehensive fan studies opus, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (2007), Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington state that the field of fan studies has seen three different stages: first came the research on audience's responses to popular media, then the producer and consumer binary was problematized, and lastly, fan studies turned its focus on fandoms as something that is "part of the fabric of our everyday lives" (ibid., 9). Early fan studies were influenced by media scholar John Fiske's "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" (1992), in which Fiske explores the different forms of fan culture productivity. Semiotic productivity refers to the "internal" meaning making processes; it explains how social identities and meanings intertwine as fans navigate popular culture. Enunciative productivity, in turn, refers to shared and spoken meanings, the "fan talk," or shared clothing styles/aesthetics that help to assert one's membership in the fan community. The last category, textual productivity, encompasses the texts that fans write based on their fandom objects. Fan fiction remains the most obvious embodiment of fans' textual productivity. However, texts have since spilled through the boundaries first imposed by literary theory, and in digital media fandoms, the modes of textual production adopt fluid features that blur the boundaries of textual production. Since Fiske's conceptualizations, fan studies has utilized Pierre Lévy's (1997) concept of collective intelligence (Jenkins 2006a), viewed fandoms through the lens of Stanley Fish's (1980) interpretive communities, and

conceptualized fandoms as imagined communities (Spracklen et al. 2010), which is an idea originally developed by political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983).

Fandoms have also been theorized through the notion of participatory culture, where, instead of acting solely as consumers, fans appropriate, analyze and circulate content, acting as cultural meaning-makers who engage in diverse cultural and interpretive activities. This is the thesis of Henry Jenkins in his seminal work *Textual Poachers* (2013[1992]): instead of othering, pathologizing and to a degree antagonizing fans, *Textual Poachers* celebrates fandom as a site for collective and transformative meaning-making. Jenkins' research not only helped to develop fan studies into an academic field, but also represents a new approach, in which Jenkins, as a fan himself, studies fandom from the inside, adhering not only to the rules and ethics of academia but also those of the fandom itself. Instead of assuming an objective (if such a thing even existed in the first place), distant academic position, in which fans are the object of research and the researcher speaks on behalf of fans, Jenkins seeks to include fans as active collaborators in his research process (Jenkins 2013, 7). It is precisely the Brechtian notion of idolizing the distance to the text that Jenkins criticizes in *Textual Poachers*: In the Brechtian approach, it is the critical distance—instead of naive proximity, where the spectator is "drawn emotionally too close to the text"—that empowers and allows the spectator to resist its ideological dimensions (Jenkins 2013, 61). I will return to the notion of critical distance against closeness to the text in the next section, as the negotiation of the different positions assumed by researchers has played a critical part in the evolution of fan studies.

Since *Textual Poachers*, fan studies has embodied a myriad of approaches, and the move to online platforms and social media has naturally birthed new perspectives, conceptualizations, and challenges. Indeed, constant technological developments transform the ontologies of fandoms. Thus, it remains important for fan studies research to explore new approaches and ways to keep up with constant movement of digital fandoms. Furthermore, fan practices are no longer viewed as a form of niche but are instead seen as a generalized mode of relating to media content (Boccia Artieri 2012, 463) and, perhaps, even as a normal way of being in the world and navigating the contemporary digital culture. Neither are fans discussed simply through the lens of linear, rigid commercial interests, in which fans are rendered pawns for commercial ends or political gains (see Jenkins et al. 2013, 165).

Many scholars have called for a fan studies that, instead of focusing solely on the social network and community based features of the fan experience, also turn their gaze toward the

individual fan (see Sandvoss 2005a; Morrissey 2013; Collins 2017). Today's enormous digital fandoms, such as ARMY, can no longer be discussed solely through the concept of collectivity. There is not really any kind of "essence"—other than being fans of BTS—that binds the fandom together, as the lived realities of individuals make up a huge prism of differing experiences.

Indeed, some theorists and media scholars have challenged fan studies' tendency to emphasize the global, collective nature of fandoms. Such views often conceptualize fandoms as imagined communities, but they do not describe *how* exactly fandoms are imagined. Lori Morimoto and Bertha Chin (2017) call for media and fan studies research to be transparent about how fan communities are imagined, as they are, intrinsically, imagined communities. As Morimoto and Chin (ibid., 174) note, the idea of fandoms as imagined communities emphasizes the "transnational reach of the Internet in creating a sense of simultaneous, shared popular cultural experience." However, as Morimoto and Chin assert (ibid., 182, 187), the privileging of specific practices, experiences, and identities may often marginalize the fan experiences that do not fit the normative view of fandoms as imagined communities.

As Katherine E. Morrissey (2013, 1.4) aptly stated over a decade ago, fan studies needs to study fans and fandoms at the level of the individual, their collective practices and the networks fans create in order to comprehensively understand the roles of each within the constantly transforming environment. This thesis focuses on the individual fans' experiences and then zooms out to examine the practices and networks that take shape within the fandom. Given the above mentioned points, fan studies scholarship has, in the past, constantly re-evaluated its approaches and evolved with the challenges brought on by the ever-shifting media environment. Furthermore, within fan studies, there is an ongoing discussion on the ethics of studying fans and fandoms.

2.2 Sensibilities, reflexivities, and ethical considerations

Fans themselves exist at the very core of fan studies. Thus, within a tradition that is deeply tied to the identities, affects, as well as the personal meanings of the individuals it studies, special care always needs to be taken as to ensure that research remains ethical. How are fans represented in any given study, both as individuals and as a part of a wider fan community? How can fans' lived experiences be represented accurately and ethically, without causing any harm? Such questions make it very clear that we choose to study is inevitably always a conscious choice and simultaneously also a question of representation. Fan studies, like many

other fields, is not a monolith with its set of rules and agreements; instead, it is a diverse sphere inhabited by different approaches, representations, and ongoing conversations.

There are examples of academic research that has, in the past, undoubtedly stigmatized fans—especially in the earlier days of audience and fan studies, when fans were sometimes presented as deviants to be pathologized. Joli Jenson (1992) explores the consequences of the pathologization of fans and fandoms: According to Jenson, fans have, both by the media and research, been characterized as "obsessed loners," "frenzied crowd members," and deviants. There is also a possibility that research belittles or takes advantage of fans in different ways, resulting in fan communities feeling used by academic research (Musiani 2011, as cited in Deller 2018, 129). ARMYs have on some occasions expressed their distrust of academia and denounced the representations it has produced of the fans, as there have been cases of neglected research ethics within studies. Furthermore, content shared and comments written on social media platforms by members of ARMY have been used without consent and with little care towards the problems involved with using fans' personal social media posts and reactions. Some would perhaps argue that content posted on public spaces is free to use by research, but the reality is more nuanced and complex. As Deller (2018, 133) notes, the content shared by fans is intended for a specific audience; fans have likely not intended for the content to be analyzed and re-published by researchers who do not inform fans of the repurposing. To ensure that all data is collected in a manner that respects ARMYs wishes to stay private and furthermore allows fans to choose what they share, I chose a qualitative survey as the data collection method of this thesis.

How can academia ensure that research remains ethical and scholars stay transparent about their own aims and motivations? First of all, academia's "cult of objectivity" has long ago been overthrown, and it is—at least within media and fan studies—generally agreed upon that no research can truly be objective or neutral. Researchers bring their own identities, feelings, and agendas to their projects, and all of these distinctive aspects affect the research, its methodologies, and approaches (Deller 2018, 129). Researchers cannot truly isolate themselves from the knowledge they produce in order to uphold the imagined ideal of objectivity and neutrality, but they can, however, practice self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity refers to a mode or position of subjectivity in which the researcher is aware of—but also open about—their own position in relation to their research (ibid.). As a fan and a longtime member of ARMY, I find it very important to adopt a self-reflexive position that allows me to remain

aware of the identity markers that "shape both our own and our participants' relationships to fandom, to research, and to one another" (ibid.).

As Saukko (2003a, 62) citing Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) notes, self-reflexivity was used in the older forms of ethnography[5] as a means to undo the researcher's bias. It is thus by no means a new concept. However, self-reflexive modes of research have evolved significantly since the days of "simply" ethnography: critical autoethnography, for instance, can take the form of self-reflexive introspection where the scholar "interrogates how social discourses have defined her/his experience" (Saukko 2003b, 94). Furthermore, as Hills (2002, 51) notes, autoethnography could unsettle the use of theory as a disguise for personal attachments. Thus, "good autoethnography does not simply validate the self and its fandoms by twisting theory to fit the preferences of the self" (ibid.). Within the sphere of fan studies specifically, self-reflexivity could therefore mean that scholars stay aware of—and sometimes explicitly state—the views, experiences and agendas that guide and influence their research.

2.3   Research positionalities and "aca-fans"

Self-reflexivity within fan studies is often also tied to the concept of the scholar fan or, as it is often shortened, the aca-fan, which I already touched on earlier when I discussed Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*. As Deller (2018, 129) notes, the stigmatization of fans led to research where scholars—through assuming the subject position of an aca-fan—sought to problematize the notion of fans as a stigmatized other. Aca-fans are generally viewed as academics or scholars who, outside of their research, have a relationship to the fandom communities and their texts, and thus, the outsider/insider binary is complicated (Raw 2020, 2.2). Jenkins' approach towards fan studies has, throughout, been heavily interconnected with his own identity as a popular culture fan, and his writing is influenced by his own connection to the text. Thus, *Textual Poachers* (1992) is often regarded as the first aca-fan work in the field of media and fan studies. Since then, aca-fandom has been a constant site of negotiation. Scholars such as Will Brooker (2017, 65) have even suggested that the term may not be useful any longer, as most academics are already and inevitably fans of what they choose to research. In this case, the aca-fan position might be a common—even expected—starting point for research focusing on popular culture phenomena and fans.

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[5] Ethnography is a qualitative observatorial, descriptive, and sometimes participational research method in which the researcher immerses themselves in the particular community or culture that is being studies.

However, problematizing the relationship between academia and fandom and being open about one's connections can still, in many cases, be seen as useful conventions within fan studies. Adrianne Raw (2020, 5.8) proposes that disclosing the aca-fan position and being open about one's own relationship with the object of study helps to promote transparent, self-reflexive scholarship that "facilitates identification between the author and their audience, establishing a space of shared interest in fandom community membership." This is an approach that I utilized specifically during the data collection phase of my research. Furthermore, assuming an aca-fan position may result in research that is more fundamentally bound not only by the community norms of academics, but also those of fans—thus, as the researcher remains accountable to their fan community, research by aca-fans could also be described as research that puts fans first (Musiani 2011, 3.5).

Milena Popova (2020) aptly traces the possibilities of studying a fandom community that the scholar is also part of, but Popova also explores the challenges that scholars may come across due to their identity as both researcher and fandom member. According to Popova, the researcher's positionality fundamentally shapes the research, as it is inescapably tied to the questions researchers ask and how they analyze and interpret the answers (ibid., 2.1). Popova (ibid., 2.2) mentions three factors that have a bearing on the positionality of the researcher: "level of openness of the setting, level of openness of the researcher, and level of participation." These three factors have helped to form and develop the self-reflexive approach that I used in this thesis. X (formerly known as Twitter) and Reddit, my two main sources for sharing the survey and asking for participants, function as open, public settings. Thus, prior to sharing my identity as a media studies master's student conducting research on ARMY, I had been able to observe and to a degree participate in the fan community's activities as a fan. In this way, my prior knowledge of the activities, discourses, values, and norms of the community inevitably shape my research to some degree. Like Popova (ibid., 5.1) mentions in connection with their own research, it also allowed me to choose what material—or in this thesis's case, topic—is fruitful and relevant for analysis. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, it allowed me, much like it allowed Popova, to make both practical and ethical choices in how I presented myself to the fans I asked to participate in the research. On a pragmatic level this meant that I utilized my own knowledge of and history in the fandom to ensure that I treated ARMYs respectfully and conducted ethical and responsible research. Here, consistent reflexive self-questioning proved to be an immensely helpful tool.

Throughout the process of my master's thesis, I felt it important to strive towards transparency and critical reflexiveness. However, my approach is not autoethnographic, or even ethnographic, in essence. Instead, like Popova mentions concerning their own research on fan fiction, it can be viewed as autoethnographic in the sense that I am studying a community that I am also a member of; after all, it was my own in-depth community knowledge (Popova 2020, 4.3) that led me to choose the subject of this thesis and also guided me in the process of formulating my research questions. Furthermore, I also make use of my own written down observations of moments in time when theorization activities reached their peak within the fandom. These moments, as I established earlier, are often tied to new content releases by BTS. Thus, in some ways, my research is inspired by ethnographic research methods—specifically during moments, such as new content releases, when I was surrounded by the fandom and experiencing the content releases in real time with other ARMYs. However, the emphasis remains on the survey data and the fandom experiences as they are described by ARMYs themselves.

My previous history within the fandom can thus be viewed as an asset in "leveraging one's own insider understanding of that community" (Popova 2020, 2.9). Furthermore, prior to my positionality online shifting from simply fan/ARMY to fan and "researcher," I was already part of an ARMY community on social media and had built many fannish relationships that were not in any way impacted by my identity as a media studies master's student working on a thesis on ARMY. Thus, visibly being an ARMY, interacting with other members of the fandom, being part of fan projects, and engaging in other fannish activities may have influenced how I was perceived by members of the fan community and how my calls for survey participants were received. In this sense, I had access to a community that may otherwise have doubted my motivations or viewed me as an outsider looking to exploit the fandom for my own—indeterminate and perhaps negative—purposes. Lastly, as Popova (ibid., 2.7) mentions, through assuming the position of a researcher, "relationship and activities that have been purely personal acquire a scholarly and professional dimension"; thus, this shift and the new emotions and responsibilities tied to conducting research within my own community necessitated an even deeper focus on the ethical dimensions of the research process. This guided me towards self-reflexiveness and obligated me to keep asking questions concerning the goals and motivations that drive this research.

2.4 The survey as a research method: mapping the benefits and challenges

In fan studies, where research is fundamentally connected to individuals and their activities, emotional connections, and identities, choosing the right research methodology is one of the most vital aspects of the entire research process. Naturally, this applies to all research that studies humans. The methods chosen often exist in direct contact with research ethics and codes, and should, as such, always be chosen carefully. This was also the main concern of my thesis, as no methods are completely unproblematic. Hence, I will discuss how and why the survey as a method for collecting data was chosen, what other methods could, possibly, have been used instead, and what the process of constructing my survey (and sharing it on different social media platforms) looked like.

It is important that the self-narratives, experiences, and stories of ARMYs themselves remain the main focus. I do not want to produce research simply by observing the fandom on different online platforms; thus, a qualitative survey with open-ended questions seems the best fit for the purpose of this thesis. As Lucy Bennett (2017, 37) states, not only do qualitative surveys allow both statistical data and longer, individually written responses, they also allow researchers to "tap somewhat directly into the voices, articulations, and performances of some fans." Indeed, the aim of the data collecting method is to enable and generate phenomenological, experience-based articulations by ARMY members. In other words, a qualitative survey remains the most compelling option, as it allows fans to freely put their own experiences into words, instead of being represented by research that simply observes the fandom, picking and choosing which fans' articulations to include.

The drafted questionnaire and survey questions were first presented to the peer writing thesis group and my thesis supervisor, Media Studies University Lecturer Mari Pajala, who guided me in the process of selecting the questions and constructing a coherent survey. Furthermore, I had the chance and honor to consult Dr. Jiyoung Lee, author of *BTS, Art Revolution: BTS Meets Deleuze* (2019), whose work on the creative, rhizome-like fan practices of ARMY has not only been highly inspirational for this thesis, but also stands as foundational work for all research on BTS and ARMY. Lastly, the survey was piloted, and its questions and structure were also discussed with individual ARMY members who kindly provided me with feedback.

I collected the survey responses during an eight-month period between December 2021 and August 2022. The survey consists of 13 questions, out of which two questions are demographic ones (age and country of residence), and the remaining 11 questions are open-

ended. This, of course, was a conscious choice, as multiple choice questions would most likely have made the survey appear less intimidating, which, in turn, would perhaps have translated into more participants. I shared a poster introducing the survey on X, and over some time, the post itself garnered over 22,000 views. Furthermore, I shared the survey on BTS' Reddit page (r/bangtan, which is moderated by fans), where I also gathered many responses. Out of the 263 individuals who clicked on the survey web link and opened the survey, 81 ARMYs participated in the survey. Initially, my aim was to find 100 participants, but going through the data collected through the survey quickly revealed that 81 responses provided sufficient data, as they, in many cases, generated detailed and expanded articulations of ARMYs' experiences. In fact, the questions were intentionally designed in a way that encouraged deeper and more detailed responses: As Bennett (2017, 40) points out, researchers should be careful that the survey questions do not simply produce "yes" or "no" answers. Following Bennett's suggestion, many questions in the survey prompted participants to give examples or offer further explanations or information. Furthermore, my aim was to formulate simple and clear questions that would contribute to the overall comprehensibility of the questionnaire.

The question of how to name respondents in the research is also an aspect that requires careful consideration. "Respondent 1" simply sounds too clinical—particularly as I seek to acknowledge the individual, lived experiences of fandom members. As Grinyer (2002, 1) notes, some respondents may "feel that they 'lose their ownership' of the data when anonymised." Consequently, a name—either a given one or one of respondents' own choosing—may be an important identity marker that individuals wish to see in the research. However, the choosing of names is inevitably tied to integral questions about anonymity. As such, there is no completely problem-free approach to using names of any kind in surveys. Furthermore, anonymity is granted to respondents in the opening statement of the questionnaire, thus rendering the use of real given names an ethical impossibility. In order to distinguish between respondents and ascribe more personality to individuals and their replies, I decided to use pseudonyms—specifically ones chosen by respondents. It is, however, not a completely problem-free naming solution either, as respondents may for instance use pseudonyms that they are also known for socially or online, or may pick the name or alias of someone else (Deller 2018, 128). Still, pseudonyms chosen by fans still remained the best option, as it tied in with this thesis's idea of allowing fans to define themselves and their own

experiences in their own words. Therefore, naming the fans—or diminishing their identity to simply "respondent 1"—would defeat that purpose.

Another important part of the survey formulating and sharing processes is the information provided both within the survey itself, as well as the information provided in conjunction with sharing the survey on different platforms. In addition to the information provided in the survey, it was important to carefully formulate the introduction that introduced ARMY members to the survey itself as I shared the survey on X and BTS' Reddit page. On Reddit, the same information that can be found on the survey itself was included, as providing sufficient information is a requirement when asking for survey participants on BTS' subreddit. However, the information provided outside of the questionnaire itself allowed me to not only appear as a student researching ARMY, but it also allowed me to identify myself as a fan, which, in itself, felt important, as I was essentially asking for the trust of ARMY members. Therefore, any attempts to somehow conceal my identity as a fan and hide behind academia would have felt questionable. Moreover, Reddit particularly provided a valuable platform for discussing the research with ARMYs, as well as receiving feedback and support.

Lastly, the question of sampling should be addressed, as it is inevitably connected to different notions of what makes the research valid in the first place. As Máire Messenger Davies and Nick Mosdell (2006, 59) note, every precaution should be taken to ensure that the surveyed individuals are representative of the group of people that the study is primarily interested in. In my thesis's case, I ensured this by sharing the survey on platforms and in environments where the survey would reach ARMY. Furthermore, as theorizing is a practice that only a part of ARMYs take part in, I needed to find ways to specifically reach ARMYs who do, in fact, theorize. I contacted X accounts specifically focused on either theorizing or academically engaging with BTS content and asked for their help in sharing the survey. Here, again, my understanding of the community and its practices was a key asset in deciding which accounts could possibly be helpful in finding survey participants.

However, it should be noted that, although the 81 responses provide more than enough data for this specific thesis, the findings will inevitably represent a rather limited group of ARMYs and their activities, and as such, "any profile of the 'typical fan' is necessarily going to be incomplete and to favor certain characteristics" (Rebaza 2009, 150, as cited in Bennett 2017, 41). Furthermore, an aspect that may impact the sample as well as limit the voices that are represented in the research is the language of the survey: As the survey is authored in one

language alone, English, it excludes a variety of international perspectives and cannot thus claim to represent all fans, or even a wider population of fans, for that matter (Bennett 2017, 41).

That being said, the diversity of participants is represented in the data: ARMYs from North America, South America, Europe, Oceania, different parts of Asia, and different parts of Africa participated in the study, as illustrated by the table below.

Table 1. Geographic location of survey respondents

Location	Number of respondents	Percent
North America	30	37.04%
Europe	25	30.9%
South America	7	8.64%
Southeast Asia	6	7.41%
South Asia	4	4.94%
West Asia	2	2.47%
Oceania	2	2.47%
Central America	1	1.23%
East Asia	1	1.23%
North Africa	1	1.23%
East Africa	1	1.23%
West Africa	1	1.23%

Moreover, the age of participants fluctuated much, with the age group of 20–24 being the largest one with 33% of the respondents. Respondents from the 50–59 age group represented 4,9% of the participants, while the younger demographic was also represented, with the youngest respondent being under 15, and 7,4% of respondents belonging to the 15–19 age group:

Table 2. The age range of survey respondents

Age	Number of respondents	Percent
Under 15	1	1.3%
15-19	6	7.4%
20-24	27	33.3%
25-29	16	19.8%
30-34	11	13.6%
35-39	9	11.1%

Age	Number of respondents	Percent
40-44	0	0.0%
45-49	6	7.4%
50-54	3	3.7%
55-59	1	1.2%
Prefer not to say	1	1.2%

The diverse demographic of respondents requires the methodological approach to leave room for polyvocality. Each person has their own way of relating to BTS' content, and as Saukko (2003c, 20) asserts, "researchers should be conscientious that they are not studying a lived reality but many"—thus, research should strive to represent the voices and views of the full spectrum of experiences represented in the data.

2.5   The embodied subject of hermeneutic phenomenology

> The magic comes when we see ordinary, taken-for-granted living as something more layered, more nuanced, more unexpected and as potentially transformative; when something is revealed of the extra-ordinary.
>
> (Finlay 2012, 32)

I have provided an overview of the data gathering process and its ethical considerations. What is left to explore is the analysis process and, furthermore, the validity of this research. I am concerned with the lived experiences of ARMYs. Therefore, I asks what kind of experientialities unfold through fans' theorizing. Moreover, I examines how ARMYs *narrativize* their experiences; how they speak of their own agency, their fan subjectivities, and self-understandings. Here, I am specifically concerned with meanings—as in, the meaning respondents give to their fandom practices. To put it differently, I seek to understand the embodied subjectivities and experiential spaces that are constructed through theorizing. In this thesis, I often refer to fans' ways of being in the world. What, then, does such a concept mean, and how can we gain knowledge about fans' subjective experiences? After all, first-hand experiences are unattainable, as I do not have access to fans' personal, subjective experiences of the surrounding world—nor their first-person point of views (see Larsen and Adu, 2021).

This is where it is helpful to turn to phenomenology, as it brings together all the methods, attitudes, and approaches I embrace in this study. Susann Laverty (2003, 22) describes phenomenology as an inquiry that seeks to understand and unfold meanings "as they are lived

in everyday existence." Although phenomenology is a diverse field of different approaches, this, in itself, is understood to be the starting point and general aim of phenomenological research. As Linda Finlay (2009, 4) notes,

> All the variants of phenomenology share a similar focus on describing lived experience and recognising the significance of our embodied, intersubjective lifeworld. To a greater or lesser extent, they all investigate consciousness and the intentional relationship between persons and situations.

As phenomenology focuses on the nature of lived experiences and explores certain ways of being in the world (Van Manen 1990, 39), it does, at first glance, seem to suit the aim of this study. However, to say that my thesis relies specifically on phenomenological thought does not fully describe the methods I used. Thus, I will give a short summary of descriptive phenomenology and then turn to examine phenomenological hermeneutic analysis, which is distinct from "simply phenomenology" in a few vitally important ways.

Firstly, as Finlay (2012, 20) notes, phenomenology is always descriptive in the sense that it primarily intends to describe rather than explain different phenomena. My research, too, relies on fans' descriptions of their lived experiences. I asked survey respondents to describe their experiences, and the open questions were designed to encourage detailed reflection and discussion (see Laverty 2003, 29). Descriptive phenomenology was first developed by the founder of phenomenology, philosopher Edmund Husserl, who focused on the study of "essences." Henriksson and Friesen (2012, 1–2) explain that Husserlian phenomenology is built upon the premise that there are ideal essences—or structures—of experience and consciousness, and that these "can be isolated outside of the researcher's cultural and historical location." Furthermore, as Larsen and Adu (2021, 35) point out, phenomenology argues for the existence of "universal truths" which are embedded in people's subjectivities. In this sense, descriptive Husserlian phenomenology also gives less importance to the embodied subjectivity of the interpreter, or researcher. In the context of this thesis, I do not subscribe to the notion that specific fixed essences can be extracted and then within research separated from their interpretations, contexts, or historicities.[6] Indeed, in contrast, hermeneutic phenomenology rejects the claim of isolated experiences and emphasizes instead

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[6] In *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Chandler and Munday, 2011), historicity is defined as "the historical dimension of human phenomena, or the distinctive sociohistorical circumstances of a specific event or series of events." In this context, I am referring to the fact that all phenomena exist as part of a sociohistorical continuum. Different phenomena are not ahistorical; instead, they are always embedded within a specific context, much like ARMY's fan practices.

the *interpretation* of meaning; thus, hermeneutic phenomenology studies experiences together with their meanings (Henriksson & Friesen 2012, 1). Hermeneutic phenomenology is therefore better suited as an approach for this study, as I do not seek to merely describe meanings but instead also interpret the meanings as they occur in fans' embodied contexts and life situations (see Finlay 2012, 22).

Furthermore, descriptive or Husserlian phenomenology often relies on phenomenological reduction, or bracketing. This refers to the process of setting aside one's assumptions and biases about the subject of study in order to "engage the experience without preconceived notions" (Laverty 2003, 28). The aim of this approach is that research remains as neutral and noninfluenced as possible and the focus stays on the phenomenon in itself (Finley 2012, 24). Hermeneutic phenomenologists, in turn, view such a process as undesirable and furthermore deny that it is even possible to completely set aside researchers' own experiences (ibid.). Instead of bracketing, this thesis embraces a hermeneutic, interpretive approach or attitude, which rejects the notion of "true fixed meanings" (Finlay 2012, 30). Furthermore, the hermeneutic approach encourages that the relationship between the researcher and the researched is teased out (ibid., 22). This relates to my earlier discussion about reflexivity and different research positionalities, as the hermeneutic approach specifically asks for researchers to stay reflexive, or as Laverty (2003, 28) puts it, to "engage in a process of self-reflection." Such a process can also be linked to contextualist validity. As Saukko (2003c, 15) notes, "[i]n traditional methodological parlance," validity is understood as "the beginning and end of all research" and will determine how truthfully or objectively research manages to describe reality or different phenomena. Furthermore, as Saukko (ibid., 18) aptly puts it, different theories and methods used in research always open up partial or specific view of reality. Within the scope of this thesis, contextualist validity means that fan studies research, too, inevitably carries with it its own historicity with its methodological challenges and questions. Thus, turning the gaze towards the social context and historical continuum of research itself allows it to become aware of its own role in social meaning-making (see Saukko 2003c, 25).

I also rely on hermeneutic phenomenology in the sense that my aim is to focus on a seemingly ordinary every-day fan practice and examine fans' theorizing with a sense of curious wonder that seeks to uncover new layers and meanings. In theory and practice, we know what theorizing is—both within academia and fandom. However, do we know what kind of feelings ARMYs' theorizing evokes, what embodied experiences and subject positions it makes possible? Here, it may be helpful to turn to David Smith's (1999) notion of the

"hermeneutic imagination." According to Smith (ibid., 41), hermeneutic imagination specifically pulls experiences out of their sphere of everydayness; it presents them in new contexts and "within the grander schemes of things." In this sense, it is above all a positioning that allows me to remain open and embrace an imaginative attitude—even towards things that may at first glance seem more mundane or trivial. However, hermeneutic imagination, as Smith (ibid., 39, 42) describes it, is also intrinsically tied to the ways in which people use language and tell stories: Hermeneutical imagination aspires to remain conscious of "the storied nature of human experience," as "we find ourself, hermeneutically speaking, always in the middle of stories." Next, I would thus like to expand on this idea and illuminate how this thesis approaches the narrativized, retold nature of the lived experiences of ARMYs.

2.6   Unfolding narratives and themes through thematic analysis

> Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes.

> (Van Manen 1990, 89)

It is clear that not even hermeneutic phenomenology with its combination of description and interpretation manages to capture lived experiences in their completeness as they are lived and felt. However, hermeneutic phenomenology considers the narrative nature of lived experiences, as Smith's hermeneutic imagination illustrates. First, it is important to point out that all recollections and descriptions of experiences are already mediated or transformed in some way (Van Manen 1990, 54). Survey respondents recollect their experiences and describe them, which means that they are mediated through a layer of discourse and narrative. As Van Manen (ibid., 78) notes, describing experiences through writing requires one to embrace a reflective attitude, which already places limits on obtaining immediate descriptions of lived experiences. Furthermore, fans' recollections are then interpreted in the context of this thesis, which adds another layer of mediation. Consequently, lived experience descriptions and accounts can never be identical to the lived experience itself (ibid., 54). If the meanings explored in this thesis are embedded within ARMYs' stories and the descriptions about their embodied experiences, what tools can be used to illuminate and analyze them?

The stories we tell about ourselves are mediated by language; language discloses how we are situated in the world and how we experience it. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) weaved together phenomenology and hermeneutics—furthermore, Ricoeur developed his influential notion of narrative identity (1988), which remains a helpful starting point for

research that examines how experiences and language or narratives intertwine. Indeed, as Henriksson and Friesen (2012, 3) point out, for Ricoeur and his hermeneutic phenomenology, language and experience are co-emergent; thus, according to Ricoeur, to bring an experience into language "is not to change it into something else but, in articulating and developing it, to make it become itself" (Ricoeur 1991, 39, as cited in Henriksson and Friesen 2012, 3). In this way, Ricoeur bridges together phenomenology (description of experiences and essences) and the interpretive study of the embodied, discursive, and narrativized subject.

However, I do not wish to apply Ricoeur's theory in its entirety, with its complexities and issues. I am instead inspired by Dan Zahavi's (2007, 184) understanding of self-narratives: Zahavi rejects the notion that narratives exclusively construct "the self" and mediate every access to the self. As Zahavi (ibid.) argues, the narratives we use and the stories we tell "play an important role in the constitution of a certain dimension or aspect of selfhood." In my thesis's context, the ways in which ARMYs write about their embodied lived experiences are seen as constitutive of specific subject *positions* connected to theorizing. I certainly do not claim that I am able to access the entire "self" or the "identity" of respondents through examining the self-narratives or ARMYs. Instead, hermeneutic phenomenology and theories of the narrativized self allow me to pay attention to the fact that, through their recollections and retellings, ARMYs do not merely describe experiences but also construct their surrounding realities and their subject positions. In other words, the ways in which fans talk about themselves, their own practices, and the surrounding reality can be seen as an important narrative tool that constitutes subject positions and, furthermore, constructs meanings. Thus, I also focus on how ARMYs talk about any given topics; what narratives, word choices, and expressions respondents use.

After collecting data through the qualitative survey, an important step in my research process was to determine what is relevant and important data within the scope of the research questions. In order to identify common themes, I chose thematic analysis as the method for analysis. As Van Manen (1990, 78), describes, the analysis of themes refers to a process used across various disciplines, such as the humanities and literary criticism, and its aim is to identify and recover themes which occur frequently in the "text." According to Braun and Clarke (2006, 82), "a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question"; it is, in some ways, a "patterned response" within any given data set. However, as Braun and Clarke (ibid.) further argue, the importance of a specific theme is not always determined by how often it emerges from the data; instead, the importance of a theme

may depend on "whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question."

To provide a brief summary of the analysis process itself: I used the qualitative analysis tool, NVivo, as the software allowed me to manage, organize, store, and code the data that I collected through the survey. Here it is important to point out that hermeneutic phenomenology does not in general support the reducing of lived experiences into neatly coded data. As Judy Rashotte and Louise Jensen (2007, 104) argue, in hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, the relationship between the research(er) and data should not follow the linear progression of "collection to coding to analysis"—instead, the circularity of the research process should be emphasized. However, the generous data required me to adopt an organized approach that allowed me to render the data set manageable. This means that I used NVivo to manually code and tag every survey response on the basis of the themes, concepts, and other units—even individual words—that appeared. Furthermore, I allowed codes to emerge from the data itself instead of sticking to a specific pre-determined frame of reference. This kind of inductive coding also left space for flexibility in the sense that my research questions quite literally lived, expanded, and evolved throughout the coding process (see Braun and Clarke 2006, 84) as I discovered themes that were perhaps more unexpected in the context of my research questions.

In this sense, the analysis process was not linear but instead sometimes took me down a meandering route of nuanced experiences and meanings. Although I used coding to keep track of how many times specific concepts emerged from the responses, I also focused on the micro-level and included themes that were not perhaps prevalent but still managed to capture or discuss important aspects in the context of my research. In this way, thematic analysis allowed me to explore and include themes that were drawn from the entire scope of the data. Here, again, I left room for hermeneutic imagination; for the unexpected to appear and for the nuances of fans' lived, embodied experiences to take form.

3 "It allows my brain to engage in imaginative play": ARMYs' playful theorizing practices

3.1 Towards playfulness: how playfulness emerged from the survey responses

The first recurring theme that I identified through thematic analysis of the data is *playfulness* within the context of theorizing, as several discourses of play and playfulness came up in the responses. Playfulness, in its many forms, often seems to function as a motivator behind ARMYs theorizing mindsets. However, the replies also shed light on a more general playful attitude that fans embrace when interacting with BTS' content and each other. Some survey responses include words and phenomena such as game, fun, entertainment, puzzles, clues, easter eggs, hidden meanings, mystery, and detective work. Abilities often relating to playfulness and play—such as imagination, creativity, and curiosity—are also frequently mentioned by ARMYs. Playfulness, thus, seems to function as a force that ties ARMYs practices together and encourages fans to keep exploring, searching, creating, and sharing.

In this chapter, I discuss the playful practices of ARMY through the lens of playfulness. In order to gain a more nuanced view of the fandom's playful activities, I approach the fandom's playful theorizing practices from an interdisciplinary point of view. Kathryn E. Ringland et al. (2022) have previously explored how ARMY and BTS together create a playful environment and how interactions within ARMY cross the boundaries of play and non-play. This chapter seeks to shed light on the manifestations playfulness by examining specifically the theorizing practices and discourses of ARMY. While an explicitly playful aspect is often present in ARMYs content creation and knowledge practices, it is important to point out that theorizing encompasses a number of purposes—some of which are less playful and perhaps more rooted in knowledge-gathering and self-development practices. Such practices, too, can of course be playful. The content of BTS evokes affectionate and deeply meaningful reactions in ARMYs. It is not my aim to state that by being playful, fan practices are merely frivolous and thus in some way less significant. As this chapter will establish, playfulness, too, can be transformative for individuals and imbue BTS' content with deeply personal and nuanced meanings.

3.2 Play, playfulness, and fandoms

The centrality of play and the playful features of culture have garnered attention from scholars particularly since the pioneer of play theory, Johan Huizinga (1955 [1938]), developed an influential theory of play in *Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Huizinga's work is still in many ways relevant when discussing manifestations of play in culture. Huizinga's views are built on the premise that play entangles itself with the different areas of human culture; play is thus a central component in the forming of cultures and civilizations, but it also predates human culture. However, Huizinga could not have accounted for the playgrounds that would spring to life—through the complex networks of different shifting agencies—within the digital spaces that allow for new and more multimodal playful practices. Fandoms, especially, have been studied as communities where playful elements thrive and intertwine with people's everyday fandom practices (see Jenkins 2013; Hills 2002; Booth 2015a; Mavridou 2017; Nybro Petersen 2022). Digital spaces allow fans to constantly share, explore, and create more content, which also means that there is always something new—or old—to play with. Furthermore, the shift from classical linear narratives to transmedia and postmodern fragmented narratives have enabled media experiences that can be viewed as inherently playful.

It is important to emphasize that the spaces permeated by ARMY's playfulness are not specifically designed to be play spaces. In other words, they are not game spaces. They are simply digital online spaces, such as social media platforms, where playfulness emerges through the intricate interaction of different forces and individuals. Another important note that ties in with the previous one is that play and playfulness are not necessarily synonymous. This chapter focuses specifically on the playfulness of the fandom, although I do, on occasion, refer to fans' activities as "play" when it suits the context of my thesis. The difference between these two terms is explored by Miguel Sicart (2014) in his book titled *Play Matters*. Sicart (ibid., 1) views play as a "mode of being human"—essentially, a way of being in the world. Play itself, as Miguel Sicart (ibid., 26) argues, is autotelic, and as such, play has its own purposes and goals and can thus be considered an activity. Playfulness, however, is marked by its nature of being an attitude towards things rather than an activity (ibid., 22). The domain of playfulness is therefore less rigid and less concerned with specific contexts and rules of play (see ibid., 28). This is an important notion, as there are no pre-determined rules that the fandom adheres to in their playful theorizing practices. Playfulness, thus, is not specifically tied to game or play contexts, but can instead also thrive in places that are

populated by individuals who have embraced a playful attitude (ibid., 28). In fact, Sicart (ibid. 7) argues that almost any given space can become a playground, and it is this precise notion I would like to keep with me throughout this chapter. The next section is concerned with the playful design of BTS content—specifically when the playful potential is tied to intertextuality. However, the intriguing aspect is how ARMYs themselves understand the playful intertextual designs and their own interactions with the content. The next section will thus focus on the interactions that enable and generate playfulness.

3.3 Intertextuality and online ARMY spaces as facilitators of playfulness

> Fans and media producers, in ideal play situations, have a shared objective – to keep playing with the media text in digital spaces.

> (Nybro Petersen 2022, 56)

When the first promotional content and teasers for BTS' song, "Yet to Come" (2022), were released, ARMYs were, within minutes, connecting symbols and themes from old music videos and finding possible links between older content and the new teaser. Screenshots of old music videos and the new teaser were parallelized, and long X threads detailing the possible themes, plots, and links were quickly shared in the fandom's social media spaces. Within mere moments the posts and threads garnered thousands of likes and re-posts, and many were joining the hype through commenting, brainstorming, and theorizing what the teasers could mean. It is especially during comebacks and new content releases that the knowledge practices of ARMY materialize. Theorizing functions as a tool for meaning-making and engaging with BTS' content. ARMYs navigate within an intertextual flow composed of BTS' previous content, works that exist outside of the world of BTS, and also meanings and knowledge that exist in the individual fan's life. At first glance there is perhaps nothing radically new in such fan practices and a fandom that theorizes, as the interpretive and creative strategies of fans who move across a wide contextual network and through doing so generate new meanings have been studied since Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992). However, I want to focus on playfulness as a fundamental feature—or perhaps the ludic ingredient—of theorizing.

The use of intertextuality, as I have established, functions as a playful element in BTS' content and encourages ARMYs to take part in creative, often communal, play. As Sicart (2014, 31) states, "playful designs" need a user who will complete them and are thus, by definition, ambiguous. However, what remains to be examined is how ARMYs themselves

view the use of intertextuality—or what could be called the playful design—of BTS' content. One of the first questions on the survey asked respondents to think about Big Hit's and BTS' motives for creating intertextual references and clues for fans to follow. One respondent from the United States, Hollie, links the use of intertextual references to the notion of accessible storytelling that may transcend language barriers, as most of BTS' content is in Korean:

> I think that BigHit/BTS put intertextual references into their content because it is a more effective way of telling the story they want to tell than simply saying it out loud. What makes BTS so unique and fascinating to me is that, while most modern pop bands will say their message very visibly and make it a part of their "brand" (ie; Harry Styles and TPWK), BTS hides part of their message within the subtext of their work. … This makes their message and content that much more accessible and understandable, and it helps them portray their messages effectively in spite of their complex nature, and the fact that the majority of their fanbase at this point does not speak the same language as them.

The idea of BTS' content being accessible although the group hides its "messages" within the subtext of the content is quite intriguing: Instead of simply sharing content and messages that do not require "decoding" or interpretation, BTS often uses recurring symbols, intertextual references, and themes that ARMYs may recognize from before. This often results in what Hollie calls "collective idea exchange." Furthermore, Sam (United States), emphasizes the conversation-like, polyphonic nature of intertextuality, and notes that BTS' content will always exist in a state of flux:

> The very act of doing this invites the audience into that same conversation and creates a multi-dimensional flow of ideas. Intertextuality means you aren't listening to a speech, you are listening to a conversation. It also allows meaning to unfurl differently each time you return to it as your familiarity with external content grows. When you look back on a conversation you had with your friends, you'll think of it differently then you did in the moment you had it because later events will change the way you interpret what you said. In that way, the meaning of BTS's words (and videos and music) will always be evolving and always be up for revisiting.

It is precisely the open-ended narratives of BTS' intertextual content that allow for a playground of fans' theorizing to thrive. BTS' content may not exist as a clearly outlined narrative "world" per se, but it can still be studied as an intertextual universe of its own, consisting of both the content put out by BTS as well as ARMYs interactions with it. As Jenkins et al. (2013, 209) note, successful media franchises do not only form audiences of like-minded individuals, but instead also function as cultural activators that give fan communities something to do. Many movie and television franchises have utilized transmedia storytelling, where the original "mothership" media—such as an original movie or series—

sprouts numerous different stories that are told across a wide range of platforms. However, some ARMYs discussed that back in 2013 and through the early years of BTS, it was rather rare for music artists or groups to create over-arching transmedial storylines and intertextual narratives:

> As an avid reader, it intrigued me that a music group was including references to books and stories, as well as using them to further their own. It never occurred to me that music groups could have an over-arching story line that would follow them from video to video, album to album. While I was quite familiar with story albums (Pink Floyd's The Wall, The Who's Tommy, Queensryche's Operation Mindcrime come to mind), I'd never heard of a group that carried that idea across all media. It was fascinating to me. I love a good story and the puzzle of it all really drew me in. (Rowan, United States)

By designing narrative content that encourages fans to solve puzzle-like structures, the company and BTS are privileging and utilizing the active interpretive potential of the fandom. As Orion Mavridou (2017, 99) notes, stories are never static; stages of storytelling need human participation to put things in motion, and this is how the story is, within fandoms, made into a playground and a system which can facilitate narrative play. The interpretive presence and the fandom activating force of BTS' work is of course immense, although a later section will examine the freedom and limits of ARMYs' playfulness.

Quite a few respondents mentioned that there is always something new to discover. According to an ARMY from Croatia, Ana, the ever-expanding content evokes a sense of excitement that encourages ARMYs to "keep an eye on everything, even explore paths that haven't (yet) been included." Furthermore, Ana notes that

> the fandom *culture of discovery* continuously develops in terms of what media is included – at first it was music, then the storyline included music videos, then physical notes came with the album, then a blog was added, then a video game and a twitter poll [italics mine].

Such an example of expanding transmedia storytelling vividly supports the idea that Line Nybro Petersen (2022, 56) discusses: Transmedia storytelling is very similar to the experience of playing, since the aim of both transmedia and play is that the participants keep the activity going. To understand BTS' intertextual storytelling and how it encourages fans to engage in playful theorizing, I need to first examine the narrative tools that are used in BTS' storytelling and content.

As many ARMYs noted in the responses, the intertextuality of BTS' content often takes the form of hints, hidden meanings, easter eggs, and clues. These encourage ARMYs to—in

respondents' own words—become puzzle-solvers, treasure hunters, detectives, and theorizers. El from the United States mentions that theorizing is

> entertaining, like a puzzle or a mystery novel. It makes you feel engaged and it challenges you and then rewards you if your theories were right. It's also exciting, imagining what stories could be told through the Bangtan Universe.

Another respondent from the Unites States, Hakey, emphasizes the social aspect of BTS' intertextuality by stating that "many fans enjoy the world building aspects of BTS. It offers a fan experience that involves a sense of mystery and also feeds conversation between fans." Ana describes theorizing as a "culture of discovery," and El, in turn, a "culture of detective work." This further highlights the notion of theorizing as a culture of its own; with its own practices and conventions that seep into the every-day realities of fandom members. It is thus fruitful to consider theorizing both as its own culture, which sheds light on the social aspects of theorizing, but also as a personal experience and way of being in the world, which I will focus on in the next section.

The intertextual nature of BTS's content—that leads to puzzle-solving and easter-egg hunts —can also be viewed as a "game" of sorts. Creating a game for ARMYs was brought up in some replies: An Italian ARMY, Angela, who uploads BTS theory and analysis videos on YouTube, notes that "they do it as a game for the fans. … By doing this, they are making their contents educational without being boring." Similarly, referring to a gamelike activity, Ana notes that

> the mechanism of *autonomous discovery* at one's own pace is both engaging and interesting on its own (a detective game of sorts), but there is also a voluntary aspect to it that makes people comfortable [italics mine].

Indeed, as Angela notes, theorizing can be viewed as an activity that is educational on ARMYs own terms —in other words, it does not take place in a classroom, at a university, or any other education institution. How necessary, then, is theorizing when it comes to the enjoyment of BTS content? Would BTS' (playfully designed) content be poorly designed if it were enjoyable only to those who are willing to spend their time looking for hidden meanings, clues, and intertextual references?

I want to find out if ARMYs feel a "theorist's approach" is needed in order to enjoy BTS' content. One survey question gathered information on this specific topic: 43 out of 81 respondents do not think the theorist's approach is needed to fully enjoy BTS' content, and 8 respondents were not sure, or think that such an approach may help to appreciate BTS more.

Many ARMYs highlighted that it is rewarding or satisfying to "be in the know"; to crack the puzzles presented through BTS content. However, some respondents mention that theorizing—as they define it—is an activity that fans with specific fandom interests take part in:

> I think there are aspects of BTS that involve a lot of digging and give lots of fodder to making connections. I think that there is plenty to be enjoyed outside of putting together clues or references, but I think it offers a specific fan experience that some people place a high value on. (Hakey, United States)

> Many fans do not delve into the complexities of HYYH, and simply enjoy other aspects of BTS prolific content. Theorizing is really targeted toward nerds like me who enjoy puzzles. (Amari, United States)

The general consensus among respondents seems to be that BTS' content and music offer meaningful, enjoyable experiences for ARMYs even without fans having to delve deep into the realm of theorizing. A survey response by Han Ji Hye (United States) sheds light on the matter:

> I highly doubt BTS would have orchestrated concepts such as they have with the intention of having it only be understood and appreciated by those who theorise and like to go as deep as they can possibly take it. 'Spring Day' was the first of BTS's music videos I saw, and I didn't look to theorise or dig deeper at first. I noticed the intertextual reference of 'Omelas' from Ursula K. Le Guin's short story 'The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas', and that was interesting enough and took a moment to digest.

Sometimes theorizing and the playfulness that emerges through it is completely casual and motivated only by the desire to have fun with the content. Indeed, "fun" was mentioned in 16 of the survey responses. Some ARMY members find it fun to know that "things are planned and carefully placed somewhere" (Ekko, Ghana); other fandom members mention that it makes everyday life more fun (Mikayla, United States). Theorizing may also be fun, since there is no limit (Moony, Egypt), or because it simply makes ARMYs "appreciate the work that BTS and Big Hit have put into their art" (exhagustd, United States).

How, then, do ARMYs themselves think Big Hit and BTS view the active participation of fans—as in, what subject and meaning-making positions do fans feel they are presented with? Companies can of course create play-encouraging content by using puzzle-like designs. As Mark J.P. Wolf (2017, 206) notes, unresolved narrative threads and incomplete infrastructures encourage audiences to return, which then fosters fans' investment in the world. However, when it comes to fans playing with content, producers do not, as Nybro Petersen (2022, 18)

states, have much say in whether fans decide to play with the content. Producers can certainly create stimulations and encouragements, but Nybro Petersen (ibid.) aptly argues that industry attempts will be mere imitations of play unless fans choose to play along freely. The following survey response by Joy from the Philippines intriguingly contextualizes the relationship between ARMYs and the company:

> They understand and respect that the fanbase is intelligent, involved, and incentivized even more when we see that such details were made intentionally for us to engage with them and their work. They know that by doing so, they are bridging the artist and the fandom in such a deep connection – by using intertextual references to stimulate personal meaning while simultaneously encouraging bilateral communication. In this way, it's not just the artist communicating to us. We are stimulated to express what we interpret from it as well.

I want to focus on Joy's notion of ARMYs being stimulated to express what they interpret from the content. The self-reflexive component of ARMYs theorizing often came up in the replies. Some fandom members—like Ana from Croatia—mentioned that Big Hit is probably paying attention to fans and might even get content ideas from fans themselves. ARMYs are thus often highly aware of their own status and influence as interpreters, and furthermore also as force of meaning-generation. Even more generally, there seems to be a self-reflexive notion among ARMYs. Fandom members value their own contribution as—in a sense— cartographers of BTS' intertextual content and history. Members of the fandom work together to create large databases of BTS' fictional universe and content. Thus, as Ringland et al. (2022, 10) note, ARMY is a curatorial fandom: Fans both consume and curate BTS related content, and the curatorial practices can also be viewed as forms of play. Furthermore, ARMYs clearly seek to generate discourse about experiencing their own experiencing.[7] ARMYs tell stories about their own activities and refer to themselves as theorists. In this way, self-reflexivity and storytelling are also tools for constructing and maintaining the identity— or identities—of the fandom.

Creating an immersive universe of content that is saturated with intertextual references and meanings for fans to interpret will, of course, encourage fans to return. In fact, 25 survey respondents mentioned engagement as a motive for creating narratives that require puzzle-

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[7] One of the founders of philosophical anthropology, Helmuth Plessner (2019[1928]), states that human reflexivity contains the ability to "experience our own experiencing."

solving and theorizing. Driek from Singapore offers an intriguing theory on BTS' use of intertextuality, metaphors and layers:

> I think it is to increase engagement & create a sense of community during the promotional period as the fandom bands together to figure things out. Also it enables them to add layers to their content through metaphors even when the budget wouldn't have sustained it during their earlier years, enhancing the richness of the art.

Saturating the content with metaphors and layers due to a limited budget is clever, as it saves resources and reduces production costs but simultaneously also builds fan-engagement. This would directly help to bring the fandom together to form an interpretive community (see Fish 1980) that uses its collective intelligence (see Lévy 1997; Jenkins 2006a) to solve the "cognitive puzzle" presented through different media (see Jenkins 2013, 238). So far, I have examined fans perceptions of some of the tools that are used to imbue BTS' content with its' intertextual presence. Such compelling storytelling and content activate the fandom to adopt playful, theorizing attitudes. However, it is specifically the experientiality of theorizing that I want to shed light on. What kind of lived experiences does theorizing and its playfulness make possible? ARMYs construct entire playgrounds as they playfully interact with BTS content, but navigating, interpreting and consuming the content may also create entirely new, transformative ways of organizing content and engaging with the surrounding natural and digital realities.

3.4 Play moods and playfulness as a way of being in the world

Survey respondent Min Holly (United States) presents an intriguing idea by stating that theorizing is a structure that allows the brain to engage in *imaginative play*. What kind of experiences and ways of being in the world does such imaginative play make possible? Is there a structure to engaging with BTS' content? Could ARMYs theorizing be examined as its own ludic (playful) language, or a specific system of interpretation? Here, it is helpful to use a phenomenological approach that focuses specifically on the lived experiences of individuals. To phenomenologists, singular descriptive accounts of specific lived experiences can offer a treasure grove of knowledge to examine and construct meaning from. BTS' content does not just exist; it is felt and experienced by ARMYs who are relating to it in their own specific ways. As redapples from the United States notes, "BTS is not purely about music. BTS is an experience, sensory and imagined." It is specifically these sensory experiences and imagined realities that I would like to focus on.

Most of the respondents described their experiences in detail and through doing so generated data that is valuable particularly for a phenomenological research perspective. Firstly, it is important to note that the playfulness of ARMY is often completely casual and intertwines with everyday life and fandom practices. As Frissen et al. (2015, 37) note, playful technologies often completely merge with everyday life. Therefore play, too, always occurs within everyday reality and not outside it (ibid., 18). While 41 respondents can think of certain theorizing strategies and describe them, 21 respondents are either not sure, cannot think of specific strategies, or simply think that theorizing feels very casual (Phoebe, Finland). Yet, many responses indicate that there seem to be particular ways approaching BTS' content, and ways of playfully positioning oneself in relation to it.

In *Mediatized Fan Play* (2022), Nybro Petersen examines the playful ways in which fans engage with the surrounding world and their fan objects. First, as a more general introduction into studying fan practices through the lens of experientiality, I would like to highlight Nybro Petersen's (ibid., 33) starting point: according to her, fan studies scholarship supports the idea that "being a fan is a particular way of approaching the world around you throughout the life course." Thus, as Nybro Petersen continues, "we may understand being a fan as a particular sensibility or an openness to meaning-production of the surrounding culture." This argument also offers insight into the phenomenology of the fan experience: Fans are often situated in the world in specific ways and are, furthermore, relating to it in specific ways. After all, fans' cultural production practices often flow outside the mere fan objects and manifest as a more general way of interacting with the surrounding world and its meanings. In other words, fans do not interact with their fan object inside a vacuum—instead, the fannish subject positions also carry over into the wider lived reality of the individual fan.

Nybro Petersen (2022, 33–34) argues that it is through *play moods* that fans construct and maintain their fan play—moreover, play moods function as ways in which the player relates to the surrounding world. According to Nybro Petersen (ibid., 35), play moods are materially, historically, and socially constructed and maintained by fans, and can further also be seen as a form of labor that "sets a tone for participatory culture." Play moods can take the form of fans reading and rereading fan fiction, rewatching shows, or going through video clips of favorite public appearances (ibid., 37). Nybro Petersen's analysis highlights play moods as a form of fan activity and community building labor, although she also discusses play moods as an attunement—a way of connecting with and relating to the world. In a similar vein, Lars Geer Hammershøj (2022) examines the different stages of the moods of play. In the initial stage of

play, as Hammershøj (ibid., 336) argues, the play mood may be experienced as "a general openness towards new ideas," while in the later stages, "the mood is related to the flow of play and concerns how the new and imaginative idea gives rise to new possibilities for thinking, acting and expressing oneself." Play moods, then, are useful, as they let us imagine the experientiality of fandom practices through the notion of being in a specific mood.

What kind of playful moods and practices, then, could be viewed as ARMYs' play moods? One intriguing notion could be found in many survey replies: theorizing—as a way of being in the world and engaging with BTS' content—often means being on constant guard and lookout for hints, references, and clues:

> A picture in the back, a writing in another language, a passing glimpse of an event, every detail is taken into account because this has been proven important in the past. … It became obvious that information is time-sensitive and this is an important part of army fandom culture in general. BTS publishes material in advance and out of order. Fans judge the timeline of BTS recording in real time based on hair color, clothes and what the members say, and this is useful when it comes to figuring out the more cryptic material that they publish. (Ana, Croatia)

> Theorizing within the context of BTS means analyzing content like music videos, lyrics, context clues and references to other content to find a greater meaning that connects all the works. Theorizing here also means puzzling together what the content creators offer. It means questioning every piece of media for clues. (Eve, Germany)

Theorizing encompasses multimodal ways of taking in and interpreting the content put out by BTS. Every surface in BTS's content, around the members, or even on the members—as highlighted by Leen below—could be significant and act as a tool for storytelling:

> Through the MVs [music videos], the images, the lyrics or spoken quotes in the MV, the message behind it, in albums, awards shows' sets, their clothes, or even the choreography. Basically everything they drop might be BU [Bangtan Universe].

In this way, the experiential potential of theorizing seems to encourage fandom members to adopt a playful positioning—or play mood—that allows ARMYs to be completely tuned into their surroundings. Ana emphasizes the time-sensitivity of theorizing, which further underlines theorizing as a cognitive space of being, or a mood. In ARMY's case, it means being attuned to BTS and the group's content. As Katsi from Belarus suggests, theorizing can be defined as

>[m]atching the dots of BTS' art and thoughts. As there's something they always tell us. The company and the artists often give us clues, and we got used to be on guard every time.

Furthermore, the "mood" or "being on guard" may be activated outside of the interactions with BTS and the group's content. As Rozenn from France suggests, the company's motive for placing hints and creating an intertextual puzzle may be to make ARMYs "think about Bangtan at random times of the day without producing more content by themselves." Rozenn adds that such a phenomenon happens visually more than textually; for instance when seeing specific types of clothes in a shop. Another way to think of theorizing as a kind of mood was proposed by Siren from Pakistan, who intriguingly linked theorizing to a reflex:

>[W]ith the overload of content, everything keeps adding and dots start connecting without knowing. And once you feel that you are truly part of ARMY, it kind of becomes a reflex to see or hear something and link it to something else.

In this way, the reflexive experientiality of BTS seeps into the everyday surroundings and reality of ARMY and thus modifies the ways of visually experiencing the world and being in the world. The interaction that is, through theorizing, constructed between BTS and ARMY seems to often take the form of a ludic language of its own. However, mastering a language requires repetition, practice, and learning the vocabulary. Even play itself can, as Sicart (2014, 18) states, be seen as a language and way of being in the world. I am interested in the specific playful positionings and forms that ARMYs' theorizing practices embody as they navigate the web of BTS' content. Next, I would like to find out if ARMYs apply specific ways and patterns of organizing the content as they playfully engage with BTS.

3.4.1 Theorizing—experiential fluidity or a manifestation of Lévi-Strauss' wild thought?

Marco Caracciolo (2019, 116) uses the notion of *experiential fluidity* to describe the experientiality that fictional worlds offer. As I pointed out earlier, BTS' content cannot be described as a contained "storyworld" with a coherent and linear narrative, but Caracciolo's term can still be used to examine ARMY's theorizing practices. According to Caracciolo (ibid.), scholars have, in the past, mainly emphasized the cognitive stability of storyworlds. Thus, examining the experiential fluidity stimulated by BTS' content may be more helpful than analyzing ARMYs activities as something bound purely by logic. This is, of course, also what allows me to approach the experiences of ARMYs from a phenomenological point of view.

ARMYs' theorizing often seems to be marked by creativity, fluidity, and freedom. As Shin from Venezuela notes, theorizing is a "way to develop and manifest our own creativity, to look at a situation from different points of view and analyze its possible outcomes." It is important to state that the often effortless flow of social media and digital platforms has an influence on ARMYs meaning-making and theorizing activities. The ease of navigating the digital content allows fans to construct a semiotic and intertextual database of images, motifs, symbols, and recurring themes. By "semiotic" I am referring to the philosophical notion that symbols and signs are forms of communication. In the study of art history, for instance, this could mean that certain symbols, such as specific objects or themes included in paintings, have come to culturally represent and mean certain things (see Lorenz 2016). The fundamental idea of semiotics is also discussed by Icarus from the United States:

> As they have a huge, diverse audience from all across the globe, using internationally renown media is necessary to fully execute their thematic connections for everyone to understand (e.g., we all know what the story of Icarus means, and so including these details in a music video automatically gives everyone an idea of what the song's primary theme is – something that a strictly Korean piece may not allow). This is made possible partially due to the intellectual prowess inherent within the BTS members, who are quite well-read and have interests in psychology, art, and literature, especially two of the main lyricists Kim Namjoon and Min Yoongi.

Icarus, the character from Greek mythology, is known as a mythic character but also as a metaphor for flying too close to the sun; for being too ambitious or confident and suffering the dire consequences. According to CedarBough Saeji (2020, 50), the companies behind K-pop groups and artists have chosen to liberally integrate non-Korean—often Western—elements and intertextual references. As Saeji (ibid.) notes, using non-Korean cultural elements and intertextual references has helped the Korean music industry to overcome barriers—furthermore, it is a way for K-pop to signal and show "that the K-pop industry wants to be part of a larger conversation." Thus, as Icarus' survey response highlights, familiar themes and intertextual references offer ARMYs something familiar to grasp hold of. Indeed, Saeji (ibid., 51) writes that the intertextual links provide international audiences "a moment of grounding and familiarity, welcoming them into the fantasy world of K-pop." In this way, the transcultural meanings and references included in BTS' content can also create a form of playfulness that is specifically cultural in nature: As Saeji (ibid., 60) aptly concludes, K-pop's inherent intertextuality with its "links to familiar and widely known texts" allows people to enjoy K-pop as a "new field of cultural play" instead of simply a "foreign language."

Returning to semiotics, it should be noted that I am applying semiotics rather loosely, as different "signs" and symbols could mean a myriad of different things to different people. This is intriguingly illuminated by Siren, who writes about the different experiences of BTS songs and albums:

> Every song has a feel or a persona of its own which can be described in relation to colors, sharpness, brightness, lines, depth etc. I find myself thinking of a song like 'Seoul' when I see art that is related to the colors grey or blue because to me, that is the feel of that song or album. Same for Hopeworld [the debut mixtape of BTS member, J-Hope], I feel that street art and even so in Pakistan where truck art is so vibrant and bright, it rings in similarity to the persona and feel of Hopeworld to me.

Having contextual knowledge of BTS' motifs, images and themes does often enable ARMYs to move deftly in a fluid, intertextual network of meanings. The experiential fluidity mentioned by Caracciolo is a useful notion for explaining the ease and fluidity with which ARMYs navigate the cosmos of BTS' content, and semiotics help to understand the databases that ARMYs cognitively create to help with theorizing. However, as Katharina Lorenz (2016, 114) states, all forms of semiotics are anti-existentialist in that they do not view humans as the primary agents of meaning-making. Instead, as Lorenz (ibid.) notes, semiotics "understand signs as catalysts for the forging and directing of human perception." This thesis is, of course, primarily interested in the knowledge practices and meaning-making strategies of ARMY. The goal of fans who interpret content or playfully engage with it is not always to arrive at any specific or "right" interpretation. Sometimes it is the process of theorizing itself that is meaningful, and ARMYs might engage in creative play riddled with possibilities rather than go looking for solutions and definitive explanations.

Looking at the experientiality of digital social media platforms may offer us another way to think of the imaginative play mentioned by survey respondent Min Holly. Frissen (2015) examines the ways in which social media and digital platforms have shifted the ways of thinking and cognitively organizing content. According to Frissen (2015, 153–154), digital playgrounds function as innovation labs that invite play and experimentation—furthermore, they invite users to constantly keep discovering new things. Frissen's starting point highlights the fundamental nature of digital platforms, where different brands and companies seek to connect with audiences and cultivate loyal fanbases. However, the most helpful and fascinating notion provided by Frissen is one relating to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' idea of the *wild thought*.

In his seminal work of structural anthropology, *La Pensée sauvage* (2021[1962]), Lévi-Strauss seeks to question the ethnocentrism of Western thought and science. By studying how the "untamed" thought—unrestricted by modern science—functions in indigenous societies, Lévi-Strauss manages to not only deconstruct colonialist prejudices that deem Western thought superior, but he also develops the notion of the *bricoleur*. For Lévi-Strauss, the bricoleur, or tinkerer, is a manifestation of the wild thought: The bricoleur uses everything in her surroundings as tools or objects that help her to create something new from previously utilized materials; materials that already have their own known "history of use" (Frissen 2015, 155). The logic and mental organization of the tinkerer bears striking similarities to the playful theorizing practices of ARMY.

Through theorizing, ARMYs have developed an organization system for the images, symbols, signs, clues, and references that show up in BTS' content, and this cognitive practice—way of being in the world, or mood—is marked by its almost flow-like, reflexive experientiality that usually occurs instantaneously with new BTS content. As soon as ARMYs come into contact with new content that seems to symbolically or intertextually resonate, they adopt a playful, knowledge-gathering mindset that allows them to consider the different uses and meanings of the presented content. Frissen (2015, 156) writes that the wild thought manifests itself as a

> different way of mentally organizing what we perceive around us. By systematically labeling and classifying what we perceive in our everyday environment, we structure our thinking. By organizing we see the coherence, cause and effect, and possibilities to combine and recombine. This process generates explanatory concepts, like myths of creation or technological discoveries and innovations.

ARMYs navigate BTS' content as bricoleurs and tinkerers who utilize an organized mental database as a tool for assigning meaning to BTS' content. Lemon from Germany describes theorizing as "the fanbase's collective beehive mind scanning," which emphasizes the often social nature of theorizing. Here I am intrigued specifically by the notion of *scanning*, as it brings us back to the phenomenology of theorizing. Scanning functions as a way for ARMYs to mentally organize and consider all the "histories of use" of specific symbols, images, themes, or narratives that show up in BTS' content. This, according to many survey replies, seems to happen rather fluidly—almost like a reflex, as mentioned by Siren. Some ARMYs note that there are also large fan-made databases that feature recurring symbols, themes, and other narrative units used in BTS' audiovisual storytelling. Such ARMY-generated databases seem to function almost folkloristically and are reminiscent of a form of oral history that is

passed on to new ARMY members. As Ringland et al. (2022, 13) note, the record keeping and media curation practices, which could be viewed as a form of an oral history of the community, serve the purpose of both educating newer ARMY but also help to build a sense of community. This aspect of theorizing is brought up by Hollie and Mikayla:

> From what I've seen, the biggest strategy in ARMY theorizing is a kind of collective idea exchange. … Often, someone will also compile everything into a single place, such as a website or a Twitter thread, and other ARMY/baby ARMY will refer to that as a theorization resource. (Hollie, United States)

> In 2020 I came across this one webpage that had hyperlinks and explanations for all these BTS related theories. It was impressive. I would say that's how theories are shared among the fandom. There are also many thorough threads on Twitter that I've bookmarked. (Mikayla, United States)

Furthermore, Frissen discusses Lévi-Strauss' notion of magical forms of thinking. According to Frissen (2015, 156) magical thinking springs from the fundamental human need for order, but it also ties in with a "way of understanding the world around us in which immediate perception and imagination play a major role." Magical thinking, however, is also closely related to *mythological thinking*, which I will examine in detail in the next chapter. To provide a brief contextualizing description: Lily Alexander (2016; 2017; 2020) illustrates how mythological forms of storytelling are still used in today's fictional narratives, which often rely on riddles, much like BTS' storytelling. According to Alexander (2020, 51), the first mythological systems required humans to read the secret magical signs that could be found in the surrounding natural environment. As humans deciphered the riddles of their surroundings, they were able to construct symbolic databases—as in, produce knowledge about their culture. Such mythological databases, according to Alexander (2016, 19), became "the man's symbolic map of reality." ARMYs, too, are using similar mythological databases and symbolic maps of reality as they navigate BTS' intertextual constellation of meanings.

As an example that highlights specifically how magical thinking functions, Frissen (2015, 156) introduces a hunter-gatherer community discussed by Lévi-Strauss: The medicine women and men of a hunter-gatherer community in the Philippines extensively studied their surroundings by using their senses, and through the detailed, inexhaustible knowledge and experimentation, they were able to produce deep "insight into the ecological balance between all the species"—animals and plants alike. According to Frissen (2015), today's digital media users (in my thesis's context, fans) often use their imagination in ways similar to the hunter-gatherers. When ARMYs consume and interpret new BTS content, the playful practice of

theorizing seems to be permeated by such forms of magical (and mythological) thinking, as it is precisely imagination, perception and being "tuned into" one's surroundings that play a key part in ARMY's practices. When fans embrace a theorizer's mood or position in a digital setting, they are taking in everything in their surroundings and using BTS' content as their treasury for meaning-making. ARMYs are considering the possible creative uses of the images, themes, symbols, and other narrative units. Like bricoleurs who rely on magical and mythological thinking, fans organize their perception by making use of their often extensive knowledge of the "histories of use" of the content they encounter.

Frissen (2015, 157) also notes that wild thought functions "more in terms of possibilities than solutions": thus, to the tinkerer, her surroundings are a "trésor or a treasure chest of experiences that contain opportunities." This, specifically, is embodied by ARMY as a theorizing fandom. It is the "what if" of ARMYs interpretive and meaning-making practices that lends itself so well to Lévi-Strauss' notion of the bricoleur. Many respondents expressed that there is, in all content put out by BTS, the possibility of embedded meanings that need to be interpreted or viewed as something potentially important. An ARMY from the Netherlands, Elle, elaborated on this aspect:

> I would define theorizing in this case as finding one of the possible answers behind symbolism (if that makes sense). The possibility of something being a symbol is the first thing to look at. The second being what the object or item could symbolize.

The logic of "what if"—as in, what could be a possibility, what could mean something, or be imagined—also ties in with theorizing as a playful way of being in the world. "What If" content is specifically discussed by Mittell (2014), who examines the strategies of transmedia storytelling. According to Mittell (2014, 273), instead of posing canonical certainties, transmedia offers hypothetical possibilities and thus invites viewers to envision alternative stories. Mittell (2014, 274) distinguishes between "What Is" and "What If" content, the former representing content that works as a puzzle with proper solutions. "What Is" as an approach of the fandom is discussed by a survey respondent from the United States:

> My favorite are the spoilers – ARMY are notorious for reading into everything and overthinking every comment hoping for a hint of what's next. I love when I go back and realize that the band showed us something, or told us something, but we didn't realize it yet.

The survey responses indicate that to ARMY, BTS' content often encompasses both "What Is" and "What If" potential. Sometimes fans may consume BTS' audiovisual media and

theorize in order to "connect the dots" and uncover the hidden meanings. Such a puzzle or hunt for easter eggs and intertextual connections is still, undoubtedly, playful in nature. However, at other times, ARMYs adopt a "What If" approach that is primarily motivated by creativity, imagination, and free play. Mittell (2014, 274) notes that such an approach may look more like "performative role-playing" that has no canonical narrative outcome, but still has playful potential.

3.4.2 "Putting on clown makeup": the playful, carnivalesque discourses of ARMY

Many fans mentioned "clowning," or "putting on the clown makeup," which is a reference to the often playful and sometimes performative nature of theorizing. Seupi from the United States explains the relationship between theorizing and clowning:

> I think most of the time fans will call their theorizing "clowning" and use the clown emoji when theorizing stuff online. I think it is a shared value that most theorizing isn't totally serious and that we all accept that it could wind up being totally wrong.

Thus, ARMYs clown discourse—that is often humorous, self-caricaturizing, and ironizing in nature—paints theorizing in a playful and carnivalesque light. Sicart (2014, 4) discusses carnivalesque play in his work *Play Matters*: The carnival of the Middle Ages was a symptom of freedom in the sense that it managed to subvert conventions and institutions during the time of the celebration. This sounds very much like the carnivalesque, festive period that usually takes place during BTS' comeback season as ARMYs try to decipher what the teasers and hints could mean. A significant part of ARMY's playful theorizing practices seems to embrace such a convention subverting logic: as redapples notes, "taking ownership of the story" could be seen as a shared value of the fandom. Furthermore, redapples adds that ARMYs value "the freedom to create stories that is not dictated by the corporate label." Regarding fans' playful treatment of media, Booth (2015a, 16–17) notes that individuals who take part in media play do so as a performative, playful spectacle. Through play that thrives on imaginative freedom, fans interact with media texts in ways wholly unanticipated by both producers and fans themselves (2015a, 16).

According to Sicart (2014, 4), "[t]hrough carnivalesque play, we express ourselves, taking over the world to laugh at it and make sense of it too." Playfulness, as Sicart (2014, 24) puts it, is "the triumph of the subjective laughter, of the disruptive irony over rules and commands." Appropriation, too, plays a large part here. Sicart (ibid.) writes that playfulness

can be viewed as the "carnivalesque domain of the appropriation." Appropriation is, of course, a fundamental part of fan communities, where fans play with, appropriate, and remix official content. Furthermore, the clown discourse also emphasizes the uncertain nature of the interpretations and theories. As Kai from the United States points out, the "clown emoji" symbolizes that "the theory is often a dream ideal, but often wrong." Similarly, an ARMY from the United Kingdom notes that a shared value of the fandom is "putting on clown makeup – when a theory turns out to be wrong (which it often does)." Thus, clowning—both as a discourse and an activity—sheds light on the notion of theorizing as a shared stage that is concerned with the playful possibilities of ideas and theories. It exists as a space, a way of being in the world, where ARMYs keep their "clown makeup at arm's length" (Avery). It is a usually unserious play mood or a fun shared realm, where the imaginative play mentioned by Min Holly reigns. Through such carnivalesque playful appropriation and performance, ARMYs "bring freedom to a context" (Sicart 2014, 29).

3.5 Playful perspectives on self and community: personalizing the world through playful expression

> Play creates its objects and communities. To play is to make a world, through objects, with others, for others, and for us. It is a creative way of expression, shared but ultimately personal.

> (Sicart 2014, 17)

Lastly, I will focus on how playfully theorizing is experienced by ARMYs as way to personalize the world and the surrounding media spaces through personal playful expression. This is also tied to on the one hand the freedom of theorizing and on the other hand the often socially constructed (see Ringland et al. 2022, 14) and collectively maintained boundaries of theorizing. For many respondents, theorizing celebrates the freedom to imbue BTS' content with personal expressions and meanings. However, for many, the playful, sometimes even clownlike mood that often surrounds theorizing seems to also create safe spaces for self-construction and forms of social testing. Such a notion is discussed by Henricks (2015, 73), who notes that play is a form of "existential testing": through the agency gained through play, individuals can hone their personal strategies and schemas in a playful environment. Thus, play can be viewed as a social laboratory, where people become aware of their own capacities for social agency and are encouraged to explore different themes and tensions (ibid., 130). Such an attitude towards theorizing is highlighted by survey respondent Hollie, who notes that

"theorizing feels like a fun puzzle I get to solve, with the added bonus of no social risks if I 'get it wrong.' " Essentially, theorizing seems to allow ARMYs to contribute with their own personal expression, knowledge, and skill-set in an experimental space that is playful, accessible, and—perhaps most importantly—safe.

Ringland et al. (2022) aptly refer to this safe, playful space as ARMY's "Magic Shop." To ARMYs, this refers not only to the song "Magic Shop" released in 2018, but it is also the comforting place presented in the song's lyrics. the Magic Shop exists as a place within the heart; it is a place that offers healing, compassion, love, and a listening ear, which is communicated by BTS' leader and rapper, Kim Namjoon (RM), through the lyrics "I do believe your galaxy, I want to listen to your melody." Ringland et al. are building on the concept of the magic circle, which in play theory refers to a specific, defined play space, where the potential for play exists and the rules and conventions of play reign. The term was first briefly mentioned by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1938) but was later re-conceptualized and popularized by Zimmerman and Salen (2003) to also apply to the digital game spaces. Thus, as Ringland et al. (2022, 16) conclude, "ARMY's Magic Shop exists in the spaces where ARMY and BTS go for playful activities and to seek comfort from one another."

The playfulness of ARMYs activities does not only imbue the world and BTS' content with personal expression and encourage fandom members to put their own unique skills, knowledges, and social capacities to use, but there is another important aspect to consider. Boovi, an ARMY from India, and lemon, from Germany, write:

> It simply entertaining, and educational as I have learnt many thing from searching about stuff realated to the BTS content. Moreover from this tiring life where we just work for the sake of work... We learn nothing as it does not intrest us. So I get to know thing that intrest me and I get to use my brain at. (Boovi)

> Life is often painful and I believe they hope to make that more bearable with through music but also art and further purposeful activity. (lemon)

Especially for younger generations, there may exist a collective sense of hopelessness towards "working for the sake of work" in a world where many may find it increasingly hard to become successful in the work sphere or even make a living. Boovi's survey reply highlights the notion that creative, playful fandom spaces may offer a sense of empowerment and fulfillment—essentially, a place where the payoffs of one's own agency and contribution are seen and felt immediately. Henricks (2015, 45) aptly traces the different experiences offered by work and play(fulness) by stating that "workers focus on the products they create" and,

furthermore, "the usefulness of those products in settings outside the circumstances of their making." Thus, as Henricks (2015, 45) continues, the "orientation is instrumental," as "[w]orkers create in order to acquire things they do not possess." Players, in turn, "change the world by turning it to their purposes"; they "create in order to know and feel" (Henricks 2015, 45). Similarly, McGonigal (2011) has examined how games and a gameful mindset may transform the world towards something better. She argues that games offer meaningful social connections that help players to experience a sense of belonging. Together, players strive towards something big and see the immediate benefits of each individual's contribution. As McGonigal (2011, 97–98) notes, this—the opportunity to contribute—in itself, is meaningful, even if the products created may not be "of real value." Through playfully theorizing, ARMYs are creating "newly constructed moments" (Henricks 2015, 43) rather than tangible products. By being playful, fandom members are saturating the content of BTS with expressions of their own while simultaneously often nurturing the collaborative aspect of the fandom experience.

As Sicart (2014, 30) aptly puts it, individuals personalize the world through playfulness; it is a way to make it one's own and bring the free personal expression of playfulness to a world outside of play. The interactions between ARMYs and BTS' content are not ontologically a game, and neither are ARMYs truly playing by any beforehand specified play rules. Still, the playful attitude of fandom members brings the free, creative, and explorative nature of play into ARMYs' everyday activities. Furthermore, as ARMYs are putting their own skills to use and drawing knowledge from their own lives, fans are, in a way, also playing with their own views, hopes, and feelings, instead of merely interacting with objects (BTS' content). In other words, fans' interactions with BTS' content are not separate from each individual fan's life contexts, and as Toot from the United States explains,

> analytical theorizing of music videos considering different hidden meanings,
> allows people to project their own experiences to enjoy the music more deeply.
> Even if it's not what the artist intended, the projection receivers of art put onto art
> is a very important aspect.

Such a notion is highlighted by Henricks (2015, 68), who states that "our play is not merely interaction with the external objects; it is interaction with our own sometimes deeply cherished visions. In brief, our play with objects is inevitably self-play."

ARMYs' playful behavior is part of many fandom member's daily practices. It is, as stated earlier, a way of being in the world and relating to the surroundings through specific playful

moods. In this way, the play practices embedded within daily life are also often tied to subject positions and identity work in the sense that individuals also construct their identities through their interactions in different communication technologies, such as the social media. As the surrounding culture and its technologies become increasingly playful, so does our identity construction. This is the thesis of Frissen et al. (2015, 35), who argue that communication media exist at the very center of contemporary identity construction, which is mediated and impacted by the ludic technologies that surround us. Thus, according to Frissen et al. (ibid., 11), the notion of ludic identity construction best describes the reflexive ways in which individuals today construct their identities. The playfulness that emerges through ARMY's theorizing activities can in this way have deeply personal and meaningful impacts. Fandom members may "construct moments" (see Henricks 2015, 43) and share fleeting playful expressions, but these passing moments may still be significant ways of constructing one's identity—or negotiating different subject positions—through daily fandom practices. Thus, cultural meaning-making within fandom and the identities of people are often woven together. As British sociologist Paul Willis (1978, 100) aptly puts it, "Cultural practices of meaning-making are intrinsically self-motivated as aspects of identity-making and self-construction: in making our cultural worlds we make ourselves." This is what ARMYs, too, are inherently doing. Through playful interactions with BTS' content and other ARMYs, fans are personalizing the world and making the surrounding digital networks their meaning-imbued playground.

3.5.1 The boundaries of playfulness

One of the survey questions requires respondents to think about any limits that they might have come across when theorizing. The responses indicate that, although theorizing can often take the form of a playful and free activity, socially negotiated and maintained boundaries still exist. This is also pointed out by Ringland et al. (2022, 14), who note that ARMY members tacitly acknowledge the dual nature of their play: there exists a specific time for play, but the playful space is still, at the same time, viewed as real life. Thus, as Ringland et al. (ibid.) maintain, the boundaries between these places are socially constructed and established through norms. Ringland et al. (ibid.) furthermore note that ARMYs are very aware of when the content can be used for humor and recognize when a playful attitude may negatively impact either BTS or ARMYs themselves. Many survey respondents who discuss limits comment that theorizing about BTS' private lives is largely deemed inappropriate by fandom members:

> Another value we have is limiting invasive speculation about BTS themselves and sticking to theorizing their content and not their personal lives. People do it, but I've noticed its frowned upon. (Marie, United States)

Speculating and theorizing about the BTS member's private lives may in this way "violate" the play mood or the socially constructed and collectively maintained playful space. As another survey respondent from the United States explains, "when people cross the line into making inappropriately specific claims, as if they are fact about private matters of the boys, it's uncomfortable." ARMYs' playful activities surround and permeate the fictional content put out by BTS, but fans' activities also center around content that is bound to reality (see Ringland et al. 2022, 16).

What seems to be essential is the skill to—often quickly, as theorizing can be time-sensitive—identify and evaluate the nature of BTS's content. Survey respondent exhagustd discusses the relationship between the "cinematic world" content and the BTS content that may be more personal in nature:

> I think in most cases I feel free to make interpretations with group content that's clearly related to some kind of cinematic world; however, if a song or output is extremely personal and doesn't seem related to any storyline then I think it would be slightly disrespectful to theorize in the way we normally do.

The practice of quickly evaluating which content is part of a possible "cinematic" or fictional universe, and which in turn is tied to BTS personal lives, can be seen as yet another manifestation of how ARMYs have become apt "cartographers" or "tinkerers" of BTS' intertextual content. Here, it is helpful to recall what I discussed earlier: ARMYs are tuned into their surroundings and often constructing cognitive databases of the content they encounter. The existing knowledge is then used to quickly "scan" the content, its possible contexts, and histories of use. These interpretive conventions of the fandom also tie in with the socially constructed boundaries of the fandom's theorizing. As Jenkins (2013, 89) states, the socialization into a fandom often requires for an individual to learn "the right way" to read and employ the community's specific interpretive conventions. Then again, there is play, which, according to Henricks (2015, 174) "celebrates people's abilities to craft their own responses to circumstances free from interference."

A few respondents expressed that while theorizing often feels free, some social interference may still limit it. Some survey respondents mentioned that they may be limited by others' theories: Sally (United States) notes that "I would likely feel limited by watching or reading

other individual's theories, which is why I don't. I like finding connections on my own." In a similar vein, Sam, also from the United States, mentions that "the only thing that would limit me is if I would allow myself to be boxed in by other's existing interpretations." Davi, from the Philippines, furthermore, elaborates on the matter:

> Personally I believe I'm free to make interpretations and find connections because I'm very interested to it. But seeing other ARMYs who's way more genius than mine I ended up realizing that there's some limits on the creativity I'm doing when I have my own theory.

As the survey responses above highlight, ARMYs often challenge Fish's (1980) concept of interpretive communities that form around shared interpretations of texts. Fish (ibid., 171) proposes that the interpretive community's strategies for interpretation determine what is read and interpreted. However, ARMYs may, in different ways, refuse to let a pre-determined context affect their interpretation strategies. Some respondents also emphasize their personally drawn limits, which often relate to staying within "canon" content, taking hints only from official sources (Latte, United States), or basing theories solely on previously proven facts. Gigi, a respondent from Argentina, states that "I always limit myself to what's explicitly stated, I don't like reaching", and Dutchie, from the United States, similarly notes that "I can only speak for myself, and I base any theories on past facts/reality. I also think it all depends on the type of ARMY; everyone flocks to their own echo chamber."

Theorizing as a playful practice is thus highly contextual. As Sicart (2014, 6) stresses, the context of play is a messy "network of people, rules, negotiations, locations, and objects. Play happens in a tangled world of people, things, spaces, and cultures." This, of course, holds true in the case of ARMY, too, as highlighted by the survey responses. The fandom is certainly not a monolith, and its social boundaries are constantly negotiated in a space comprised of different individuals, objects, and values.

3.5.2 Theorizing as a playful tool for cultural and personal meaning-making

Although it can be argued that companies create an overflow of content shared on different platforms as a marketing tool to maximize fans' time spent on the products, most ARMYs who responded to the survey expressed that they were initially fascinated by the authenticity of BTS—specifically when that authenticity takes the form of emotional, impactful stories and content. Indeed, what matters most in the context of this thesis is what fans do with the content; how they play with it and creatively engage with it in often unanticipated ways. The

lived experiences of ARMYs highlight the impacts, passions, joys and tools of self-construction that playfully engaging with BTS' content can offer. As Celia Pearce (2009, 125) notes, play has often—even within the field of game studies—been seen as a waste of time. However, examining ARMY's playful every-day activities specifically through theorizing offers insight into a multitude of meaning-making and community building practices of the fandom. It is important to note that although ARMYs' playfulness often simply makes engaging with BTS' content more fun, play is still, fundamentally, a meaning-making activity. It is a way to personalize the world and mold it to an expression of one's own creativity. As Henricks (2015, 64) succinctly puts it, through play, "we try to find out what we can do in and to the world." To many ARMYs, theorizing opens up spaces for different ways of experiencing BTS' content and the world. Furthermore, new and innovative ways of thinking and organizing content spring forth as fans interact with BTS' content and each other, as highlighted by the fluidly functioning bricoleuristic practices. ARMYs' knowledge practices are, in this way, an apt example of how Lévi-Strauss's notion of the wild though functions—both on a personal and social level—in the context of a massive, transcultural fandom. Indeed, as Frissen (2015, 161) writes:

> [W]e use our magical powers of imagination in the confrontation of old and new and develop our own differentiated frame of reference and rich and colorful language and imagery to organize our impressions and exorcize them to a certain degree. The creativity we show in this has an almost magical nature.

It is fair to propose, then, that fans—with their diverse knowledge-making practices—exist as bricoleurs at the very center of the contemporary digital culture.

Pearce (2009, 51) discusses the meaning and definition of culture specifically in the context of media, where "culture" mainly refers to entertainment, the arts, and literature. However, as Pearce (ibid.) adds, to sociologists and anthropologists, culture has a broader meaning and encompasses an

> entire repertoire of collective symbols and forms of meaning-making, including language, arts, ritual and mythology, and everyday practices that are shared by a given group or society.

In the context of my thesis, I view ARMYs' playful practices as a part of such a wider, more comprehensive arena of cultural meaning-making, with its own structures of interpretation—its own conventions, symbols, and ways of viewing the world. Examining theorizing as a transformative practice of the fandom reveals that for many ARMYs, theorizing is a playful

interpretive activity, but it may also be a specific way of being in the world and organizing and collecting information. Furthermore, the digital audiovisual fandom spaces create another intriguing layer and often modify the ways in which meanings are constructed and shared.

The experientiality of theorizing often takes the form of a social, carnivalesque celebration, which usually happens during "comeback" season. However, at its core, theorizing encourages fans to playfully explore the different "What If's"—the imagined alternative stories and realities—of BTS' content. Indeed, according to Sebastian Deterding (2015, 43), games are places where the feeling that "another world is possible" can be explored. Although interacting with BTS' content cannot be seen as a game, ARMYs bring a sense of playful experientiality to their interpretive practices. Perhaps it is fandoms, then, that are teaching us creative and innovative ways to bring a playful quality to everyday practices—whether those practices are meant to simply be fun or generate entirely new ways of being in the world and experiencing content. As Jos de Mul (2015, 341) states, during the reflective uncertainty of the present age, it is all the more important to develop playful identities, to exercise world openness, and to remain playful— even as adults. Whether theorizing takes the form of imaginative play, a culture of discovery, puzzle-solving, an intertextual easter egg hunt, or clowning, it is still, in its essence, an ode to playfulness.

4 "They want us to be educated": ARMY's democratic, transcultural knowledge and learning spaces

4.1 Fandoms: classrooms or economies?

As the previous chapter illustrates, the theorizer's mindset is a playful one: ARMYs playful theorizing fills the nooks and crevices of BTS' intertextual network, rhizomatically attaching onto its structures, sprouting new creative viewpoints and innovative knowledge practices. Theorizing is more than an activity in the sense that it is also a discourse; it is a way of speaking and assigning meaning to the fandom's practices. In this chapter, I will thus examine the meanings, philosophies, and values attached to the theorizer position. What do fandom members mean when they speak of themselves as theorizers, and what kind of knowledge and learning practices are attached to the theorizer position or subjectivity? If the previous chapter seeks to outline how fans playfully interact with the content of BTS, in this chapter I will focus on the skills, knowledges, literacies, values, and learning practices accumulated and adopted through theorizing. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to understand BTS' fandom as a *space* for knowledge and learning.

I would like to propose Paul Booth's (2015b) "Fandom: The Classroom of the Future" as a starting point for the themes and discussions that are addressed in this chapter. Fandoms are, according to Booth, places where learning, writing, and critical thinking continue once formal schooling is completed; they are spaces that promote knowledge practices and give individuals the tools for life-long learning. In his article, Booth (ibid., 2.8) discusses the shift that has occurred in conjunction with the popularization of fandoms: The media industries often portray fandoms and their audiences as passive, uncritical, and consumeristic. According to Booth (ibid., 1.3), such a mindset is a part of the wider neoliberal phenomenon, which has also brought forth the "neoliberal turn in fandom." In this context, fandoms are promoted as "capitalist enterprises" (ibid.). The viewpoint focuses on the free labor of fans in the late capitalist system and contextualizes the practices of fans through a heavily commercialized, consumerist lens. Here, as highlighted by De Kosnik (2012), the economic aspect of the entertainment sector is emphasized—whether that economy takes the form of the gift economy of fans (where fans freely circulate and create fan content for the enjoyment of other fans), the reputation economy (where creating fan content functions as a status cultivation device within the fandom), or the general digital economy.

Some scholars—especially during the earlier days of fan studies scholarship—have discussed the exploitative practices of the entertainment industries, where the digital publics' immaterial labor is exploited by a "capitalist formation" (Terranova 2000). Such standpoints often emphasize the highly consumerist role of fans within the entertainment industries. Furthermore, the K-pop industry itself is sometimes spoken of as an exploitative capitalist machine that views its idols as mere products and, in turn, its fandoms as capitalist enterprises that uncritically consume the content they are presented with. I recognize that fandom practices are a part of a large network of different shifting agencies and industries (see Booth 2015b, 2.1). However, in the context of this thesis, I am uninterested in viewing fandom as merely another pawn in the capitalist system. Instead of examining fandoms through a capitalist lens, I focus specifically on the creative, generative and productive knowledge and learning practices of fans. My emphasis in this chapter is on how ARMYs are constructing knowledge and learning spaces. Indeed, as Shannon Sauro (2017, 134) points out, many fans "go beyond mere consumption"; they "engage in discussion or creative and productive fan practices that lead to the development of a range of new skills and digital literacy practices."

Finally, it should be noted that a few survey respondents mentioned that Big Hit Music is most likely expanding BTS' intertextual transmedia universe and constantly churning out more content in order to make the company more money. Such a critical conclusion is, of course, completely realistic. However, it remains important to focus on the meaningful lived experiences that many fans place high value on when they speak of their fan engagements. Such experiences often have real-world personal impacts. As this chapter highlights, interacting with fannish objects often functions as an affectively charged self-development tool through which fans may, for instance, take part in informal learning and hone their digital literacies. Furthermore, as Booth (2015b, 3.7) aptly argues, it is not enough to consider fandoms as something people "do"—a mere practice—as a large part of being in fandom has to do with identity. For many ARMYs, the fandom may function as an important civic engagement and activism space, where individuals gain the opportunity to support important causes, such as ARMY's one million dollar donation in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in June 2020. Although I will not specifically examine how ARMY enables fans to take part in activism and civic engagement practices, being in a fandom space is often fundamentally tied to the identity and values of the individual fan.

4.1.1 "Please use me, please use BTS to love yourself"

> I think the plot eventually is about self-love and how to first find the Map of the Soul. It's being explained in much different way like stories and arts, rather than just saying 'hey you should love yourself', etc.
>
> (Leen, Saudi Arabia)

As Joy from the Philippines recalls, during one of BTS' concerts, the leader[8], Kim Namjoon (known by his stage name, "RM"), encouraged fans to freely use BTS and the group's content to love themselves. The leader held his "ending ment"[9] in New York at the last concert of the North American leg of the group's Love Yourself Tour. The encouragement, "please use me, please use BTS to love yourself," is an important starting point, as it is precisely the transformative route of self-love encouraged by BTS that many ARMYs are embarking on to—in many different ways—enhance their quality of every-day life. Minnion from India summarizes that "loving your own self and speaking for own self for betterment of an individual is the most neglected but most important value that was learnt … within BTS content." Thus, it is important to emphasize that it is often specifically the members of BTS that inspire their fans: according to the survey data, it is the stories, personalities, and ambitions of the members that fans are, in most cases, touched, motivated, and inspired by.

Many survey respondents also mention that there is a sense of BTS and the company viewing the world and their fans positively. Furthermore, many ARMYs noted that BTS wants to encourage critical thinking and inspire learning. Such a notion is discussed by Sam:

> RM once said (can you tell yet how much of an RM fan I am? love them all though!) that "There are two ways to change the world. One is to be a revolutionary. One is to view the world positively. I would like to do both." (paraphrased) BTS's ability to combine what is traditionally considered 'high' and 'low' art is absolutely fascinating and to me it demonstrates the power of viewing things positively. It views BTS fans positively – believing them to be capable of curiosity and thought and insight needed to enjoy such works; and it views art institutions positively.

As the survey responses show, BTS' positive philosophy that encourages self-love—without resorting to toxic positivity and sugar-coating the more difficult aspects of the human

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[8] In K-pop groups, one member is usually chosen as the leader of the group. Sometimes the oldest member becomes the leader, but this is not always the case. Leaders may act as the spokesperson of the group; they may, for instance, represent the group during public appearances.

[9] In the context of K-pop, the ending ment is a form of a closing comment or statement. However, the introduction speeches of group members at the beginning of concerts, as well as the talks in the middle of concerts, can also be called ments.

experience—has a direct ripple effect on fandom members' values, knowledge practices, and personal development initiatives. The fandom's practices are not detached from the affectively felt and experienced impacts of the group's music, the members themselves, and the meanings found in lyrics and other content. BTS' sincerity and the group's readiness to also discuss the "deeper themes" are brought up by Kirsty (England):

> I think there are many deeper themes within BTS content that aren't readily explored in other K-Pop music. For example, a lot of the lyrical/thematic makes explicit reference to mental health and social issues. There's an honesty within the lyrical content which is not usually found within mainstream K-Pop. There's a big emphasis on theories of self, and intellectual/emotional improvement.

Thus, for many ARMYs who took the survey, it is meaningful that BTS talks with their fans in "intellectual terms" (Sam, United States). Furthermore, Katja (Austria) notes that BTS wants their fans "to be educated" and to "think for themselves." In this way, propelled by the desire to learn from BTS and to understand the presented meanings, the multidisciplinary knowledge-gathering and learning practices of ARMY may often lead fans down a route of meaning-seeking that spans a wide field of different topics and knowledges that fans would not otherwise have been exposed to.

In this chapter, I focus on three central survey questions or topics. Firstly, I asked respondents if BTS has inspired them to look for connections outside Bangtan Universe (BU) or the group's content. Thus, I will explore the different media and fields of knowledge that ARMYs have been led to explore. This is helpful as it allows me to more generally map the scope of fans' explorative intertextual practices before I delve further into the actual knowledge practices of ARMY. Another survey question gathered data on the values that fandom members associate with theorizing. Lastly, I asked if respondents could think of any skills that engaging with BTS' content taught them. Thus, I will examine how ARMYs conceptualize the different skills, literacies, and learning practices that they have embraced through their fan engagements. These three questions also allow me to examine specifically what kind of *knowledge spaces* are constructed through ARMY's fandom practices, and how these spaces are influenced by transcultural meaning-making, as digital fandom spaces today are intrinsically and ontologically transcultural in nature.[10] Fan communities are, as Morimoto and Chin (2017, 175) note, made up of people who "hail from a diversity of cultures: of

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[10] It should be noted that BTS' content itself is also transcultural in that it is an amalgamation or fusion of elements—such as the aesthetics, arts, myths—from different cultures (see Saeji 2020).

nation and language, but also race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and so on." The chapter concludes with a discussion that brings us back to old—even ancient—forms of meaning-making practices as I examine how phenomena such as mythmaking and fairytale culture may still, in intriguing ways, show up in ARMYs' fandom practices.

4.1.2 From Cumbrian dialect to discussions with Jungian analysts—the scope of ARMYs' knowledge exploration

As I have established, ARMYs who interact with BTS' content often find themselves caught up in a flow of interdisciplinary meanings and are, along the way, absorbing knowledge from a multitude of different fields, such as literature, mythology, and psychology as they seek to interpret the themes and meanings presented in the group's content. However, as the previous chapter that centered on playfulness showed, it is often the "journey" that ARMYs seem to take delight in. Thus, it is not necessarily about "cracking all the codes" and coming to the definitive, right interpretations. In other words, taking part in theorizing is, according to respondents, enjoyable in itself. Out of the 81 survey respondents, 68 respondents mention that they have, through BTS, been inspired or motivated to consume and familiarize themselves with other cultural products, such as books, art pieces, mythological characters, psychological theories, or philosophical concepts. As many ARMY members in the previous chapter stated, anything may be a hint; something that might be significant when it comes to interpreting the group's intertextual content.

In the responses, many ARMYs write about noticing, for instance, a specific book that a member is seen reading. In BTS' show, *BTS In the Soop* (2020), some group members are seen reading the South Korean novelist Sohn Won-Pyung's novel, *Almond* (2017). Later, Kyobo Bookstore, Korea's largest bookstore chain, reported that Sohn's novel was among the best sellers soon after the book had appeared on *BTS In the Soop*. This specific occurrence, among many others, sheds light on the immense power that BTS holds as cultural influencers and promoters of art. Specific books may appear in BTS' content, and even if they are photographed from far away, with the title often difficult to identify, ARMY will, in a matter of moments, find the book or any other cultural product, art piece, or work in question. This is discussed by Amari (United States):

> Most recently, Tae [BTS member Kim Taehyung/"V"] changed his profile picture on instagram to one where he was holding a book, the Shadow of a Crime by Hall Caine. I literally read through 80% of this book that was written in olde English just in case it was related to the comeback.

I want to highlight the specific phenomena mentioned by Amari, as it so clearly demonstrates fandom members' willingness to explore often completely unfamiliar—and perhaps, in the case of the Cumbrian dialect, slightly intimidating—content. However, for others, knowledge-gathering can also take a more casual form: Some respondents note that they search for X threads or analyses created by fellow fandom members, while others prefer to look up information through condensed and summarized sources, such as Wikipedia, to gain a more general overview without the necessity for a deeper dive. The latter approach is discussed by Seupi (United States):

> Sometimes they reference things like mythology, psychology, philosophy, or other similar things in their lyrics. I have an interest in those things as well, though I don't usually read whole books about them (usually just fall down Wikipedia rabbit holes), so there have been times I'm unfamiliar with something they referenced so I will go and look it up.

The notion of challenging oneself and adopting different knowledge-gathering tactics to understand BTS' contents is common amongst the ARMYs who responded to the survey. Firstly, many have picked up different books, such as Hermann Hesse's *Demian* (1919), which is mentioned by 23 respondents, who have either familiarized themselves with the book or read it after learning that BTS' *Wings* (2016) album and its "Blood Sweat & Tears" music video are inspired by *Demian*. Several other works within literature are also mentioned. Among these are works by Ursula K. Le Guin, Franz Kafka, and Haruki Murakami. Many respondents also discuss looking into or reading about psychology—mainly Carl Jung's theories as they are presented and summarized in Murray Stein's *Jung's Map of the Soul* (1998). BTS' albums *Map of the Soul: Persona* (2019) and *Map of the Soul: 7* (2020) were, as the names suggests, inspired by Stein's introductory book on Jungian analytical psychology. After learning that the albums were heavily inspired by his own work on Jung's school of thought, Stein engaged in a conversation with fandom members; he replied to fans' questions and analyzed BTS' album and song concepts through a Jungian lens. This, in itself, is an intriguing phenomena that illustrates how the pop-culture sphere of BTS may, at times, interact with areas of knowledge that would usually fall outside the scope of popular culture. Furthermore, survey respondents discuss philosophy (such as Nietzsche's existentialism), mythology (both Western—such as Greco-Roman—and Korean), different films, and artworks. Many respondents also note that they have been inspired to learn Korean because of BTS, or that they have looked into different cultural, social, and political aspects of South-Korea.

While many ARMYs used expressions such as "look up" or "look into," many also refer to their knowledge-gathering practices and information behavior as "research," "analysis," or "studying," thus emphasizing the theorizing, deeper learning, and critical thinking dimensions of their fan practices:

> I have studied Jungian psychology, I studied Nietzsche's philosophy, I researched in many fields of art and science. I did it for fun, to understand BTS contents but also to expand my own knowledge. (Angela, Italy)

Fandom members often conceptualize their information-seeking and knowledge attainment practices through perspectives that highlights the most frequently mentioned values associated with the fandom. I asked respondents if they can think of any commonly shared values of the fandom. Many mention curiosity, intellect, striving for knowledge, and a desire to learn and attain information across a wide field of (often multicultural) knowledges. By being a part of the fandom and engaging in different information practices, many people are, on a daily basis, interacting with an environment that encourages people to embrace an inquisitive and curious subject position. Again, as the data suggests, such attitudes are often motivated by the desire to follow BTS' example:

> They want to encourage exploration outside of our norms, and be open to learning about a wider world than the one we had previously lived in. It may be fanciful thinking, but it makes sense, doesn't it? (Han Ji Hye)

As Korobkova and Black (2014, 629) aptly point out, fandoms are full of young people who are developing literacy practices and fostering their relationships to different forms of media—thus, through fandom interactions, people develop their voices and reinforce positive attitudes toward media literacies. It is precisely such positive and "generative" attitudes towards knowledge, literacies, and learning that are also described by the survey respondents. As I have provided a brief introductory overview detailing where the intertextual orienteering and playful exploration has led fans, I will now shift my focus on the online affinity spaces and networks that form through ARMYs' knowledge practices.

4.2 Democratic and horizontal knowledge spaces: ARMY fandom as an online affinity space

Survey respondents frequently note that theorizing allows ARMYs to put their own skills and knowledges to use and simultaneously discover new knowledge in fandom spaces that feel affectively charged, personally relevant, and—most importantly—meaningful. As Wyra from

Austria describes, "[theorizing] gives me a space to use the knowledge I have as a person while talking about something I deeply care about and can then share and talk about those things with others." Wyra speaks of the fandom as a space that allows one to apply one's own knowledge in discussions constructed around a shared, meaningful subject. Through their playful theorizing and knowledge practices, ARMYs undoubtedly create joyful and passionate fandom spaces, but many fans also contribute to the construction of what can be seen as *online affinity spaces*. Gee (2005, 225–226) defines these as spaces where "people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavours, goals or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability or social class." This thesis's sample manages to demonstrate the diversity of ARMY: fans from 32 different countries took the survey, and respondents' ages range from people under the age of 15 to people, who are in their 50s. The diverse demographics of the fandom have been explored in a global fan-driven demographic study on ARMY, "BTS ARMY Census," which was carried out in 2022. The data consists of over 560,000 responses and was collected through a survey that was mainly shared on different social media platforms. In order to reach as many individuals as possible (in as many countries as possible), the study was translated into over 30 languages.

Furthermore, viewing ARMY as a space rather than a community has some benefits. Even though we could view ARMY as a digital community culture of its own, I am in some ways hesitant to designate ARMY with its community status, as the notion can often bear connotations of a group of people with a monolithic ontology. In other words, not all ARMYs engage with BTS or each other in the same ways; depending on the individual fan, there are varying degrees of interaction, different fandom areas of interest, and diverse fan subjectivities. As Dutchie (United States) notes, "there's no such thing as 'the fandom'. It is only 'the fandom' in the sense that they are fans of BTS." According to Gee (2005, 214–216) the notion of a community brings with it the idea of a membership, and as there are such varying degrees of being a member, the term is, in some ways, problematic. Thus, Gee's notion of affinity spaces helps us to imagine ARMY as a more fluid space that allows each fan to use it in their own unique ways (see ibid. 231). How, then, do ARMYs create diverse affinity spaces that encourage the retaining and sharing of different kinds of knowledge? Spaces that foster learning and support the attaining of skills that fans can use not only within their fandom spaces, but also outside of them?

I would briefly like to focus on one specific survey response. An ARMY from the Philippines, Miguel Rivera, likens ARMY's fandom practices to those of epistemic

communities: "[Theorizing] creates an epistemic community[11] around the work, one that appreciates the deepening of insights without losing sight of the emotive aspects of art." Such a notion is an intriguing starting point, and there are certainly many similarities between epistemic communities and fandoms such as ARMY, where people collaboratively generate knowledge and information, often becoming experts at applying that knowledge and embracing diverse viewpoints. When ARMY faces a "problem" in the form of BTS content that needs to be interpreted and decoded, the fandom collaborates and relies on the diverse expertise that can, often, be found within the fandom space itself. Liv (Indonesia) notes that "some [ARMYs] also interpret the theories using their speciality of field such as those who major in film will interpret using their knowledge in that field etc." The concept of applying and sharing one's own—often specialized—knowledge for the benefit of the fandom is also discussed by Marie and Han Ji Hye:

> I've noticed that if you know a lot about a certain subject, like filmography or music or Korean literature, you're expected to help other people understand the content by sharing your knowledge. … [T]here is the expectation that fans with more expertise or knowledge share what they know and guide newer fans in theorizing. (Marie, United States)

> I've found perspectives and theories broached by fans with degrees in philosophy, or degrees in psychology, who can approach theorising from a more unique and knowledgeable way than I could. (Han Ji Hye, United States)

In summary, ARMY could be viewed as a space—or a network—consisting of people with different areas of interests (both within and outside the fandom), but also varying and diverse knowledges, which are then applied and utilized within the fandom. Of course, as Lemke and Van Helden (2009) state, cultural anthropology, too, recognizes that diverse social systems are not held together merely by shared values, but instead also different people's diverse knowledges and skills that that the system is dependent on. When the fandom encounters "problems" that need solving, the collectively sourced knowledge is gathered and applied much in the same vein as epistemic communities function when faced with a problem. As the survey responses indicate, individual fandom members often offer—or are expected to offer—their specialized knowledge and thus contribute to the accessibility and understandability of BTS' content.

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[11] In *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, Chandler and Munday (2011) define epistemic communities as groups of people with "shared knowledge, expertise, beliefs, or ways of looking at the world: for example, 'the scientific community', a group of professional specialists, or a school of thought."

Miguel Rivera brings up another interesting point concerning theorizing: it is also important for knowledgeable ARMYs to "popularize" the knowledge instead of sharing information that is too serious or specialized—in this way, theorizing ARMYs are making knowledge more accessible:

> Although care must be taken that … theorizing engages not only fellow theorists but also the larger community. In other words, while theorists must take BTS seriously, they must not be too serious so as not to engage with the "lighter" side of the fandom.

Furthermore, ARMYs also have their own established ways of communicating and bringing forth their knowledge and theories before the fandom. Someone may, for instance, compose a long X thread detailing their theory. Perhaps a botanist ARMY is, through their expertise knowledge, presenting and analyzing the significance and meanings of plants and flowers that have appeared in BTS' content. They are, much like the experts of epistemic communities, persuasively and in the form of a theory presenting knowledge, which would then not only be discussed, but judgements on its validity would also be made. Therein lies the main difference between ARMY and epistemic communities, although there are, undoubtedly, many similarities: Within ARMY, there are no authorities or professional institutions that either validate or reject the presented knowledge or theory.

This is how we arrive at the affinity spaces discussed by Gee: they are spaces where newcomers (or as they are often affectively called within ARMY, "baby ARMYs") are not segregated from so called masters or experts (Gee 2005, 225)—that is, the fans who may have been in the fandom longer and have thus accumulated more knowledge. Instead, as Gee (ibid.) explains, "the whole continua of people from new to experienced, from unskilled to highly skilled, from minorly interested to addicted, and everything in-between, is accommodated in the same space." Thus, within ARMY's online affinity spaces, the knowledge acquisition and sharing practices of fandom members are democratic in nature. They are also personalized, and allow fans to attain knowledge, take part in discussions, hone their skills, and learn in whichever way and capacity personally suits each fan. The survey data shows that ARMY as an online affinity space is, in most cases, accommodating and accessible, catering to the diverse tastes and desires of its demographics. Indeed, as Curwood (2013) notes, the main characteristics of affinity spaces "include self-directed engagement, collaboration, and multiple paths toward participation." Furthermore, ARMYs' information seeking and learning practices are often also spontaneous, as fans follow intertextual links or narrative units that

appear in BTS' content and discover new often specialized knowledge. In this sense, the spontaneous knowledge acquisition that often takes place within ARMY is also tied to informal learning practices (see Wu et al. 2023).

The survey responses show that ARMYs' information and theorizing practices lead fans to discover various different types of knowledge—this, too, is a feature of online affinity spaces. Gee (2005, 226) notes that online affinity spaces enable people to gain and spread "intensive knowledge," which allows people to display specialized knowledge in different topics. In ARMY's case, such knowledge could take the form of fans learning how exactly the global music charts work in order to boost BTS' music chart success. However, online affinity spaces also encourage people to gather extensive knowledge across various fields or topics; such knowledge is "less specialised, broader, and more widely shared" (ibid.). Within ARMY, such forms of knowledge may materialize as fandom members more generally looking up—perhaps on Wikipedia—mythological themes or characters that appear in BTS' content and then sharing their discoveries on social media, which then generates further reactions and discussion.

In this thesis, I focus on ARMY as a non-hierarchical, democratic affinity space. However, it should be noted that fan studies scholarship has also sought to illuminate the hierarchies that form within fandoms. Bertha Chin (2018) problematizes the notion of fandoms as democratic communities where no hierarchies exist: Chin (ibid., 249) describes how "popular" fans may take on the role of "the fan leader and by extension, the spokesperson for the fan community, or for the fandom itself." However, within ARMY, such hierarchical concentrations of power and authority are difficult to find; in fact, ARMYs often seem highly suspicious and critical of fans who claim to speak on behalf of the fandom, fans who somehow seek to appear as leaders, or clearly use the fandom spaces, other fans, and BTS for their own benefit. In *BTS, Art Revolution*, Lee (2019) discusses ARMY's and BTS' interactions through the Deleuzian notions of horizontality and rhizomes. As Lee (ibid.) demonstrates, within the fandom, there exists a rhizomatic system, a "horizontal connection without a singular center." According to Lee, such a connection directly and inherently opposes the notion of any hierarchical top-down power structures. In this way, BTS—as a phenomenon that encompasses the group, their content, and the fans—is contributing to a larger democratization of knowledge, art, and meaning-making. Respondents note that BTS themselves are empowering the art industry, increasing art education and accessibility (Rozenn, France), "promoting artistry in every

form" (exhagustd, United States), and Sam (United States), furthermore, writes that BTS is uniting the often separated spheres of high art and popular art:

> BTS has always been about breaking down barriers and improving access. … Even when BTS sees that things might be wrong, they approach problems by building bridges rather than tearing things down. There are problems with high art (too insular, doesn't reach general public, etc.,) and there are problems in the pop music world (too watered down, catering to the lowest common denominator or the highest dollar, etc.); but instead of tearing either of them down, BTS bridges them together.

Through their fandom practices, ARMYs, too, are often breaking down barriers, democratizing meaning-making and promoting the accessibility of information and learning. There exist, or have existed, numerous X accounts managed by ARMY that share specialized knowledge for the benefit of other ARMYs. ARMY Academy (@armyacademics) offers free, voluntary tutoring in subjects, such as English, Korean, writing, and STEM subjects through connecting tutors and tutees. There is an X account that shares different job opportunities and offers career guidance to ARMYs (@BTSARMYJobBoard). BTS ARMY Medical Union (@armymedunion) promotes health awareness through combining BTS and medicine in imaginative, educational, and fun ways. In the community's directory, which can be found on their website, they state that they are a "community of licensed medical professionals, pre-med and med students who all share the same fervent passion for medicine." @BTSARMYKitchen shares BTS-related recipes and health tips, while @ArmyCompsci shares resources and knowledge on computer science & cybersecurity.

As I have shown above, ARMYs bring together their fandom activities and academia through various platforms. Thus far, fans have organized four global interdisciplinary conferences that focus on BTS and surrounding phenomena, and there are also open-access journals and magazine publications, such as *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review* and *Borasaek Vision*, which both publish online articles and content about BTS and ARMY. The X account, Bangtan Scholars (@BangtanScholars), is "A place for current & aspiring scholars of @bts_twt to connect, inspire, & grow together." Numerous accounts and ARMYs are also translating BTS's content in real time and are thus contributing to the transcultural accessibility of BTS content. Democratic and horizontal knowledge sharing reaches entirely new, transcultural forms through these various—often educational or otherwise helpful—resources and spaces created by ARMY, for ARMY.

4.2.1 Connect, ARMY: connecting different learning practices and spheres of education

> What are the passions that support learning, retention and future use of knowledge and skills? What are the affective dimensions of social-emotional and intellectual development? What do we really mean by excitement, curiosity, playfulness or the joy of discovery? What are the actual emotional trajectories of learners over longer periods of time?
>
> (Lemke & Van Helden, 2009)

In 2020, BTS launched a global art project, "Connect, BTS", which brought five art exhibitions including the work of 22 diverse artists to five different cities. The project was a part of the group's *Map of the Soul: 7* album rollout and was, to an extent, impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In a thought-provoking article that focuses on the project, Stefania Piccialli (2021, 163) imagines "Connect, BTS" as "a galaxy of semantic possibilities, as diverse storytelling methods and media representations converge in one ecosystem." The themes and philosophies that run through the project seem to focus on what art is, and how the gap between "commercialized" pop (music) culture and art that graces the walls and fills the spaces of art galleries can be bridged. I asked respondents why they think BTS—a music group—launched a global, wide-scale contemporary art project, and two main themes are brought up in the responses. Although I do not specifically focus on "Connect, BTS" in this section, focusing on fans' articulations about the project allows me to examine specific themes that link to my thesis.

Firstly, ARMYs emphasize that many or all of the members have, throughout their careers, expressed their interest in various forms of art. Isha (Kenya) states that "BTS love art and this is something that they have been upfront about. They love all forms of art so it makes sense that they would be able to launch something like Connect, BTS." In a similar vein, Cahethel (Germany) discusses BTS' ontology as an "interdisciplinary global work of art":

> I think it's simply because they like art themselves, besides that they see themselves like kind of an interdisciplinary global work of art... What I mean is, that an artist nowadays is not only a painter, singer, sculptor, writer, musician etc. but a creator, who tends to experiment with several art forms, and therefore become more global.

Furthermore, many survey respondents mention that the philosophy of "Connect, BTS" is perfectly in line with BTS' overall intention, which, according to respondents, is to foster global connection, to promote artistry in different forms, and to break barriers and build

bridges. In their responses, ARMYs discuss how BTS is democratizing art and cultivating multicultural spaces. As I have shown, ARMYs are often doing very much the same within their fandom spaces and through their fan practices. However, I would like to focus on a specific kind of connecting that is taking place within the fandom: the phenomena of ARMYs connecting different learning practices and constructing a network, where informal fandom learning intertwines with the spheres of formal education.

When we think of learning and education that takes place outside the confines of formal learning spaces and institutions, what can ARMY tell us about informal learning in spaces permeated by affects, playfulness, excitement, and people's own interests? First, I want to find out how ARMYs themselves are conceptualizing and describing the competencies and skills they have cultivated through engaging with BTS or the fandom. In the survey, I specifically asked respondents if theorizing and engaging with BTS content has taught them any skills that can be used outside their fandom practices. The most frequently mentioned skills are those related to critical thinking. Many note that theorizing and engaging in fandom activities has improved their analyzing and close reading skills. Furthermore, respondents discuss how taking part in fandom practices has enhanced their interpretation skills as well as "helped with multiliteracy" (Phoebe, Finland). In their survey responses, many also describe the positive impact the fandom has had on their communication skills, while others note that theorizing has helped them to understand contexts and to see the bigger picture or narrative. However, intriguingly, many respondents do not separate the "fandom spaces" from "non-fandom spaces"; instead, ARMYs discuss ways in which they are connecting different formal knowledge spheres—such as their studies or work—and their hobby, BTS.

In their survey responses, Spring (Germany) and Hollie (United States) discuss the intersections between different knowledge spaces:

> [Theorizing] is way to connect my field of studies (media) with my hobby (BTS fandom), I'm interested in connecting global popular culture and other forms of culture that might seem inaccessible at first, interested in the connection of global culture (Western cultural production and Korean references/context). (Spring)

> I … wrote an entire paper on how BTS' music follows the Hero's Journey, so I've obviously spent a lot of time thinking about their music and what it means in a greater context. I'm also a big fan of analyzing the way the media covers BTS and how it often differs from how other artists are portrayed. So, in short - I've done a little bit of everything! (Hollie)

Earlier, I examined how ARMYs are constantly—in new, creative, and resourceful ways—bringing together their fandom interests and formal education institutions, such as academia, through various different ways and platforms. Instead of referring simply to "skills" and "learning," I would like to imagine education as a wider network or continuum, where different learning practices become connected through the interplay of fans' subject positions and passions. As Lemke and Van Helden (2009, 167) stress, education is not merely about either informal nonschool or imposed school learning; instead, education "is the development over time of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will support us in pursuing our own and our community's goals for better lives and a better world." As Rowan (United States) notes, "those who theorize seem to value knowledge and understanding… of self, of others, of the world." Such values are often given a tangible form specifically through the fandom's practices.

Furthermore, Booth (2015b, 3.1) brings up an important point: Due to neoliberalism and the tendency to view the "student as a consumer," many students may view liberal arts and critical thinking as less valuable than the more practical fields of study. However, the survey data suggests that it is within fandoms such as ARMY where the benefits of the liberal arts and humanities are often utilized and their values still acknowledged. Fandoms may, for many, offer spaces that still remain untouched by neoliberal rationality or so called burnout culture. Neoliberal burnout work culture emphasizes the constant need to perform better and faster; to constantly strive to be more productive. Furthermore, it views the individual first and foremost as a consumer. However, within fandom spaces, the experientialities and learning opportunities are tailored to the individual's needs. Thus, their sole purpose is to enrich the every-day realities of fans, who may not otherwise—at their workplaces or educational institutions—gain opportunities to learn in ways that also consider the identity, attachments, and passions of the individual. In this way, fandom environments, specifically, may be extremely important knowledge and learning spaces. Furthermore, they are often spaces that individuals may interact with throughout their life courses. As Lemke and Van Helden (2009, 151) argue, significant learning is sustained over longer periods of time: it is connected to our identities, values, habits, and preferences.

As Booth (2015b, 3.2–3.3) mentions, the fan-based modes of critical thinking—creative thinking, aesthetic appreciation, and collaboration—are all important skills to possess after formal schooling. Learning to navigate different media and to resourcefully gather knowledge from a variety of digital sources is undoubtedly a valuable skill to master in today's incredibly

media saturated reality. Indeed, the Janissary Collective (2014, 82–83) go as far as suggesting that fandom is a form of "survival" in the media life: The competencies of media fandoms can be considered survival skills, a new form of "hunting and gathering or farming food in media." Thus, as the Janissary Collective (ibid.) asserts, one will be less able to "enhance fitness with one's environment as the lifeworld has moved into media" if one is not a fan.

The information and knowledge practices of fandoms and contemporary digital communities have prompted scholars to examine how literacies are formed in the age of information and social media. Along with Booth's (2015b) enticing proposal to think of fandoms as classrooms of the future, where life-long learning takes place once people complete their formal schooling, Itō et al. (2019) discuss connected learning as a form of education where the gap between people's personal interests or passions and formal learning is bridged. Itō et al. (ibid., 6) illuminate how digital media specifically supports forms of connected learning: Digital media provides easier access to knowledge and information, it promotes the forming of online affinity groups, and offers "engaging formats for interactivity and self-expression." However, Itō et al. (ibid.) mention that connected learning also links "a broader and more diverse range of culture, knowledge, and expertise to educational opportunity." This, specifically, sounds exactly like ARMYs' knowledge and learning practices. Within ARMY's online affinity fandom spaces, there exist various opportunities and resources for connecting different learning and life spheres. If we think of spaces where education becomes a part of valued relationships, shared practices, and shared culture (ibid., 45), it is precisely the type of education that is nurtured and made possible within ARMY spaces. Thus, I argue that ARMYs are, through their practices, demonstrating how connected learning functions within a massive multicultural digital fandom.

ARMYs construct spaces where individuals are supported by their peers through the connecting of tutors and tutees. Some fans give free mentoring on careers, and some accounts help academic ARMYs to connect with each other. Furthermore, many ARMY spaces and accounts connect fandom activity and academia, and others share resources that other fans can freely use for their own purposes and "modes of self-creation" (see Bailey 2005, 211) and self-development. As Lemke and Van Helden (2009, 169, italics in original) aptly state:

> The future of education is not about schools, and it is not about online learning. It is about new ways of *connecting all the ways that people learn*. It is not about a single ideal culture of learning in schools, or about one culture of online learning. It is about supporting critical learning and creative production across times and places, work and play, academic knowledge and popular culture capital and across

many different but interconnected social networks with many diverse learning
cultures.

Through the interactions with BTS and the fandom, education and information gathering
become woven into ARMYs' everyday ways of being in the world. In the last chapter I
examined how ARMYs have developed "playful reflexes" and how they instantaneously with
new content releases scan the content in order to evaluate its meaning-making potential. In the
same vein, education may also meaningfully and integrally become a part of fans' every-day
tapestries of life and intertwine with ARMYs' playfulness. Lemke and Van Helden (ibid.,
169) encourage us to consider the role of affect, passion, and emotions in all different kinds of
learning and development processes. Motivated by their affection and passion for BTS,
ARMYs are constructing informal, horizontally functioning and democratic learning spaces,
where education is connected specifically to fans' emotions and interests. This is precisely
how people's ways of being in the world are—often through their daily fan interactions—
connected to life-long curiosity, learning, and education. Indeed, it is through fandom
activities that identities and literacies often become connected (see Korobkova & Black
2014), as my data also suggests. Fandom affinity spaces, such as ARMY, may thus help fans
to construct personalized constellations of informal, passion driven, and self-motivated
learning.

4.2.2 Transcultural flows and counterhegemonic spaces

ARMYs' survey responses do not only highlight the wide intertextual and interdisciplinary
field or cosmos within which fans navigate; they also indicate that the information and
knowledge practices of fans are often inherently transcultural in nature. By transculturalism or
transculturality, I am referring to the inherent nature of today's global media culture, where a
wider combining, intermingling, and blurring of cultural lines and features is taking place.
Mikhail Epstein (2009, 330) defines transculturalism as a "new sphere of cultural
development that transcends the borders of traditional cultures (ethnic, national, racial,
religious, gender, sexual, and professional)." Although Epstein (2009) argues that transculture
"liberates" one from the rigid boundaries of one's own culture, he does not mean that cultural
features disappear altogether or lose their meaning. Instead, as Epstein (ibid., 334) describes,
the concept of transculture emphasizes the openness and mutual involvement among different
cultures. BTS is not a part of the "western hegemonic sphere" of culture and entertainment in
that they are not an American or European group similar to the previous popular culture
giants, such as the Beatles, whom they are sometimes compared to. Instead, they are a South

Korean group, whose elements, meanings, and aesthetics are imbued not only with the group's Korean heritage but also carry a more transcultural flow of elements. As Saeji (2020, 50) notes, Korean music has been able to overcome barriers by also utilizing "widely known non-Korean cultural elements."

According to Saeji (2020, 60), it is the intertextual "connections to visual, musical, and written texts from around the world" that allow the music videos of Korean artists "to be read at more than one level." However, many survey respondents emphasize that, through their interactions with BTS' content and each other, they are specifically attaining knowledge about Korean culture, language, history, social phenomena, and politics. Charralito (Honduras), for instance, "will soon start a Korean studies course to learn about the history of the country, how it was divided into 2 states (North and South Korea), its society and international context." Many other ARMYs, too, describe how BTS' Koreanness functions as a gateway to learning about Korea, its language, and the group's Korean heritage:

> BTS have inspired me to want to learn Korean. I feel a sense of desperation to be able to understand them fully and wholly. … The new webtoon [7FATES: CHAKHO] has inspired an interest in some of the traditional myths and stories of Korea. It's the reason I watched Bulgasal on Netflix which turned out to be fantastic! Since I've been looking up some of the mythologies and hope to find physical books in English. (VP, Australia)

> I … tried to learn some cultural context that were used in their songs that used traditional concepts and music, such as in IDOL and in Daechwita, as a way to emphasize how their culture shapes their identity as artists and in turn, how their artistry is also shaping their culture. (Joy, the Philippines)

As highlighted by the responses above, ARMYs are, through their fan interactions and practices, constantly looking for new entry points into BTS'—often transcultural—content and the meanings presented. What kind of transcultural spaces are constructed within ARMY as fans interact with transcultural contents and engage with experientially diverse knowledges?

Earlier, I discussed how ARMYs democratize meaning-making and break down different forms of barriers. However, BTS and ARMY are also taking part in the formation of a digital counter-hegemonic culture, if Western popular culture is viewed as the hegemonic form of popular culture. Thus, examining BTS as a transcultural phenomenon allows us to also think of the broader global flows of culture, representation, and meaning, and how these are negotiated within the fandom. In her analysis on BTS and ARMY as a manifestation of

counter-hegemonic culture in the network society, Ju Oak Kim (2021, 1063) argues that a new form of non-western cultural power has gained footing as digital networks have weakened the "exclusive reproducibility of western cultural power." Similarly, Min et al. (2019, 615), who have explored how Latin American fans experience K-pop, note that K-pop allows Chilean fans to take part in a "fantasy of modernity that does not equate with Western modernity." BTS is thus presenting fans with alternate experientialities, or "alternative possibilities" (see Kim 2021, 1064)—in other words, spaces that are not defined by nor imbued solely with Western hegemony and cultural meanings. Within these digital fandom spaces, new forms of cultural imagination and transcultural meaning-making take form. Indeed, as Kim (ibid., 1072) discusses, cultural interactions have become more decentralized within digital networks, which in turn has led to the capitalization of new cultural sensibilities and values. BTS has dominated western music charts, the group has made several appearances at the Grammy awards, and in 2022, the members visited the White House during AAPI heritage month to discuss anti-Asian hate with the president. An entire study could be conducted in order to understand what BTS' global representation has meant for the group's fans, who hail from various different cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds.

The learning and education that often takes place in ARMYs online affinity spaces is also impacted by transculturality and geographical boundlessness. Grace MyHyun Kim (2016) proposes the concept of *transcultural digital literacies* to describe the personalized, digitally mediated, and border traversing literacy practices that today's students and younger generations are engaging in. According to Kim (ibid., 204–205), such practices are dialogic, reflexive, and "emphasize the importance of informal institutions, cosmopolitan and global reaches, the multimodality of communication, and the innovative and active nature of literacy practice." Many ARMYs take part in fan practices that allow them to exercise their active, dialogic agencies and develop a deeper sense of self-reflexivity: in the responses, ARMYs conceptualize their own competencies and acknowledge their own skills, limits, and values. Furthermore, ARMYs are, through narratives such as the theorizer position, using the fandom to imbue their fan subjectivities with various personally and socially relevant meanings. These often resonate in the values respondents' link to theorizing: Betty (United States) notes that ARMYs respect other cultures and are open to different experiences. Similarly, TA (Portugal) lists social responsibility and respect as common values of the fandom. Moon (Bolivia), in turn, mentions intellect and perseverance. This is also how a transcultural fandom affinity space that allows for different imagined realities and possibilities becomes highly relevant.

Listening to ARMYs' conceptualizations of their lived experiences allows us to gain knowledge of how fans are using fandoms to constitute their identities—or rather, their subject positions (Weedon, 1997). As Kim (2016, 103) notes, "identity" often "connotes something static or impermeable," while Weedon's term "subject positions" refers to a kind of movement that may occur across self-representations. Fans' conceptualizations of themselves are also a powerful narrative tool. Indeed, Anne-Mette Albrechtslund (2010) uses philosopher Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identities to analyze how people in online communities use stories and narratives for identity construction. According to Albrechtslund (ibid., 123), Ricoeur's point is that we resignify the world through narratives; narratives thus enable us to "interpret and to transform the actions taking place." What is central here is specifically the notion of transformation—both the transforming of actions and the transformation of spaces. The theorizer's position among other subject positions that ARMYs may embrace allows fans to control the narrative themselves and to furthermore determine their own fan subjectivities. There is much to be said about how fandoms that are mainly comprised of women have been treated by the media, which has often sought to ridicule, juvenilize, and devalue the popular culture interests of women (see Gerrard, 2022). Thus, fans' stories about themselves, their practices, values, and interests function as narratives that resignify and transform the spaces constructed by ARMY.

As the fandom meets BTS' decentralizing potency that enables new, imagined realities, ARMY's online affinity spaces foster new, transcultural forms of imagination and meaning-making. Within the transcultural knowledge spaces created by ARMY, fans are constantly interacting with themes and knowledge that exists outside their own cultural spheres. Thus, ARMY's online affinity spaces allow fans to take part in transcultural meaning-making and encourage fans to actively embrace diverse, shifting subject positions as they move through and engage with transcultural currents of meaning.

4.3   Mythmaking, weaving connections, and re-enchanting the world

> Transformative fan cultures … challenge the limits of the possible by inserting the pleasures and demands of everyday people back into mass culture narrative products, opening space for the unexpected to emerge.
>
> (Kustritz 2018, 250)

Fandoms can be seen as their own cultures, and perhaps it could be argued that entire worlds come into being as specific customs, narratives, practices, values, and meanings merge into

fandom supersystems and create their own realities—or indeed worlds—inhabited by passionate fans. Marta Boni (2017, 9), who examines worldmaking and -building in its many manifestations, views worlds as "collectively built, semiotic realms." Although Boni mainly explores worlds in terms of transmedia storytelling, she offers some intriguing insight into the interplay between fandoms and worlds. Fandom, according to Boni (ibid., 23), "is a cultural practice that builds, maintains, or transforms worlds." Furthermore, Boni (ibid., 10) notes that worlds are artificial constructions that are dependent on their explorers, who thus also become map-builders. Indeed, as I examined in the previous chapter, ARMYs collectively build their own databases and networks of contextual meanings that turn up in BTS' content. This knowledge about the themes, symbols, and motifs allows fans to navigate BTS' network of meanings with apparent ease and fluidity. It is the shared semiotic "map" that offers the tools and "know-how" to navigate the content and its intertextual dimensions. In this sense, ARMYs do create their own realities with their distinctive experientialities and ways of being in the world. However, worlds, as concepts and as ontological things, are very difficult to define. Whether we view ARMY—the fandom—as its own world, a culture, or simply a space, collectively built realms held together by semiotic meaning-making often contain one last component: their own mythologies.

Narratives such as the "theorizing ARMY" help to construct fans' subject positions, but they are also powerful community-building tools. As Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning (2010, 13–14) note, narratives are means of self-making, but they also contribute to community-making. Furthermore, narratives do not only represent life but they also form life (ibid., 12). Narratives speak of how people and communities view themselves and how they in turn wish to be viewed. They communicate the features, values, and conventions of the group. In other words, narratives are ways to collect, build, and share the knowledge of a specific group of people, but narratives also help to document and maintain the histories of those peoples. However, the fan culture practice of narratively constructing realities and fandom histories also effortlessly shifts into forms of mythmaking. When asked about the motive behind BTS' intertextual content, Latte (United States) notes that BTS and the company intend to create a mythology. Intriguingly, mythmaking and constructing mythologies also relate to themes discussed in the last chapter that focuses on the fandom's playfulness. I will thus explore the forms mythology and mythmaking take within ARMY.

Lily Alexander (2016; 2017; 2020) offers some helpful insight into myths and mythologies, although she examines these specifically in the context of fictional world-building. As I

previously mentioned, Alexander (2017, 115) views mythology as the "operational system" of culture. Thus, I will examine how it can also be seen as a part of ARMY's knowledge practices and culture. Alexander lists several reasons as to why mythology has, to this day, maintained its cultural influence, and many of the mythic aspects she mentions also continue to reverberate in ARMY's fandom practices. I will primarily focus on the riddle quality of mythology, which Alexander also calls "semantic vibrations" (ibid., 122). In the previous chapter, I focus entirely on the playfulness of ARMY and how the intertextual puzzles construct a culture of discovery (Ana, Croatia) among fans. By creating intertextual references—an intertextual network, if you will—and by presenting content that has the alluring potential to unfold like a rhizome of meanings, BTS is inviting the fandom to take part in playful mythological quizzing.

Alexander (2016; 2017; 2020) intriguingly illustrates how humans' first mythological systems were connected to reading the "magical signs" found in the surrounding natural environment. The "coded communication" of the magical realm (as in, the mythic gods and deities) took the form of hidden messages and "writing on the walls," which mortals then needed to interpret and solve (Alexander 2016, 23). Alexander (2020, 51) asks

> Why so many secrets? And why are we enthralled with storytelling full of riddles and puzzles? Early man's interactions with his habitat were defined by the need for deciphering or "cracking the codes" of his natural environment. … Since the dawn of the "mythological mind", it was assumed that the very interpretation of reality must include decrypting Mother Nature's subtle signifiers and passing her implicit tests.

Alexander is essentially discussing symbolic language, which then, through the stories and narratives of humans, unfolds, as in, takes new forms and becomes knowledge; "the man's symbolic map of reality" (Alexander 2016, 19). There is an intriguing connection between mythological thinking and the knowledge practices of ARMY, a contemporary popular culture fandom. Alexander argues that the very same mythological and magical thinking that she discusses still resonates in today's fictional world-building and its narratives. As Alexander (2016, 20) writes, the imaginative logic of fictional world-building has always had the generative power of mythic world-making, and the very same mythic logic still echoes in the stories of popular culture. The patterns and quizzes of mythic storytelling are, as Alexander (2017, 116) proposes, a natural and intellectual endeavor in all of humankind, "developed as a passage between the natural world and the emerging world of ideas." A

similar notion of humans' inherent desire to embrace forms of mythological thinking is discussed by survey respondent, Icarus (United States):

> I went to school for writing, and honestly analyzing media becomes second nature after years of schooling. Humans desire meaning; it is why we have religion and philosophy. We're obsessed with understanding the why of things. Theorizing is part of every fandom for that reason—we want there to be deeper meaning to things.

The intertextually rich, symbol-riddled, and quizlike storytelling of BTS is creating a "guessing game" that also "involves the audience, making mythic storytelling 'interactive' " (Alexander 2017, 123). As Alexander (ibid., 122–123) notes, the incompleteness of symbolization—its "meaning-making expertise"—creates intellectual puzzles and hearkens back to humans' inherent desire to figure out the semantic riddles of their surroundings. If we recall what Ana (Croatia) said about "a picture in the back, … a passing glimpse of an event, every detail is taken into account because this has been proven important in the past," and Eve's (Germany) discussion about puzzling together and questioning every piece of media for clues, we can see how ARMYs rely on mythological thinking in their daily knowledge practices. The group's content is full of symbols and semantically vibrating riddles waiting to unfold and take the shape of stories, meanings, and knowledge. In this way, BTS builds quizzes and riddles that continue the ancient tradition of mythic storytelling. Fans, in turn, construct "symbolic networks" (Alexander 2017, 125) and "semantic maps" (ibid. 2016, 22) as they navigate the alluring symbolically and intertextually vibrating content of BTS.

Alexander (2017, 122) notes that mythic narratives and mythology in general have maintained their influence because of their translatability and an inherent ability to bridge cultural gaps. In the survey responses, many ARMYs note that they have sought information about different cultures' mythologies as well as the mythic figures and symbols that show up in BTS' content. Furthermore, Alexander (ibid.) mentions the communiability or sociability of myths—in other words, their ability to establish social networks and connect people through comprehensible transcultural storytelling. In the previous chapter, survey respondent, Icarus, explains how BTS successfully executes and creates "thematic connections" through the use of mythic narratives, such as the story of Icarus. These mythic characters and stories wander from media to another; they effortlessly cross cultural borders and appear yet again in new contexts and settings. Mythological thinking and myths furthermore carry with them the magical power of different "what ifs"; the possibilities of unfolding, hidden meanings and secret knowledges that await their interpreters. As I have discussed, these meanings can serve

the purpose of a playful intertextual puzzle, or they can become a means to attain knowledge and informal education within fandom affinity spaces. It is through such mythic, quizlike storytelling that BTS manages to encourage fan activities that combine playfulness with different knowledge-seeking and meaning-making practices.

As I have shown, the meanings that fans construct as they interact with BTS' content are often highly personalized. They are adapted, or transformed, to suit the specific needs of the individual ARMY or the fandom. Hence, I cannot help but think of the transformative practices of fairy-tale cultures: As Anne Kustritz (2018, 245) notes, the difference between fan cultures and fairy-tale storytelling cultures is a matter of interpretation and perspective—perhaps even a matter of different names for the very same practices. In many different ways, ARMY's fan culture functions as interactive fairy-tale culture, within which "every tale is adapted … to suit the audience, the occasion, and the cultural context" (ibid., 248). Fairy-tales, much like the theories created by ARMYs, are also multi-authored in the sense that each person brings their own voice into the cultural production as they bounce off ideas and share their interpretations (see ibid., 248, 250). However, Kustritz (ibid., 250) argues that it is specifically the term *transformation* that connects fairy-tale cultures and fandoms: not only do both have their shared histories, which include transformative[12] works of art and literature, but both cultures also focus on "transformation through magic and wonder." This, I believe, is essential in BTS' and ARMY's case. Within ARMY spaces, magic seeps into the everyday activities of fans as they interact with BTS' intertextual, symbolically rich narratives. Through transcultural spaces that allow ARMYs to write their own histories, construct their own semantic databases, as well as produce knowledge about their own fandom through academic articles and such, ARMYs "become authors of their own culture and insert themselves into the ongoing narrative flow that makes sense of and shapes the world around us" (ibid.).

There is yet another fairy-tale culture phenomenon to consider in the context of ARMY. Although this chapter examines the several kinds of connections that take form within ARMY's fandom spaces, I would also like to borrow the fairy-tale culture notion and metaphor of "weaving" (see Bacchilega 2013). In terms of fairy-tale culture, this mainly refers to the weaving of stories and perhaps even the weaving of intertextual references into a

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[12] Fandoms are often viewed as "transformative" in the sense that fans often remix and re-work different media content. Indeed, as Rosenblatt and Tushnet (2015, 385) note, fans create new creative works, "fanworks", based on existing media—transformativeness is thus a central part of fans' remix culture and the creation of fan communities.

network of meanings. However, there is a wider phenomenon of weaving taking place within ARMY. Some respondents mentioned that ARMY is weaving together connections found in BTS' content and in the individual ARMYs life (Joy, the Philippines), or that fans are, through theorizing, weaving together a more complete picture (Courtney, United States). Furthermore, as we have seen, ARMYs are weaving together different spheres of knowledge and learning. They are also weaving together their playful expressions and knowledge-gathering. Through practices that cross and transcend national borders, ARMYs weave networks that encompass various knowledges, different experientialities, and ways to participate.

Lastly, I would like to recall German sociologist Max Weber's (2004 [1917]) argument about modern society suffering from a "disenchantment" or "demagification," as Swedberg and Agewall (2016, 86) have translated the original German word, *Entzauberung*. According to Weber (2004, 13), such a phenomena is brought about by modernity, intellectualism, rationalization, and secularization. Essentially, what Weber speaks of is the wider elimination of a magical worldview, or the "magical garden" (see Marotta 2023, 12, 15). Michael Saler (2012, 6), in turn, argues that a cultural project of re-enchanting the disenchanted world is taking place. This phenomenon, as Saler (ibid., 17) proposes, is constructing new public spheres of imagination. In this master's thesis, I have illuminated how such spheres of imagination manifest and are constructed through ARMY's theorizing practices. Boovi's (India) survey response highlights that BTS' content—as entertaining and educational content—is meaningful because it offers a stark contrast to merely "working for the sake of work." Such work may not grant individuals the agency, fulfillment and empowerment that interacting with creative and playful fandom spaces offer. Thus, in a similar vein as Saler (2012), I argue that magic and enchantment are brought back to the modern society through riveting fictional "worlds" and alternate realities that fans can inhabit, play with, re-interpret, and use for diverse knowledge-building and attaining activities—much like ARMYs are doing. Through their playful tinkering practices that allow ARMYs to view BTS' content as a treasury of malleable, semantically vibrating meaning-making ground, fans are enchanting their every-day spaces and imbuing their embodied realities with a sense of wonder. In doing so, they are "transforming through magic and wonder" (Kustritz 2018, 250) while also using their fandom spaces as playful spheres of information attainment and education.

As I noted earlier, Nybro Petersen (2022, 33) argues that fans have as a specific sensibility or openness to meaning-production. However, Alexander (2016, 42) has gone as far as to

propose that engaging with fictional worlds and interactive storytelling models helps us to "grow brand-new brains." As Alexander (ibid., 44) continues, such interactive narrative forms stimulate and put to use our "super cognition," which then generates "enlightening new activities." Alexander (ibid.) refers to the fact that fictional storytelling has transcended the limits and borders of narratives; thus, navigating today's fictional worlds and media spaces requires us to develop entirely new forms of consciousness. In this thesis, I have examined such emerging forms of consciousness and meaning-making in the context of ARMY—a massive, global fandom with its' own intriguing practices. Boccia Artieri (2012, 463), too, stresses the importance of understanding how media contents today are generating different and entirely new interpretive categories. These, he refers to as a "new semantic" (ibid.). In the context of ARMY, I argue that the brand new brains, super cognition, and the "new semantic" manifest in the playful knowledge attaining and sharing practices which I have examined. Knowledge-gathering takes the form of a reflexive and fluid activity; it allows ARMYs to often multimodally gather knowledge and construct intertextual (and semiotic) databases. Fans may "scan" the content, its intertextual vibrations and possibilities for unfolding. They consider the "what ifs" of the content as they playfully interact with it and shape it into something personally relevant and meaningful. Most importantly, ARMYs' survey responses highlight that for many, fandom spaces and the experientialities they offer take the form of Weber's enchanted magical garden. They are spaces replete with possibilities, agency, learning, and, perhaps most importantly, acres of lush meaning-making ground to roam.

5   Conclusion

I have examined the playful theorizing practices and the knowledge practices that take shape within the South Korean pop-group BTS' fandom, ARMY. Many fans use ARMY's online affinity spaces as informal learning spaces, where learning intertwines with fans' personal interests and subject positions. The digital spaces and BTS' narratives function as ARMYs' playful knowledge hunting grounds, which are then adapted, expanded, and transformed into spaces that support the specific needs of fans—whether ARMYs seek to engage in playful intertextual puzzle-solving or wish to use the fandom as a self-development and learning space. Playfulness and the fandom's knowledge practices often come together through theorizing and take intriguing forms. Furthermore, ARMY's spaces encompass the construction of symbolic/semantic networks, forms of mythmaking, and some features of interactive fairy-tale cultures.

I set out to understand how theorist discourses and activities shape fans' notions of themselves. Furthermore, I wanted to understand the experiences, or experientialities, it offers—both on the level of the individual fan and the fandom. Fans often theorize about their fandom objects—this is a generally accepted fact within fan studies scholarship. However, the specific feelings, practices, subject positions, and experiences attached to theorizing are seldom explored by research in detail. Furthermore, fan studies scholarship has, in the past, often focused on fandoms specifically as communities or collectives. Consequently, the lived experiences of individual fans have sometimes remained in the periphery of research. In my thesis, I have examined the affinity spaces that are constructed through ARMYs' fan practices. However, I have also focused on the experiences of individual fans. I employed a phenomenological approach, which has not been previously used in the context of ARMYs' theorizing and knowledge practices. Hermeneutic imagination (Smith, 1999) allowed me to approach the data and fans' recollections of their lived experiences with a sense of curiosity and see the practice of theorizing in new contexts; within larger networks of cultural meaning-making. This led me to explore how magical thinking (Lévi-Strauss 2021[1962]; Frissen 2015), mythological narratives, and mythological thinking (Alexander 2016; 2017; 2020) can be examined in the context of ARMYs' theorizing. Exploring fans' meaning-making practices from the perspective of mythological and magical thinking opened up new ways of describing the experientiality of ARMYs' practices.

Hermeneutic phenomenology—as an attitude and a research framework—allowed me to draw experience-based data from ARMYs' survey responses. Furthermore, thematic analysis proved helpful, as I was able to identify the themes that emerged from the data, while narrative analysis highlighted the ways in which fans give meaning to and speak about their lived experiences. Much like ARMYs' theorizing, which allows fans to discover new meanings and leads fans down interdisciplinary paths of knowledge, I wanted this research to remain open to the unexpected, to the meandering paths and hidden trails that I did not perhaps initially expect to take. My aim was to let ARMYs define and describe their own practices, experiences, subject positions, and values. Thus, I adopted an inductive research approach, which allowed different themes, notions, and concepts to emerge from the data. However, both my research questions and the survey questions inevitably steered the direction of my analysis to some degree. Although I initially set out to examine the knowledge and meaning-making practices of ARMYs through the notion of theorizing, a wide variety of themes and discussions sprang forth. Playfulness became the phenomenon and essence that in many ways weaves together the fandom's practices and its philosophies.

I wanted to understand how fan subjectivities and self-understandings are constructed in the theorist discourses. My research shows that the theorizer's subject position embraced by many ARMYs is often tied to specific values. Frequently mentioned values are those related to intellect, learning, gathering knowledge across various different fields, and being open to different (often transcultural) experiences. Survey respondents describe their profound desire to learn specifically from BTS; to understand the meanings presented by the septet. BTS' content is fundamentally transcultural in nature in the sense that it encompasses elements of BTS' South Korean heritage but also carries with it a more transcultural flow of elements. While many ARMYs learn about Korean culture, language, and history, they also engage with the imagery and meanings of a myriad of different cultures. New, alternative forms of cultural imagination emerge and challenge the hegemony of Western popular culture. Furthermore, the responses showed, intriguingly, that many ARMYs emphasize that BTS wants ARMYs to learn and to be educated. Thus, ARMYs' theorizing and knowledge practices are often propelled by BTS' encouragements to use the group's content for self-development purposes.

One of my research questions focuses specifically on the experientiality of theorizing. I examined theorizing through Nybro Petersen's (2022) concept of *play moods*, which allowed me to imagine theorizing as a specific attunement; a way of positioning oneself in relation to BTS' content. ARMYs mention that they question every piece of media for clues: through

this practice, theorizing becomes a reflex-like activity, where fans are completely tuned in to their surroundings. In this sense, theorizing also becomes a distinct way of *being in the world* and a specific way of organizing and collecting information. The survey responses indicate that theorizing manifests as a highly fluid activity. Furthermore, it often occurs instantaneously as fans encounter new content. To aid in theorizing, ARMYs rely on what one survey respondent called "scanning": fans scan the content for symbols and narrative units that have appeared before or can be linked to other BTS contents. When ARMYs scan the content, they consider all the "histories of use" (Frissen 2015, 155) of the specific narrative units—such as images, symbols, or themes—that turn up in BTS' content. Moreover, ARMYs create semiotic and intertextual databases that allow fans to fluidly navigate BTS' network of meanings. Such databases also help in quickly determining which content resonates intertextually or symbolically. Above all, my research shows that when ARMYs encounter BTS' content, they see opportunity: the opportunity for playfulness, for learning, for knowledge-gathering, and imbuing BTS' content with personal meanings.

My research questions also led me to explore how ARMYs construct and maintain fandom *spaces* for knowledge and learning. I used Gee's (2005) concept of *online affinity spaces* to illustrate the possibilities opened up by viewing army as a space rather than a community. Gee's notion enabled me to imagine ARMY as a more fluid space that each fan can use in their own ways, for their own specific needs (see ibid. 231). These spaces allow ARMYs to discover various types of knowledge, whether fans wish to attain more general knowledge or more specialized and intensive knowledge (see ibid., 226). My findings also illuminate the ways in which ARMYs democratize the attaining of knowledge.

Firstly, the knowledge attaining practices of ARMYs' online affinity spaces are often collaborative in that they utilize the skills and personal knowledge of individual fans. However, some ARMYs mentioned that there may even be an expectation to share one's personal, often specialized knowledge for the benefit of other fans. What seems to be most important is that the knowledge is popularized: As I have shown, there are many accounts on X that creatively and entertainingly present specialized knowledge within fandom spaces and thus contribute to the democratization and accessibility of knowledge. Another intriguing finding is that within ARMY's spaces, there exist a myriad of opportunities to bridge the gap between formal education and informal, non-school learning that takes place outside of formal education institutions. Many ARMYs describe how they connect the different knowledge spheres that exist in their lives. Fans are, in creative ways, finding different platforms for the

purpose of bridging the gap between formal education (or work) and the fandom's knowledge practices. ARMYs organize interdisciplinary conferences that allow fans to share their BTS-related academic research with other fans. Moreover, fans create open-access journals, such as *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review*, which allow fans to publish their scholarly work on BTS.

The scope of this thesis expanded and the research questions lived especially during the first stages of the process. The qualitative survey, which in addition to two demographic questions featured only open-ended questions, presented its own challenges. Although I had prepared for these and taken into account the possible low response-rate, the process of gathering responses was long and challenging. As I had initially expected, the response rate among people who opened the survey was rather low—this is most likely due to the 11 open-ended questions. However, the data that I collected through the survey is extensive and provided me with a trove of data that manages to illuminate respondents' lived realities and fandom practices in nuanced ways. Moreover, I received survey distribution help from several X accounts maintained by ARMYs. Without the help of ARMYs who shared the survey on their X accounts, the process of finding survey respondents would have been much more difficult.

As a member of the fandom, my own lived experiences and previous fan engagements helped me to conceptualize and shape the research questions. Furthermore, they also aided me in the data collection phase of this study. Given that I had, during my years within the fandom, followed the fandom's reactions towards research, I had a comprehensive understanding of the ethical concerns that needed to be considered during all stages of the research. In many ways, this study also led me to problematize and explore my own subject positions as both fan and a master's student, who examines her own fandom. I maintain that my prior attachment to BTS and the fandom was beneficial, as it allowed me to conduct nuanced and reflexive research. Furthermore, I greatly benefited from understanding the fandom's different conventions. Throughout this thesis, I embraced a self-reflexive approach specifically as I considered the validity of this thesis and the representations it presents. The notion of contextualist validity was especially helpful, as it allowed me to keep in mind that research constructs and maintains representations of people, identities, and communities (Saukko 2003c). Moreover, considering the ethical aspects of fan studies research remained vital, as fandoms—often those comprised mostly of women—have, in the past, been represented in harmful ways.

My master's thesis encompasses a journey that has lived and breathed alongside the fandom and ARMYs' changing interests—thus, it opens a window into a specific time within the fandom. In a sense, it looks back at the "golden age" of BTS' content and theorizing, when the group was actively producing new albums: the group's fictional narratives and intertextual storytelling content were thriving and there was an abundance of intertextually resonating content for fans to theorize about. Although the group members are currently performing their compulsory military service and are expected to be back as a group in 2025, the fandom remains active—even if its focuses have largely shifted and the fandom spaces, too, have evolved to encompass new activities.

This thesis centers on the fictional narratives and storytelling aspects of BTS' experientiality and how they can serve as learning, education, and self-development tools, but it should be noted that fans' practices do not exist in a vacuum untouched by real-world crises and injustices. Thus, future studies could explore how BTS' experientiality and social media fan spaces are impacted by different crises and how fans' subject positions, narratives, and values live and shift within the diverse digital transcultural fandom during such times. In other words, research could explore what kind of agencies the fandom spaces allow for fans during humanitarian crises and wars. Fandoms can, undoubtedly, be used as platforms and spaces that allow people to take part in important social, cultural, and political discussions. Furthermore, an important limitation of this thesis lies in the exclusion of affects. Thus, future studies may want to look at the field of affect theory, as it could help to illuminate the role affects and emotions have in ARMYs' fan practices and interactions. Although hermeneutic phenomenology allowed me to focus on the experientialities of theorizing as they are described and recalled by ARMYs, focusing on affects could help to illuminate the constellations of visceral, immediate forces that exist alongside fans' reactions and interactions. Researchers could, for instance, ask how fans are affected by specific fan spaces, interactions, and fan experiences.

Lastly, the intertextual world of BTS' content is comprised of different fictional elements that allow for the playfulness of the fandom to emerge, but at its center exist the members of BTS, who in various ways inspire and energize fans in their re-enchanting, self-improvement, and knowledge-seeking endeavors. It is incredibly important to emphasize that fans' practices and motivations are not separate from the emotions and passions that spur ARMYs' fan practices. As VP from Australia notes, "the members themselves, though they are so much younger than me, have taught me how to live a better life. And that translates into the real world and

outside the fandom every day." I hope that I have managed to present fans' attachments in nuanced ways that retain the integrity of fans' own descriptions and conceptualizations. Indeed, my master's thesis sheds light on the importance of self-narratives: In many ways, theorizing manifests not only as a practice but also as a discourse that allows fans to grasp control of the representations that shape both ARMYs' subject positions and fans' lived realities.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Survey questions

1. If you would like, please choose a pseudonym/name (other than your real given name) that you would like to be addressed as.

2. In which country do you reside?

3. How old are you?

4. Have BTS' content and intertextual references inspired you to look for connections outside Bangtan Universe or BTS' content, for example in literature, film, mythology, art, psychology, etc.? If yes, please give examples.

5. What would you say is Big Hit's and BTS' motive for creating clues and intertextual references for ARMYs to find?

6. How would you define "theorizing" within the context of BTS?

7. Do you take part in theorizing? If yes, please explain what kind of theorizing activities you take part in.

8. Are there specific strategies for theorizing, and does ARMY share these strategies within the fandom? If yes, how are the strategies shared among ARMYs?

9. Why do you enjoy theorizing or looking for intertextual references in BTS' content? (Intertextuality: the references between BTS' own content and references between BTS content and other media or cultural products)

10. Does something limit your creativity when theorizing or do you feel like you are free to make interpretations and find connections?

11. Fan cultures and communities often associate certain values with different fan practices. Can you think of any shared values that the fandom associates with theorizing or analyzing BTS' content?

12. Do you think a theorist's approach is needed to fully appreciate BTS' intertextual content?

13. In 2020, BTS launched the global art project, "Connect, BTS", that brought five art exhibitions including the work of 22 artists across five different cities. Why do you personally think BTS, a music group, launched a global, wide-scale contemporary art project? No prior knowledge is needed to answer this question and there are no wrong answers.

14. Has theorizing and engaging with BTS' content taught you any skills that can be used outside fandom practices?

Appendix B. Suomenkielinen lyhennelmä

Digitaalisten faniyhteisöjen hyrskyistä kumpuaa nykypäivänä monenlaisia eri kokemuksellisuuden muotoja. Fanituksen kohteiden ympärille rakentuu kokonaisia kulttuureja omine käytäntöineen. Tarkastelen tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa eteläkorealaisen seitsenhenkisen BTS-popyhtyeen fanien tieto- ja merkityksenantokäytäntöjä teoretisoimisen käsitteen kautta. Teoretisointi on ollut tapana liittää akateemiseen maailmaan: kuten Richard Swedberg (2014, 1) toteaa, teoretisointi on prosessi, joka johtaa teorioihin. Samoin myös fanit käsittelevät usein eri sisältöjä analyyttisesti; he "leikkivät" sisällöillä navigoidessaan audiovisuaalisessa digiviidakossa, luovat sisältöjen välille yhteyksiä ja keskustelevat löydöksistään sekä teorioistaan muiden fanien kanssa. Näin myös BTS:n ympärille on muodostunut laaja fanitoiminnan verkosto, joka mahdollistaa monenlaisia toimijuuden muotoja ja luovia merkityksellistämisen käytäntöjä.

Pro gradu -tutkielmani nojaa fanitutkimuksen teoreettiseen viitekehykseen, jota määrittää vahvasti etenkin tieteidenvälinen lähestymistapa: fanitutkimus kumpusi alun perin kulttuurintutkimuksen kentältä, mutta on myöhemmin omaksunut traditioonsa muun muassa mediatutkimuksen, kirjallisuustieteen, viestintätieteet, antropologian, psykologian, elokuvatutkimuksen ja queer-tutkimuksen. Myös tämän pro gradu -tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys rakentuu tieteidenvälisesti monien eri ajattelun traditioiden varaan. Kuten Tisha Turk (2018, 540) kuvailee, tieteidenvälinen lähestymistapa yhdistää harmonisesti eri tieteiden ideat, jolloin voidaan saavuttaa kattavampi ymmärrys jostakin ilmiöstä. Fanitutkimuksen huomio taas on kiinnittynyt etenkin fanifiktioon, fanitaiteeseen ja muihin perinteisesti merkityksellisiksi koettuihin fanien luomiin sisältöihin. Priorisoidessaan tietynlaisen fanitoiminnan ja sisältöjen tuottamisen fanitutkimus on mediateoreetikon ja fanitutkimuksen uranuurtajan Henry Jenkinsin (2018, 13) mukaan usein jättänyt huomioimatta, kuinka muun muassa fanituksen kohteista keskusteleminen ja fanien eri kuratointikäytännöt luovat merkityksiä. Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastelen nimenomaan vähemmälle huomiolle jäänyttä fanitoimintaa. Fanien teoretisointi kietoutuu BTS:n virallisiin sisältöihin ja omaksuu yleensä eri sosiaalisen medioiden alustoilla käydyn keskustelun muodon, jolloin siihen on kenties hieman haastavampaa tarttua – teoretisointi saattaa nimittäin usein kadota mediavirran kuohuihin sekä on lisäksi yleensä tiettyyn aikaan ja paikkaan sidottua toimintaa. Yleensä fanien teoretisointi saavuttaa huippunsa BTS:n julkaistessa uusia albumeja ja albumiin liittyviä sisältöjä tai vihjeitä, kuten kuvia tai "teaser"-videoita.

BTS – koreaksi Bangtan Sonyeondan – debytoi kesäkuussa 2013, ja ryhmä on sittemmin noussut globaaliksi ilmiöksi. Laajan diskografiansa ja dynaamisten esitystensä lisäksi BTS:n hyödyntämä tarinankerronta rakentuu usein transmediaalisesti ja intertekstuaalisesti: tarinat, symbolit ja hahmot vaeltavat mediasta toiseen, ja BTS:n eri sisällöt saattavat intertekstuaalisesti viitata joko toisiinsa tai BTS:n oman intertekstuaalisen verkoston ulkopuolella oleviin teoksiin. BTS:n sisällöistä löytyy myös usein viittauksia esimerkiksi kirjallisuuteen, mytologiaan ja toisinaan muun muassa filosofiaan sekä psykologiaan. Laadullisen kyselylomakkeen avulla keräämässäni aineistossa painottuu ajatus siitä, että BTS:n sisällöt kannustavat ryhmän faneja, "armyja", omaksumaan teoreetikon lähestymistavan: tulkitakseen BTS:n sisältöjä ja pysyäkseen mukana kerronnan intertekstuaalisessa virrassa fanit tutustuvat usein laajalti eri merkityskenttiin. Toisinaan fanit kutsuvat itseään teoreetikoiksi leikkimielisesti, mutta armyt saattavat myös kytkeä teoretisoinnin itsensä kehittämisen ja monialaisen oppimisen teemoihin. Teoreetikkodiskurssiin liittyy kuitenkin usein itsereflektiivisyyden taso: armyt eivät ainoastaan keskustele BTS:n sisällöistä, vaan tekevät myös näkyväksi tavat, joilla tulkitsevat BTS:n sisältöjen merkityksiä. Teoretisoiminen ja siihen liittyvät diskurssit eli puhetavat, joilla luodaan ympäröivää todellisuutta, kytkeytyvät siis myös fanien itseymmärrykseen ja subjektipositioihin. Näin ollen teoretisointia tarkastelemalla pääsee käsiksi juuri kyseisen fanitoiminnan kokemuksellisuuteen.

Tutkimuskysymykseni ovat seuraavat: Kuinka fanit käsitteellistävät oman toimijuutensa BTS:n intertekstuaalisten sisältöjen tulkitsijoina? Kuinka fani-identiteetti ja fanien itseymmärrys rakentuu fanien teoretisointia koskevissa diskursseissa? Tarkastelen lisäksi fanien teoretisoimisen fenomenologisia ulottuvuuksia. Fenomenologialla viittaan pro graduni konstekstissa filosofiseen oppiin tai ajatteluun, joka painottaa nimenomaan yksilöllisen "paikantuneisuuden" ja aistimusten roolia ympäröivän maailman kokemisessa. Yksinkertaisuudessaan fenomenologia tutkii siis ilmiöitä niiden eletyssä ja keholla koetussa muodossa. Näin ollen tarkastelen sitä, minkälaista kokemuksellisuutta teoretisointi tarjoaa armyille. Fenomenologiaan nojaten voi kysyä, miltä teoretisointi tuntuu sekä minkälaisia maailmassa olemisen ja ympäröivän todellisuuden kokemisen tapoja se luo.

Fenomenologian teoreettiseen jatkumoon lukeutuu monia eri suuntauksia, joiden näkökulmat eroavat toisistaan jonkin verran. Tutkimukseni on tarkentunut nimenomaan hermeneuttisen fenomenologian viitekehykseen. Fenomenologian perustaja Edmund Husserlin ajattelu keskittyy kiinteiden "perusolemuksien" tarkasteluun, ja Husserlin deskriptiivisen

fenomenologian perusoletus onkin, että subjektius pitää sisällään "universaaleja totuuksia" (Larsen & Adu 2021, 35), joita voi kuvailla fenomenologian avulla. Hermeneuttinen fenomenologia taas painottaa merkitysten tulkintaa ja elettyjen kokemusten kontekstia; näin ollen myös tulkitsijan – eli tutkijan – omat kokemukset ovat keskeinen osa hermeneuttista tulkintaprosessia.

Hermeneuttis-fenomenologinen ajattelu ruumiillistuu pro gradu -tutkielmassani etenkin David Smithin (1999, 41) kuvaileman "hermeneuttisen mielikuvituksen" muodossa. Fanien omaksuma teoreetikon lähestymistapa nähdään usein itsestäänselvänä ja arkisena fanitoimintana. Hermeneuttinen mielikuvitus antaa minun tarkastella ilmiötä uteliaaseen ihmetykseen ja avoimuuteen turvautuen, jolloin ilmiö kiskaistaan irti sen arkisesta piiristä ja kuvitellaan uudessa valossa eli uusia merkityksiä ja kerroksia etsien. Hermeneuttis-fenomenologinen lähestymistapa näkyy myös itserefleksiivisyyden omaksumisessa. Tein tutkimusprosessissa näkyväksi oman positioni sekä fanina että fanikuntaa tutkivana, sillä läpinäkyvyys liittyy läheisesti tutkimusetiikkaan. Kuten Milena Popova (2020, 2.1) toteaa, tutkijan positio muovaa vääjäämättä tutkimusta: positio vaikuttaa kysymyksiin, joita tutkijat kysyvät, ja konkretisoituu sen lisäksi analyysimenetelmissä ja tulkintatavoissa. Aiempi tietämykseni faniyhteisöstä auttoi minua valitsemaan tutkielman aiheen ja muotoilemaan tutkimuskysymykseni. Lisäksi omakohtaiset kokemukseni ohjasivat minua sekä käytännöllisten että eettisten valintojen tekemisessä.

Keräsin aineiston tutkimukseeni avoimiin kysymyksiin pohjaavan laadullisen kyselylomakkeen avulla. Kyselylomake mahdollisti sen, että armyt saivat itse tuottaa tietoa ja määritellä omat eletyt kokemuksensa yksityiskohtaisesti. Vastaajien anonyymiyden suojelemiseksi vastaajat saivat valita pseudonyymin, jolla heihin viitataan tutkielmassa. Jotta otanta vastaisi sitä ryhmää faneista, joiden teoretisointia tarkastelen, pyysin muun muassa lomakkeenlevitysapua X:ssä (entisessä Twitterissä) fanitileiltä, jotka joko keskittyvät teoretisoimiseen tai muuten BTS:n sisältöjen analysoimiseen. Näin varmistin, että lomake saisi näkyvyyttä nimenomaan teoretisoivien fanien keskuudessa.

Tutkimukseen osallistui lopulta 81 vastaaja, ja kyselylomake tuotti suuren monimuotoisen aineiston. Itse aineistonhallinnan, organisoimisen ja koodaamisen apuna käytin laadullisen analyysin ohjelmistoa, NVivoa. Kuten Judy Rashotte ja Louise Jensen (2007, 104) argumentoivat, hermeneuttis-fenomenologisen tutkimuksen ei tulisi seurata lineaarista aineistonkeruu–koodaus–analyysi-skaalaa, vaan tutkimusprosessin kehämäisyyden tulisi

painottua. Vaikka laaja aineisto vaati, että omaksun järjestelmällisen lähestymistavan, tutkimuskysymykseni elivät prosessin aikana ja jätin myös tilaa joustavuudelle: annoin eri koodien kummuta lomakevastauksista mahdollisimman vapaasti sen sijaan, että olisin turvautunut ennalta määriteltyyn teorialähtöiseen kehykseen. Tämä lähestymistapa kytkeytyy myös itse aineiston analyysimenetelmiin eli aineistolähtöiseen temaattiseen analyysiin ja narratiivien tutkimukseen.

Ensinnäkin, tämän tutkielman tavoite on tarkastella armyjen elettyjä kokemuksia, jotka avautuvat nimenomaan fanien tuottaman oman vapaan kerronnan ja puhetapojen kautta. Näin ollen tarkastelen myös vääjäämättä fanien tapoja puhua omista kokemuksistaan ja toiminnastaan. Niinpä tämä tutkielma hyödyntää narratiivien analyysia. Kuten hermeneutiikan ja fenomenologian yhdistänyt ranskalaisfilosofi Paul Ricoeur toteaa, kieli ja kokemus ovat perustavanlaatuisesti yhteensidottuja; ne tulevat olevaksi samaan aikaan (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, 3). Tämän tutkielman kontekstissa fanien tuottama puhe itsestään on siis tärkeä narratiivinen työkalu, jolla fanit konstruoivat subjektipositioitaan ja tuottavat merkityksiä. Temaattisen analyysin avulla taas voi tarkastella aineistossa esiintyviä teemoja. Virginia Braunin ja Victoria Clarken (2006, 82) mukaan "teema" manifestoituu jonakin, mikä on tärkeää suhteessa tutkimuskysymyksiin: yhtäältä se saattaa siis olla aineistossa usein toistuva "yksikkö" mutta voi toisaalta myös olla harvemminkin esiintyvä ja ansaita temaattisen statuksensa, koska se onnistuu vangitsemaan olennaisen tärkeää tutkimuksen aiheen näkökulmasta.

Armyjen tavoissa puhua teoretisoinnista ja BTS:n kerronnan kokemuksellisuudesta korostuu etenkin leikillisyys. Fanikuntia onkin tutkittu yhteisöinä, joissa leikilliset elementit kukoistavat ja nivoutuvat yhteen ihmisten jokapäiväisen fanitoiminnan kanssa (katso Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002; Booth 2015a; Mavridou 2017; Nybro Petersen 2022). On tärkeää huomioida, että leikki ja leikillisyys eivät ole toistensa synonyymejä, sillä tarkastelen pro gradu -tutkielmassani nimenomaan leikillisyyttä. Kuten Miguel Sicart (2014, 26) toteaa, "leikki" viittaa toimintaan, jolla on tietyt tavoitteensa, kun taas "leikillisyydellä" viitataan tietynlaiseen leikilliseen asenteeseen tai suhtautumiseen ympäröivää maailmaa kohtaan (ibid., 22). Teoretisoinnin kokemuksellisuuden leikillisyys avautuu tutkielmassa kahden eri tason tarkastelun kautta: BTS:n tarinamaailmassa hyödynnettyjen leikillisen kerronnan muotojen kautta ja fanien oman leikillisen asenteen tarkastelun kautta. Kuten lomakkeeseen vastannut Ana toteaa, BTS:n narratiivien palapelimäinen ja intertekstuaalisuutta hyödyntävä struktuuri luo yhtyeen sisältöjen ympärille "löydöksien kulttuurin" ("culture of discovery"): BTS:n

tarinamaailmassa navigoidessaan fanit tulevat omien sanojensa mukaan palapelien ratkojiksi, aarteenmetsästäjiksi, salapoliiseiksi ja teoreetikoiksi.

Line Nybro Petersenin konsepti "leikin mielentiloista" (play moods) tarjoaa hyödyllisen lähtökohdan teoretisoinnin kokemuksellisuuteen. Nybro Petersenin (2022, 33–34) mukaan leikin mielentila määrittyy tietynlaisena suhtautumisena – tai virittäytymisenä – ympäröivään maailmaan. Näin ollen se luo siis tietynlaisen avoimen, leikillisen kokemuksellisuuden tilan. Vastauksissa korostuu se, että kaikki BTS:n mediasisältö voi jollakin tavalla liittyä "Bangtan Universeen" (BTS:n fiktiiviseen tarinamaailmaan) tai olla muuten tarinankerronnallisesti tärkeää BTS:n sisältöjen tulkinnan näkökulmasta. Niinpä armyt omaksuvat leikillisen position, joka toimii lähes refleksinomaisesti BTS:n julkaistessa uusia sisältöjä: fanit ikään kuin skannaavat kaiken BTS:n jakaman sisällön turvautuen semioottisiin ja intertekstuaalisiin "kartastoihin" tai tietokantoihin. Tämän organisoidun, kontekstuaalisen tiedon avulla fanit reflektoivat sitä, miten uusi sisältö kytkeytyy vanhaan ja kuinka jotakin BTS:n sisältöjä voi käyttää uusissa luovissa asiayhteyksissä. Armyjen kontekstuaalinen tietämys BTS:n sisällöissä vaeltelevista aiheista, kuvista ja teemoista sallii siis fanien navigoida sujuvasti BTS:n laajassa merkitysten ja intertekstuaalisten yhteyksien verkossa.

Kulttuuriantropologi Lévi-Straussin (2021[1962]) "villin ajattelun" käsityksen hyödyntäminen tässä yhteydessä antaa armyjen toimille kiintoisan näkökulman: "brikolööri" (bricoleur), jossa ruumiillistuu villi ajattelu, käyttää kaikkea ympäristöstään löytämäänsä uusien merkitysten ja viitekehysten luomiseen – hän hyödyntää materiaalien "käytön historian" tietämystään ja luo sen avulla uutta (Frissen 2015, 155). Omaksuessaan teoreetikon leikkisän mielentilan fanit virittäytyvät ympäristöönsä (eri medioissa rakentuvaan tarinankerrontaan) ja luovat leikkisästi yhteyksiä eri sisältöjen välille, jolloin BTS:n sisällöt muuntuvat merkitystenluonnin aarreaitoiksi. Sen sijaan, että fanit keskittyisivät ratkaisemaan BTS:n intertekstuaalisen verkoston palapelin, teoretisointi leikillisenä asenteena tarjoaa armyille ennemminkin mahdollisuuksia ja "mitä jos" -sisältöjä. Näin ollen teoretisointi ruumiillistuu ennen kaikkea luovaan kuvitteluun johtavana leikillisenä asenteena. Teoretisoiminen saattaa tosin diskursseissa omaksua myös ironisoivia, humoristisia ja karnevalisoivia muotoja: armyt kutsuvat itseään toisinaan "klovneiksi", mikä korostaa teorioiden usein epävarmaa statusta – tässä tapauksessa teoretisoinnin kokemuksellisuus näyttäytyy leikillisen performanssin ja faniyhteisön "kollektiivisen naurun" valossa.

Leikkisä teoretisointi omaksuu toisinaan vakavampia fanien subjektipositioihin kytkeytyviä muotoja. Aineiston valossa teoretisointi toimii myös sosiaalisena laboratoriona tai eksistentiaalisena testaamisena, jonka avulla ihmiset voivat hyödyntää omaa tietämystään eri asioista turvallisessa leikkisässä tilassa (katso Henricks 2015, 73, 130). Vaikka armyt painottavat teoretisoimisen vapautta ja leikillisyyteen kietoutuvaa kokemuksellisuutta, leikillisyydellä on faniyhteisön sisällä kuitenkin myös sosiaalisesti ylläpidetyt rajansa: muun muassa tietyistä aiheista, kuten BTS:n yksityiselämästä, teoretisoiminen rikkoo leikillisen tilan, eli teoretisoinnin leikillisyys on luonteeltaan erittäin kontekstuaalista.

Armyjen tavoissa puhua teoretisoinnin kokemuksellisuudesta painottuvat lisäksi vahvasti informaalin oppimisen, monialaisen tiedon omaksumisen ja tiedon demokratisoimisen tematiikat. Ensinnäkin fanien teoretisoinnin myötä rakentuu yhteisöllisiä oppimisen ja merkityksenannon tiloja, joihin James Paul Gee (2005) viittaa käsitteellä *online affinity spaces*. Kyseisissä digitaalisissa tiloissa ihmiset kokoontuvat yhteisten mieltymysten ympärille, ja fanit voivat hyödyntää tilaa joustavasti ja personoidusti omien tarpeidensa mukaisesti. Tiloihin ja sosiaalisiin yhteisöihin liittyen aineistosta kumpuaa lisäksi ajatus ARMY-faniyhteisöstä "episteemisenä yhteisönä": fanien, jotka ovat jonkin tietyn alan tai ilmiön asiantuntijoita, odotetaan jakavan asiantuntemuksensa ja kansantajuistavan tietämyksensä muiden armyjen teoretisoinnin ja oppimisen hyödyksi. Armyjen digitaaliset fanitilat tukevat näin myös informaalia oppimista, jolloin oppiminen ja tiedon omaksuminen tapahtuvat pidemmällä aikavälillä ja kytkeytyvät ihmisten identiteetteihin, mieltymyksiin, arvoihin ja jokapäiväisiin tapoihin (Lemke ja Van Helden 2009, 151). Näin ihmisten olemisen tavat ja subjektipositiot kietoutuvat jokapäiväisessä fanitoiminnassa usein elinikäisen uteliaisuuden ja oppimisen filosofiaan.

Yhtäältä BTS itse edistää armyjen mukaan taiteen saavutettavuutta muun muassa punomalla korkean taiteen ja populaaritaiteen usein erillään pidetyt kentät yhteen, mutta samalla ryhmän fanit tuovat eri oppimisen piirejä yhteen: X:stä löytyy fanien ylläpitämiä tilejä, jotka tarjoavat esimerkiksi eri alojen tuutorointia ilmaiseksi, jakavat tietoa avoimista työpaikoista ja levittävät terveysvalistusta yhdistämällä luovan värikkäästi BTS:n sekä lääketieteen. Lisäksi vuodesta 2020 lähtien järjestetty jokavuotinen BTS:ään keskittyvä globaali monitieteinen konferenssi, BTS: A Global Interdisciplinary Conference, tarjoaa alustan BTS:ää käsittelevälle ja monesti fanien itsensä tekemälle tutkimukselle. Keskeistä onkin, että faniyhteisön tilat tarjoavat moninaisia mahdollisuuksia ja tapoja yhdistää eri tiedon sekä

oppimisen piirit. Aineiston valossa voi siis todeta, että monien fanien opintojen tai työn viitekehys saattaa kiintoisin tavoin kietoutua fanitoimintaan.

BTS:n tarjoaman kokemuksellisuuden transkulttuurinen luonne nousee aineistossa keskeiseksi teemaksi. Pro gradu -tutkielmani kontekstissa viittaan transkulttuurisuudella nykypäivän globaalin mediakulttuurin luonteeseen, jota määrittävät perustavanlaatuisesti etenkin kulttuuristen rajojen ja piirteiden sekoittuminen sekä hämärtyminen. Korealaisena yhtyeenä BTS ei varsinaisesti ole osa länsimaista hegemonista piiriä, koska yhtyeen musiikki, kuvastot ja kokemuksellisuus ovat vahvasti juurtuneita sekä yhtyeen korealaisuuteen että BTS:n sisältöjen laajempaan transkulttuuristen elementtien fuusioon. Monille faneille BTS tarjonneekin juuri vaihtoehtoisia kokemuksellisuuden muotoja, jotka eivät kytkeydy ainoastaan länsimaisiin kulttuurisiin merkityksiin ja kuvastoihin. Armyjen transkulttuurisissa digitaalisissa fanitiloissa syntyy näin ollen uudenlaisia kulttuurisen mielikuvituksen muotoja. BTS:n monimuotoiset kuvastot ja merkitykset sallivat toisin sanoen fanien kuvitella vaihtoehtoisia todellisuuksia ja kyllästää jokapäiväiset fanitilansa itselleen henkilökohtaisesti ja sosiaalisesti relevanteilla merkityksillä.

Armyjen teoretisointia voi tarkastella myös mytologisen ajattelun ja myytinluomisen näkökulmista. Tämä kietoo nähdäkseni kiintoisin tavoin yhteen armyjen leikillisyyden ja faniyhteisön tieto- ja merkityksenantokäytännöt. Ensinnäkin BTS:n sisältöjen arvoituksiin ja intertekstuaalisiin palapeleihin turvautuva luonne kutsuu fanit mukaan mytologiseen leikkiin tai arvuutteluun. Fiktiivistä tarinankerrontaa mytologian näkökulmasta tarkasteleva Lily Alexander (2017, 122) käyttää "semanttisen värähtelyn" (semantic vibration) käsitettä viitatessaan myyttien ja mytologisen ajattelun luonteeseen. Alexander (2016; 2017; 2020) kuvailee, kuinka ihmisten ensimmäiset mytologiset järjestelmät perustuivat ajatukseen siitä, että ihmisten tuli lukea maagisia merkkejä ympäristöstään: tämä myyttisten jumalten koodattu kommunikointi näyttäytyi nimenomaan arvoituksina, salattuina viesteinä ja symboleina, joita ihmisen tuli tulkita (Alexander 2016, 23). Luonnosta ammennetut symbolit muovautuivat tarinoiksi ja narratiiveiksi, eli ne muuntuivat tiedoksi, jonka perusteella ihmiset rakensivat ympäröivän todellisuuden symbolisen kartastonsa (Alexander 2016, 19). BTS:n intertekstuaalinen vaeltavien ja toistuvien merkitysten rihmasto hyödyntää samankaltaista interaktiivista arvausleikkiä: teoretisoidessaan armyt huomioivat BTS:n sisältöjä tulkitessaan tarkasti yksityiskohtia ja vihjeitä, sillä ne voivat osoittautua tärkeäksi. Fanit navigoivat BTS:n sisältöjen narratiiveissa turvautuen aiemmin luomaansa symboliseen verkostoon (Alexander 2017, 125) ja semanttiseen kartastoon (ibid. 2016, 22). BTS:n sisällöt ovat täynnä symboleita

ja semanttisesti värähteleviä arvoituksia, jotka odottavat tarinoiksi, tiedoksi ja merkityksiksi avautumistaan nimenomaan aktiivisen tulkitsijansa avulla.

BTS:n tarinankerronnan myyttisiä ulottuvuuksia voi lisäksi tarkastella käännöksellisyyden ja yhteisöllisyyden näkökulmista, joihin Alexander (2017, 122) viittaa termeillä *translatability* sekä *communiability*. Mytologia on säilyttänyt vaikutusvaltansa ennen kaikkea siksi, että myyttiset narratiivit ja hahmot ylittävät vaivattomasti kulttuuriset kuilut ja rajat (ibid.), kuten myös tutkielmani aineisto osoittaa: monet armyt kuvailevat, että he ovat BTS:n sisältöjen inspiroimina päätyneet etsimään tietoa eri kulttuurien mytologioista ja myyttisistä hahmoista. Myyttiset narratiivit, symbolit ja kuvastot siis resonoivat erittäin vahvasti; niihin sisältyy ikään kuin lupaus kutkuttavasti avautuvista merkityksistä, yhteyksistä ja kulttuurisia rajoja ylittävästä intertekstuaalisesta tarinankerronnasta.

Keskeistä BTS:n ympärille rakentuneen faniyhteisön toimissa ja merkityksenantokäytännöissä on nähdäkseni ajatus jonkinlaisesta transformaatiosta tai muodonmuutoksesta esimerkiksi ympäröivien sosiaalisten tilojen personoimisen tai omien narratiivien luomisen kautta. Faniyhteisössä kiteytyy myös ajatus siitä, että ympäröivässä todellisuudessa on jotakin maagista ja erityistä, jotakin salattua, johon täytyy tarttua ja joka täytyy paljastaa – tässä tapauksessa nimenomaan teoretisoimisen avulla. Kaikki nämä piirteet ovat ominaisia myös satukulttuureille (fairy-tale cultures) ja eri kansantarujen traditioille. Kuten Anne Kustritz (2018, 245) toteaa, satukulttuurit ja faniyhteisöt ovat toisinaan eri nimiä samalle toiminnalle; kyse on usein ennen kaikkea määrittelystä ja perspektiivistä. Juuri kuten satukulttuureissa, joissa jokainen kertomus muovataan sopimaan tietyn ryhmän tarpeisiin ja kulttuuriseen kontekstiin (ibid., 248), myös armyt muovaavat BTS:n sisältöjä, tarinoita ja narratiiveja luovasti omiin tarpeisiinsa sopiviksi. Fanien teoretisointi on pitkälti moniäänistä: jokainen fani saattaa kutoa oman äänensä osaksi kulttuurista toimintaa armyjen jakaessa eri tulkintoja ja verratessa toistensa teorioita keskenään (katso ibid., 248, 250). Sovellan tutkielmassani juuri satukulttuurien käyttämää "kutomisen" metaforaa: kuten satukulttuurien sadunkertojat, myös fanit kutovat teoretisoidessaan laajoja intertekstuaalisia kokonaisuuksia yhteen ja luovat verkostoja, joiden avulla he navigoivat BTS:n kerronnallisessa maailmassa. Tämän lisäksi fanit kutovat yhteen erilaisia oppimisen ja tiedon piirejä. Laajempana teemana olen myös tarkastellut sitä, kuinka leikillinen kokemuksellisuus kietoutuu monin tavoin fanien informaatiokäytäntöihin ja monialaisen tiedon omaksumiseen.

Fanien merkityksenanto- ja informaatiokäytännöt kietoutuvat fanien arvoihin ja subjektipositioihin – näin tutkielma valottaa myös narratiivien tärkeyttä itsemäärittelyssä. Teoretisoimista määrittää toisin sanoen vahvasti myös sen kytkeytyneisyys faniyhteisön diskursseihin, joiden avulla fanit neuvottelevat omia representaatioitaan ja subjektipositioitaan. Kysyin armyilta myös faniyhteisöön usein liitetyistä arvoista: toistuvasti esille nousseita arvoja ovat muun muassa intellektuaalisuus, itsensä kehittäminen, uteliaisuus ja halu oppia sekä omaksua tietoa laajalti ja monialaisesti. Lisäksi on keskeistä huomata, että fanien toimet, arvot ja omaksutut subjektipositiot ovat vahvasti sidoksissa affekteihin. Armyjen vastauksissa painottuu se, että fanit seuraavat nimenomaan BTS:n jäsenten henkilökohtaisia elämänkäsityksiä ja esimerkkejä: jäsenet inspiroivat faneja, motivoivat armyja kehittämään itseään, omaksumaan tietoa ja suhtautumaan uteliaasti ympäröivää todellisuutta kohtaan. Monet armyt toteavatkin tähän liittyen, että BTS toivoo fanien olevan sivistyneitä ja tiedonjanoisia – näin faniyhteisössä rakentuu muun muassa juuri teoretisoimisen kautta yhteisöllisiä merkityksenannon ja oppimisen tiloja. Myös tämä liittyy omanlaiseensa transformaatioon. Transkulttuuriset fanitilat sallivat armyjen kirjoittaa oman historiansa ja tuottaa tietoa omasta faniyhteisöstään. Tässä mielessä heistä tulee, kuten myös satukulttuurien kertojista, oman kulttuurinsa kirjoittajia – he siis astuvat kulttuurin narratiiviseen virtaan, joka auttaa yhtäältä tulkitsemaan ympäröivää maailmaa mutta toisaalta myös rakentaa ympäröivää todellisuutta (Kustritz 2018, 250).

Giovanni Boccia Artierin (2012, 463) mukaan nykyajan mediasisällöt tuottavat täysin uudenlaisia tulkinnan kategorioita tai jopa kokonaan uusia "semanttisia järjestelmiä". Alexander (2016, 42) on samaan tapaan ehdottanut, että moninaiset interaktiivisen tarinankerronnan muodot auttavat ihmisiä kasvattamaan täysin uudenlaiset aivot, jotka auttavat navigoimaan fiktiivisissä maailmoissa. Armyjen fanitoiminnassa Boccia Artierin ja Alexanderin kuvailemat konseptit manifestoituvat nimenomaan leikillisten tiedonomaksumis- ja jakamistapojen muodossa. BTS:n sisällöt toimivat armyille usein laajana tiedon metsästysmaana, jota fanit muokkaavat ja laajentavat omien tarkoitusperiensä mukaan. BTS:n sisällöt ja samoin myös fanien luomat tilat tarjoavat monenlaisia kokemuksellisuuden muotoja – oli sitten tarkoitus ottaa osaa leikilliseen intertekstuaaliseen palapeliin tai käyttää faniyhteisöä itsensä kehittämisen ja oppimisen työkaluna.

Saksalainen sosiologi Max Weber (2004 [1917]) on esittänyt ajatuksen siitä, että länsimainen kulttuuri kärsii jonkinlaisesta lumouksen ja taianomaisuuden haihtumisesta: rationalisaatio, sekularisaatio ja modernismi ovat kumonneet aiemmin vallinneen maagisen maailmankuvan

ja köyhdyttäneet modernismia edeltäneen "taianomaisen puutarhan" (katso Marotta 2023, 12, 15). ARMY-faniyhteisön transkulttuurisissa tiloissa taianomaisuus ja myyttinen ajattelu virtaavat kuitenkin fanien jokapäiväiseen toimintaan ja elettyyn todellisuuteen; niiden myötä syntyy uusia mielikuvituksen muotoja ja luovia merkityksenannon käytäntöjä. Näin ollen yhdyn mieluiten Michael Salerin (2012) käsitykseen siitä, että nimenomaan faniyhteisöjen ja värikkäiden fiktiivisten todellisuuksien tarjoama kokemuksellisuus palauttaa taianomaisuuden ja luo samalla uusia julkisia mielikuvituksen piirejä (ibid., 17). Armyt kohtelevat aineistoni perusteella BTS:n sisältöjä ja yhtyeen laajaa kerronnan verkostoa muovailtavana merkitysten aarreaittana. Näin faniyhteisöt saattavat näyttäytyä monille faneille juuri Weberin taianomaisena ja rehevänä puutarhana: faniyhteisön tilat tarjoavat faneille eri toimijuuden ja haltioitumisen mahdollisuuksia. Ennen kaikkea ne luovat hedelmällistä merkityksenantomaaperää ja mielikuvitusta ruokkivaa leikkikenttää, jolla temmeltää.