

“Got ARMY right behind us”: BTS ARMY fan identities on Twitter and Weverse

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to merge the three research areas of digital communication, persona studies, and fan studies by examining interactions within the BTS ARMY fandom community in the contemporary microblogging spaces of Twitter and Weverse, and investigates how fans perform, express, and construct their individual and collective identities through digital activities in the age of globalization. The theme of this work was inspired by the increase in popularity of Korean pop music as the evolution of the genre and musicians have been a fascinating phenomenon in globalized culture. However, the focus of this research is on the fans who take part in the fandom not only to receive content related to their beloved idols, but also to participate in online conversations about issues important to their being and lives in society. This exchange of opinions and values can have an effect on individuals in terms of their identity and worldview. In addition, the architecture of the platforms on which fandoms participate is also decisive to this identity construction. Weverse is distinct from Twitter in being solely dedicated to the fan community, while Twitter is a general social network for everyone. This differentiation constructs a paradigm of fans and fandom object shifting in terms of interaction, performance, and identity. To answer the research question of *how BTS ARMY fans between 18 to 25 years old use the online social platforms of Twitter and Weverse to interact with each other and the band*, 10 qualitative interviews were conducted with BTS fans belonging to ARMY fandom. The data from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis, with five main themes identified. First, interviewees explained their own interpretations of fan concepts by distinguishing them as individual understandings of being ARMY and belonging to the BTS fandom. Second, collective fan identities were established on the basis of belonging to the ARMY community and undertaking joint fan activities. Third, the behaviours and self-expressions of ARMYs were consistently replicated within the individual identities of BTS fans. Fourth, observations concerning the affordances offered to fans by Twitter and Weverse were explicated. Fans acknowledge social media's worldwide reach in uniting subculture communities, as well as the technological capabilities that allow fans and the band to interact in both direct and indirect means. Finally, the last theme looked at the constraints of these two platforms for fans. The respondents criticize the undeveloped Weverse features that prevent direct interaction between users as a result of the differences in the architecture of both platforms. Similarly, fans express dissatisfaction with Twitter notifications that prioritize data collection from user accounts over social interaction. This

research concludes that fans take advantage of the diverse features offered by the platforms, which enable them to engage with other members of the formed community with whom they share collective identification, as well as use those characteristics that allow the control and articulation of their individual identities.

Keywords: Fandom, Social Media, Convergence Culture, Hallyu, Identity

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1. Introduction

The area of fandom research arose out of the academic interest in media audiences and users with the discipline emerging in the last three decades (Booth, 2018). The concept of fandom can be understood as a community with a common identity and interests that developed characteristic patterns of consumption and interpretation (Jenkins, 2018). As a result of the growing importance of online media and technology, communication as well as information facilitate the cultural exchange of individuals and groups (Jenkins, 2006). The Internet is a particularly essential tool used by the fan community. The existence of this medium, as well as its active use by this social community, has significantly changed the nature of fandoms. Most importantly, it has aided in their development, popularization, and expansion in terms of both membership and associations (Siuda, 2008). The activity of fans in social media can be therefore described as a form of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006; Kusuma, Purbantina, Nahdiyah, & Khasanah, 2020).

The participatory model of convergence culture is focused on an active attitude toward both the culture's goods and its other users. This is made possible by the special characteristics of communication technologies and tools. Accordingly, they should be collaborative and interconnected in nature, enabling communication through the use of different devices, complementing one another and taking over various tasks assigned, while also being available and easy to use (Negroponte, 1996). Moreover, the communication tools also enable the establishment of interpersonal relationships that contribute to the active reception of media in technological culture and dominate participation in social life and customs (Jenkins & Purushotma, 2009; Negroponte, 1996). The phenomenon of fandoms is a variant of the participation model, which was developed on the basis of available communication technologies, as one of the convergence culture's subsystems (Jenkins & Purushotma, 2009). Therefore, the essence of a fandom is seeking contact and exchanging various fan labour products, opinions, or acquired knowledge among its members.

Globalization is another feature contributing to the alterations taking place in fandom studies. It is described as a process of changes taking place at the economic, social, political, and cultural levels (Danaeefard & Abbasi, 2011). The observed effect of this transition is the global integration of economic structures and a large unification of economic and social behaviours. Consequently, consumption structures, education systems, technological solutions, as well as value and concept systems, are all intertwined (Danaeefard & Abbasi, 2011). As the rapid flow of knowledge can be used to shape bonds, globalization has also

facilitated a broader development of fandom creation (Kusuma et al., 2020). In the era of globalization and mass communication, one can quickly and effortlessly connect with people who share the same values, exchange views, and share knowledge about certain passions (Kusuma et al., 2020). Thus, society is no longer confined to a small local group, but can interact with anyone from anywhere in the world at any time. The emergence of international cultures has created diversity in popular culture, bringing new trends to the mainstream media.

One of the prominent trends from Asia has been the Korean Wave, referred to as *Hallyu* (Lie, 2012; Oh & Park, 2013; Saraswati, 2020). The Korean Wave can be considered a manifestation of cultural diffusion, in which local customs gain a global dimension (Lie, 2012; Oh & Park, 2013), and is also disseminated through the media (Lie, 2012; Oh & Park, 2013). Film series, video games, and fashion from South Korea have dominated the Asian mass culture space and successfully expanded into Western markets (Kim, 2015; Oh & Park, 2013). This transnational cultural flow has promoted South Korean culture in the international arena, within which Korean music has become widespread and known as K-Pop (Kusuma et al., 2020; Oh & Park, 2013; Saraswati, 2020). K-pop is produced by the South Korean music industry specializing in creating denationalized transnational celebrities (Kim, 2015; Lie, 2012). Korean cultural industries, such as popular music production, play a significant role in the Asian cultural goods market. The rise of Korean pop has been fuelled by music companies dealing with the phenomenon professionally (Oh & Park, 2013). Korean creative industries, supported by the South Korean government, skilfully employ modern digital technologies and social media to initiate and increase interest in Korean culture (Kim, 2015; Lie, 2012; Oh & Park, 2013).

Bangtan Sonyeodan, popularly known as Beyond the Scene or BTS, is a K-Pop group that has gained extensive recognition overseas (Saraswati, 2020). The South Korean band consists of seven members (Saraswati, 2020). In its eight-year history, BTS has broken records many times. Their success has dominated the international music charts, making the group one of the world's unprecedented phenomena (Saraswati, 2020). One of the band's global successes is the fact that their single became the most viewed video on YouTube in less than a day in August 2020, with 101.1 million views (Tankovska, 2021). Owing to the aforementioned song, the K-pop group also became the first Korean band to top the Billboard Hot 100, earning praise from South Korean president, Moon Jae-in (Parc & Kim, 2020). Additionally, with 756,000 fans from over 100 countries, the online concert in June 2020 set a new Guinness World Record for the most-watched live music concert (Triscari, 2020). Much

of their transnational success can be attributed to their devoted international fan base, known as ARMY, which has helped establish BTS as a global music group (Parc & Kim, 2020).

Fan engagement is at the core of the music industry, with money spent on concerts, albums, and official merchandise accelerating a rising artist up the charts, regardless of demographic boundaries (Stewart, 2013). ARMYs are well-organized and steadfast in their devotion to BTS (Parc & Kim, 2020; Suntikul, 2019). Their activities also include promoting the group's activity on various social media, organizing broadcasts of new music, and even creating merchandise for other fandom members (Parc & Kim, 2020). In particular, BTS fans perceive the band as original, sincere, and socially conscious personalities who are not afraid to talk openly about challenges and fears on their career path (Parc & Kim, 2020).

1.1 Research question

This thesis focuses on the BTS fandom known as ARMY, which stands for Adorable Representatives M.C. for Youth (Parc & Kim, 2020; Saraswati, 2020). Due to their active participation in social media, this study compares their activity on Twitter and Weverse. Therefore, the central research question of this thesis is designed as follows: *How do BTS ARMY fans between 18 to 25 years old use the online social platforms of Twitter and Weverse to interact with each other and the band?* Subsequently, the central question is divided into two sub-questions to examine how the platform structures provide affordances and constraints for fan interaction and construction of online identities. Consequently, the sub-questions of this thesis are:

How do online platforms shape fan construction of their individual and collective online identities?

How do the characteristics of the platforms provide affordances and constraints for fan and band interaction?

1.2 Academic relevance

Along the lines of the context mentioned above, this thesis is a study of fandom in the era of digitization with internet data documents and in-depth interviews with members of the fandom used as sources. Academic texts on the phenomenon are included in the research literature with Jenkins (2006), Siuda (2008), Meyrowitz (1994), and other theorists providing the theoretical context focusing on such issues as active reception of the media message, fandom studies, and contemporary forms of community. Additionally, van Dijck's (2013)

platform analysis framework is used to examine the affordances and constraints of the platforms under study. Comparing a platform designed for the general public with one for a specific target group can assist in discovering specific paradigm shifts in fan behaviour.

Furthermore, a constituent of the material base is derived from the Internet. Using internet sources in scientific research may raise doubts, but in the case of a popular culture phenomenon such as BTS, the Internet as an open and interactive occurrence is an appropriate source for up-to-date information on the band's career and fan activity (Siuda, 2010).

Due to BTS's relatively recent entry into the global music market, research into international fandom has been unexplored from the perspective of ARMYs, despite the existing research into the exceptional success of BTS. The study's research question is therefore of scientific importance, as it not only investigates the role of social media in the creation of identities but also scrutinizes the characteristics of the online platforms that allow the fandom to be internationally active. In addition, exploring the perspectives of K-Pop fans allows for an examination of the consequences of globalization in the wake of the influx of Asian culture, thus reconstructing the popular culture model as deriving from the West.

1.3 Social relevance

The starting point for the research that forms the core of this work was the issue of interpersonal relationships within the fan group. The aim of the work is, on the one hand, to characterize the group, which provides the framework for the entire study and can serve as a contribution to further research, and on the other hand, to draw conclusions about the relations between fandom members, activities undertaken in the community, in particular those specific to it, and the interpretation of the group's fans and other participants themselves. Accordingly, this research builds on this discussion in fandom studies with insights as to how online social platforms foster and/or inhibit online community.

The sociological analysis of this type of collectivity is carried out in a very limited way. Aside from the research on fandom studies driven by Western trends, there is a lack of empirical study on communities interested in Asian popular culture (Pande, 2018; Stanfill, 2018). Despite the fact that cultural scholars have raised the issue (Kusuma et al., 2020; Parc & Kim, 2020; Saraswati, 2020; Suntikul, 2019), international interest in the BTS group is still relatively recent, providing space for further investigation into the ARMY fandom. This study's social and practical importance derives from a deeper understanding of ongoing studies into the identity and strategy of fan behaviour and interaction. In this regard, it is necessary to take a critical perspective when examining this contemporary and interdiscursive

field of research. Moreover, an in-depth investigation from a potentially integrated perspective can also suggest ideas for improving the understanding of socio-cultural interactions in the digital era.

1.4 Chapter outline

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how the structures of social media platforms provide affordances and constraints in how BTS fans establish their individual and collective identities. The analysis in this thesis consists of five chapters, each with accompanying sections.

Following the introduction, the second chapter reviews the theoretical framework of the study by presenting the leading concepts of discussion. In order to introduce the ARMY fandom, the BTS phenomenon and its relationship with fans over the years are introduced. Furthermore, I discuss the concept of fandom and its meaning, which constitutes a form of convergence culture, as well as its influence on the identities of fandom members. Similarly, the significance of social media is presented along with a discussion of the theoretical context in academic texts. Additionally, as a means to interpret fan activities on social media, the two chosen platforms are fully described.

Next, the third chapter presents the research design. In this part, the form of the qualitative method and the structure of the thematic analysis are identified, through which to answer the research questions. Moreover, the procedure of gathering participants is presented here. Subsequently, chapter four analyses the selected data from participants according to the established methodology identified in chapter three. By analysing the data, the main themes that appeared in interviews with BTS fans are presented. Finally, the thesis ends with a concluding discussion on the main findings.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Fans and fandoms

Before delving into the specific fan communities, it is crucial to define who they are and how the idea of fandom is viewed by researchers and practitioners. In the field of social science, the image of a fan is extremely diverse and has progressed throughout the years. The word's etymological origins portray the fan as a fanatic, and for many years, fans were considered a pathological layer (Jenkins, 1992; Sullivan, 2020). According to the general definition, the word *fan* is an abbreviation of "fanatic," which comes from the Latin "fanaticus," which in the literal sense means "temple servant" or "devotee" (Sullivan, 2020, p. 192). Over time, however, the term *fanatic* began to be used in relation to an exaggerated and irrational enthusiast, rather than only referring to the religious adherent (Jenkins, 1992; Sullivan, 2020). In colloquial language, the concept of a fan is used in a very arbitrary manner, as it defines a variety of phenomena, all of which are significantly different (Siuda, 2008). The type of fan mentioned in this work, however, cannot be characterized according to common ideas or stereotypes. The most suitable approach would be to specify the concept of a fan in regard to anyone who enjoys popular culture and exclude someone who enjoys anything else.

Siuda (2010) describes fans as ideal, enthusiastic and productive consumers. The fan is caught in an endless loop of consumption, and has a deeply rooted sense of obligation to buy more and more. Furthermore, the fan's emotional devotion as well as the value system he or she adheres, makes the fan an outstanding customer and enthusiastic user (Siuda, 2010). The author claims that due to their unique dedication to the reception of the object of adoration and curiosity about its every form, fans can be categorized as culturally active people in every detail (Siuda, 2010). Nevertheless, a fan is not only a customer and a passive user, but also a creator who produces works based on the original text.

Other ideas concerning fandom participation, such as self-declaration and rating of attendance, contradict the idea that joining a club automatically qualifies a person for membership in the fandom (Jenkins, 2018). According to Jenkins (1992), the participatory traits of a fandom are characterized by engagement, which forms a bond between created community participants, as well as the production, consumption, and collective interpretation of the texts created. As the author describes, textual poaching, which defines the strategies of the active receiver of the text that transforms the original one, has become an expression of resistance against the prevailing media industries, and its practitioners have been compared to

disobedient children who revolt against reading the text according to the imposed guidelines, treating the process as entertainment (Jenkins, 1992). Fans have thus evolved into entitled communities who not only borrow fragments from the dominant culture, but also build their own culture or subculture out of semiotic and unprocessed media resources. The process of appropriating media texts and rereading them has been labelled as a manifestation of mainstream culture's transition into popular culture (Jenkins, 1992).

By contrast, Siuda (2010) characterizes this stage in fandom research as less radical, attempting to break free from the stereotype of creators and viewers as adversarial camps. The mainstream wave acknowledges both parties' shared interests and the opportunity for synergy along with interpenetration, since nothing withholds a fan from being a full-fledged creator (Siuda, 2010). Thereby, producers pay heed to the voices of existing consumers and begin to regard them as the most critical audience (Siuda, 2010). Accordingly, fans are not so much consumers as they are prosumers, or brand supporters (Booth, 2018; Bruns, 2006; Siuda, 2010).

Contemporary fandoms include not only individual and collective admiration of a popular text, but also the production, gathering, exchange, as well as dissemination of views, knowledge, and creativity related to it through the use of interactive tools that enable users to communicate with others who share similar tastes (Booth, 2018; Chin, 2018; Jenkins, 2006; Siuda, 2010; Sullivan, 2020; Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). Since modern fan cultures are both broad and widely scattered, contact in the fandom is facilitated by communication technology the majority of the time. Social networking is the primary tool used by contemporary fandoms (Booth, 2018; Chin, 2018; Jenkins, 2018). Even if the object of fans' adoration is a popular culture product, communication, information sharing, and creativity take place in a virtual environment (Booth, 2018; Chin, 2018; Jenkins, 2018). The creation of a large-scale creative fandom, as well as the international and global exchange of cultural content, was made possible by new media (Chin, 2018; Jenkins, 2018). Fandom perceptions of a media commodity are multifaceted, but they are often focused on acquiring a specific type of knowledge, incorporate the recipient's cultural competences and intertextual capabilities into the reception process, and are focused on communication and sharing with other recipients (Booth, 2018; Chin, 2018; Jenkins, 2018; Siuda, 2010; Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). As a result, it is the initial stage of establishing fan-friendly social links (Hellekson, 2018).

Although fandoms may be formed around many popular culture products, they have become particularly prominent in relation to music, notably pop music performers, over the years (Duffett, 2017). The development of social media has aided the creation and widespread

participation of numerous fan groups. However, this diversification also often leads to a polarization that exists both inside the fandoms and between different fan groupings. Buchanan (2019) describes the competition between Rihanna's fandom, namely the Rihanna Navy, and Beyoncé's BeyHive, explaining that the cultural discourses presented by these particular artists in the media have an impact on their fans' advocacy as a sign of their dedication. Moreover, various media practices, such as award ceremonies, encourage fans to appoint the best fandoms, driving competition between different fanbases (Buchanan, 2019).

Consequently, fan communities are one of the catalysts for the transformation of modern media. Jenkins (2006) claims that the most committed, self-organizing fans, as well as the dynamically influencing media industry, are the ones who are most responsible for charting the course of these shifts. He connects the rise of popular culture market engagement to the mechanism of intellectual growth, while also implying that the phenomena he discusses would have a broad effect, affecting other economic and political sectors of society. The concept, which Jenkins (2006) bases his considerations on, is the concept of media convergence, defined by the author as a mechanism of the flow of content and media audience between separate, coexisting media structures.

2.1.1 BTS and ARMY fandom

The South Korean music market had for a long time been dominated by three labels, namely JYP Entertainment, SM Entertainment and YG Entertainment, collectively known as the Big 3 (So, 2021). For several years, they have been the most influential and dominant. Smaller labels had to take into account financial constraints and difficult working relationships with the media, which preferred to show interest in well-known artists and sources (Allen, 2021; So, 2021). It was no different in the case of Bang Si-hyuk's *Big Hit Entertainment*, a small label established on February 1, 2005, that would eventually equal, and in some aspects even surpass, the Big 3 (Allen, 2021; So, 2021).

Bangtan Boys, Bulletproof Scout Boys, and Beyond the Scene are all names for the Korean boy band group BTS (Saraswati, 2020). The boys are signed to the Big Hit Entertainment company, which was rebranded as HYBE in 2021, although the label to which the group belongs remained known as Big Hit Music (Allen, 2021). The band consists of seven members whose stage names are RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin, V, and Jungkook. They debuted on June 13, 2013, with the hip hop song "No More Dream" (Parc & Kim, 2020). They have a loyal fan base all over the world, which is known as ARMY, which stands for Adorable Representative M.C for Youth (Parc & Kim, 2020; Saraswati, 2020).

Although BTS made its debut in 2013 (Suntikul, 2019), its international recognition in the media is determined as 2015 (Parc & Kim, 2020). In addition, while ARMY's global fan base from all over the world had been expanding for some time, news of BTS's presence did not reach Western media until BTS became the first Korean band to win an award at the Billboard Music Awards in 2017 (Parc & Kim, 2020). Despite this recent global recognition, the BTS ARMY fandom has become prominent since the band's debut through various forms of activity (Saraswati, 2020).

According to Suntikul (2019), the main reason for the band's international success is the mutual dedication between BTS and ARMY. The production and activity of BTS function mainly in Korean, but, through social media platforms, fans have been able to provide multilingual translations to reach a wider audience (Suntikul, 2019). Moreover, BTS fans use the offered features of social media platforms to intensely promote the activities of artists and engage in events organized both by the team and among the fandom (Saraswati, 2020; Suntikul, 2019). Hallyu is being distributed around the world by fans constantly supporting musicians (Kusuma et al., 2020). The fact that BTS members largely not only co-create, but also generate their songs is the key point of fans against those who do not accept them as a K-pop band (Saraswati, 2020; Suntikul, 2019).

BTS also shows initiative in maintaining relationships with their fans. Engaging in extensive social media communication with potential future fans and demonstrating their creativity allowed BTS and their fans to develop a stronger relationship between the artists and their fans in the long run (Saraswati, 2020). According to Suntikul (2019), the band is active on several official social media platforms where they regularly share content and engage in fan-generated posts. Moreover, the artistic activity and social commitment of BTS reflect people-to-people diplomacy, which builds the recipient's trust in the artist and creates the image of a credible persona (Suntikul, 2019). The close connection between BTS and ARMY has been demonstrated in numerous instances during their career and artistic output, as evidenced by the following quote from their new single "Butter": "Got ARMY right behind us when we say so" (HYBE LABELS, 2021, 2:08–2:11).

2.2 Identity

Jenkins (1992) deduces that being a fan is not about being a fan of a particular cultural product, but about a fan identity, considering that in some instances, there is a deeper connection between two fans of diverse titles than between a fan and a non-fan. He thus

argues that being a fan is a propensity to engage in certain behaviours and a mental attitude (Jenkins, 1992). As a result, community is at the heart of fan practice.

Identity is a concept that has made the greatest impact in social sciences in the last decade. Furthermore, identity, alongside globalization, is also considered a most frequently mentioned term in sociology, cultural anthropology, and cultural studies (Włodarczyk, 2014). The concept of identity refers to the dynamic relationship that exists between the outside world and an individual's consciousness (Włodarczyk, 2014). Therefore, the phenomena behind identity also includes what is individual and group specifically (Włodarczyk, 2014). As a result, the term refers to the synthesis of the human-world interaction as defined by social and cultural factors (Włodarczyk, 2014).

According to Jenkins (2004), there is a continuum of individual and collective identities when it comes to social identity. The author states that identity mainly concerns both feeling alike as well as separate from others (Jenkins, 2004). As a result, for the purposes of group identity and social comparisons, people use social identification to indicate themselves as fans of specific cultural products or texts, and others as non-fans. Likewise, Giddens (1991) argues that identity is also something with which individuals can decide whether to engage or not. Consequently, individual identity is no longer seen as a default, but emerges as something that has to be developed and maintained in the individual's behaviour (Giddens, 1991). Therefore, fan practice and involvement in the fandom community can affect the construct of both individual and collective identity.

2.2.1 Collective identity of fans

Shared interests, loyalty, and enthusiasm bind fans together. Fiske (1992) argues that fans are united by a desire to demonstrate their individuality from the cultural mainstream and their environment. This is facilitated by concentrating on issues that are commonly perceived as irrelevant. According to Bennett (2014) and Jenkins (1992), while poaching around popular culture, fans choose the elements that interest them and, on this basis, construct a vision of themselves and an alternative community of similar individuals. Apart from the interest in the product of culture that attracts its members, the fan community also preserves the fan's work, ways of interpreting texts, and cultural customs (Bennett, 2014; Jenkins, 1992).

Knowledge and art are developed, shared, and edited in direct and mediated collaboration with other text users by using accessible technical means (Kratz & Reimer, 1998). It results in the creation of collectives, which are bound together by shared preferences and social traditions (Włodarczyk, 2014). This practice is followed by a deep sense of group

identification and belonging, as well as self-observation and self-conscious examination of the processes taking place within the fan culture (Włodarczyk, 2014). Accordingly, this identification contributes to community-based initiatives as well as more broadly oriented social and/or economic activity.

Roig-Marín (2016) describes the use of sociolinguistics in assigning names to various fandoms and influencing group collectives. The author believes that these classifications are an essential part of creating and disseminating the fan group image by which they morphologically associate with the artists they admire, or collectively assign themselves a dissimilar name with which they wish to be identified. As illustrated by the author, morphologically formed fandoms may include One Direction's Directioners or Taylor Swift's Swifties (Roig-Marín, 2016).

Furthermore, individuals in fandoms may play a variety of roles in the community. Internally, they have a hierarchy based on how much time and effort each fan puts into the culture (Chin, 2018). This allows the fan to be identified as a member of the group. Chin (2018) suggests that a social framework of particular fandoms is formed on the basis of the cultural community and internal differentiation. Accordingly, organizational structures unite fans and aid in the formation of a distinct culture. As a consequence, in the digital media space exist organisations on a general level, which represent, sustain, and coordinate the entire fan community (Chin, 2018; Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). Organisations are thus vital, as they allow for the achievement and archival of creativity and knowledge (Chin, 2018).

Additionally, fans were previously considered to be mass media outlets, but according to Duffet (2013), an individual becomes a fan by transforming media consumption into cultural engagement, sharing feelings and emotions about their fandom item with others, and joining a community of like-minded people. Furthermore, as Lacasa, de la Fuente, Garcia-Pernia, & Cortés (2017) argue, celebrities, who are the focus of the fandom, reveal their public personality through the published image and artistic production. Hence, fans build collective enterprises and share common goals that create a collective identity. Likewise, Sandvoss (2005) implies that a fan's object of interest is intertwined with their sense of self. Their bond becomes so intimate that the interest of fandom becomes a part of the self, defining who the fans are as individuals and as members of a broader society (Sandvoss, 2005; Włodarczyk, 2014). Consequently, through belonging to the subculture that is a fandom, fans adopt particular shared identities that are also exposed to generalization and stereotypical conception from third parties (Jenkins, 1992; Lacasa et al., 2017; Włodarczyk, 2014).

2.2.2 Individual identity of fans

Communities not only offer a sense of protection to people, but they are also a vital criterion in the formation of individual identity. Cottle (1998), referring to Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society*, argues that an individual who lacks equilibrium is unable to act in society. A new affiliation is paired with a new personality based on a new foundation, which is the lifestyle. This process, however, is followed by a self-identification crisis (Cottle, 1998). Thus, the old identity pillars are no longer relevant. Since few people acquire an identity that remains all-encompassing throughout their life, they must find alternative ways to define their position in society (Cottle, 1998). One of them may be expression that enables the social focus on a person's individuality. It is particularly evident in the sphere of consumption, as it incorporates both impressions and sensations (Cottle, 1998). The media, which broadens the reach and variety of relationships, also has an impact on this phase (Kratz & Reimer, 1998). It is easier to initiate contacts, but the connections are shorter, and at the same time more serious and stronger (Cottle, 1998; Kratz & Reimer, 1998). Fluid modernity imposes the need for continuous updating, therefore identity changes from a permanent, defining element of life, and becomes a process that is carried out throughout life (Cottle, 1998).

According to Lacasa et al. (2017), the construction of identity is influenced by both the personal relationship with the text, and the impression of performance created by the artist. For that reason, it can be exerted by the public, private, or intimate perception of the performer. Moreover, fans' identities as members of a subculture are shaped by subcultural consumption processes (Lacasa et al., 2017; Siuda, 2010; Włodarczyk, 2014). Individual purchases and use of market goods identify, articulate, and convey a subculture's distinctness and diversity from the rest of society (Lacasa et al., 2017; Siuda, 2010; Włodarczyk, 2014). Consumption is one of the ways that fans build and emphasize their individual identities while also recreating themselves culturally (Siuda, 2010; Włodarczyk, 2014). Hence, members of a given group become known for their consumption of a given popular culture product or text.

Additionally, there also arouses the identity potential of the fandom and technological capabilities. Anonymity provides a sense of security, but it also opens the possibility of presenting the identity that an individual espouses (Booth, 2010). In such cases, the fandom becomes a safe space for people to speak openly about themselves or experiment with alternate identities. For instance, Wasserbauer & Dhoest (2016) describe how being a fan of various artists that promote equality and empowerment, such as Lady Gaga or Madonna, influences their open representation of LGBTQ identity in everyday life and surroundings.

Therefore, adopting a particular identity often allows fans to experiment with various forms of contact with others (Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). It also presents the opportunity to improve one's communication skills while also strengthening the right to comment on a range of topics (Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). This also constitutes an example of Foucault's work on the techniques of self for gaining and maintaining control in discourse (Smutradontri & Gadavani, 2020).

2.3 Social media

Fandoms have colonized the Internet, discovering in it the opportunity to gather around a shared passion amid the vast distances between its participants (Booth, 2010; Kratz & Reimer, 1998). Fans have also rapidly mastered other means of communication and social media, as fandoms develop over time (Booth, 2010; Kratz & Reimer, 1998). Their long-term durability is conditioned by a constant inflow of new stimulation, continuous enrichment and renewal of cultural material, along with the possibility of ongoing communication and exchange with other members of the community (Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). Fandoms that are now evolving or developing, established fan groups, and other subcultures whose popularity is steadily dwindling, can all be found in the space of social communication (Booth, 2018; Chin, 2018). Within, one can witness the repertoire of relations and communication processes that are characteristic of each society, which may involve individual and social tensions, emerging and persistent debates around significant values, understanding processes, and renegotiating interpersonal and intra-group relationships (Booth, 2018; Chin, 2018; Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). Consequently, the division of the Internet's past into two periods, Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, is significant in this context.

Although this binary pivot point of 2004 is somewhat reductionist, the Internet society was generally split into two groups, namely content producers and passive recipients (Booth, 2010; Lule, 2015). The era known as Web 1.0 was distinguished by the fact that users had little to no input into the creation of sites that were managed by people with the necessary technical skills (Booth, 2010; Lule, 2015). Web 2.0, on the other hand, is regarded as an online democratic revolution in which the emergence of social networks and open-format platforms has resulted in the development of a living web (Booth, 2010; Lule, 2015; Muñoz-Expósito, Oviedo-García, & Castellanos-Verdugo, 2017). Consequently, any Internet user has now the opportunity to generate Internet content by using simple, intuitive resources, whether by contributing elements to the common pool of information, or by writing a blog, creating a photo gallery, publishing own texts, and managing a private account on a social network

(Booth, 2018; Castells, 2010; Lule, 2015; Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Zubernis & Larsen, 2018). According to Lule (2015), it is also vital to transfer data by exchanging discovered content with others. This is conducive to creating small communities, groups of recipients, and forging one's own Internet paths by visiting similar sites and adding content to them (Lule, 2015).

Thereby, since its inception, social media has been a tool for the production and consumption of published content. As Bruns (2006) reports, the remarkable feature of online platforms is that it engages users in the customisability of products and interests, turning them from passive consumers into active producers. Additionally, users of various social media have also a wider possibility to connect with other users. The rise of social media has led to the emergence of new forms of social activity, thus involving users in participating in communication processes related to the relationship between users, and distinguishing them from traditional media (Bruns, 2006; Lule, 2015). The activity of the production and consumption of information integrated with each other, and while occurring simultaneously, they introduced a new dimension of communicative activity (Booth, 2010). Castells (2010) describes the Internet as a form of interactive communication rather than a medium. As a result, the Internet can bind two people directly, provide them with news, or serve as a portal to the mass media, which has been compelled to adapt the format (Castells, 2010). The author also points out that modern information techniques have tremendous potential for connecting individuals and forming new cultures (Castells, 2010).

Therefore, the context and specificity of the media in question reflect the two components of the word, namely, *social* and *media* (Booth, 2010; Lule, 2015). The first element is concerned with social goals and functions. It entails maintaining the ability to communicate with users, interact with them, establish relationships, make acquaintances, and exchange interests, as well as sharing and transmitting various types of data (Booth, 2010; Lule, 2015). The subsequent part, on the other hand, refers to the technological level at which the users' needs are met (Booth, 2010; Lule, 2015).

According to the system-theoretical concept of media, social communication, and therefore society and its systems, are possible with and by the media (Lee, 2000). Following this approach, Lee (2000) refers to Luhmann's assumptions that society is a communication structure that encompasses the range of the communications generated by social systems. The media and their use are thus an integrating force in everyday life. Additionally, their significance does not result from their technical form, but from their utility and the habit of using them. According to McLuhan (1964), the medium is a social application rather than a

message, suggesting the deciding function of human life and social media. Moreover, the researcher deduces that every technological innovation is an extension of the human nervous system and its senses, a compensation for the imperfections of human organs (McLuhan, 1964). In this approach, the media determine the communication of individuals and collectives as they are used to encode their culturally diverse social realities.

Meyrowitz (1994) coined the term *medium theory* to differentiate an approach centred on following the evolution of a single medium from the various media theories established by a variety of scholars. According to the author, viewing culture as a consequence of adaptation allows for the discovery of cultural content as a result of people adjusting to the demands of the information society (Meyrowitz, 1994). These products do not need to be universal or global; all that is expected is that they enable individuals to function in the institutions of a modern, atomized society on the one hand, and in new types of pluralized masses on the other (Meyrowitz, 1994). Furthermore, when arguing that the media alters the geography of social contexts, Meyrowitz (1994) observes that, due to the media, the audience is increasingly becoming a direct audience for events occurring elsewhere. This undermines the conventional connection between the physical world and social circumstances.

Nevertheless, van Dijck's (2013) *The Culture of Connectivity* takes a different view of the role of social media in relation to connectivity. The author remarks that social media is more than just a technical rendering of communication processes and therefore a shift to the online world; it is a shift in the disposition of relationships, production, and interactions between users (van Dijck, 2013; Xia, 2015). In other words, social media places users in a more symmetrical role in comparison to other people, traditional media, and a variety of public-sector organizations. The user transforms into a participant characterized by activity and creativity (van Dijck, 2013; Wilcox, 2015, Xia, 2015). Moreover, participants can be groups, organizations, and individuals (van Dijck, 2013). Therefore, social networking, operating in the algorithmized space of the Internet, has developed something akin to a shared language, allowing free flow of social, cultural, political, and economic discourses (van Dijck, 2013).

On this basis, van Dijck (2013) proposes an analytical framework that takes into account several elements, namely technology, users and usage, content and cultural form, ownership, business models, and governance, and discusses the facets of the model that look at the standards that underpin the regularities and how consumers and owners can help change these norms (Wilcox, 2015). Wilcox (2015) states that in order to distinguish various degrees of analysis, van Dijck (2013) also combines political economy (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol,

Qiu, & Sey, 2009) and actor-network theory (Latour, 2005). Additionally, van Dijck (2013) distinguishes between connectivity and connectedness. She perceives connectivity as the corporations monetizing user connections through the utilization of platform technical qualities. Conversely, connectedness refers to individuals connecting with one another. The author contrasts between approaches centred on market profit and those who favour the socializing element of platforms through the application of these principles (van Dijck, 2013).

The phenomenon of convergence has thus led to the emergence of various patterns and behaviours in a new media space (Jenkins, 2006). The universal aspect of digital media enables users to take advantage of the possibilities offered in a quick and targeted manner. According to Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad (2013), the technical affordances of media platforms, through which social media tools can distribute information and communication, enable user participation and knowledge sharing, as well as other capabilities that allow for a specific action to be taken. Therefore, the profile of social media user has a significant information potential (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Additionally, the process of shaping the information space is also heavily influenced by user behaviour (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Users of social media are exposed to a specific pattern of social relationships based on the idea of network individualism (Wellman, Quan-Haase, Boase, Chen, Hampton, Díaz, & Miyata, 2003). Owners of private profiles construct networks tailored to their needs, guided by a community of interests or undertakings (Castells, 2010). Moreover, according to the produsage model (Bruns, 2006), networks of units that ensure the transmedia delivery of materials are automatically included in the processes of establishing the information environment. This process is characterized by a high degree of decentralization, which means that any user may participate in the creation of new content or the distribution of pre-made content (Bruns, 2006).

According to McLaren & Jin (2020), the BTS band administers professional accounts on multiple social platforms to promote their career. However, Twitter and Weverse are the platforms that stand out with the highest activity in publishing posts and event updates, along with direct interactions between team members and fans (McLaren & Jin, 2020). As Dzurillay (2020) suggests, the reason is that in addition to a professional Twitter account, the team also manages a more personal group account, while on Weverse the team members are available on separate accounts from which they individually connect with fans. The technological microblogging structure shared by the two platforms contributes to placing the user in the centre of the site, enabling worldwide connectivity and communication (van Dijck, 2013). Accordingly, these two platforms are described and analysed in this study.

2.3.1 Twitter

Jack Dorsey, Ev Williams, and Biz Stone founded Twitter in 2006 (Murthy, 2012; Steiner, 2009). Murthy (2012) describes Twitter as a microblogging social media service that offers publication of short public messages and provides a selection of received messages visible to the user. Due to this structure, Twitter is considered a social media platform rather than a social networking platform since users can consume media produced by users with shared interests and interact with strangers (Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Murthy, 2012). Its key feature that sets the platform apart from other websites is the speed at which content is placed, as the maximum length of a single post, referred to as a tweet, used to be 140 characters, but was expanded to 280 characters in 2017 (Perez, 2018).

The general concept of Twitter is based on the profiles that each user can create. Short messages may be posted there, which is visible to anyone who follows a particular user (Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Murthy, 2012). It is also possible to forward messages posted by any other user, who enables such action. Each message may also be represented by a keyword, which is referred to as a tag or a hashtag, and is followed by a number sign symbol (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Steiner, 2009). Hashtags make it easier for other Internet users searching for information to find these tweets (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Steiner, 2009). Additionally, supplementing the tweet in the hashtag is a way to strengthen the message, scale the conversation, and get instant access to pre-defined topics (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Steiner, 2009). Likewise, by creating a Twitter profile, the user, whether it is a physical person or an organization, can personalize it by providing details such as name, surname, or company name, as well as other personal data, such as interests or location (Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Steiner, 2009).

Furthermore, Twitter messages are displayed in the form of a stream that at first glance resembles the timeline known from Facebook (Steiner, 2009). The tweets are listed in chronological order (Steiner, 2009). The user can switch to notifications from the stream view and see who has tweeted about them, as well as who has liked or retweeted their post (Steiner, 2009). As described by Wu, Hofman, Mason, & Watts (2011), the Twitter Lists feature allows users to create a private or public group where group members can classify users and create multiple streams of tweets according to their members' activity. Additionally, there are also private messages available (Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Steiner, 2009).

The technological structure of the website, the transition of certain non-media communication processes, as well as their dynamism and expansion, have become a

significant source of information for researchers studying communication processes related to the behaviour of subcultures, including fandoms (Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Murthy, 2012). According to the platform analysis of van Dijck (2013), the diversified features of Twitter make it possible to increase the group of followers and active engagement in the content produced by these users, along with tracking trending topics. Apart from the active participation in the production of Twitter content, users have the option of retweeting published posts, which circulation has a chance to reach more users outside the specified group (Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Murthy, 2012). Twitter features allow users to build their audience and create additional smaller groups. Furthermore, by posting short updates with a limited number of characters, Twitter users publish their identity and self-affirmation to which other users can respond or share (Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Murthy, 2012). The activity of Twitter users belonging to the fandom can also generate a collective identity. This occurs through creating a dialogue between other accounts that share interests, or connecting with the profile of the celebrity, maintaining a relationship between fans and their idol (van Dijck, 2013).

2.3.2 Weverse

Similar to Twitter, Weverse's features enable microblogging (Kusuma et al., 2020). It is an application that allows K-Pop fans to follow their idols' activities. However, this platform offers additional features that can cause discrepancies between the model components compared to van Dijck's (2013) Twitter analysis, which can also affect fan identity and interactions. According to Choi (2021) and Kusuma et al. (2020), Weverse is an app developed by Weverse Company, formerly known as beNX, a subsidiary of the BTS management company HYBE, also previously known as Big Hit Entertainment. Mehta (2020) claims that the platform is visited by over 1.4 million users daily. Although Weverse is a HYBE subsidiary that began by showcasing the artists of its labels, it now expands its worldwide reach through collaborations with Western musicians to include various fan communities (Dredge, 2020). Since Weverse is a network dedicated to certain sorts of fandom rather than a general media for everyone, collaborating with other labels has the potential to deepen the bond between artists and their followers while also increasing both parties' revenue (Khan, 2021; Stassen, 2020).

Due to the strong relationship between the company and the band's promotional activities, Weverse was designed to create an official platform exclusive for fans of various artists where they will have the opportunity to interact with the celebrities (Lee & Nguyen,

2020). BTS is one of the many accessible bands and artists, whose members post and respond to fan comments (Choi, 2021). Devoe (2020) describes the platform as a site that offers a wide range of free and paid content, including educational and entertainment videos, Instagram Story-style updates, artist-to-fan interactions, and forums for users to communicate. Weverse also allows fans to watch videos of BTS, including not only music videos, but also shows put on by the band and a six-episode documentary about their lives (Dupre, 2020). Moreover, the platform offers a Korean learning course with the aim of reducing the language barrier between audiences and artists (Dupre, 2020). Likewise, the service provides the translation of the content into several languages to facilitate international communication (Devoe, 2020).

Therefore, the platform offers connectivity between fandom users, and direct interactions with the BTS members who contact fans through self-generated content and comments under the posts (Kusuma et al., 2020). When it comes to the user-generated content and the affordances of creating messages, Weverse features do not limit the number of characters used in the content and allows artists to share time-limited moments (Devoe, 2020). However, despite the free access to most of the functions, Weverse also extends access to exclusive content and merchandise for a yearly subscription fee (Devoe, 2020). Additionally, HYBE introduced the e-commerce platform Weply in June 2019, which was later renamed as Weverse Shop (Fast Company, 2020). The app offers the purchase of merchandise, inclusive items, and content associated with Weverse (Fast Company, 2020).

3. Methodology

The topics addressed in this thesis are developing and evolving rapidly. Despite the fact that fan societies have been observed for decades, their possible effect on the development of identity and moral attitudes has much potential to be further investigated. Furthermore, research conducted in a digital era has its own set of characteristics (Durant, Carey, & Schroder, 2002). The respondents' anonymity, which is widely accepted, can make it complex to obtain accurate data (Durant et al., 2002). This study, on the other hand, may be significant for the advancement of social science surrounding fandom and engagement, as well as for individuals interested in identity research who would be able to more actively discuss the problems of digital media and activity related to popular culture's customs that now accompany everyone's daily being.

Before undertaking any research, one should first become thoroughly familiar with the methodology and its various techniques. Knowledge of methodology is crucial when it comes to conducting research, in view of the fact that without proper methodological understanding, no one is able to properly construct and conduct research on any topic (Kothari, 2004). Moreover, without methodological expertise, one is vulnerable to mistakes that, in turn, undermine the credibility of the study, making it difficult to draw reliable requests (Kothari, 2004). A methodology is the study of which approaches are most appropriate when conducting research in a given field. Bryman (2008) describes research as scientific activities that consist of collecting and then analysing data. This process occurs in direct or indirect interaction with the subject under investigation, with the aim of the study being to obtain answers to the previously posed questions.

In order to examine how BTS ARMY fans interact with each other and the band on Twitter and Weverse, and to provide an adequate answer to the research question and sub-questions of the thesis, qualitative research was conducted. While qualitative analysis cannot draw assumptions regarding the whole community, quantitative approaches are incredibly challenging to use while researching a group such as the fandom (Siuda, 2008). One of the issues with fandom research is the ambiguity of the concepts, which makes determining the right demographic difficult. Fandom analysis is strenuous to conduct, owing to the difficulty of locating the appropriate respondents. Another problem may also be geographic dispersion, as discussed in detail by Siuda (2008), who conducted research among fan studies experts dealing with the phenomena of fandom. The author posed a series of questions about the

fanbase and the investigation possibilities. It has proven that even researchers are divided over how to research fans and fandom (Siuda, 2008).

Nevertheless, according to Brennen (2017), a qualitative approach can be described as an interpretative and interdisciplinary method that uses language to establish meaning based on perceptions and experiences. Unlike quantitative methods that present scientific correlations, the qualitative method is descriptive, which allows for a broader understanding and interpretation of data (Babbie, 2020; Brennen, 2017). In general terms, qualitative researchers perform an active function in the research process, as they assume that reality is socially constructed through language (Boeije, 2012). This approach to the research also allows understanding the profound sense of the proposed conceptual framework embedded in the views of participants of this study. Since qualitative research accepts alternative notions of knowledge and a variety of meanings and truths (Brennen, 2017), it is suitable for this particular investigation of fans (Bury, 2017; King-O’Riain, 2020; Malik & Haidar, 2020; Williams, 2016; Yoon, 2019). Therefore, in accordance with the above description and the research question that is *How do BTS ARMY fans between 18 to 25 years old use the online social platforms of Twitter and Weverse to interact with each other and the band?*, it can be inferred that the study of social relations, especially in a specific community like fandom, should be a qualitative study. Furthermore, the difficulty of determining the precise number of participants of a particular fanbase supports qualitative approaches.

3.1 Research design

Qualitative interviews were conducted to collect relevant answers to the research question of this thesis. According to Gaskell (2000) and Hermanowicz (2002), interviews constitute a form of a purposeful conversation between two or more people, which enables mutual understanding in order to collect the sought-after information. This method allows researchers to learn about the ways of thinking, experiencing, habits, and gestures, as well as motivations, value systems or the dominant attitudes of the studied people or community (Hermanowicz, 2002). As a result, the obtained findings can help the researcher get a better understanding of the factors that influence the behaviour of the respondents’ subjects of interest (Gaskell, 2000). This primarily represents the method’s essence and tells a lot about the researcher’s and respondent’s roles in the study circumstance. It is also worth noting that not every interview, and certainly not every in-depth interview, satisfies the methodological criteria. The in-depth interview is conducted as an individual report rather than a discussion, with the interviewer only asking questions and assisting the respondent in finding a precise

response (Gaskell, 2000; Hermanowicz, 2002). The researcher is thus in charge of directing the conversation as well as the respondent (Gaskell, 2000; Hermanowicz, 2002).

Because of the very different styles of interviews, interview techniques are diverse. Brennen (2017) distinguishes three forms of interviews, which include *structured interviews*, *semi-structured interviews*, and *unstructured interviews*. To investigate the ways in which ARMYs create their fandom on Twitter and Weverse, this study, similar to previous fandom studies (Bury, 2017; King-O’Riain, 2020; Malik & Haidar, 2020; Yoon, 2019), incorporated semi-structured interviews to find accurate answers to the established research question. Brennen (2017) explains that semi-structured interviews are organized with a predetermined question structure. Contrary to categorized interviews, this type of interview gives the person conducting a much greater room for manoeuvre. The researcher is provided with a list of questions that should be raised, but their form and order depend on the interviewer. Nevertheless, this technique also allows for the development of the conversation and flexibility in responses (Brennen, 2017).

3.2 Sampling

For the interview section, the participants were selected through purposeful sampling combined with snowball sampling, both driven by the criteria imposed by the theoretical framework. Purposeful sampling is one of the most common sampling methods, in which the researcher pre-selects a group of participants based on suitable parameters for the study’s subject (Dudovskiy, 2012). The participants selected through purposeful sampling were chosen by recruiting willing participants on Twitter and Weverse who showed interest in a published announcement post. Thereafter, potential participants were contacted through direct message. In this case, the researcher was not searching for a common K-pop fan to participate, but instead, looking for others who are personally interested in fan events such as attending a band or fandom’s gatherings, attending a concert, collecting albums and merchandise, or other individual fan activities in order to provide a profound response to the research question of this thesis. Consequently, a criterion sampling technique was used to ensure finding the eligible interviewees by using sample requirements such as age and length of time the participant has belonged to the fandom. Thereby, to satisfy the needs of this study, experience and judgement were used to classify these individuals. Accordingly, users who post content that encourages other fans to respond with the platform features at least once a week were considered active and individually contacted via private message on Twitter (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019).

3.2.1 Participants

Due to the fact that this thesis focuses on the appointed BTS ARMY fandom, a total of 10 selected participants constituted the people who consider themselves as part of it (See Table 1). To allow for a rich influx of information related to the activities of the artists and the fandom, participants needed to belong to the ARMY fandom for more than one year, which guarantees their fan experience. Furthermore, given that this thesis analyses user activity on Twitter and Weverse, interviewees had to meet the criteria of having accounts on these two social platforms and be their active users who post at least once a week (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Additional background information about participants asked their age, which must be between 18 and 25. The selected age range ensured that the demographic differences related to the self-identification of respondents are minimized, as they belong to the group of young adults (Plante, Roberts, Reysen, & Gerbas, 2014; United Nations, 1981). The aim of relying on a single group of participants of common age groups and backgrounds is to obtain representative results for this age group.

Table 1. Overview of the participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Nationality	Occupation	Educational level	Date & time (CEST time)	Setting
Interviewee 1	22	Female	Polish	Student	Master student	22 March, 2 p.m.	Skype
Interviewee 2	23	Female	Polish	Copywriter/ Freelancer	Bachelor	23 March, 11:30 a.m.	Skype
Interviewee 3	21	Female	German	Student	Bachelor student	24 March, 4 p.m.	FaceTime
Interviewee 4	22	Male	Polish	Student	Master student	26 March, 10 a.m.	Zoom
Interviewee 5	24	Female	Polish	Entrepreneur	Bachelor	29 March, 1:30 p.m.	Skype
Interviewee 6	20	Female	Polish	Student/Retail employee	Bachelor student	30 March, 2 p.m.	Zoom
Interviewee 7	22	Male	Danish	Student	Bachelor student	31 March, 2 p.m.	Zoom
Interviewee 8	20	Female	Polish	Student	Bachelor student	7 April, 4:30 p.m.	Zoom

Interviewee 9	22	Female	Polish	Student/ Barista	Bachelor student	9 April, 5 p.m.	Skype
Interviewee 10	23	Female	Polish	Assistant manager	Master	10 April, 10:30 a.m.	Skype

Within the interviewed K-pop fandom members, I discovered a connection between economic, social, and cultural resources, as proposed by Bourdieu's (1984) forms of capital. The question about the occupation or the educational level allowed the background of the respondents to be determined. As can be seen from the table above, the responses have demonstrated that the fans are educated people who have various interests and who find themselves in various research areas, as 7 out of 10 study participants are currently university students, and the remaining participants have obtained the title of bachelor and/or master. Furthermore, the respondents are both men and women, of whom eight are identifying themselves as women, and two as men (Williams, 2020). The youngest of the respondents is 20 years old and the oldest 24. Due to the selection of respondents by social media, their demographic location varies, therefore the study was not limited to one country. Filep (2009) advises that the interviewer should be well-versed in the language and culture of the interviewees so that the nuances are not lost in translation. As a result, eight of the participants are from Poland, thus the interviews were conducted in Polish to enable an accurate flow of information. Since I am of Polish descent, I was able to understand and appreciate the ideas that the participants shared with me. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, all the cited responses described in the next chapter have been adequately translated into English, maintaining the message and context of the responses. The remaining respondents, of whom one is from Germany and one from Denmark, were interviewed in English.

3.3 Conceptualization

The concepts of fandom and social media platforms outlined in the theoretical framework have served as sensitization concepts focusing on selected aspects of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006). An example of a view of affordances and constraints entailed highlighting the platforms' properties or settings that enable or hinder their technological capabilities (Jaidka, Zhou, & Lelkes, 2019; Majchrzak et al., 2013). Furthermore, the platform analysis model determined by van Dijck (2013) served as a means of comparison for platforms' functionality, which was also used to analyse fan interactions. Meyrowitz's (1994)

medium theory is also noted for ways that online platforms can shape fan interaction. Additionally, the persona and identity performance approach to the identity-building process of fans allowed to understand how the fans interact with the celebrity persona and fandom practices (Holland & Lave, 2009; Lacasa et al., 2017).

3.4 Operationalization

To answer the research question of how BTS ARMY fans use the online social platforms of Twitter and Weverse to interact with each other and the band, an interview guide (Appendix A) was compiled. The theory and theoretical concepts grounded in the theoretical framework and conceptualization of this thesis served as the basis for a guide to the interviews, and also helped in analysing the collected data. In order to examine how the structures of the platforms provide affordances and constraints in how the fans establish their individual and collective identities, the data analysis process took a form of inductive approach to thematically examine each unit for hidden meaning and derive concepts (Schreier, 2013).

Two main categories derived from the theoretical framework include “identity” and “social media,” and can be seen in Appendix A. Before delving into the main categories, the participants were asked four introductory background questions and three warm-up questions that introduced respondents to the topic of fans and fandom. Their objective was to break the ice and create a composed, trusting atmosphere in which participants felt at ease answering questions, at the same time revealing participants’ understanding of the existing differences in the concepts of fans and ARMY. Subsequently, the questions were directed towards understanding the self-identification of the participants and the impact of the fan activities on it. The questions were formed in a way that combines both the view on individual and collective identity. Thereafter, the “social media” category delves into the subject of the influence of media platforms on the lifestyle of fans, discovers affordances and constraints of selected social media, and draws attention to the participants’ perspectives on their roles in the virtual space of the fandom. Lastly, the concluding questions were formed to summarize the standpoints of the respondents and ensure that the interview reached the point of saturation.

3.5 Data collection and analysis

3.5.1 Setting

The semi-structured interviews took place from March 22 to April 10, 2021, through video conferencing meetings at a time convenient for participants. This form of interviewing was due to constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the meetings, the conversations between researcher and interviewee were consensually voice recorded. The consent forms with information regarding the process and the respondents' rights were distributed among all respondents. Subsequently, the recorded interviews were transcribed and then further edited in order to take into account translation errors resulting from uncontrolled factors such as accent or background noise.

3.5.2 Thematic analysis

The meanings created by individuals differ and are not standardized as a result of the inherent interpretative feature of qualitative research (Brennen, 2017; Boeije, 2012). Consequently, a thematic analysis was applied to strengthen the participants' assessment of the most relevant issues and systematically analyse their views on the correlation between social media and fandom activities. According to Boeije (2012), thematic analysis consists of three coding steps that allow the data to be split into meaningful phrases and defined in a single term or short sequence of words. The coding started with open coding of all available data. Subsequently, axial coding classified the codes, clustering them into thematically similar subcategories (Boeije, 2012). Lastly, selective coding formed the coding tree seen in Appendix B, which revealed the most relevant topics found among the analysed data by grouping the subsets into main themes to provide detailed answers to the research questions. To locate the codes, the thematic analysis was used inductively. Therefore, useful information was satisfactorily provided with information saturation by identifying interpretable subjects and categories, which then lead to theoretical expertise in the field (Boeije, 2012).

3.6 Ethics

To ensure ethical considerations, all interviewees received an informed consent form containing information about the study as well as the rights of the interviewees, as seen in Appendix C. In addition, before the recording of the interviews began, participants were verbally informed and asked to confirm their consent to participate in the study. The interviewees also had the possibility to stop participating in the interview at any time.

3.7 Validity and reliability

The methodology that was used throughout the study can be considered transparent, and the precise justification for each resource and method step increases the credibility of the study (Silverman, 2011). As the qualitative method provides in-depth insight into the data, it also reduces the risks associated with the possibility of data generalization (Silverman, 2011). To ensure validity of the research, the member check method was used, through which participants were able to review the objectives and outcomes of the findings (Koelsch, 2013), and the interview guide was derived in part from previous fandom studies (Bury, 2017; Malik & Haidar, 2020). Additionally, a thematic analysis of the extraction of analytical resources and continuous data comparison revealed the most commonly used codes (Boeije, 2012), which also ensured the reliability of the research. To see any variations and make improvements to the final code list, the coding was done twice.

4. Results

This chapter discusses the findings from the research conducted. In order to find an adequate answer to the research question: *How do BTS ARMY fans between 18 to 25 years old use the online social platforms of Twitter and Weverse to interact with each other and the band?*, ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The objectives of this research project were to, firstly, identify and validate, within participant experience, belonging to the BTS ARMY fandom community. Secondly, the study aimed to measure the impact of online platforms on fans constructing their individual and collective identities, while, the ultimate goal of this research project was to recognize patterns by which platform characteristics provide affordances and constraints for fan and band interaction. This chapter is divided into five distinct parts, relating to the research focus areas for this project, based on the topics found during the data analysis and situating them within the theoretical framework. In the first observations, the textual data analysis revealed twenty open codes, which were connected by axial coding to group twelve comparable subthemes (see Appendix B). Ultimately, selective coding revealed five core categories. The main themes identified in the interview data are the following: fandom, collective identity, individual identity, affordances, and constraints.

The first theme discusses the characteristics that respondents assigned to people belonging to the fandom, distinguishing between a regular fan and ARMY, in other words, a person belonging to the BTS fandom (Parc & Kim, 2020; Saraswati, 2020). The second and third theme sections outline the diverse ways in which respondents differentiate between collective and individual fan identity, as well as the existing influences of the online platforms in question. The fourth theme delves into the affordances of the platforms for the fans. Finally, the fifth theme examines the constraints of the platforms for the fans. Additionally, due to the differences between the structures of the two social media platforms, the themes of affordances and constraints were both further divided into sub-themes of Twitter and Weverse in order to refine the characteristics and features defined by the interviewees.

4.1 Fandom

Before examining and deducing the effects of online platforms on identity and interaction, it was important to lay the foundations for participants' understanding of the terms of fans and ARMY. Therefore, one of the main goals of the preliminary interview questions was to establish the premises of interest in a specific work of popular culture, as

well as the beginnings of conscious belonging to a given fandom and to define the core themes.

The introductory part of the interview was aimed at encouraging the respondents to talk, so it focused on a topic that any fan enjoys discussing, that is the beginning of their interest in the band. The participants were then asked to discuss what it meant to them to be a fan and how they interpreted the concept. As it turned out, there are many sources of interest. Even if the respondents could not recall exactly when or under what conditions their first encounter with the team occurred, they were able to recount when they learned about it or who could have inspired it. As the following citation proves, Interviewee 2 (March 23, 2021) drew attention to the visual representation of the band on the social media: “It’s been about three years, I think [...] I once came across some pictures of the members on Twitter who, let’s face it... I liked a lot visually.” Nonetheless, most often it was individuals from their immediate surroundings or other titles that led them to BTS. An example of this is the story of Interviewee 10 (April 10, 2021), who says, “[...] a close friend of mine kept talking and talking about them until I was actually forced by her to listen to them and see what the fuss was all about.” This supports the considerations of Jenkins (1992) that fan interests create a network between interested parties.

The next step was to compare and contrast the meanings formulated by the researchers who explore fandom studies with the fans’ intuitive definitions. The respondents were asked to explain the meaning of a fan with their own words, and further explain the difference between a fan and a non-fan. For some, being a fan is tantamount to performing specific activities, and for others, self-identification serves as the foundation. The commitment that emerged in almost every response is the common thread that runs across both approaches. On the one hand, the spectrum includes people who recognize a fan based on their actions:

“So, what sets fans in general apart from ordinary people is, of course, the interest in music, when it comes to a fan of a musical artist or band. When you are a fan, you listen to this music, you are interested in news, and it even becomes your hobby, in a way.” (Interviewee 7, March 31, 2021)

Accordingly, commitment is essential – a fan is one who gets deeply involved in the band, be it emotionally or through action. Some, on the other hand, were opposed to building fan action catalogues, preferring to focus on self-identification. Interviewee 10 (April 10, 2021) debates that “ordinary people would rather not call themselves fans, so I guess it’s also about

some identity with which fans identify themselves.” The cited statements reveal the image of a fan who, in line with the assumptions of Siuda (2010) and Jenkins (1992), shows emotional devotion and self-identification.

Surprisingly, when asked to compare their definition of a fan with that of ARMY, all respondents agreed that there was a difference between the two. As Interviewee 2 (March 23, 2021) admits,

“BTS fans may like the band in terms of their creativity, for example, they like songs they know from the internet or the radio. However, ARMYs are more mature in terms of their knowledge of BTS, they know individual members, they are interested not only in their music, but also, to some extent, in other activities or products of the artists.”

Noticeably, Interviewee 1 (March 22, 2021) also drew attention to the diversity of BTS projects, saying:

“Looking at the fact that BTS have a lot of content and projects, I can not only listen to their music, but also watch various movies, series, or other works related to the band’s activity [...] there is also an important commodity that they produce, and the value and motivation that they convey.”

In this statement, one can notice not only the external insights of the diverse activities of the artists, but also the share of values and the message conveyed in the artist’s texts. Due to the fact that BTS often forms social commitment in the form of multilayer meaning in their works (Suntikul, 2019), it also influences the dissemination of fan views (Jenkins, 2006). This is further exemplified by other participants who, by gaining knowledge about the band and its projects, create an emotional relationship with the work of culture itself and also become part of the community, such as Interviewee 5 (March 29, 2021) who explains that “fans may like BTS’s music, but ARMYs share a certain emotional bond with the band and with each other, to the point where they usually form a close-knit group with similar values and intentions.”

As a result, it appears that people who belong to a group characterized by above-average knowledge of BTS’s work, and a higher degree of dedication and emotional attachment to the band, distinguish themselves from the common understanding of the concept of a fan, and group into a distinct, more engaged community. Taking this into

account, subsequent parts of the interviews raised the issue of ARMYs identities and activities within the online fandom.

4.2 Collective identity

The following section of the interview focused on the respondents' experience with belonging to a fan community, as well as the effect of online media on the BTS fandom's collective identification. The questions thus targeted linking the reception of a favourite popular culture product and artists with communication and bonding, which occurs in the process of developing and distributing knowledge relevant to this text, using one's own information data, the knowledge of others, and resources provided by communication technologies.

The importance attributed to community presence in the virtual space was evident in the interview data. All participants acknowledged that the presence of the fandom on social media is the reason for their vast scope, and it also strengthens the connectivity between their individual members. In particular, attention was often brought to the geographical dispersion of fandom members who, through the platforms that facilitate communication, have the opportunity to establish connections and transfer information. As Interviewee 1 (March 22, 2021) admits:

“Personally, I think these media are of great importance to our fandom as a group. Most importantly, they enable communication without borders, such as location, because you can communicate with people from other parts of the world.”

Some participants also shed light on how these platforms help to form smaller groups among the fandom:

“[...] these platforms allow both to participate in all fandom activity, but also to build smaller groups among which you can share various things. Just as I belong to one general ARMY fandom, I can also build my own group [...] where I will only observe users who also identify as ARMY.” (Interviewee 8, April 7, 2021)

Fans recognize that the social network is a place where they can encounter most of the fandom based on shared interests. As a result, they believe that they are primarily a virtual community, but it is critical for them to continue to transfer it to reality, to demonstrate their

existence, and their fan identity. This refers to the considerations of Bennett (2014) and Jenkins (1992), who explain the creation of subcultures on the basis of mutual interests.

Additionally, sharing an interest also contributes to the feeling of belonging. Interviewee 5 (March 29, 2021) highlights a shared objective that improves affiliation between ARMY users:

“Due to the fact that we have one goal, a common interest, somehow you can feel better among similar and yet so different people. You can build your group depending on your personal preferences.”

However, the group identity is also reinforced by the fandom name that is associated with an army subordinated to BTS. Interviewee 8 (April 7, 2021) believes that “the very fact that you can be called ARMY makes you feel like you belong to something.” Similarly, Interviewee 3 (March 24, 2021) also touches upon the matter of the fandom name, who says,

“As the name suggests, we are a team, an army that supports each other and has one shared goal, which is of course BTS. We don’t bear arms, but we use our voices and their music. Platforms are a source and a way that somehow enable us to interact or communicate with the team itself, or even the fact that we get a lot of different information from them regarding their activities, or various ventures.”

Although the linguistics used in the creation of the BTS fandom does not belong to the morphological structure (Roig-Marín, 2016), the dissimilar name associated with military enhances the feeling of affiliation and loyalty to the fandom and to the band itself, which also affects the collectives constructed by their members. Moreover, the language used by fans in the form of slang also influences the feeling of belonging to the group. As Interviewee 6 (March 30, 2021) describes:

“We have our own language; we create some kind of slang. We are privy to various information and codes that are often incomprehensible to others.”

However, this point is one of the reasons why non-fans have a negative perception of fans who are subjected to stereotypical judgment. This is explained by both Jenkins (1992) and Sullivan (2020), who refer to the negative fan associations due to the etymological denotation

of fanatics, which, according to the respondents, is also reflected in their fan experiences. Despite unfavourable encounters, Interviewee 6 (March 30, 2021) maintains an optimistic perspective, seeing such situations as a reason for shared experience with other fans:

“All our excitement is often incomprehensible or even confused. [...] We are often judged together on the basis of what we like, what we listen to, or how we behave, [...] I think that we also experience these negative experiences together, as one fandom and as one community, because we can support and understand each other. We all go through, or have gone through, the same or similar situations, so we may feel that we are not alone in all of it.”

Interviewee 7 (March 31, 2021), a 22-year-old male, also noted the prevalent age and gender stereotypes regarding the fan image distributed by social media, which conflicts with the identity of many ARMYs who do not fit into this portrayal. He explicates that

“I also have the impression that such an approach has become entrenched in the era of social media, where younger people often consider themselves fans, and it is widely believed that this is a phase from which they possibly grow out. I think it’s hard for such people to understand that there are also slightly older fans, or that often men, like me, are also among them.” (Interviewee 7, March 31, 2021)

Furthermore, fans have noticed the prevailing classification or hierarchical order based on the level of engagement or knowledge of the group, also discussed by Chin (2018) and Siuda (2010). During the interviews, the topic of the division of the fandom based on fan knowledge and interest was brought up. Most notably, this division is not negative, as the categories do not classify fans into subgroups, but rather individual stages of initiation. Additionally, all groups often turn to the non-music media produced by the band, which offers a greater degree of insight. This hierarchy was approximated more precisely by Interviewee 3 (March 24, 2021):

“Baby ARMY are those fans, who have started to explore music, other productions, just like meet members, but not yet know the entire discography or various events important to the fandom [...] Next, there are ARMY [...] who know BTS activities, take part in various fan campaigns, have their bias, are up-to-date with events, and

know that they are part of this community. The last ones [...] are veteran ARMY that have been in the fandom for a long time [...] and are very familiar with everything about BTS and the fandom.”

This being said, all these subgroups function side by side, and the fans do not notice any rivalry between them. These comments further reveal that, as they delve into the band’s career and fan activities, the collective identity of ARMYs is shaped by group roles that are translated into group practices performed by fans on social media platforms. Interviewee 6 (March 30, 2021) lists the practices created on the platforms in question, emphasizing the importance of shared interest: “We share similar excitement with BTS’s activity and music, we analyse their music videos together and [...] we share some common activities that we also do on the Internet.” It follows that the fans’ collective identity is shaped by a variety of forces managed by media features to unite individual fans into a single, widely scattered community.

4.3 Individual identity

In order to explore the impact of social media sites on the individual identity of fans, the interviews addressed the effect of Twitter and Weverse use along with fan activities on the construction of personal identification, change of behaviour, and utterance.

What was striking in the observations was how deeply attached the participants are to their favourite artists, to the point that it interferes with their ways of self-expression. Upon being asked about how the fandom experience affected themselves, most participants quickly revealed how much it affected their personal interests. For example, Interviewee 8 (April 7, 2021) mentions her interest in the foreign language, saying: “since I started to become more interested in BTS, I took on a lot of different interests or self-development, such as learning basic Korean, which is very handy when watching them live.” Similarly, Interviewee 2 (March 23, 2021) is fascinated not only in the language but in Asian culture as a whole, emphasizing the attraction shift from Western culture: “before BTS I was rather interested in Western music, their trends, and various things [...] It changed a lot when I started to be interested in BTS, I got interested not only in their music, but also in the whole South Korean and Asian culture in general.” Additionally, Interviewee 3 (March 24, 2021) stresses individual consumption habits related to her interests: “I would never have said that today I’d be involved in a Korean band to such an extent that I’d spend a lot of money on merch and other stuff related to them!” What this illustrates is that the responses seem to show a change

in the processes of cultural globalization transferred by media products, and thus a reconstruction of the existing model of popular culture spread by the West. This resonates with Siuda (2010) and Włodarczyk (2014) paying attention to cultural recreation along with the expression of individual identity. The identity of the fandom is thus shaped to a much lesser extent by national and state values, and to a greater extent by popular culture and the ideology of consumption (Bourdieu, 1984).

The observations also revealed the ability to establish contacts with other users and the use of the technological capabilities of social media. On the one hand, Interviewee 8 (April 7, 2021) describes the possibility of making new friends with whom she has the opportunity to share her private life, saying that “the activity in this fandom constantly prompts me to make new friends or meet new, interesting people with whom I can share my interests or emotions regarding the team or even my private life.” On the other hand, Interviewee 6 (March 30, 2021) points to the lack of intensity in these relationships, explaining that they are based exclusively on fan experiences: “The activity in the fandom has opened me up to a wider group of friends, and although it may not be that intense, I have people with whom I can share this part of my life.” This contrast highlights the quality of social media networking opportunities. As Cottle (1998) and Kratz & Reimer (1998) argue, the media offer ease of making new contacts, which are however shorter as a consequence of fluid modernity. Therefore, virtual acquaintances have the ability to adapt or change. Accordingly, fans are exposed to a wide range of personal patterns and viewpoints as a result of the multiplicity and diversity of media posts, greatly expanding their options for following their own life course. For instance, although Interviewee 7 (March 31, 2021) acknowledges that he was initially unable to embrace his fan identity for the sake of his environment, the ARMY community, along with the approach openly advocated by BTS, assisted him in self-acceptance and expression of his personal side of life as well: “I think that opening up to people on the Internet who shared my interests and who I didn’t know, really helped me a lot in finding myself, getting to know myself.” His statement further emphasizes the importance of establishing contact between fandom members, which is made possible by the affordances offered by social media platforms where fans can interact with each other. Moreover, it follows that fans as a group have a similar cultural capital, which is also emphasized by Bourdieu (1984).

Another aspect raised during this part of the interviews was the emotional relationship with the band and its texts, which are exacerbated by activity on the platforms. Interviewee 5

(March 29, 2021) describes the dependence of her well-being on fandom as a result of her affection and emotions:

“My self-presentation in terms of well-being is also somewhat dependent on what happens in the fandom because of my emotional approach. I am often in a much better mood when something good happens from the fandom and the band.”

Likewise, Interviewee 9 (April 9, 2021) expresses equivalent thought: “I think this relationship with BTS influenced my behaviour and online presentation, because I get excited a lot more about these little things, and I think that, in real life, I started to act a bit differently than I used to.” Additionally, Interviewee 3 (March 24, 2021) connects her personal relationship with the artists and the fandom with the message contained in BTS’s lyricism: “I have the impression that their music appeals to me as a person struggling with various life situations, so I also perceive them in a very individual and emotional way.” This particular view was also shared by four other participants who point out the impact of messages conveyed in music that BTS creates on their behaviour and identity.

These observations can be linked to the findings of Lacasa et al. (2017), who argue that both the intimate connection with the text and the perception formed by the artist affect the creation of identity. Accordingly, the impact of fandom participation and personal involvement in artists’ creativity on self-expression and behaviour of the respondents, as well as on the construction of individual identity, can be seen in the interviewees’ responses.

4.4 Affordances

The fourth observed theme in this study are the advantageous characteristics and features of the discussed social media platforms, which offer technological affordances for fans interacting with other users or undertaking fan activities.

In accordance with the answers provided in the interviews, the fandom could develop without the Internet, but nowadays it would be very difficult to do so. The Internet is first and foremost a medium through which people can connect (Booth, 2010; Castells, 2010). Interviewee 2 (March 23, 2021) describes the dependence of fandom on the universality of the Internet and the promotional possibilities of platforms: “I think our society is already too dependent on the web to give it up, and at the same time it is becoming a very good way to promote different people or things.” Thus, the Internet can be a cognitive medium when it comes to a given work.

In the case of fandom, the Internet can be primarily a communication medium. According to the responses demonstrated in the previous parts of the study, social media has resulted in major changes in the formation of social relationships between fans. In particular, the platforms enable the creation of virtual connections. Likewise, the Internet's technical capabilities have changed the relationship between fans and their idols, who now use social media to engage with fans. When asked about noticing a change in this area of fandom activity, all respondents unanimously owe BTS's success to social media and fans' online activities. As Interviewee 4 (March 26, 2021) explains:

“[BTS's] success is largely due to the relationship and credibility they have created in the media. They managed to gain a large group of fans who [...] contributed to their great publicity.”

Additionally, Interviewee 4 (March 26, 2021) lists various technological prospects that have facilitated the global reach of the K-Pop band, which breaks down existing barriers between different cultures:

“I think it is much easier now to build a group with similar interests, because demographic aspects [...] or even cultural aspects [...] are not a big obstacle in communication between fans and between the band. Thanks to the options for easy, maybe often inaccurate translations, you can express yourself directly and it will be more or less understood.”

Despite these barriers, cultural diversity has also been credited with the creation of variation and possibilities by Interviewee 1 (March 22, 2021):

“These cultural differences and individual opportunities [...] are of particular importance when it comes to the development of fan groups. Fandoms can connect people with the same interests, thanks to which the community becomes a little more homogeneous and connected in this place, so to speak.”

Hence, given the diversity between the global fandom and the human barriers that hinder them from understanding other languages, it has been noted that the technological capability

provided by social media allows fans to have intercultural understanding and global influence, which also offers the ability to make artists popular.

Furthermore, self-presentation in the network can be dependent on information detached from the individual's corporeality, material goods, or social status, allowing to conceal what users consider to be flaws or imperfections. In cyberspace, it is much easier to create the desired persona, which has a positive effect on people who prefer to show only their fan identity (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; van Dijck, 2013). This observation was apparent in seven out of the ten participants, who chose to obscure their personal data out of their profiles. For example, Interviewee 2 (March 23, 2021) prefers to have fan accounts and not to mix up her private life in them: "Due to the fact that I use accounts dedicated only to being a fan and I do not have such private accounts, my self-presentation on these platforms is mainly about presenting my fan side of life." Likewise, Interviewee 10 (April 10, 2021) admits that she maintains privacy, but is willing to breach this rule in order to share a fan life event of her own:

"My accounts on the platforms we're talking about today are dedicated solely to who I am as a fan. I don't share a lot of my private life there, unless I want to share something or it has to do with being ARMY."

Additionally, disclosing a fan identity is also associated with the ease of recognizing other fans of a given group on platforms. When asked how they do it in order to create their group of recipients, all respondents noted the visual appearance of the created account, which highlights belonging to a given fandom. An example of this is the statement of Interviewee 5 (March 29, 2021) who says: "I think other fans usually have a photo or name set up that shows they are part of the fandom, so it's easier for other fans to identify and follow that person and customize the displayed platform content." Participants also mentioned other clues that point to other ARMY users, such as Interviewee 7 (March 31, 2021), who specified the characteristics of his account that may lead other ARMYs to interact with him:

[...] my profile is tailored to the fandom, so first of all, the icon matches both the band's image and the purple theme, that is, the ARMY colour. Maybe my username does not immediately indicate that I am associated with the band in some way, but I have a classic little seven in honour of the *Map of the Soul: 7* album. And, of course, my feed is full of the BTS content!

Nonetheless, when it comes to expressing one's personality to another, the ability to monitor the interpretation is crucial. The sense of anonymity that network users experience also leads to disinhibition, since the Internet makes it possible to avoid socially articulated disapproval resulting from a fan behaviour. Interviewee 8 (April 7, 2021) stresses the importance of anonymity with regard to control over who can view her shared content:

“You can remain anonymous on the platforms, so you don't have to worry about someone judging you based on your appearance or financial situation, or even your interests and likings. While the online environment is often toxic, you can still have some control over the people you follow.”

Nevertheless, the publication of content, use of features, and undertaken social media activities varied in the answers of the respondents due to the diversity of structures and characteristics of Twitter and Weverse.

4.4.1 Affordances of Twitter

Since a profile picture is considered as a way of making a good first impression on other followers, each of the participants use their idol's photo as icons to display their fan images into the online world. All of the answers confirmed that they posted photos of their idols to express their admiration for them and to entice other fans to follow them. At the same time, Interviewee 1 (March 22, 2021) assumes that identifying another ARMY on Twitter could be based on other considerations, such as being fandom-marked on the biography section, in cases where a user has a different picture:

“I believe that even if someone does not have those things that are visible at first glance [...] then a biographical description usually helps in such situation, in which users often have descriptions that are interesting for them or their content that they share on their profile.”

Accordingly, although this option is less clear to people who do not delve into the profile of users, it gives an unmistakable indication of belonging to the fandom.

Another observation of Twitter's affordances is its lack of limitations in terms of the type of users and the content it provides, which resonates with the considerations of Muñoz-

Expósito et al. (2017) and Murthy (2012). Interviewee 5 (March 29, 2021) describes her approach to using the platform as entertaining and diverse:

“I treat Twitter more, let’s say... entertaining. I don’t care too much about the nature of my tweets, they’re usually more fun, and I’m not limited to sharing BTS-specific stuff either. On Twitter, they are probably a little more varied, because I share a lot of content from the world too.”

Interviewee 7 (March 31, 2021) shares this view by saying: “[on Twitter] I’m also more often involved in non-fandom topics, because users on Weverse are more fandom-grouped.” These remarks found their outlet all the more when listing affordances with regard to specific wide-ranging features, among which the Trends feature was mentioned by Interviewee 2, Interviewee 6, and Interviewee 7. Interviewee 6 (March 30, 2021) claims that “Due to the fact that the trend feature on Twitter is tailored to the person or country, it is much easier to find information from outside the fandom or from another fandom, which makes the environment a bit more, so to speak, different, diverse.”

Despite the possibility to engage with non-fandom content, participants admitted that their accounts are mainly dedicated to ARMY activity, including interactions with other ARMYs on Twitter. In this sense, the interaction takes place on many levels, which can be classified as direct and indirect interaction on the basis of the functions used (Murthy, 2012). Interviewee 2 (March 23, 2021) gives an example of her indirect activity, which uses reactions to others’ posts:

“I often like and retweet the tweets of others, even those who are not strictly my own audience, nor am I theirs, just, for example, if someone gave a tweet and it appears on my timeline. That’s when I interact a little bit with other users too, and we often end up observing each other, which is great too!”

Conversely, Interviewee 7 (March 31, 2021) describes his direct interactions with other ARMYs:

“I prefer to write openly with other fans [...] or initiating a conversation in a comment and going to private messages. I think that, thanks to this, I have a chance to increase my group of friends and then, like, maintain the contact with them.”

Regardless, all users use mixed methods of interacting with other fans that expand their group of followers, such as Interviewee 5 (March 29, 2021) who says, “I like that the group I have built is not limited only to that group only, because other users can spread the content of those who I don’t follow, so I can expand my audience all the time.” Similarly, this occurs in the case of interaction with the band. All respondents admitted that they follow the activity of the band’s Twitter accounts on an ongoing basis, to which they also respond. Interviewee 10 (April 10, 2021) discusses the variety of her reactions to their posts:

“Every time they share something on Twitter, I obviously have to like it and pass it on to get them as many reactions to their post as possible. And if this is a post made by one of the guys, such as a photo, then of course I also need to add a comment to express my reaction.”

As Interviewee 4 (March 26, 2021) adds jokingly, “Sometimes I tag them in my own tweet, but I haven’t seen them reply yet.” It follows that Twitter offers many functions that enable connectedness and communication between fans and BTS, which resonates with van Dijk (2013).

However, Twitter fan activities are not limited to using these features. As follows from the description of Interviewee 3 (March 24, 2021), fan practices focus around the activity of the band: “Most often it is just promoting various projects, promoting different hashtags or [...] slogans, or even simply writing about various things that are currently being discussed in this... community.” The theme of promotion of BTS appeared in the responses of all participants, which most often manifests itself by creating a hashtag related to a given event. For Interviewee 5 (March 29, 2021), hashtags are an opportunity to stay up-to-date in fandom events: “There is often something that pops up in trends that are personalized to the content that I most frequently observe, so that is very helpful in this case.” Interviewee 2 (March 23, 2021) further emphasizes that “Even if nothing is happening at the moment, the mass commotion is caused by a simple post or a photo of them!” It appears that the personalization of the content improves the activity of fans on Twitter.

4.4.2 Affordances of Weverse

Comparable with Twitter, the display of the participants’ Weverse accounts indicates membership to the BTS fandom. However, due to the structure of this platform being

different from Twitter, Weverse users do not need to recognize other fandom members among the rest of the users, since the audience is determined by the artist they follow (Lee & Nguyen, 2020). As a result of this configuration, by following the BTS account on the platform, ARMYs are automatically matched to the fandom. During interviews, this structure was praised for the homogeneity of audience interest, as in the case of Interviewee 8 (April 7, 2021), who owes it to the cognition between users: “I think that the ARMY group is a bit tighter there, because the posts are not intertwined with the posts of other fandoms or people, so the news mostly concerns the band itself.” Furthermore, Interviewee 5 (March 29, 2021) also applauds the ability to access content without being obliged to follow other users, which allows for greater exposure to the varied topics discussed in the fandom: “The advantage is that I do not have to observe other users there for something to appear in the feed, which is why I often come across various news and I can expand a more diverse group.”

The activity of respondents on this platform manifests itself mainly by creating posts and reacting to posts of others, along with the ongoing monitoring of the activity of individual team members through enabled notifications. Interviewee 2 (March 23, 2021), while listing the actions taken on Weverse, points out that the platform does not have a character limit, as is the case on Twitter, which affects the content of the generated posts:

“There, I usually write comments on BTS posts or use the ‘cheer’ option for artists and other fans. Since there is no character limit, other fans and I can write what is often useful!”

Interviewee 1 (March 22, 2021) also noted the change in the subject of her posts, describing the content on the Weverse as more solemn: “I have the impression that on Weverse I write more serious posts more often, while on Twitter they are often more... so to say... funny.” This view was shared by Interviewee 5, Interviewee 6, and Interviewee 9 who, by being able to receive feedback from artists, dedicate their posts to much of an expression of gratitude to the team.

Furthermore, Interviewee 8 (April 7, 2021) explains the more frequent activity of the band on Weverse as a result of the fact that each member has a separate account in which they undertake individual activity appearing on the account of the entire team:

“[...] on Weverse, I see them much more often, because each of the guys has their own account, so every time they comment on someone’s post or post something

themselves, I get a notification. It is also then that I usually comment on this post myself or create my own, since I know that one of them is also available at that time.”

Likewise, Interviewee 3 (March 24, 2021) attributes the forum to the development and maintenance of a positive connectivity between fans and the band, which has an effect on fan activity on the platform: “Due to the fact that each member has their own account, they are much more active there than on Twitter... and are more likely to comment on others’ posts, so the chances of fans to be noticed are kinda bigger, and BTS becomes more involved in relations with fans.” Correspondingly, Interviewee 4 (March 26, 2021) links this to his increased activity on the platform: “They also respond to fan posts more often there and I have the impression that they put individual posts more often [...] there is a greater chance that they can notice a post, so I also have the impression that I contribute there more often.”

Additionally, Interviewee 5 (March 29, 2021) also draws attention to the wider possibilities of making fan activities with the help of membership, which entitles access to the official content provided by the band:

“[...] as a user with membership, I don’t have to limit myself to just writing or responding to posts, but I can also watch other BTS’s projects. It also expands my options a bit more when it comes to using the application.”

This statement is confirmed by Dupre (2020) who lists the non-musical projects offered by BTS on Weverse.

4.5 Constraints

The last of the themes that has been observed during thematic analysis refers to the limitations that the discussed social media platforms impose on BTS fandom users. While the aforementioned sense of anonymity among Internet users is helpful in holding the fan identity distinct from real life, it turns out that respondents are also aware of its drawbacks. Many of the objectionable behaviour in cyberspace seems to be unaffected by censorship, allowing hate speech to circulate among third parties while lacking proper accountability for such behaviour. Interviewee 7 (March 31, 2021) points this out by saying: “Of course, it is a plus that you can become anonymous on the net, but it’s also sometimes conducive to spreading hate speech, which is difficult to locate or take consequences, because some people feel too

powerful on the Internet.” Furthermore, Interviewee 9 (April 9, 2021) noted a complication with the difference between a fan and ARMY:

“I think you can tell at a glance if someone is a BTS fan, but I also think it’s a bit worse to say if it’s ARMY. If someone has a picture of BTS on the icon, you can assume that the person knows this band and probably listens to it, so great, there is already one clue.”

Interviewee 10 (April 10, 2021) also shared the hardship, pointing out the possibility of belonging to other fandoms: “I think it’s identifiable as long as you pay attention to visual cues [...] But different fans can also belong to different fandoms, so it’s a bit more difficult here, as long as you don’t want to delve into the whole profile.” Interviewee 6 (March 30, 2021), on the other hand, noticed conflicts due to disagreement or competition between fandoms, which are exacerbated by social media and the presence of users belonging to multiple fandoms: “[...] there are a lot of trends that not all fans agree with, so it can split the fandom to some extent or even create different conflicts among other fandoms, which is problematic for people who belong to different fandoms.” This resonates with Buchanan (2019) who describes the competition of fandoms resulting from their media practices.

4.5.1 Constraints of Twitter

When asked for their thoughts on Twitter constraints, respondents criticized four characteristics and features that hinder fan interaction or were met with a negative perception of them. First of all, Interviewee 1 (March 22, 2021) lists the character limit for the shared tweet on the platform: “Due to the fact that Twitter has this character limit for a tweet, it greatly limits the length of one message, which is why I write shorter messages on it, but I have the impression that they are more frequent.”

Second of all, Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 8, and Interviewee 9 expressed their reluctance and disapproval of the Twitter Lists features, which allow the creation of smaller groups and the classification of displayed content (Wu et al., 2011). For example, Interviewee 9 (April 9, 2021) believes that this option limits diversity of content and the ability to reach a wider audience: “I don’t use the List feature myself, because I prefer the main Twitter timeline than join other groups.”

An equivalent belief was expressed regarding the Twitter Moments feature, which, according to five out of ten respondents, lacks originality due to its similarities to other apps

with similar functions, as well as the fact that it reduces the accessibility of all moments when having a significant number of followers. As Interviewee 6 (March 30, 2021) states:

“I really don’t like Twitter Moments because I have the feeling that they are neither necessary nor original. It reminds me a bit too much of Snapchat or Instagram, and if you have a very large number of users followed, it creates a slight mess!”

Subsequently, Interviewee 8 and Interviewee 10 criticized the receipt of notifications not relevant to the user. According to Interviewee 10 (April 10, 2021),

“[...] with a lot of activity on Twitter, you can easily lose important notifications by some that do not make any sense, for example, that someone liked something that I retweeted or liked. In my opinion, this is not necessary because it is not relevant to my usage.”

This statement can be linked to Trifiro & Gerson (2019) discussing the information potential of virtual accounts, as well as van Dijck’s (2013) considerations on corporate platform owners prioritizing profit above sociality. Additionally, when asked for feedback on the possible creation of separate accounts for individual BTS members instead of using a group account, Interviewee 1 (March 22, 2021) expressed concern about the possibility of unequal treatment of individual accounts, which could lead to problematic situations in the fandom:

“[...] there could be a fair amount of inequality between the individual members. Due to the fact that everyone would have a separate account, these uncool fans would be able to follow [...] their favourites, and not all of them, which would make those members with less interest feel very uncool [...].”

In general, despite having access to the platform’s interactive features, seven out of ten participants expressed criticism about the particular Twitter’s features.

4.5.2 Constraints of Weverse

Contrary to Twitter, Weverse faced a negative evaluation regarding the insufficient number of interactive features enabling private networking. According to six respondents, the lack of direct messaging to other users makes it difficult to establish a closer relationship with

another individual on the platform, and thus limits interactions in the fandom. For instance, Interviewee 1 (March 22, 2021) claims,

“I miss being able to write a private message to someone. Of course, you can follow someone and write comments to each other, but the lack of the option to write to someone privately slightly limits such interpersonal interaction, especially if someone would like to keep in touch.”

Likewise, Interviewee 4 (March 26, 2021) admits that the lack of this option complicates establishing international relations on the platform: “I feel that I could make a lot of friends there too, a bit more developed in terms of localization.” The limitation of individual interactions amongst Weverse users can be linked to van Dijck (2013) distinguishing between corporate and social interest driving decisions in the exploitation of platform technological characteristics.

Furthermore, while the Twitter List feature faced criticism for a limited access to content, Weverse encountered an unfavourable review regarding its inability to form smaller groups. According to Interviewee 10 (April 10, 2021),

“I think Weverse could develop a bit more of its functions of communication between fans, which could make communication a little easier or even enable to create separate groups. I have had a situation many times where a nice comment [...] was lost among the mass of other comments, because I could not even write to this person privately.”

Additionally, Interviewee 2 (March 23, 2021) voiced remorse for the lack of artist and content diversification due to the still expanding collaborations with the app, making it problematic to attract new audiences to the BTS fandom:

“A bit of a limitation is that there are a limited number of artists on the platform at the moment. They have to cooperate with the app to appear on it, which makes it difficult, so to speak, to recruit new fans to our fandom, because BTS is already watching people who are interested in these fans.”

In conclusion, despite Weverse being a platform created specifically for the fandom community (Lee & Nguyen, 2020), respondents believe that the platform limits their fan-to-fan interactions as a result of an underdeveloped communication system.

Based on these findings, this chapter identifies and addresses five key themes that can assist in answering the research question. Although each of them individually influences fandom operations, the virtual functioning of ARMYs seems to be reflected by the stated distinction between affordances and constraints of social media platforms, which allow members of the subculture to engage in a variety of activities offered, or limit their mutual connectedness, thus altering their individual and collective identities. In this context, technical capabilities in the form of characteristics and features have the potential to regulate user behaviour, which translates to their platform usage and fan-team engagement possibilities. The results are discussed in further detail in the following chapter, which also serves as a conclusion to the research.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary objective of this thesis was to find an answer to the following research question: *How do BTS ARMY fans between 18 to 25 years old use the online social platforms of Twitter and Weverse to interact with each other and the band?* This was accomplished by conducting interviews with 10 BTS fans who identify as ARMY and who at least once a week post content on Twitter and Weverse that encourages other fans to respond with the platform features. The respondents had no qualms sharing their personal thoughts, and they often surprised with their in-depth approach to the topic and clear reflection on the phenomenon in which they participate. Nevertheless, the research question cannot be resolved by solely one specific answer. Instead, it is understood by integrating the results from the themes that have been established in the analysis and theoretical considerations presented in the second chapter of this study.

Since fans seem to be conscious of their own identities, a difference between individual fan conceptions and the existing ARMY community has been drawn. According to fans' statements concerning the ARMY image, an ARMY is a person who displays a deep emotional, practical, and insightful dedication to the popular culture product created by BTS, making fan activity part of identity. The aspect of self-identification is substantial, since it can be inferred that if anyone calls themselves a fan, they are dedicated to a product and have a foundation to associate with the community formed by other ARMYs.

While Jenkins (1992), Siuda (2010), and Włodarczyk (2014) argue that becoming a fan is an identity in and of itself, the effect of the commodity on the receiver is a significant element in the matter of collective ARMY recognition, and such factors can be incomparable to an ordinary fan. In this case, the assumptions of Giddens (1991) appear to be more accurate to fan testimonies, as ARMYs hold more in-depth knowledge of BTS, notably in terms of consumption processes and group behaviour in the community. At the same time, socialization and virtual interaction in the process of generating the collective identity of BTS fans remain substantial. All participants recognize the impact of using the Internet on shaping identity. According to the majority, it creates a creative effect, consisting of contact with many users, confronting different views, and providing unlimited access to information, which allows them to gain greater self-awareness. Respondents also note that their platform choices strengthen identity, targeting user-generated content that confirms such views.

As reported by Cottle (1998) and Kratz & Reimer (1998), an important feature of media acquaintances is also the impermanence of relationships that are concluded within

them. The responses provide conflicting details on this subject – some respondents are uninterested in deeper relationships, whereas others boast about their fandom friendships, which, in their view, are more permanent than the interest in BTS itself. However, in this case, fans pay attention to the individual approach to creating friendships and self-presentation in social media, taking into account the possibility of controlling their own image presented on the web.

Furthermore, the general public has been exposed to the toxic prejudices identified by Jenkins (1992) and Sullivan (2020) as a result of biased academic attitudes toward fandoms and widespread media demonization of fans. However, the interviews revealed that fans' individual activities on social media have a global dimension. BTS fans are aware of contemporary problems and challenges, which the band itself addresses in their media activity and artistic message, allowing them not only to help each other within their own community, but also to participate in virtual projects and globally promote Asian culture. Moreover, the intimate relationship with the projects and lyricism of BTS influences the individual expression and behaviour of fans, which resonates with the assumptions of Lacasa et al. (2017), as well as consumption processes of ARMYs, which is in line with Siuda (2010) and Włodarczyk (2014). Consequently, the existing model of popular culture and media trends from the West seem to be reconstructed by Hallyu.

Likewise, the affordances and constraints offered by the platforms also proved to be significant findings in fan interactions on Twitter and Weverse. As stated by Booth (2010) and Castells (2010), fans have the potential to conquer digital media. The Internet gives them a better understanding of the group in which they participate, as well as the opportunity to communicate across demographic lines. BTS's participation has also increased, which helps to retain credibility and enhance the image conveyed by interacting with fans. Accordingly, as nearly all of the interviewees acknowledged, fandom would not circulate on such a wide scale without the Internet, and it would have been impractical to pursue projects that today only entail initiative and effort. For fans, fandom is akin to a social society, or a group of people who can communicate with other members virtually. This resonates with the findings of Meyrowitz (1994), who argues that societies work as a consequence of adaptation to new forms of pluralized masses, while still being a direct audience for activities taking place elsewhere.

When comparing the statements of respondents discussing the use of Twitter and Weverse to interact with other fans and the band, a discrepancy in the structure of these two platforms can be noticed, particularly when considering the analytical framework of van Dijk

(2013). The main variations in interaction are related to the technological characteristics of the platforms. Despite the fact that both Twitter and Weverse are microblogging platforms that are compliant with other technical devices (Choi, 2021; van Dijck, 2013), respondents take into account the underdeveloped Weverse features that hinder communication between users. Participants believe that the absence of direct communication with other fans diminishes their connectedness as compared to Twitter, which provides distinct affordances in both direct and indirect ways. Conversely, participants also expressed concern about the inequality between users on Twitter that could affect the performance of artists in case of their activity on individual accounts. This observation is consistent with the reflections of van Dijck (2013) who connects Twitter users' inequity to the platform's architecture and filtering mechanisms, which affect their reach and influence.

Additionally, when comparing BTS's activity on both platforms, fans observe that the band is more active on Weverse, due to their individual activity on their personalized accounts. Whereas Weverse is not individualized and does not allow private messaging, it resembles a discussion forum for a small group of recipients who are solely interested in the fandom object. Those strategies can be considered as serving the interests of the economic capital of HYBE rather than the social interests of the fans, which brings to the fore van Dijck's (2013) distinction between connectivity and connectedness. Likewise, the provision of unnecessary notifications to users about their Twitter behaviour raises the deliberations that corporate platform owners prioritize data gathering from user accounts, and thus value market profit over sociality in the structure of their platforms. Considering that fans adopt a hybrid approach of the individualized networks (Wellman et al., 2003) and interest-based fandoms (Jenkins, 2006), there is room for debate over the future of the fan community's preferred platform architecture.

Nonetheless, the findings of the research reveal the characteristics that allow fan activity and interaction on social media. Despite variances in platform structures, respondents were able to identify connectivity-enhancing features that enable users to share interest, and promote BTS throughout the world. Furthermore, fans find the suitable approach to the band that customizes the fandom's setting, despite the variation in the length of published posts. This demonstrates that these platforms are a tool for the fandoms that use them to form their activities.

Therefore, in order to provide an answer to the research question, it can be argued that the BTS ARMY fans benefit from a variety of Twitter and Weverse features that allow interaction between fans and BTS. Fans feel as if they belong to a well-defined community in

which they can control their online identity and have unrestricted access to knowledge and information. Moreover, ARMYs experience a sense of belonging to a society in which they can discover and construct themselves independently through fan roles and interactions with the band and other users. The interactions are carried out in a variety of ways, using both direct and indirect functions provided by the platforms that allow for virtual communication and self-expression.

5.1 Limitations and future research

This thesis provided valuable insights into fan studies by analysing the online interactions of the BTS fandom. Nevertheless, there are certain noteworthy limitations that should be taken into account. The most important consideration is the lack of prior and appropriate research on the subject at the local level. While this study involved male and female participants from three different European nations, the results could vary if more participants from other parts of the world, such as Asian fans, were included, providing different insights and experiences into the globalization of Hallyu. These considerations also apply to the limited sample size. As a result of the practical constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the study used interviews with 10 participants, which may have translated into variation in responses. In addition, the imposed restrictions were followed by the consequences of conducting online interviews, making it unachievable to thoroughly analyse the non-verbal language of the participants.

Although fandoms are increasingly attracting the attention of researchers, they remain an unexplored phenomenon in many ways. It is a constantly developing and evolving phenomenon, and therefore it comprises an interesting cognitive material. Fandom participants are progressively willing and brazen in using many of the resources provided by online platforms. Currently, fandoms use them mainly for communication, knowledge sharing, and self-publication. However, since the Internet is continually expanding and shifting, its usage in fandoms is subject to change. Thereby, future research should take into account and aim to interview the fandom's activity in the changing setting of social media platforms, as well as explore how the fandom evolves over time.

Another possibility for future research is interviewing the ARMY fandom delving into the subject of globalization of Hallyu, in conjunction with the social, economic, and political impact of BTS. Respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of this band on their collective and individual identities, as well as how BTS alters the imposed patterns conveyed in popular culture. Their increasing importance in the media space would provide an

opportunity to explore specific paradigms that have arisen from Western popular culture, and could help understand the behaviour of online communities that are also transforming the real world.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide

Background

- What is your gender?
- How old are you?
- What is your current occupation and/or educational level?

Warm-up

- How long have you been a member of BTS ARMY?
- What does it mean to you to be a fan?
- How would you define an ARMY?

Identity

- How do you identify other ARMY on Twitter and on Weverse?
- Does being a fan help you to express yourself? (Online and offline) [In what way?]
- Could you tell me a little bit of your role in the fan group?
- Please evaluate the role Twitter and Weverse play in online fandom collective identity construction. How do you think the use of Twitter and Weverse affects the group identity of BTS fandom?
- Has fandom experience on the platforms played a part in your individual identity construction? [Why/Why not]
- Have you ever felt like your experience on online fandom has affected your behaviour and self-presentation in everyday life? [If yes, how?]

Social media

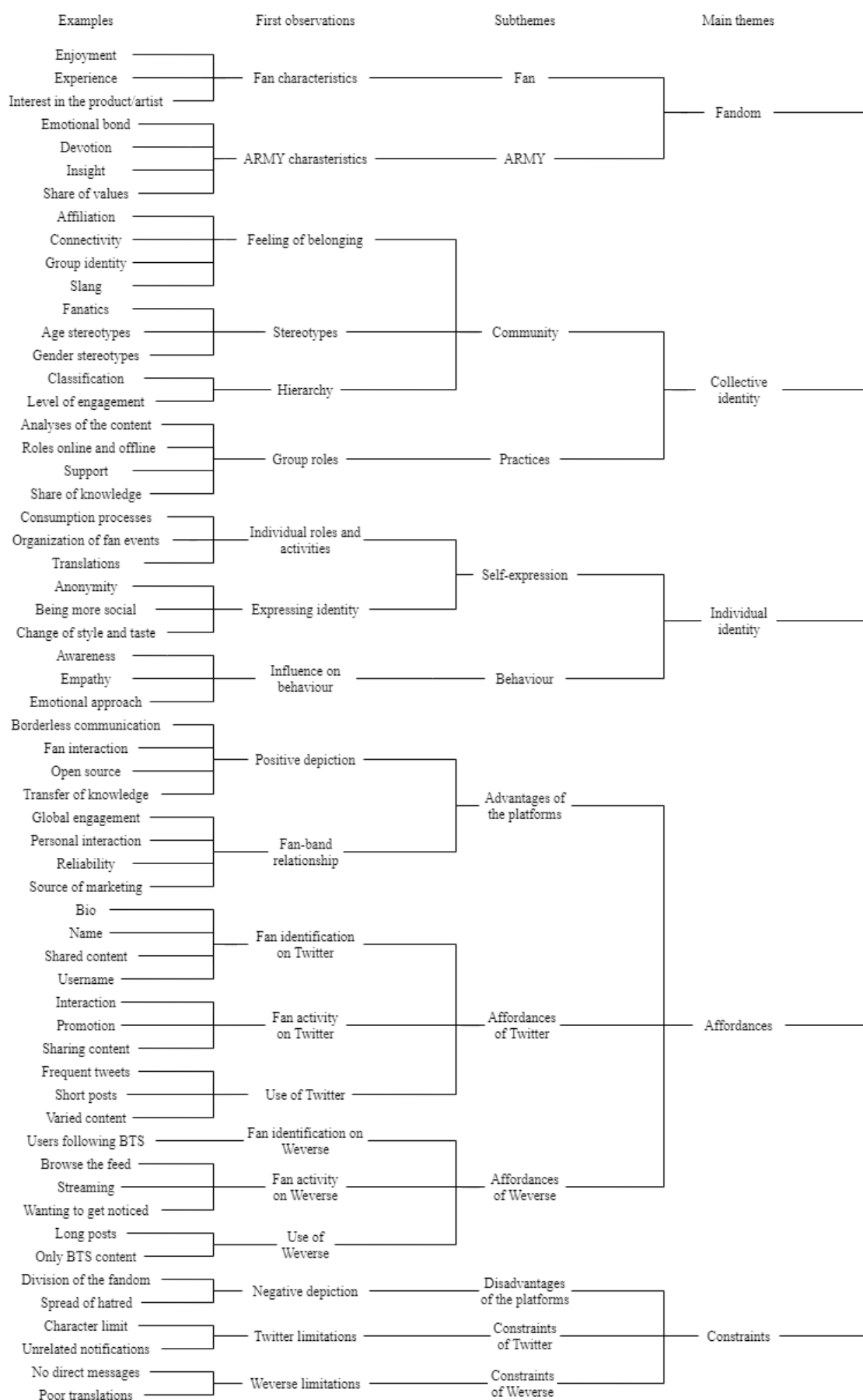
- How do you interact with BTS and other ARMYs on Twitter?
- How do you interact with BTS and other ARMYs on Weverse?
- What kind of online activities, practices, or routines are performed within this community?

- Can you elaborate on some ways you feel these platforms help or do not help your feeling of belonging to the ARMY community?
- Do you sometimes have to perform different roles depending on your personal life and persona on social media? [Why/why not?]
- What social media tools do you use for your presentation?
- In what way does this representation of yourself change in different platforms settings?
- As a social media user, what activities you usually do on Twitter relevant to your fandom?
- How about on Weverse?
- Do you think that there is any change in the relationship between fans and idols in the era of social media? [Why/why not?]

Conclusion

- In your opinion, what characteristics of both platforms are most useful for interactions between fans?
- Do you think these platforms somehow limit interaction among the ARMY community? [Why/why not?]
- Is there anything on this topic that you think is relevant and that we didn't cover?

Appendix B: Coding tree



Appendix C: Informed consent form template

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Zuzanna Ilejko, 583549zi@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You¹ are invited to participate in a research about your experience as a BTS ARMY fan. The purpose of the study is to understand how the fans use the online social platforms of Twitter and Weverse to interact with each other and the band.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept be interviewed. In general terms,

- the questions of the interview will be related to your experience as a BTS fan, how you use and perceive different social media platforms, and how they shape your collective and individual identities
- your participation in the experiment will be related to your experience and perspectives
- my observations will focus on your perception of the subject of fan activity, fandom, and the affordances and constraints of various social media platforms

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use a tape recorder for the interview.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information not in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by [measures that will be taken: pseudonym, general identification only mentioning age and gender, etc.].

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

¹ In the case of minors, informed consent must be obtained from the parents or other official carers. They will have to sign this form. Please make sure to adjust this form accordingly.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take no more than an hour. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish—
mamedia@eshcc.eur.nl

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name

Signature

Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name

Signature

Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Thank you so much for participating in my Master Thesis research. I greatly appreciate it!

With kind regards,

Zuzanna Ilejko