ARMY Insights:
Understanding BTS Fans' Reactions to Parasocial Relationships Controversies

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ABSTRACT

The global influence of Korean popular culture, or *"Hallyu,"* has surged in recent years, with K-pop playing a pivotal role in promoting South Korea's cultural and economic interests. Central to this phenomenon is BTS, a globally renowned boy band who's massive fanbase, ARMY, exemplifies the profound emotional connections fostered through parasocial relationships. This research explores how BTS fans engage with and interpret parasocial relationships amidst controversies involving their idols, focusing on incidents of stalking and privacy violations. Through a thematic analysis of 625 comments, the study addresses the research question: *"How do K-pop fans actively engage with and interpret instances of parasocial relationships amidst controversies surrounding their favourite idols?"* along with sub-questions on the perceived boundaries of fan behaviour and expectations of the artists' companies. Three primary themes emerged: fans' reactions, perceptions, and demands. Fans' reactions reveal strong emotional responses and calls for protective measures, highlighting their protective instincts and frustration with management companies. Fans' perceptions delve into understanding *sasaeng* (obsessive fan) behaviour, exploring motivations behind intrusive actions and their impact on both idols and fans. This theme underscores the complexity of parasocial relationships, where intense fan loyalty coexists with concerns over privacy breaches. The third theme, fandom demands, reflects the collective expectations for stricter management responses to protect idols and address stalking incidents effectively. These demands emphasize fans' unwavering commitment to their idols' safety and well-being, advocating for better protective measures and accountability from management companies. The analysis underscores the significant role of *Hallyu* in enhancing South Korea's cultural diplomacy. The global reach of BTS and their engagement with an international fanbase demonstrate the effectiveness of K-pop as a tool for cultural influence. The study also highlights the differing expectations and responses of Western international fans and South Korean fans, shaped by cultural values. Western fans often demand immediate, direct actions, while South Korean fans emphasize respect and politeness. In conclusion, this research illuminates the intricate dynamics of K-pop fandom and parasocial relationships, revealing fans' deep emotional investment and proactive stance in advocating for their idols. It calls for ongoing dialogue, research, and interventions to protect both idols and fans, emphasizing the need to address the evolving challenges of fan-idol interactions. By understanding the motivations and expectations of K-pop fans, particularly in the context of controversies, this study contributes to the broader discourse on celebrity worship and the psychological well-being of both idols and their devoted followers.

KEYWORDS: K-pop; Korean wave (*Hallyu*); parasocial relationships; marketing; soft power

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[Preface]

As I reach the end of this incredible journey, I cannot help but feel a mix of nostalgia and excitement. This thesis marks the culmination of not just years of hard work and dedication, but also the end of an era—the end of my student life. Being an international student, for the past two years, has been a unique and enriching experience, filled with challenges and growth. Along the way, I have been fortunate to have an amazing support system that made this journey not only possible but also memorable.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Korean popular culture has rapidly expanded its influence worldwide, commonly referred to as the "Korean wave" or "*Hallyu*" (Lee, 2011b, p. 85). This surge in popularity encompasses various facets, including Korean pop music (K-pop), series (K-drama), movies, and beauty among others, particularly captivating the younger demographic (Bok-Rae, 2015, p. 154). The emergence of *Hallyu*, driven by technological developments such as social media and smartphones, has propelled the global reach of the K-pop trend beyond East Asia (Bok-Rae, 2015, p. 157). Recognizing the potential of this cultural phenomenon, the Korean government actively supported its media industries in exporting Korean pop culture, contributing to the enhancement of South Korea's national image and economy, and positioning *Hallyu* as a tool for public diplomacy (Lee, 2011b, p. 85). Functioning as both an economic and cultural force, South Korea views its cultural exports, especially K-pop, as vital resources for its economy and cultural diplomacy (Chen, 2016, p. 27).

K-pop, characterized by its unique talent agency system, stands out as a prominent tool for promoting South Korea's culture globally, with a structure not easily replicable in other countries' music industries (Chen, 2016, p. 36). Beyond direct marketing, entertainment management companies employ several strategies, including parasocial interaction, to foster genuine and enduring emotional connections between fans and idols (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 194). Particularly with new bands, meticulous efforts are invested in cultivating affective links with the prospective fan base (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 194). As the distinction between the “celebrity-as-a-person and the celebrity-as-a-cultural-product” (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 197) blurs, concerns arise about the potential exploitation of fans affection by entertainment companies, questioning whether the constructed parasocial relationships may manifest as a problematic social phenomenon (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 197).

This research aims to explore how fans actively participate in and react to controversial incidents caused by fans, investigating how they interpret and comprehend parasocial relationships with their favourite idols. The significance of this research extends beyond the realm of K-pop, resonating with broader social relevance in recognizing the importance of fans as a valuable asset in the music industry (Derbaix & Korchia, 2019, p. 2). Fans, far more than mere consumers, invest emotionally in their chosen artists, making their support a meaningful and irreplaceable aspect not achievable only through advertising (Derbaix & Korchia, 2019, p. 2). In the specific context of K-pop, there is a gap in existing studies on this topic, emphasizing the scientific relevance and the need for a deeper understanding through further investigation. Thus, with the research question: *“How do K-pop fans actively engage with and interpret instances of parasocial relationships amidst controversies surrounding their favourite idols?*; and the following sub-questions: *“What are the perceived boundaries of expected fan behaviour in the context of parasocial relationships with K-pop idols?”* and *“How do fans feel that the artist’s company's response aligns with their expectations?”*, the goal is to gain deeper insights regarding the study topic, concentrating on how fans of BTS respond to

controversies involving BTS members and navigate the dynamics of parasocial relationships.

The research focuses on the K-pop boy band BTS (Korean: 방탄소년단; Romanized Korean: Bangtan Sonyeondan), comprising seven members—RM, Jin, SUGA, J-Hope, Jimin, V, and Jung Kook—since their debut in June 2013 (Big Hit Entertainment, 2022, para. 2). BTS has garnered a massive global fanbase and achieved Pop Icon status, breaking numerous world records (Big Hit Entertainment, 2022, para. 2). Beyond their musical success, BTS has made a positive impact through initiatives like the "LOVE MYSELF" campaign and the UN "Speak Yourself" speech, mobilizing their fanbase, known as ARMY, and earning accolades such as TIME's Entertainer of the Year 2020. The band has also received Grammy nominations and won prestigious awards at events like the Billboard Music Awards (Big Hit Entertainment, 2022, para. 2). BTS has firmly established itself as a global phenomenon, boasting widespread recognition.

However, alongside their immense success and massive fan following, the group has encountered instances where certain fans cross boundaries by intruding into the members' private lives in unsettling ways. In March 2023, during a Weverse live stream, Jungkook addressed fans who followed him to the gym, urging them not to seek him out (Cherrie, 2023, para. 4). Weverse stands out as a platform that provides fans the opportunity to connect globally, interacting with artists just like any other social media platform (Devoe, 2021, para. 6). Users can follow, create posts, and engage with other fans. Additionally, its built-in translator appeals to international fans, facilitating the translation of artists' posts into their preferred language and enhancing communication accessibility (Devoe, 2021, para. 7). While expressing gratitude for the interest, Jungkook emphasized the importance of mutual respect and requested fans to avoid showing up unexpectedly at his places (Cherrie, 2023, para. 6). Two months later, in May 2023, he once again used Weverse to discourage fans from sending food to his home, stating he would not consume it and might resort to legal action if the situation persisted (Business Insider, 2023, para. 1-4). BTS member V also encountered a severe stalking incident in October 2023, during which a woman waited for him outside his residence, followed him into the parking lot, and pursued him into the building (Debbarma, 2023, para. 3). She attempted to convince V to sign a marriage certificate in the elevator at his residence (Debbarma, 2023, para. 3). This case was reported to the police, leading to an investigation into the woman for stalking the singer (Debbarma, 2023, para. 1). Subsequent investigations revealed that the woman had visited V's residence on multiple occasions before this incident (Ha, 2023b, para. 3).

Despite the recent incidents mentioned earlier, these are far from isolated cases. BTS have faced persistent stalking issues over the years. These include the unauthorized dissemination of leaked photos from personal schedules, leaked flight information, and the theft of Jimin's personal mail (Olivares Juárez, 2022, para. 1). RM's personal information and booking schedules were stolen from a Korean railroad company over a span of three years (Mallorca, 2023, para. 1-4). Additionally, while serving his military service, Jin was unauthorizedly vaccinated by a nurse who acted without

permission (Ha, 2023a, para. 1-6). These examples highlight the ongoing privacy violations that BTS members have endured. Hence, the study aims to analyse BTS fans' reactions to these incidents, exploring how they engage with controversies and navigate parasocial relationships.

2. Theoretical Framework

To explore how BTS fans perceive and react to instances of parasocial relationships amidst controversies, the focus lies on four key concepts: the Korean wave (*Hallyu*), fans and fandom, parasocial relationships, and K-pop's idol system.

2.1 The Korean Wave: Hallyu

2.1.1 Introduction to Hallyu and its Eras

Chen's (2016, p. 26) research suggests that adopting a global perspective, as opposed to focusing solely on foreign or local markets, proves to be more effective when expanding into international markets (Chen, 2016, p. 26). The Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, a cultural phenomenon spanning over 15 years, is defined by the intentional global dissemination of K-pop to audiences worldwide (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 67; Jin & Yoon, 2014, p. 1278). Even for individuals less acquainted with Asian popular culture, the swift rise of K-pop as a fan phenomenon on a global scale has been hard to overlook (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 191).

Numerous key components are identified as contributing to the widespread appeal of Korean cultural exports among global audiences (Chen, 2016, p. 28). Firstly, the active promotion of cultural products by the South Korean government has played a significant role (Chen, 2016, p. 28). Additionally, the liberalization of media technologies has facilitated the rapid expansion of cable and satellite television networks, creating opportunities for increased airtime (Chen, 2016, p. 28; Kim, 2022, p. 132). Moreover, the Korean government played a pivotal role by taking the initiative to advance the country's internet infrastructure (Messerlin & Shin, 2017, p. 422). Alongside this, the swift expansion of social media has played a crucial part in shaping the dissemination of local cultural products, further fuelling the current Korean wave phenomenon (Jin & Yoon, 2014, p. 1282; Chung, 2019, p. 137). Lastly, another perspective attributes the adoption of Korean cultural products to the diffusion of Asian, particularly South Korean, populations worldwide (Chen, 2016, p. 28). The presence of South Koreans across the globe has provided fertile ground for the spread of South Korean pop culture, as immigrants seek to maintain connections with their homeland through cultural consumption (Chen, 2016, p. 28).

Hallyu comprises two successive phases: the "original" *hallyu* in the 1990s and the *shin-hallyu* (new Korean wave) in the early 2000s (Kim, 2022, p. 124; Chen, 2016, p. 27). *Hallyu* is defined by the widespread appeal of South Korean TV dramas, while, *shin-hallyu*, involves the spreading of K-pop music (Kim, 2022, p. 124; Chen, 2016, p. 27). In contrast to the first wave, the new Korean wave is more of a youthful trend, marked by the rise of K-pop groups such as Girls' Generation and Big Bang (Chen, 2016, p. 27). Additionally, *shin-hallyu* distinguishes itself from its predecessor through its global reach, exemplified by the increasing number of North American audiences engaging with *hallyu* content (Jin & Yoon, 2014, p. 1278).

2.1.2 The Interplay of Industry and Government in Hallyu's Global Expansion: Evolving Perspectives

Driven by two main forces, the success of K-pop centred significantly on the three leading K-pop companies: YG Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and SM Entertainment, as well as the strategic development of South Korea's internet infrastructure by the government (Messerlin & Shin, 2017, p. 422). These entities have excelled in choosing the right entertainment "products" that align with the advantages that Korea possesses in the global entertainment industry (Messerlin & Shin, 2017, p. 422). The “star manufacturing system” follows a structured approach to create and promote individual artists as well as idol groups tailored to specific fan demographics (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 191). It incorporates appealing melodies and dance choreographies to captivate audiences both within and beyond South Korea (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 191).

Recognized as both an economic and cultural force, *Hallyu* holds significance for the South Korean government, acknowledging its cultural products as vital assets for the economy and as tools for cultural diplomacy in East Asia (Chen, 2016, p. 27). The impressive scale of the *Hallyu* becomes apparent when considering that foreign consumers, despite significant language barriers, actively engage with Korean dramas and music, showcasing not only an attraction to South Korea as a destination but also an increasing preference for Korean-made goods (Chen, 2016, p. 29; Chung, 2019, p. 139). Contrary to expectations, these challenges have not hindered the phenomenon but rather, have seen enhancement in recent years (Jin & Yoon, 2014, p. 1278). In contrast to its earlier phase, the "new Korean wave," appears to exhibit increased intensity in recognition and extensive circulation (Jin & Yoon, 2014, p. 1278).

Media scholars have been investigating the Korean wave phenomenon more extensively over the first decade of the 21st century, seeing it as a fresh development in the global media landscape, aiming to provide an alternative perspective to the predominant discourse on media globalization (Jin & Yoon, 2014, p. 1279). *Hallyu*, defined by some researchers as a counterflow against the dominance of Western media, embodies a decentralizing multiplicity that offers a counterbalance to the overwhelming influence of Western media markets (Jin & Yoon, 2014, p. 1279). The Korean Wave, characterized by the rapid expansion of domestic cultural sectors and the widespread dissemination of Korean popular culture and digital innovations on a global scale, has shown ongoing growth (Jin, 2018, p. 1; Kim, 2022, p. 123). South Korea's newfound status as a key player in the global cultural landscape has sparked discussions about the transnationalization of popular culture and its potential to reshape the cultural hegemony long held by Western nations (Jin, 2018, p. 1). Transnationalization refers to the state in which individuals, goods, and ideologies surpass national borders without being exclusively associated with a singular place of origin (Jin, 2018, p. 1). This shift towards a more transnational approach in Korean Wave studies challenges traditional notions of cultural imperialism, highlighting the complex interplay between global and local forces in shaping cultural consumption patterns (Kang, 2022, p. 3312). The theory of cultural imperialism

strongly emphasizes that Western powers, through their control of transnational communication entities, impose their ideologies and lifestyles onto developing nations, leading to the erosion of local philosophies (Kang, 2022, p. 3312).

A significant aspect of this transnationalization is the development of hybrid cultural products that integrate both local and global elements, driven in part by the involvement of global capital in the production of Korean cultural content (Jin, 2018, p. 2). While this hybridization enhances South Korea's cultural presence on the global stage, it also raises questions about the asymmetrical power dynamics favouring Western countries (Jin, 2018, p. 3). Even so, South Korea's cultural status "as a local-based key player in the global markets" cannot be overlooked, as it demonstrates the potential for countercultural movements to challenge the dominance of Western cultural hegemony (Jin, 2018, p. 3).

The transnational perspective in the study of the Korean Wave involves critically examining the cultural imperialism theory (Kang, 2022, p. 3312). A significant flaw in the arguments of cultural imperialism is the assertion that culture is entirely reducible to economic factors - "the logic of capital" (Kang, 2022, p. 3312). The widespread popularity of Korean dramas in East Asia, particularly in Japan, a country with greater economic influence than South Korea, proposes that the dissemination of audiovisual material is not solely dictated by a dominant power nor are they compliantly accepted by domestic spectators (Kang, 2022, p. 3312). Therefore, there is a proposal to reconsider the concept of transnationality in the study of the Korean Wave. The transnational approach to Korean Wave studies, as proposed by Kang (2022, p. 3314), encompasses three key perspectives: trans-urban, trans-local, and trans-media. The researcher introduces these perspectives as a means to reconceptualize transnationality in Korean Wave studies, aiming for a more accurate understanding of the phenomenon.

The trans-urban viewpoint delves into the interaction between cultural encounters within major cities and global cultural movements, highlighting the adaptation of urban cultural experiences to local contexts in the digital era and its high level of global connectivity (Kang, 2022, p. 3316). In contrast, the trans-local perspective focuses on the "historical and genealogical dimensions of cultural continuity", highlighting the enduring influence of collective memory and cultural heritage on the interpretation of cultural products (Kang, 2022, p. 3316). The trans-urban aspect looks at how cities connect at the same time, while the trans-local aspect focuses on the historical aspects of continuity over time. Lastly, the third aspect of transnationality is termed trans-media, leveraging technological advancements to facilitate "intertextual storytelling and foster participatory fan networks" (Kang, 2022, p. 3319). Traditionally, trans-media refers to how different types of media interact, but now, it is also about how media content is shared and mixed together using digital tools like the internet (Kang, 2022, p. 3319). By incorporating the convergence of three main domains - "city-connectivity, culture-continuum, and communication-convergence" - this structure offers a methodical approach to analysing the intricate global distribution and reception of the Korean Wave

(Kang, 2022, pp. 3321-3322). Indeed, in recent years, the Korean Wave has achieved significant success in global markets across various media platforms, including film, drama, and music (Kang, 2022, p. 3322).

2.1.3 South Korea's Soft Power and Hallyu

Established in the early 1990s, the definition of soft power is described as the capacity to attain objectives through attraction and persuasion, as opposed to coercion or force (Valieva, 2018, p. 208; S. J. Lee, 2009, p.1; Chung, 2019, p. 138). Described as the capacity to influence others' behaviour through attraction, soft power involves a state's ability to attract other governments by showcasing the appeal of its culture, political values, and foreign policy (Kim & Marinescu, 2015, p. 2; Valieva, 2018, p. 208). This approach is particularly pertinent given the role of the political process in shaping governments and public sentiment, thereby facilitating the advancement of strategic goals for both established and emerging international actors (Valieva, 2018, p. 208). Notably, South Korea, positioned as a middle power, faces challenges in competing with larger powers such as China and Japan on the basis of hard power alone (Lee, 2011a, p. 140; S. J. Lee, 2009, p.1; Kim, 2022, p. 125). Acknowledging this circumstance, there is a growing recognition that soft power offers an alternative avenue for South Korea to expand its global influence - the rise of South Korean cultural influence, exemplified by the success of the *Hallyu* phenomenon through mediums like television series, further underscores the potential of soft power in enhancing South Korea's global presence (Lee, 2011a, p. 140; Chung, 2019, p. 138).

Soft power, which can be strengthened by the exchange of cultural values and policies aligning with international norms, is frequently synonymous with "cultural influence" in social and cultural discourse (Kim & Marinescu, 2015, p. 1). This form of power stems from three main foundations: the attractiveness of its culture, the adherence to its political values both nationally and globally, and the perception of legitimacy and moral authority in its foreign policies (Proctor, 2021, p. 83; S. J. Lee, 2009, p. 6). Thus, researchers have categorized soft power into five distinct types based on the intended policy objectives (Lee, 2009, p. 207). These categories include: (1) enhancing the external security environment by projecting peaceful and appealing images of a nation; (2) harvesting support from other countries for one's foreign and security policies; (3) leveraging soft power to influence the perspectives and preferences of other nations; (4) upholding the unity of a community or coalition of countries; and (5) boosting the approval ratings of a leader or gather support for a government (Lee, 2009, pp. 207-208). The five categories of soft power rely on a common factor - soft resources, encompassing ideas, images, culture, and more, which serve as the foundation of this power that can be actively employed to influence others (Lee, 2009, p. 209). Soft power strategies must align with specific objectives and simply achieving attractiveness or respect alone cannot be the primary aim (Lee, 2009, p. 212). In South Korea's case, following an East Asian tendency of recognizing soft power as a strategic asset, this application of soft resources has been pivotal in enhancing its global

influence.

When reflecting on the Korean Wave, it becomes evident that *Hallyu* embodies South Korea's effective use of soft power. Through intentional export of cultural products like K-pop and K-dramas, South Korea attracts global audiences and enhances its international influence (Kim, 2022, p. 124; Chen, 2016, p. 27). *Hallyu* not only entertains but also fosters positive perceptions of South Korea and promotes cross-cultural exchange (Lee, 2009, p. 215). By integrating *Hallyu* into discussions of soft power, we recognize its role in shaping global perceptions and enhancing diplomatic relations (Lee, 2011b, p. 85). In navigating global politics, South Korea's strategic deployment of soft power, exemplified by *Hallyu*, stands as a testament to its skill in the 21st century.

2.2 Fans and Fandom

2.2.1 Evolution of Fan Culture

Publics matter because their actions can affect other actors, and this concept, inherently tied to communication and interaction, involves the role of media and communication technologies in shaping and organizing publics (Henriques & Silva, 2022, p. 29; Lima, 2022, p. 53). Fans, here understood as publics, is a concept identifying individuals forming a strong emotional connection with a specific interest, regardless of whether they express these sentiments publicly (Jenkins, 2018, p. 16). On the contrary, fandom pertains to those who assert a shared identity and culture with fellow fans (Jenkins, 2018, p. 16). Fandoms highlight their commitment collectively, and the rise of social media has given platforms for fans across various locations to come together (Harriss, 2020, pp. 2-3).

While the field of fan studies formally took shape in the latter part of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century, it is widely acknowledged that media enthusiasts have existed for a far longer period (Harriss, 2020, p. 2). Media fandom traces its roots back to the Industrial Revolution, which foreshadowed the rise of mass culture (Harriss, 2020, p. 2). Drawing closer to reality, since the onset of the 1960s, echoing the passion surrounding the British band, The Beatles, fans have frequently been depicted as deeply committed followers, displaying intense attachment to celebrities (Reijnders et al., 2017, p. 1).

2.2.2 Participatory Culture: Community and Engagement, Social Media and Fan Empowerment

Research on fan culture draws upon preceding theories such as uses and gratifications and encoding/decoding (Harriss, 2020, p. 4). These theoretical frameworks have broadened the scope of media analysis by acknowledging the active roles and influences of fans (Harriss, 2020, p. 4). Additionally, as highlighted by Jingke and Jiayi (2021, p. 121), fan culture is characterised as a type of participatory culture, intricately linked to technological advancements. Consequently, with the evolution of the internet and social media platforms, participatory culture has transformed, and fan culture is one of the manifestations that has emerged from this progression (Jingke & Jiayi, 2021, p.

121; Jia et al., 2021, p. 2173). Easy access to artistry, strong encouragement for producing and exchanging creations, informal guidance from experienced individuals to newcomers, acknowledgement of the value of individual contributions, and a sense of social belonging among fans are some of the characteristics of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2018, p. 18).

Furthermore, fandom and fan culture intertwine with a sense of community, where fans foster a greater sense of belonging, emotional connection and sense of safety in their fan communities rather than their local ones (Raw, 2020, p. 10; Jenkins, 2018, p. 18). Thus, participation culture has evolved from a niche occurrence to the new normal (Reijnders et al., 2017, p. 3). Social media platforms have significantly broadened the scope of fan engagement, not only providing a convenient space for fans to interact with their idols and fellow fandom members but also organising a wide array of events (Jia et al., 2021, p. 2173). Not limited to mere consumption, fans have evolved into active producers, generating various forms of content across different social media platforms, including “fan art, fan fiction, and offline gatherings” (Jia et al., 2021, p. 2173). This trend underscores the empowering role of social media in facilitating fan endeavours and creativity (Jia et al., 2021, p. 2173). Thereby, fans transcend the role of passive consumers, emerging as dependable contributors to the consumption and production cycles (Harriss, 2020, p. 2; Dinningrum & Satiti, 2021, p. 53).

Differing from the aspect of fan community building, another dimension involves the disruption of those connections and the fragmentation of the community, which refers to fans' perceptions that arguments within a fandom can drive people away from a particular fan group or the fandom altogether (Raw, 2020, p. 120). Arguments within fan communities frequently become avenues for criticizing or targeting individual followers, with prevailing sentiments and views expressed in these exchanges often fostering an environment that feels hostile to certain members, thus fuelling feelings of exclusion (Raw, 2020, p. 120). Similarly, gatekeeping within fandom debates adds another layer to this phenomenon, creating obstacles that hinder the formation of bonds between fans and the community, thus deterring potential new members and making the community less inviting (Raw, 2020, p. 127).

In addition to fostering connections among fans, discussions within fandoms can lead to the dissolution of these bonds or prevent their formation altogether (Raw, 2020, p. 133). While certain fans may find common ground and unity within a fandom, others may encounter feelings of detachment (Raw, 2020, p. 133). In the absence of defined protocols or authorities to regulate fan conduct, there exists a prevailing sentiment within fandoms that community members must self-regulate (Raw, 2020, p. 136). This implies that the community itself must engage in conversations to establish acceptable norms and ethical standards, and subsequently uphold and enforce them (Raw, 2020, p. 136).

In the context of participatory culture, fans and fandom dynamics are pivotal in shaping emotional connections. Thus, this foundation is key to exploring how BTS fans engage with

controversies and navigate parasocial relationship complexities.

2.3 Parasocial Relationships

2.3.1 Understanding Parasocial Interactions and the Progression to Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial interaction (PSI) is a phenomenon wherein some fans engage in an imaginary, unilateral interpersonal interaction with celebrities, resembling face-to-face interactions (Adhikari, 2020, p. 1; Konijn & Hoorn, 2017, p. 1; Stever, 2017, p. 2). Despite being one-sided, fans frequently feel a sense of familiarity almost akin to friendship (Adhikari, 2020, p. 2; Elvery, 2022, p. 477; Groszman, 2020, p. 214). Consequently, through consistent exposure to media, fans may gradually form an enduring sense of intimacy, establishing a one-sided parasocial relationship (PSR) (Adhikari, 2020, p. 2). PSRs, reflecting offline social relationships, entail individuals perceiving intimacy with celebrities without reciprocation (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 1; Stever, 2017, p. 1). While these relationships may mimic genuine interpersonal connections, they diverge significantly by lacking reciprocity between the celebrity and the fan (Tal-Or, 2017, p. 1). Establishing social ties serves as a primary incentive for engaging with media, a need that is partially fulfilled through the formation of PSRs (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 1). As a result of these parasocial connections fostering feelings of safety, consistency, and belonging, parasocial attachment (PSA) emerges as an advanced stage within the parasocial theory (Stever, 2017, p. 2). This progression signifies the evolution of PSRs to a point where the media persona becomes a source of emotional security and refuge (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 1). Moreover, forming PSRs correlates with reduced feelings of isolation and negative emotions overall, as well as heightened self-confidence (Stein et al., 2022, p. 21; Elvery, 2022, p. 479).

2.3.2 Effects of Parasocial Relationships

Interacting with media personalities through PSRs can have multifaceted effects on individuals. Firstly, people often emulate the passions of these figures, fostering a sense of consistency and overall happiness (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 3). Moreover, observing how celebrities demonstrate confidence and resilience in overcoming challenges can inspire and guide personal development, thereby boosting individuals' confidence in their ability to navigate similar circumstances (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 3). Additionally, PSRs ease the discovery and shaping of identity, as online platforms offer opportunities to experiment with various personas (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 3). Interacting with celebrities further enriches this journey of self-discovery and evolution (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 3).

Academics examining PSRs have approached the phenomenon through various psychological theories. The uses and gratification approach suggests that individuals form these relationships to fulfil their needs for companionship and communication through media use (Tal-Or, 2017, p. 4; Stever, 2017, p. 3). Additionally, the uncertainty reduction theory posits that relationships develop as individuals gather more information about others, reducing uncertainty (Tal-Or, 2017, p. 4).

Meanwhile, attachment theory suggests that childhood caregiver behaviour influences attachment styles in adulthood (Tal-Or, 2017, p. 4). Those with secure attachment styles tend to have optimistic hopes for relationships, while avoidant people struggle with trust issues and anxious individuals fear rejection (Tal-Or, 2017, p. 4). Hence, anxious people are more likely to form PSRs, while avoidant people tend to dodge them (Tal-Or, 2017, p. 4).

Originating from a sense of admiration, celebrity worship, a manifestation of PSRs, involves individuals becoming fixated on celebrities, with fanatical love potentially leading to harmful effects (Cahyani & Purnamasari, 2019, p. 167; Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 66). The behaviour of celebrity worshippers also commonly identified as "fangirls" mirrors addiction tendencies - the greater the fixation on celebrities, the deeper the engagement with them (Cahyani & Purnamasari, 2019, p. 167). As fans intensify their interaction with media figures, they begin to perceive them as close acquaintances, fostering ongoing PSRs (Cahyani & Purnamasari, 2019, p. 167).

2.3.3 Risks, Caution and Guidance in Fan Culture

Korean fan cultures have exhibited concerning changes. *Sasaeng* fans, characterized by their extreme obsession going beyond fan loyalty, go to dangerous lengths to get close to and interact with their idol artists (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 67; Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 195; Williams & Ho, 2015, p. 82). Apart from instances of stalking, celebrities have faced harassment in various forms, including allegations of sexual assault brought against male idols in court and instances of blackmailing (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 195). Although many of these accusations have been found to lack merit upon investigation, the melodramatic reporting surrounding them underscores the susceptibility of K-pop idols to allegations of moral misconduct, regardless of their validity (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 195).

K-Pop fans, often synonymous with fanaticism, display high loyalty to their idols however, despite acknowledging the commercial potential of fan culture, caution is urged regarding the potential pitfalls of blind fanaticism, emphasizing the need for proper guidance in fan culture (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 66; Jia et al., 2021, p. 2174). It is crucial to bear in mind that fervent devotion often fuels violent behaviours, including verbal attacks aimed at causing harm, engaging in arguments, and expressing hatred or dissatisfaction (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 68).

2.4 K-pop's Idol System

2.4.1 Economic Dynamics of Fan Engagement

At the heart of K-pop lies not just its international musical allure and polished sound, but equally significant is its visual influence and presentation (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 192; Kim et al., 2021, p. 2). K-pop fans, recognized for their unwavering loyalty and affection, actively contribute to the support of their idols through actions like purchasing albums, and attending concerts, among others (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 66; Dinningrum & Satiti, 2021, p. 43). Notably, the economic

value of affection and emotions is emphasized, framing emotion as a form of Marxist capital (Lima, 2022, p. 61).

K-pop companies, aiming at profit, have been at the forefront, recognizing the potential of the internet for the distribution and marketing of K-pop content, displaying a global leadership role (Messerlin & Shin, 2017, p. 425; Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 66; Kim et al., 2021, p. 2). This strategic approach extends to the Korean entertainment industry's adept utilization of social media, where various channels are maximized to guide fans to promotions and events, providing exclusive content to stimulate engagement and consequently change consumer purchasing patterns (Jin & Yoon, 2014, p. 1280; Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 69). A notable illustration of how K-pop companies capitalize on fan devotion to enhance their revenue is through brand collaborations featuring idols or producing merchandise related to idols, knowing full well that fans will readily purchase such items (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 66; Dinningrum & Satiti, 2021, p. 50). Intriguingly, a seemingly economic transaction is underpinned by intricate layers of communication strategies, driven by the belief that mobilizing an audience is crucial for the success of a project (Lima, 2022, p. 57).

2.4.2 Talent Agency System and Idol Production

The Korean pop eco-sphere's talent agency system, underscored by Chen (2016, p. 36) as a unique feature, not easily replicated, sets itself apart. Instead of portraying idols as unreachable, K-pop companies strategically engage with fans, highlighting the economic benefits of nurturing PSRs (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 190). This idol system forms the basis for cultivating PSRs and the participatory cultural practices integral to K-pop fandom (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 193). When considering the production process of idols, there is often a differentiation drawn between "talents" and "idols" in South Korea - "talents" encompasses various icons like actors and solo artists (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 193). On the other hand, the idol structure refers to the structured training process managed by entertainment corporations with the ultimate goal of attaining success and revenue (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 193; Kim et al., 2021, p. 3). These companies scout potential idols from a young age, typically in their pre-adolescent years, and enrol them in rigorous training programs (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 193; Lee, 2012, p. 556). These young individuals undergo demanding training in dance, singing, stage performance, and learning new languages and those who do not meet the standards or show enough commitment are disqualified by the corporations (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 193; Kang, 2017, p. 137; Venters & Rothenberg, 2022, p. 460; Lee, 2012, p. 556). However, the select few who persevere reside in company-owned residences and adhere to a highly disciplined lifestyle, aiming to make it into one of the entertainment corporations' idol bands (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 193; Venters & Rothenberg, 2022, p. 460). Upon selection for a group, each idol undergoes the development of a public persona, which entails the establishment of a narrative and specific traits that shape the identity and role of each idol within the group (Messerlin

& Shin, 2017, p. 425; Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 193). Considering that many trainees enter these programs during their formative years, one can only speculate about the potential negative effects of such a rigorous and fast-paced lifestyle might have on them. (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 193; Venters & Rothenberg, 2022, p. 466).

2.4.3 Lifestyle Regulation and Idol's Public Persona Maintenance

The K-pop industry places a significant emphasis on keeping the romantic relationships of idols confidential, considering such revelations scandalous and potentially career-damaging (Groszman, 2020, p. 217). This secrecy is particularly strict for trainee idols, who are typically prohibited from dating (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 193; Venters & Rothenberg, 2022, p. 460). Even so, established and older idols eventually find partners and negotiate less restrictive contracts, but emerging talents are required to remain single to maintain appeal to teenage romantic ideals (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 194). Their daily routines are meticulously regulated to ensure optimal performance in dance choreographies and the maintenance of a visually appealing physique - this control extends to exercise, strict diets, and, in some cases, plastic surgeries (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 193; Venters & Rothenberg, 2022, p. 463). The Korean idol system pushes media engagement to the extreme, demanding that idols consistently maintain this facade and "follow their role", avoiding any actions that could be considered controversial as elucidated by Elfving-Hwang (2018, p. 194). In instances of unintended missteps, K-pop idols commonly issue public apologies, often accompanied by exaggerated displays of remorse, to address any offence caused (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, pp. 194-195).

Thus, the realm of K-pop places significant emphasis on idols adhering to ideals like "politeness, respect towards seniority, filial piety, hard-working and humility" (Han & Pothong, 2021, p. 9; Lee & Zhang, 2020, p. 533). Departures from these norms are generally met with disapproval, highlighting the necessity for idols to consistently maintain their assigned personas without deviation (Han & Pothong, 2021, p. 9; Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 194).

2.5 Theoretical Summary

The Korean Wave is evidence of South Korea's skilful distribution of cultural exports to exert global influence - through music, TV dramas, and cinema, South Korea showcases a blend of tradition and modernity, resonating with audiences worldwide and reinforcing the nation's soft power on the global stage.

Central to the Korean Wave phenomenon is the bond between fans and South Korean cultural products. This connection fosters lively global fandoms while nurturing parasocial relationships that transcend geographical boundaries. The concept of parasocial relationships underscores the complex dynamics between fans and their idols within the realm of K-pop. On one hand, these relationships serve as a powerful vehicle for fans to feel connected to their favourite idols, offering a sense of

belonging and emotional fulfilment. However, the flip side reveals a more nuanced reality - parasocial relationships can sometimes blur the lines between fantasy and reality, leading to unrealistic expectations and emotional dependency on idols.

At the core of *Hallyu* lies the idol system within K-pop, where commercial interests intersect with fan engagement. Through rigorous training and disciplined lifestyles, idols become symbols of aspiration, captivating audiences with their talent and charm. In essence, the convergence of the Korean Wave, South Korea's soft power, fans, parasocial relationships, and the idol system paints an intense picture of cultural dynamism and global interconnectivity.

3. Method

This section outlines the methodological decisions undertaken for this study. It starts with a summary of the research design, followed by information on data collection, operationalization, and the chosen method for data analysis.

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach, emphasizing the exploration of relationships and the process of meaning-making derived from the gathered research data (Brennen, 2017, p. 4). Initially, content analysis predominantly adopted a quantitative orientation, concentrating on the examination of the occurrence and prevalence of specific themes within datasets - this early approach leaned heavily on quantitative methodologies rooted in journalism rather than embracing the intricacies of social scientific inquiry (Krippendorff, 2004, pp. 13-14). However, as the final half of the 20th century progressed, there emerged a shift towards qualitative inquiry among researchers. This transition saw qualitative scholars increasingly employing content analysis techniques to delve into the nuanced intricacies inherent in data (Mayring, 2000, p. 2).

This proves itself as the most adequate method to answer the research question as qualitative research, known for its interdisciplinary and interpretative nature alongside the gathered data, does not aim to find facts or objective pieces of data that can be listed and quantified. Instead, it focuses on the meaningful relationships and experiences that can be interpreted from said data (Brennen, 2017, p. 4). Hence, it possesses a distinctive capability to address intricate and elaborate textual materials, all the while acknowledging the cultural and contextual nuances that shape the creation of such data (Schreier, 2012, pp. 52-54; Azungah, 2018, p. 385). Furthermore, qualitative research is the optimal choice for the research, particularly in analysing online comments related to specific events within fandom. This decision stems from the recognition of the intricate and nuanced nature of communication within fandom communities, where diverse messages are conveyed through various writing styles and discourse strategies (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 120). Utilizing qualitative methods allows for a thorough exploration of these complex layers, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and contextual dimensions embedded within the data (Azungah, 2018, p. 385).

Lastly, qualitative research can take on either deductive or inductive approaches. Deductive content analysis is grounded in existing research and frequently employs pre-established codebooks from prior studies on the topic (Azungah, 2018, p. 391). Conversely, inductive content analysis involves the development of codes and themes directly from the data during analysis (Azungah, 2018, p. 391). In this research, a blend of deductive and inductive approaches was utilized. Initially, a set of predetermined codes sourced from existing literature was applied to the collected data. However, the analysis also remained open to the discovery of new and pertinent codes through extensive re-evaluation and examination. This methodological mix enabled a balanced approach,

incorporating existing knowledge while remaining receptive to emerging themes within the dataset, therefore aiming at gathering as much valuable data as possible.

3.2 Data Collection and Sampling

Comments from social media platforms, namely Instagram and Twitter/X, and from “allkpop”, a K-pop news website, were used to collect the data. To identify the most appropriate sample for the study, purposive sampling was employed. This method was chosen intentionally to seek specific characteristics within the sample, aiming to pinpoint the most suitable research units based on the study's requirements (Babbie, 2017, p. 200; Boeije, 2010, p. 36).

The focus involved obtaining data from fans conversations and reactions to these cases of controversy, involving BTS, and how they make sense of parasociality. The sample encompassed diverse sources such a K-pop news reports website and discussions on the social media platforms Instagram and Twitter, particularly in English. The acknowledgement of potential bias due to reliance on English-language sources was present. While this may have skewed the focus more towards international fandom, it is recognized that English emerges as the predominant language for communication within the K-pop fan community, ensuring valuable data collection (Malik & Haidar, 2020, pp. 361-375).

For a more in-depth analysis, two specific instances, as previously mentioned in the introductory part of the research, involving BTS members, Jungkook and V, were sampled focusing on the controversies surrounding the cases. Specific moments were timed and analysed to explore the implications of parasocial relationships. For each study case, the analysis focused on data beginning from the initial public disclosure of the case and the subsequent 24-hour period. The choice of the 24-hour period for data collection was strategically informed by journalistic considerations of trustworthiness versus immediacy (Diekerhof, 2021, p. 412). The tension between these factors has long been recognized, with speed often posing a challenge to precision (Diekerhof, 2021, p. 412). Notably, in the digital age, the importance of immediacy has heightened, particularly in online newsrooms (Diekerhof, 2021, p. 412). The traditional linear chronology of gathering before publishing is increasingly blurred in online settings, where continuous deadlines prevail (Diekerhof, 2021, p. 423). However, some news organizations, such as The Guardian, adhere to a 24-hour content refresh policy to ensure the most current version of stories is available (Ananny, 2016, p. 421). Thus, the 24-hour period aligned and facilitated a timely yet reliable analysis of the data.

Nonetheless, when considering online comments, such as tweets and Instagram comments, as part of the data collection process, it is important to acknowledge their unique temporal dynamics. These often capture the first instances of a conversation, providing valuable insights into the initial reactions within ARMY. However, it is also essential to include those that extend beyond the 24-hour period, as these examples often represent ongoing conversations within the fandom. By including online comments that do not fit neatly into the 24-hour window, it was possible to better

measure the continuation of discussions and reconstruct previous events, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the parasocial relationships at play. These serve as crucial connecting points between cases, highlighting the evolving nature of fan discourse surrounding BTS parasocial controversies. Information gathering is a continuous and dynamic process that involves conducting multiple related actions simultaneously to gather information for various stories (Diekerhof, 2021, p. 423). These actions are often interrupted by additional tasks related to other stories, highlighting the fluid and interconnected nature of the process (Diekerhof, 2021, p. 423).

3.2.1 Research Units

The sample comprised online comments made by ARMYS, BTS fans, on Twitter, Instagram and one K-pop News website. These platforms were selected as they stand out as major hubs where K-pop fans actively participate. Concerning news reports, emphasis was placed on dedicated K-pop news platforms exemplified by outlets like "allkpop" and “@thektea”, “@bts_daily.news” and “@globalmyeon” on Instagram.

Additionally, measures were taken to include data from individuals self-identifying as BTS fans. This manual approach entailed examining symbols such as individual comments, photos, profile photos, usernames, and profile descriptions, among other elements (refer to Table 1). By filtering content using distinctive identifiers that link these accounts with the ARMY, the aim was the inclusion of only genuine fans of BTS. While this method is not fail-proof, it provided a valuable perspective on the sentiments and reactions within the BTS fan community. Finally, the study analysed 625 pieces of data, shared across the aforementioned platforms.

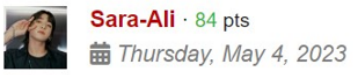
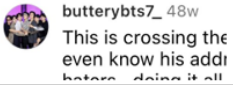
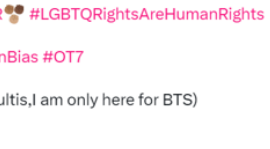
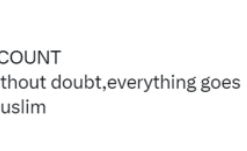
“ARMY” Symbols	
Profile Photo	
Profile Photo	
Username	
Username	
Profile Description	
Profile Description	

Table 1 - ARMY Symbols Identifiers

3.2.2 Data Storage

The analysis of the data was conducted using the ATLAS.ti software, with the research data securely stored in the software's cloud for easy accessibility. Additionally, the data was saved in separate folders - organized by platform, event, and the BTS member affected - with each screenshot meticulously named for efficient tracking (refer to appendix A). As an added safety measure, a duplicate of this folder was also stored on Google Drive and personal computer.

Due to the use of ATLAS.ti the concept of "groundedness" briefly shows up later in the results section. Groundedness, within the context of qualitative data analysis, refers to the extent to which a category or theme is supported by the data (Smit, 2002, p. 73; ATLAS.ti 22 Windows - Quick Tour, n.d.). It is a measure of how many times a particular code appears across the dataset, indicating the prevalence and significance of that theme in the overall analysis. Including groundedness serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it exhibits how frequently each theme was identified, which helps in illustrating the relative significance of different themes and sub-themes. Secondly, it supports the validity and reliability of the findings by showing that certain themes are not merely unreliable but are grounded in multiple data points. Lastly, it offers readers a general overview of the data distribution, allowing them to understand the overview of the findings.

3.3 Operationalisation

Creating particular research methods that yield tangible outcomes and effectively portray concepts in real-world contexts is referred to as operationalization (Babbie, 2017, p. 142).

The theoretical foundation of this study revolved around the core principles of fandom and parasocial relationships, serving as the fundamental elements. Hereby, table 1 offers a detailed overview of these crucial concepts, encompassing their definitions, references, and potential data examples.

Concept	Definition	Sub-concepts	Observed Data
Fandom	Fandom pertains to those who assert a shared identity and culture with fellow fans and (…) is characterised as a type of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2018; Jingke & Jiayi, 2021).	Participatory Culture	Fan culture
		Fan communities	Sense of belonging
			Emotional connection
Parasocial Relationships	PSRs, reflecting offline social relationships in many aspects, entail individuals perceiving intimacy with celebrities without reciprocation (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).	Fanaticism	Privacy invasion
			Stalking
		Celebrity Worship	Extreme obsession with an artist
			Belief in the existence of intimacy that is unilateral

Table 2 - Theoretical Concepts Overview

The core aim of this research was to delve into BTS fans' responses regarding controversies surrounding parasocial relationships. It sought to investigate how fans engage with and react to hostile incidents. Additionally, it aimed to gauge how fans perceive the responses of the artists' management companies in relation to their expectations. Drawing from established theoretical frameworks, fandom and parasocial relationships are often intertwined with established theories through ongoing research. For instance, uses and gratifications theory and encoding/decoding are frequently associated with these concepts, reflecting the evolving understanding of fan engagement and media consumption behaviours (Harriss, 2020, p. 4; Tal-Or, 2017, p. 4; Stever, 2017, p. 3).

By employing a qualitative content analysis approach, while utilizing both deductive and inductive methodologies the examination and analysis of the gathered data provided insights into ARMY's reactions to parasocial relationship controversies and their active involvement in responding to these occurrences. It delved into fans' interpretations of parasocial connections with idols, the perceived boundaries of fan behaviour, and their evaluations of management company responses in alignment with their expectations.

3.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative descriptive designs encompass methods such as qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 100). Within this broad framework, qualitative content analysis includes various specific approaches, among which thematic analysis falls (Schreier et al., 2019, p. 7) Thematic analysis itself has various conceptualizations and is often seen as an overarching term that includes a diverse set of approaches to qualitative analysis (Lester et al., 2020, p. 95). Content analysis, known for its methodical and thorough approach emerges as a versatile technique capable of adapting to various data types, including textual, visual, and audio formats (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 22; Leavy, 2014, p. 377). It enables researchers to extract meanings and identify overarching themes, contextualizing messages to understand their significance (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 35). Moreover, content analysis facilitates the exploration of multiple perceptions by considering a spectrum of voices and alternative viewpoints (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 35). In this study, thematic analysis was chosen as the approach for data analysis. This method involves identifying and examining patterns within a dataset (Joffe, 2011, p. 210). Thematic analysis essentially categorizes research data into distinct "themes" to unveil significant patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). These "themes" play a pivotal role in the research process by highlighting recurring and meaningful information, thereby revealing consistent responses and the creation of meaning within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

The initial phase of thematic analysis demands the researcher's full immersion in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Subsequently, initial codes were generated from the collected content, and once all the obtained content was coded, axial coding was conducted to establish correlations between codes, resulting in preliminary themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). Furthermore, a coding

scheme was formulated, encompassing all codes related to the original themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). Finally, selective coding refined the initial themes, resulting in the primary themes that addressed the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). As previously stated, the thematic analysis conducted in this qualitative research employed both deductive and inductive methodologies. Initially, a predetermined set of codes sourced from existing literature was applied to the collected data. Nevertheless, the research remained receptive to the identification of novel and pertinent codes through meticulous re-evaluation and analysis.

3.5 Reliability, Validity and Ethical Considerations

In any research, the researcher's responsibility is to maximize the presence of reliability and validity. Reliability pertains to the consistency of findings, while validity involves the trustworthiness and plausibility of the research results (Silverman, 2011, p. 360; Tracy, 2010, p. 842). Consequently, I consistently engaged in reflexivity throughout this study, recognizing how my interpretations of the evidence are shaped by personal experiences, notably in this case, the fact I am part of the ARMY fandom (Brennen, 2017, p. 22). During the research, I made a continuous effort to prevent my experiences as a fan from influencing how I perceived the results obtained through the qualitative content analysis process. I aimed to maintain impartiality and concentrate solely on the data gathered from the online comments.

Regarding data collection, online platforms serve as valuable repositories of authentic dialogue, capturing sincere and often spontaneous exchanges among participants - these interactions offer researchers rich data for analysis (Colby, 2021, p. 259). However, amidst the wealth of publicly accessible content, the issue of privacy looms large as participants may not fully grasp the extent to which their contributions are open to scrutiny. This raises ethical considerations regarding the exposure of individuals' thoughts and expressions without their full awareness (Colby, 2021, pp. 259-260). While some advocate for informed consent as a safeguard, practical constraints often make its implementation challenging since contacting every online platform user for permission is logistically daunting and may disrupt the natural flow of online discourse (Colby, 2021, pp. 260-261). Despite these ethical complexities, the wealth of data within online forums presents an invaluable resource for researchers. By delving into online discussions, researchers gain access to real-world insights and perspectives, enriching their understanding of diverse communities (Colby, 2021, pp. 255-256). In essence, leveraging existing online content streamlines the research process, granting researchers a vast collection of data for exploration. This efficient approach allows for deeper analysis and interpretation, ultimately enhancing the quality and depth of research outcomes (Colby, 2021, pp. 255-256).

On that account, ethical considerations have been carefully integrated into the research, prioritizing the confidentiality and anonymity of users by refraining from linking them to their expressed opinions. The study seeks to explore the responses of ARMYs to controversies

surrounding parasocial relationships and BTS. Importantly, the nature of this investigation does not mandate the attribution of stable identities to the individuals' contributing comments. Furthermore, no discernible ethical dilemmas have emerged that necessitate immediate resolution.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of the conducted research aimed at addressing the primary research question: "How do K-pop fans actively engage with and interpret instances of parasocial relationships amidst controversies surrounding their favourite idols?" along with the following sub-questions: "What are the perceived boundaries of expected fan behaviour in the context of parasocial relationships with K-pop idols?" and "How do fans feel that the artist's company's response aligns with their expectations?". Utilizing Qualitative Content Analysis, the research delved into understanding and gaining deeper insights into the study topic, with a specific focus on how ARMYs respond to controversies involving BTS members and navigate the dynamics of parasocial relationships.

This chapter is structured into three sections, each corresponding to key areas identified during data analysis and aligned with the theoretical framework. Initial data analysis yielded 139 codes, which were subsequently grouped into 8 sub-themes, leading to the identification of 3 main themes (refer to Appendix F). The primary themes derived from the data collection encompassed the fans' reactions, fans perceptions and fandom demands. The first theme delves into ARMYs' overall reactions to the cases examined in this research, encompassing their emotional responses, calls for action, and assessments of the idols' responses to the situations, including their views on stalking as an issue. The second theme focuses on the fandom's perception of *sasaengs*, exploring their understanding of *sasaeng* motivations and the concept of fanaticism. Furthermore, it also explores the fandom's broader relationship with the idols, particularly in light of the stalking incidents discussed. Finally, the third theme delves into the fandom's expectations and demands regarding artist protection and consequences for sasaengs following the publicized stalking incidents.

For each theme—fans' reactions, fans' perceptions and fandom demands—two specific cases were subjected to in-depth analysis concerning BTS members Jungkook and V, respectively, encompassing the bulk of the research data. In March 2023, Jungkook addressed fans during a Weverse live stream, specifically those who had followed him to the gym, emphasizing the importance of respecting his privacy (Cherrie, 2023, para. 4). Two months later, in May 2023, he once again used Weverse to discourage fans from sending food to his home, stating he would not consume it and might resort to legal action if the situation persisted (Business Insider, 2023, para. 1-4). Additionally, V encountered a stalking incident in October 2023, prompting police involvement (Debbarma, 2023, para. 1). However, the dataset also encompasses other incidents of stalking related to BTS members and the band as a whole, which were included in the analysis due to an interesting observation that emerged during the research process. Twitter/X cultivates an ongoing conversational atmosphere due to its unique platform structure. Unlike Instagram and K-pop news websites, where users typically comment on a post or article and may not revisit it, Twitter/X endorses each account to post various tweets. This setup fosters a sense of community as users can engage with multiple tweets, whether on their private profiles or others' posts. Consequently, individuals are more inclined

to participate and interact, contributing to the platform's dynamic and continuous discourse. The inherently public nature of tweets facilitates the automatic structure of discussions around specific topics by using common discussion tags (Bruns, 2012, p. 1324). This structure enhances the platform's capacity for ongoing dialogues. Additionally, Bruns (2012, p. 1325) highlights the significant role of retweets in these conversations, describing how they contribute to a "conversational ecology" characterized by public interaction. This interaction forms a feeling of shared context, further cementing Twitter/X's role as a hub for continuous and interactive discourse (Bruns, 2012, p. 1325). Notably, while the study primarily focused on the two specified main cases, it was evident how an ongoing discourse on Twitter/X often interlinked the most recent case with past incidents, serving as a means to underscore and reinforce the fandom's discontent and concern regarding these occurrences.

It is important to note that these codes are not mutually exclusive, and comments could be coded under multiple themes if they exhibited relevant characteristics, such as both Fandom Reaction and Fandom Demands. Network visualization is also featured in the appendices section. Table 3 presents a recording of the themes, sub-themes and their groundedness. These themes are ranked from the most prevalent to the least prevalent.

Groundedness			
Theme	***Theme Groundedness***	***Sub-Theme***	***Sub-Theme Groundedness***
Fans Reaction	1108	Emotional Responses Towards Stalking as an Action	468
		Emotional Responses: General Overview	427
		Call for Action	174
		Reaction Towards Idol Response	39
Fans Perceptions	772	*Sasaengs*	333
		Fanaticism	278
		Of and/or Towards Idol and its relationship with ARMYs	153
Fandom Demands	332	Demands	332

Table 3 - Groundedness: Themes and Sub-themes

4.1 Fans Reactions

Across all datasets, fans' responses emerged as a focal point, filtering discussions and

interactions within BTS's fandom, ARMY. Twitter/X emerges as a pivotal platform for fan discourse, offering a diverse display of reactions that illuminate the complexities of fan engagement. Within this platform, fans exhibit a proactive stance, with several tweets serving as calls for action, indicating a mobilized fanbase eager to advocate for BTS. Moreover, the emotional landscape on Twitter/X is rich and varied, with tweets providing an overview of fan sentiments. Furthermore, there is a prevailing concern related to stalking behaviours. A significant proportion of tweets express discomfort or opposition towards such behaviours, highlighting a pressing concern within the fandom regarding privacy boundaries and respectful conduct.

On allkpop, discussions surrounding the K-pop band members reveal distinct reactions from fans. Here, calls for action are prevalent, with discussions urging for resolutions or justice in response to the stalking incidents, showcasing a proactive stance among fans on this platform. Additionally, discussions on allkpop tend to adopt a more pragmatic and less emotional approach with only 2.33% representing the feelings overview of ARMYs. In contrast, on Twitter/X and Instagram, emotional expressions are significantly higher, ranging from 33% to 45%. Furthermore, there is a heightened level of discomfort regarding stalking behaviours, particularly evident in discussions that highlight concerns about privacy violations. Instagram also serves as a prominent platform for discussions related to BTS stalking incidents. Across accounts like @bts_daily.news and @globalmyeon, discussions primarily focus on providing insight into the emotions ARMY have felt in light of the researched cases.

Table 4 presents a recording of codes grouped under the Fans Reactions category.

Theme	***Sub-themes***	***Open Codes***
Fans Reactions	Emotional Responses Towards Stalking as an Action	Disbelief
		Anger
	Emotional Responses: General Overview	Callout *Sasaengs*
		Frustration
	Call for Action	Legal
		Call Out Hybe/Big Hit
	Reaction towards Idol Response	Surprisingly Nice
		Too patient

Table 4 - Theme: Fans Reactions

4.1.1 Emotional Responses Towards Stalking as an Action

The emotional responses towards stalking as an action, are situated prominently within the fans' reaction's theme and offer a comprehensive exploration of the emotional responses evoked by instances of stalking involving BTS. The most prominent manifestations within this sub-theme include an overwhelming feeling of disbelief towards the situation, followed by a strong sense of anger towards the stalking behaviour and a palpable sense of fear towards stalking. Valuable mentions also include feelings of sadness, reminiscences of past stalking events, hopes for the safety of the idols, and expressions of frustration.

Examples of disbelief include reactions such as, *"Why tf* (the f*ck) *is people sending food to his house and his address (...)"* and *"*😜 😳 *oh my gosh that is too much (...) I can't believe it* 😳*"*. These reactions demonstrate the collective shock that BTS fans feel when their idols' personal spaces are violated. The use of emojis such as " 😳 " and " 😳 " further amplifies the sense of disbelief, highlighting the fans' emotional investment and their struggle to process these violations. This disbelief may also arise from the fact that stalking incidents are nothing new to the BTS fandom; they have been occurring for years. Examples include fans crowding airports when BTS or a member is travelling, which puts their safety at risk. In such scenarios, despite their severity, the band usually has a security team to protect them from physical contact with fans. However, the specific situations highlighted in this research evoke shock and disbelief due to their increased danger, involving severe privacy violations like knowing an artist's home address. The anger towards the stalking behaviour is evident in comments like, *"I'm so done… what is even going on nowadays (...)"* and *"She better hope I don't ever find her bcs* (because) *I'll be the one in jail."* These statements reflect the intense frustration and outrage felt by fans towards the *sasaengs* stalking attitudes. In the realm of parasocial relationships, this anger underscores the deep-rooted protective instincts fans hold towards their idols. They not only feel a personal responsibility to defend their beloved artists but also direct their indignation towards the incidents and their perpetrators. What's striking is the fearlessness with which fans employ strong language to shield their idols (Maros & Abdul Basek, 2022, pp. 293-294). Fear towards stalking is highlighted by remarks such as, *"Do simply stop crossing their privacy line! It's scary and disrespectful."* and *"I'm really scared… Those sasaeng no joke…"*, demonstrating the anxiety and apprehension fans experience. Valuable mentions also include feelings of sadness, with comments utilizing sad or crying emojis, adopting capital letters to non-verbally indicate anger and emphasize what makes them sad. The prevalence of fear and sadness among ARMYs in the data aligns well with this research. Parasocial relationships often evoke feelings of friendship towards the idols one supports (Tal-Or, 2017, p. 2). Consequently, when those we admire are endangered, it is natural for individuals in the BTS fandom to react with emotions of fear and sadness. Just as they would empathize with a real-life friend facing such situations, they similarly do not want their idols to experience them either. Additionally, the inclusion of emojis serves to accentuate the conveyed emotions even more effectively.

Fans often recall past stalking incidents, which linger in their minds and fuel ongoing concerns. These comments reflect the repetitive nature of these events in the fandom, shaping fans' reactions and reinforcing their worries. Hopes for the safety of BTS members shine through, showing fans' genuine care for their idols. This caring attitude mirrors the friendship-like bond fans feel with BTS, wishing for their safety just like they would for a friend. Fans also express frustration, venting about both the perpetrators and the frequent occurrence of these incidents. This frustration stems from a sense of helplessness, as fans feel like nothing changes despite repeated warnings from the fandom, BTS company, and the members themselves. These diverse emotional responses reflect the range of psychological effects experienced by fans in response to stalking incidents involving BTS members. Remarkably, the responses and sentiments regarding stalking incidents show a consistent pattern across all platforms examined in the study. On allkpop, both Jungkook and V's individual stalking experiences stand out as the most discussed, emphasizing the significant emotional impact of these events. Similarly, Twitter/X highlights this sub-theme prominently, ranking second in overall discussions about BTS as a group, while taking the top spot for Jungkook and V's cases individually. On Instagram, there is a slight variation in rankings, with Jungkook's cases leading the discussion. As for V's cases, there is a difference in rankings between the two pages examined (@globalmyeon and @thektea), yet this sub-theme consistently emerges as the most prominent topic across multiple instances, underscoring its importance in the fan community's discourse.

Overall, this sub-theme provides insights into the profound emotional impact of stalking incidents within the BTS fandom. Its prominence across various platforms underscores the universality of these emotional responses and the critical importance of addressing the psychological well-being of both idols and fans in navigating instances of stalking and intrusive behaviour. The intensity of these responses aligns with Cahyani and Purnamasari's (2019, p. 169) findings on celebrity worship, which suggest that fans experience deep personal feelings towards their idols, often feeling sadness and concern when their idols face distressing situations. This connection is evident as fans continuously monitor updates on their idols' conditions, highlighting their emotional investment (Cahyani & Purnamasari, 2019, p. 169). Also, Maros and Abdul Basek (2022, p. 284) note that fans exhibit a fearless readiness to use strong language to protect their idols. This is seen in the anger and frustration expressed by BTS fans, who are quick to defend their idols against perceived threats. The involvement of fans in protecting their idols' reputations is reflected in the fans' active engagement in online discourse to challenge and protest intrusive behaviours and wrongdoings towards BTS members (Maros & Abdul Basek, 2022, p. 293). These theories emphasize the psychological mechanisms driving fan behaviour and highlight the need for strategies to manage the emotional well-being of both fans and idols in the face of stalking and privacy invasions.

4.1.2 Emotional Responses: General Overview

The groundedness of this category ranks second overall within the fans' reaction's theme. This highlights the significance of the emotional bonds and expression within the fan community (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 68; Raw, 2020, p. 10; Malik & Haidar, 2020, p. 363). Among the most prominent manifestations of emotional responses, the top three categories include callouts directed towards *sasaengs*, attempts to reason with *sasaengs*, and a general sense of frustration, alongside the acknowledgement of idols as humans.

The callouts directed towards *sasaengs* reveal a palpable concern for the well-being and privacy of idols. For instance, one fan expresses, *"You, the sender, are making him anxious and scared, you are making him feel not safe at his home* 👺 *",* while another emphasizes, *"(...) giving hate will not solve the problem, but after this too if someone still sends for gifts, they might deserve some hate…".* Attempts to reason with sasaengs are characterized by pleas for understanding and respect the idols, to support them and remember they are humans, underscoring the emotional connection between fans and idols, asking sasaengs to *"stop interrupting their privacy* 🥺*"* as *"he's a human first and idol 2nd"*. A general sense of irritation permeates the discourse, with fans frequently (*"how many times do we gotta say this?"*) expressing this feeling regarding the invasion of idols' privacy as *"getting out of hand"*. Furthermore, there is an emotional acknowledgement of idols as humans, underscoring the emotional connection between fans and idols. A fan shares, *"My heart legit broke after this (...) The fact that I'm saying that he's a human first and idol 2nd speaks volumes.",* while another urges, *"(...) Stop harassing Jungkook. He's a human too. Respect his privacy."*

The vocal judgment of *sasaeng* behaviour by ARMYs reflects the fandom's proactive stance in addressing such issues, which is consistent with their known tendency to speak out against misconduct within the fan community. The aggressive tone of these callouts, as evidenced by the language used and the accompanying emojis expressing anger towards sasaengs, underscores the fervent disapproval of their irresponsible and dangerous actions. This criticism is representative of the broader frustration felt by the fandom in response to these recurring incidents. Concurrently, there are ARMY members who adopt a less confrontational approach, seeking to reason with *sasaengs* and appeal to their empathy in an effort to dissuade them from their intrusive behaviour. The use of sadder emojis in these instances aligns with the intention behind appealing to *sasaengs*' emotions. This approach stems from the recognition of idols as individuals deserving of respect and privacy, like any other human being. The predominance of the aggressive approach in the coding may correspond with the perception held by other fandoms of ARMY as quick to defend BTS aggressively. However, it is essential to consider the context: BTS's decade-long bond as a group, coupled with their immense popularity, has led to an escalation in stalking incidents over time. Consequently, frustration within the fandom is inevitable, and after years of supporting the group,

their tolerance for such incidents may logically decrease, leading to a more vocal and assertive response.

Additional noteworthy mentions include feelings of boundaries being crossed, happiness at the prospect of legal justice measures being taken, the perception of *sasaengs* as not true fans, overall support towards idols, and reaffirmation of the importance of boundaries between fans and idols. These diverse emotional expressions reflect the complexity of fan sentiments and their multifaceted responses to various situations. Fans express feelings of boundaries being crossed, emphasizing the need for respectful fandom behaviour. For example, one fan asserts, *"You can show your love and support to Jungkook in other ways. Just don't cross the line like bringing him food in his home and invading his privacy".* There is substantial happiness among fans at the prospect of legal justice measures being taken against sasaeng behaviour, who are often not perceived as true fans by some due to their extreme behaviour: *"These people aren't real army they are stalkers and who knows what is going on in their head."*

The sense of boundaries being consistently breached demonstrates ARMY's criticism of *sasaengs* for their disregard of personal boundaries and insistence on disrespectful fan conduct. This sentiment is intertwined with the reaffirmation of the significance of maintaining boundaries between fans and idols, emphasizing the need for fans to discern between the virtual admiration they feel and real-life relationships. Moreover, these perspectives coincide with ARMY's conviction that *sasaengs* do not embody the true spirit of fandom, as genuine fans would never engage in such intrusive behaviour. Additionally, given the potential risks posed by *sasaeng* actions, it is understandable that the fandom expresses joy at the prospect of legal repercussions for these individuals, as it serves to enhance the safety and well-being of idols. These examples illustrate the range of emotions and perspectives within the ARMY community, reflecting an interplay between fandom culture, ethical considerations, and the dynamics of idol-fan relationships.

An intriguing aspect of this sub-theme is its variability in prominence across different platforms. For instance, on Twitter/X, the expression of feelings emerges as a dominant theme, occupying the top position for discussions involving BTS as a group and Jungkook specifically. While it ranks slightly lower for V, it still maintains considerable significance across different contexts. Similarly, on Instagram, the expression of feelings also holds notable prominence, especially in discussions related to stalking incidents involving Jungkook and V. This suggests that both Twitter/X and Instagram serve as platforms where ARMYs feel comfortable expressing their emotions, particularly regarding incidents of stalking involving BTS members. In contrast, on news report websites like allkpop, emotional content appears to have a lower prominence, suggesting a different discourse environment compared to social media platforms. This divergence suggests that on news websites, ARMYs may adopt a more practical and collected and less emotionally expressive approach in their comments, focusing more on factual reporting and analysis rather than emotional reactions. The reasoning behind why the fandom might feel more inclined to be more emotional on

platforms such as Instagram and Twitter/X might be because said platforms foster a greater sense of community and personal space. Unlike news report websites like allkpop, where emotional content occupies a less prominent position, Instagram and Twitter/X provide environments conducive to fostering personal connections and interactions (Malik & Haidar, 2020, p. 363; Jingke & Jiayi, 2021, p. 121). On these social media platforms, users can easily engage with each other's content, fostering a sense of belonging within the fandom (Jia et al., 2021, p. 2176). In contrast, news websites, even if they allow people to create profiles and leave comments on the news report, may not evoke the same level of personal investment or emotional connection (Ksiazek, 2016, p. 651). Therefore, ARMYs adopt a more practical and less emotionally expressive approach in their comments on news websites, focusing more on polite factual reporting and analysis rather than emotional reactions, a trend consistent with the observations made by Ksiazek et al. (2015, p. 861).

4.1.3 Call for Action

This subtheme underscores the significance and prevalence of fan-driven initiatives seeking tangible outcomes. Just as individuals are inclined to protect their loved ones due to friendship bonds, fans are similarly motivated to safeguard the well-being of their idols (Archer, 2021, p. 544; Tal-Or, 2017, p. 2). This observation suggests that fandom often inspires acts of loyalty, mirroring the protective instincts observed in friendships. Within the BTS fandom community, this loyalty manifests through passionate calls for action, reflecting fans' dedication to ensuring the safety and well-being of the members they admire. The most prominent manifestations of call for action include calls for legal action, callouts directed towards Big Hit Music, which is under the Hybe Corporation - BTS company, and efforts to spread awareness on the matter. For instance, within the category of calls for legal action, comments commonly argue that stalkers need to *"go to jail"* and/or seek *"psych evaluation and treatment"* as their behaviour is considered *"scary"* and delusional. Thus, fans feel the urgency to address such concerning situations through legal means. Regarding callouts directed towards Big Hit and Hybe, fan comments express frustration and concern towards the management companies and their lack of action to safeguard their idols, especially as the companies knew about the stalking issues beforehand, as shown in this statement: *"There's nothing that makes me more unassured than Tae still being under this company. Cause what do you mean that woman has been stalking him for quite some time, and BH (Big Hit Music) said and did nothing and are only coming out with this stupid repetitive statement now cause she was caught?"*. This, among others, echoes a demand for more proactive measures to ensure the safety and well-being of BTS members.

ARMYs advocating for legal repercussions for *sasaengs* underscores the pervasive nature of such behaviours and the frustration felt by the fandom in addressing them. The recurrent lack of accountability for these actions imposes stricter consequences to deter future incidents and reinforce the notion that *sasaengs* are not exempt from the law. Similarly, callouts directed towards Big Hit Music, a subsidiary of Hybe Corporation and the management company for BTS, reflect the

fandom's dissatisfaction with the company's response to these incidents. Despite acknowledging the severity of the situations, the perceived lack of tangible results fuels frustration among fans, as stalking incidents persist without significant intervention. These grievances ultimately converge in the collective effort of the fandom to raise awareness on these matters. By mobilizing to spread the message of respecting BTS's privacy and safety, fans aim to amplify their voices and garner support from a broader audience, reinforcing the importance of addressing and combatting *sasaeng* behaviour within the fan community. The discontent expressed by ARMY towards the management company overseeing BTS is not a novel occurrence. Over the years, there have been numerous instances where fans have vocalized their desire for the company to improve its professionalism, prioritize the protection of the members, and effectively address concerning situations. Despite the company's assurances through statements claiming continuous investigation into any potential threats against BTS, incidents persist. Consequently, this has led to growing frustration within the fandom, with some expressing disappointment and a loss of trust in Big Hit and/or Hybe. As recent as May of 2024, ARMY protests against the company have garnered attention in the media, with reports indicating plans for activism aimed at pressuring HYBE to implement stronger measures to shield the boy band from unfounded rumours and speculation (Lee, 2024, para. 1; Kim & Kim, 2024, para. 1-3). This highlights the continued commitment of the fandom, who actively participate in initiatives not only to voice their dissatisfaction with BTS's management company but also to advocate for improved protection measures for the K-pop band as a whole. Fans also urge idols to take action rather than against *"... still being sweet…..complain against 'em (them) bro* 😤 😤 😤 😤*"*.

The fandom's appeals for the idols to take direct action stem from genuine concern for their well-being. While ARMYs recognize that the companies usually handle such situations, ongoing frustration with BTS's management prompts them to urge the members themselves to intervene. This appeal goes against the traditional expectations placed on idols, who are often taught to adhere to strict behavioural guidelines representing Korean values and soft power. However, BTS's unique position—having saved Big Hit Music from bankruptcy (Nishad, 2021, p. 12) and achieved significant international success—for the fandom grants them more freedom to act independently without the same level of backlash smaller, less popular K-pop groups might face. This call for idol intervention aligns with the fandom's demand for better security measures, reflecting their dissatisfaction with the current protections provided by BTS's management as it is essential to ensure the members' safety, particularly in their own homes. Lastly, the advocacy for psychiatric help for *sasaengs* highlights fans' perception that such extreme stalking behaviours are a result of severe psychological issues. ARMYs argue that these individuals have become dangerously obsessed, losing touch with reality over their extreme level of parasociality towards the members, and thus require professional psychiatric evaluation and treatment.

The fandom's persistence and diverse calls for action across platforms like Twitter/X, allkpop, and Instagram (@bts_daily.news, @globalmyeon, @thektea) underscore their commitment to

safeguarding Jungkook, V, and BTS as a whole. These responses reveal proactive measures in addressing incidents, demonstrating a rational approach to securing the idols' safety. ARMY'S dedication to addressing safety and privacy concerns surrounding the band is evident. While it may not always emerge as the primary reaction from the fandom across platforms, the consistent emphasis placed on the call for action underscores its immense importance within the BTS fan community. Thus, while the call for action may not always claim the top spot in fan reactions, its persistent presence and substantial grounding across various platforms highlight the fandom's unwavering commitment to advocating for meaningful change and protection of their beloved idols (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 66). This active engagement of fandom, akin to love and friendship, involves participation in social practices that reinforce fans' devotion (Archer, 2021, p. 547; Adhikari, 2020, p. 2). Additionally, according to Archer (2021, p. 559), devotion to an idol may propel fans to take actions aimed at safeguarding their idol's reputation. As Ardhiyansyah et al. (2021, p. 68) define it, the fanaticism exhibited by fans—extraordinary devotion to an object—entails passion and dedication beyond the ordinary, underscoring the depth of commitment within the fandom. Thus, theoretical insights align with empirical observations, highlighting how fans' devotion translates into tangible actions aimed at protecting their idols' well-being and reputation.

4.1.4 Reactions Towards Idol Response

Reactions towards Idol Response presents an exploration of the fandom's perceptions and sentiments regarding the responses of BTS members to the instances of stalking. Despite its thematic significance, this sub-theme occupies the least prominent position in terms of groundedness, thereby indicating its comparatively lower prevalence within the fan discourse. Among the most prominent manifestations within this sub-theme are the ARMYs' perceptions of the idol's surprising kindness considering the severity of the issue, beliefs that the idol displayed excessive patience given the circumstances, and expressions of frustration that the idol's response should not have been necessary in the first place. Significant mentions also include recognition of the idol's perceived emotional strain despite their amicable response. For example, concerning perceptions of the idol's surprising kindness considering the severity of the issue, fans expressed sentiments such as, *"That's so creepy omg* (oh my god)*...it's incredible how he's able to still ask them so nicely"* and *"He is so soft for this…like instead of saying many times, he could simply report this."* Regarding beliefs that the idol displayed excessive patience, comments like *"Y* (why) *is he being so patient? There's nothing wrong with reporting these kinds of people. I wish he could just take some action"* and *"Jungkook already spoke about this during one of his Weverse lives. He always talks so respectfully even though such things are dangerous and definitely scary"* were prevalent among fans. Expressions of frustration that the idol's response should not have been necessary in the first place were articulated through statements like *"Tannies* (BTS members are affectionately called *"tannies"*. It comes from Bangtan Sonyeondan, their Korean name) *have told us to respect their privacy… That should've told you*

enough" and *"Respect his privacy for once, he asked a lot of times in the past for it."* Additionally, recognition of the idol's perceived emotional strain was evidenced by comments such as *"How long does he have to repeat himself asking for privacy and respect?"* and *"This might not be the first time… JK* (Jungkook*) would have tolerated many times and finally put up a warning after he had enough"*.

ARMYs' views on the idol's surprising kindness and excessive patience highlight their desire for stricter consequences for sasaengs. Many fans felt that Jungkook, who took a more confrontational approach towards his stalking incident, still showed too much kindness and patience given the situation's brutality. While they admire his kindness, they urge him to take immediate measures rather than warning and calling out *sasaengs*. Expressions of frustration that the idol's response should not have been necessary, along with recognition of the idol's perceived emotional strain despite their amicable response, align with the overall discourse among ARMYs. Fans believe that BTS members should not need to address *sasaengs*' intrusive behaviours, which should not happen in the first place. The fandom also acknowledges the emotional toll these recurring incidents take on the members, recognizing the strain on their mental well-being despite their composed responses. Once more, it is possible to see that BTS finds themselves in a nuanced position, exemplified by Jungkook's handling of a recent issue. On one hand, Jungkook addressed the situation more confrontationally than most idols would. K-pop idols are expected to represent South Korea and its values, shaped by the use of soft power and the global spread of Hallyu and Jungkook's direct approach could be seen as deviating from traditional values such as respect and humility (Han & Pothong, 2021, p. 9; Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 194). On the other hand, his composed and respectful conduct while addressing the issue reinforces the very Korean values promoted through these soft power tactics (Han & Pothong, 2021, p. 9; Lee & Zhang, 2020, p. 533). This duality highlights the complex role BTS plays in balancing individual responses with broader cultural expectations.

Similar to previous sub-themes, reactions towards idol response exhibit disparities in prominence across different platforms. On Twitter/X, this sub-theme is not particularly prominent, ranking last for BTS as a group and individually for Jungkook and V. Similarly, on Instagram, reactions to the idol's response also rank low for both Jungkook and V. However, allkpop presents a slight deviation from this trend, where reactions to the idol's response rank third for Jungkook. For V, this sub-theme still ranks last, likely due to the absence of direct engagement from the idol regarding the situation. While V reassured fans of his well-being on the Weverse platform, he did not explicitly reference the stalking incident, leaving room for interpretation and connection by fans. In contrast, Jungkook's response on Weverse took a more direct approach, explicitly addressing the issue of unwanted food deliveries to his home and signalling potential stricter measures if the behaviour persisted.

The reactions towards idol response offer insight into the dynamics of fan perceptions and expectations regarding BTS members' reactions to challenging situations. Despite its relatively

subdued presence across platforms, this sub-theme unveils the intricate dynamics of fan engagement while delving into the intricate "idol life" experienced by BTS members. It offers insights into how they navigate and respond to such complex situations, which are governed by the strict rules of the K-pop industry. The idol system places immense pressure on idols to maintain a flawless public image, as emphasized by Elfving-Hwang (2018, p. 194). This pressure extends to aspects such as media engagement, with idols expected to perpetually embody virtues like politeness, respect, hard work, and humility, as noted by Han & Pothong (2021, p. 9) and Lee & Zhang (2020, p. 533). Any departure from these prescribed norms is met with disapproval, underlining the imperative for idols to uphold their assigned personas without deviation (Han & Pothong, 2021, p. 9; Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 194). This contextual backdrop further elucidates the significance of examining BTS members' responses to instances of stalking, which not only reflects their individual approaches but also underscores the broader constraints and expectations imposed by the K-pop industry.

4.2 Fans Perceptions

The analysis of the data highlighted an important theme throughout the study: fans' perceptions. Twitter/X emerges as a pivotal platform for fan discourse as within this platform for both Jungkook and V's particular cases but BTS in general as well, the most significant theme is the perception of fanaticism, with 52.94% of tweets reflecting concerns and criticisms regarding extreme fan behaviour. Issues related to *sasaengs* also feature prominently, comprising 32.35% of the discourse. However, the motivations behind these behaviours are discussed less frequently, appearing in only 2.94% of tweets. Perceptions towards the idols themselves and the relationship ARMYs perceive to have with them account for 11.76% of the conversations.

On allkpop, discussions about Jungkook reveal distinct reactions from fans. The most pressing concern is sasaengs, with frequent mentions reflecting ongoing worries about intrusive behaviours. Motivations behind these behaviours are also discussed, though less prevalently. Fanaticism towards Jungkook is a significant topic, indicating strong concern among ARMYs. Additionally, perceptions of Jungkook as an idol, representing the perceived relationship ARMY has with him, show multifaceted fan engagement on this platform.

On Instagram, particularly on accounts like @bts_daily.news, fan perceptions related to Jungkook provide a different perspective. Concerns about *sasaengs* remain prominent, highlighting ongoing issues with intrusive behaviours. The motivations behind these actions are less frequently discussed. Fanaticism is a key theme, reflecting a strong emotional, unhealthy investment from *sasaengs*. Perceptions of Jungkook, showcasing the perceived relationship ARMY has with him, are highly significant, indicating a deep emotional connection. In Twitter/X discussions about Jungkook, the most dominant theme is fanaticism, reflecting intense interest and emotional engagement. Concerns about *sasaengs* are also significant, underscoring ongoing worries about privacy and safety. While motivations behind these behaviours are not widely discussed, perceptions of Jungkook

and the relationship ARMY maintains with him remain a notable topic, reflecting the fans' deep connection and interest in the members' perspectives.

Discussions about V on allkpop predominantly focus on sasaengs, highlighting significant concerns about intrusive behaviours. The motivations behind these actions are not discussed. Fanaticism towards V is a notable topic, though less prominent, while perceptions of V as an idol, representing the perceived relationship the fandom has with him, are mentioned less frequently, indicating relatively lower engagement in this area. On Instagram, the account @globalmyeon shows an overwhelming concern with *sasaengs*, emphasizing ongoing worries about privacy invasions. Motivations behind these behaviours are, as well not addressed. Fanaticism appears less frequently, and discussions about V's relationship with the fandom are also less prominent, reflecting significant concerns but lower engagement in these themes. Similarly, the Instagram account @thektea highlights *sasaengs* strongly, indicating persistent issues with intrusive behaviours. Fanaticism and perceptions towards V are also discussed, showcasing balanced but notable engagement in these areas. Twitter/X discussions about V similarly show significant concern with *sasaengs*, underscoring ongoing worries about privacy and safety. While motivations behind these behaviours are rarely mentioned, fanaticism towards V is highly significant. Perceptions of V as an idol and the relationship the fandom maintains with him are also highlighted, reflecting a deep connection and interest in these topics.

Table 5 presents a recording of codes grouped under the Fans Perceptions category.

Theme	***Sub-themes***	***Open Codes***
Fans Perceptions	*Sasaengs*	Stalkers
		Mentally Unstable
	Fanaticism	Privacy Invasion
		Stalking
	Of and/or towards Idol and its relationship with ARMYs	Protection
		Empathy

Table 5 - Theme: Fans Perceptions

4.2.1 Sasaengs

The perceptions of *sasaengs*, situated as the foremost sub-theme under the overarching theme of fans' perceptions, offer an insightful examination into the collective views of BTS fans regarding intrusive and obsessive behaviour exhibited by certain individuals. With a groundedness of 333, it highlights the substantial attention devoted to understanding and addressing the phenomenon

of *sasaeng* behaviour within the fandom. Among the most prominent manifestations within this sub-theme, the top three categories include the prevailing perception among ARMYs that *sasaengs* are synonymous with stalker followed by perceptions of their insanity and their perceived mental instability. Additionally, perceptions of *sasaengs* as dangerous, scary, and delusional emerge as recurring themes.

Within the category of *sasaengs* as stalkers, fans have expressed sentiments such as, *"Please erase the word "fans" and instead put "stalkers" in the title,"* and, *"And for that stalker, girl….be ready to be strictly dealt with. This is a glaring red line crossed with no return."* The term "stalkers" being the first adjective that ARMYs associate with sasaengs is understandable given BTS's history with these situations. For the fandom, it is clear that regardless of the love and affinity one might have for their idol, there are boundaries that should never be crossed. Caring for an idol cannot justify invasive behaviour. When someone begins actively stalking and invading the privacy of their idols, they are no longer considered true fans by the fandom. True fans, according to ARMYs, understand and respect the boundaries and recognize their idols as human beings deserving of respect, not objects to be stalked and owned to satisfy their delusions.

In terms of *sasaengs* and their perceived insanity by ARMYs, fans comments reflect strong disapproval and concern. Statements like, *"People are seriously deranged if they actually thought he was gonna eat some random food that showed up at his house,"* and *"Karma this Karma that, y'all are lewsers* (losers)*, sasaengs r* (are) *crazy n* (and) *been doing things even worse to k idols,"* highlight the extreme and irrational behaviour attributed to *sasaengs*. The perception of *sasaengs* being mentally unstable is evidenced by comments such as, *"They are just a bunch of traitors who have sick obsessive mentality,"* and, "*FFS* (for f*cks sake)*, why would she even think ANYONE would be interested in a mentally sick person that does this kind of thing?"* These statements reflect the view that *sasaengs* suffer from severe psychological issues. The frequent use of adjectives like "insane" and "mentally unstable" by ARMYs to describe *sasaengs* aligns with the call for action subtheme, where there is a prominent code urging psychiatric evaluation and treatment for sasaengs. This perception is rooted in the belief that parasocial relationships can escalate to dangerous and fanatical levels (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 68). For ARMYs, *sasaengs* represent the extreme negative end of fandom, where individuals are no longer seen as composed or healthy but as people needing professional mental health intervention due to their perceived insanity. Furthermore, *sasaengs* are deemed as potentially dangerous and a perceived threat to the safety of the idols and those surrounding them, including other fans, expressing concern that "*those sasaengs could endanger people's lives."* Fans also find sasaengs scary and suffering from what a commenter names *"parasocial delusion"*, with several comments conveying the fear and discomfort that sasaengs induce among fans.

Given the severe breaches of privacy in the cases studied, where Jungkook's and V's personal home addresses were leaked, it is natural for the fandom to view sasaengs as extremely dangerous

and frightening. The fact that these individuals managed to obtain and disseminate such sensitive information understandably evokes fear among fans, who worry about the potential for physical harm to their idols. Even though no physical harm occurred in these incidents, the mere possibility and the unknown intentions of these stalkers amplify the perceived threat. This connects seamlessly with the perception of *sasaengs* as delusional. The fandom recognizes that the intensity of parasocial relationships can lead to dangerous levels of delusion and insanity. *Sasaengs*, in their extreme obsession, may believe they have a personal connection with the idols, and this delusion can potentially drive them to harmful actions. The perceived insanity and potential for violence, even under the guise of care or affection, underscore the genuine concern for the idols' safety when faced with such invasive and unpredictable behaviour.

In summary, the perceptions of *sasaengs* represent a pivotal aspect of the fans' perception theme, with fans actively engaging in heated discussions and expressing their views on the implications of intrusive behaviour (Maros & Abdul Basek, 2022, p. 284). The research findings match the theory that describes *sasaengs* as highly obsessive and fanatical individuals who relentlessly seek closeness and interaction with their idols, sometimes resorting to dangerous methods to achieve this (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 67). Furthermore, the findings on ARMYs perceptions of *sasaengs* also reiterate that the research points out that these fans exhibit an unhealthy preoccupation with the private lives of K-pop idols, going beyond mere loyalty to engage in stalking and other intrusive acts, which can have severe physical and emotional impacts on the artists (Williams & Ho, 2015, p. 82; Williams, 2016, p. 85). Additionally, the virtual social identity of *sasaeng* fans is often associated with various negative traits which align with the research findings. These include psychological issues and threatening, even unlawful behaviours, presenting an overpoweringly negative representation of the *sasaeng* identity that sets these individuals apart from "normal society" (Williams, 2016, p. 85). Despite variations in emphasis across different members and platforms, the recurring prominence of this sub-theme underscores its significance in shaping the collective understanding and response to *sasaeng* behaviour within the BTS fandom.

Sasaengs Motivations

The examination of *sasaengs* provided insight into what ARMYs believe motivates these intrusive behaviours. Although this aspect was the least prominent within the theme of fans' perceptions, with only a few mentions, discussing these perceived motivations still adds valuable depth to the research. Two primary motivations surfaced as potential explanations for *sasaengs'* stalking behaviours. Foremost among these is the desire to garner the attention of idols, suggesting a quest for validation and acknowledgement from the objects of their obsession. As one fan noted, *"they got full rights to enjoy their lives like others too!! But some of you're literally snatching this right for them and stalking them just for clout and attention is so sick,"* highlighting the extreme lengths some *sasaengs* will go to for recognition. Another fan emphasized that *"they don't care about*

their image or self respect, they just want to be noticed by the idol," underscoring the desperate need for acknowledgement that drives these actions. Additionally, *sasaengs* may derive a sense of power from possessing private information about idols, enabling them to exert control and influence over their lives. This sense of power is reflected in fan discussions, where it is noted that *"their motivations are about power, not support, and the fact that some people have to deal with their harassment over and over and over is awful."*

As observed throughout the research results, BTS's fandom consistently views *sasaengs* and their behaviours negatively, placing them on the extreme negative end of the spectrum of parasocial relationships. The motivations behind *sasaeng* behaviour are perceived similarly. ARMYs primarily attribute these behaviours to two motivations: seeking attention and a desire for power. These motivations are heavily criticized by the fandom, emphasizing that *sasaeng* actions stem not from genuine care or love for the idols but from a desire to exert control over them, such as by possessing private information like home addresses. The research reveals notable variations in the emphasis and recurrence of discussions about *sasaengs*' motivations across different platforms. On Twitter/X, conversations about these motivations are most prevalent when discussing BTS as a band, though they receive minimal attention in the individual cases of Jungkook and V. Similarly, on Instagram, V's sasaengs' motivations are discussed more frequently than Jungkook's, though both are still infrequent topics. Interestingly, on allkpop, there is a slightly higher occurrence of discussions about Jungkook's *sasaengs'* motivations, but this topic is absent in discussions about V. These variations highlight differing levels of engagement and concern regarding the reasons behind *sasaeng* behaviour among fans on different platforms.

The examination of *sasaengs* motivations provides valuable insights into the underlying factors driving their intrusive behaviours and how ARMYs perceive those behaviours. Despite its relatively low groundedness, this sub-theme underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the complexities surrounding *sasaeng* behaviour to ensure the well-being and safety of idols and fans alike. According to Tal-Or (2017, p. 1), parasocial relationships can materialize through emotional and cognitive connections with a celebrity, as well as through actions like trying to have contact with them, which helps to explain the motivations behind *sasaeng* actions. Jia et al. (2021, p. 2174) point out that specific fan actions have the potential to negatively impact artists' personal lives or infringe upon the interests of others. *Sasaengs*, specifically, have been documented to partake in various troubling activities aimed at obtaining extremely personal details about idols (Williams, 2016, p. 83). The search for intimate information often arises from a pathological longing for physical closeness and acknowledgement from K-pop idols (Williams, 2016, p. 85). Moreover, in their need to distinguish themselves, *sasaengs* purportedly resort to extreme measures - these individuals are recognized for their determination to uncover their idols' precise schedules to maximize proximity, motivated by a craving for recognition (Williams & Ho, 2015, p. 82). Integrating these perspectives, it becomes evident that the motivations of *sasaengs* are deeply rooted

in the dynamics of parasocial relationships and a pathological pursuit of connection and validation. Addressing these behaviours is crucial for the safety and well-being of both idols and the broader fan community.

4.2.2 Fanaticism

Fanaticism, positioned as the second most prominent sub-theme within the fans' perception theme, offers insights into the perceptions and understandings of obsessive behaviour within ARMYs. Fanaticism is characterized by an exceptional level of devotion, marked by intense obsession, commitment, and excessive measures that go beyond what is considered normal and expected (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 68). This sub-theme emerges as a significant topic of discussion, highlighting the prevalence of conversations surrounding the boundaries of fandom and the potential consequences of fanaticism. Among the most prominent manifestations within this sub-theme, the top three codes include the perception of fanaticism as an act of privacy invasion, followed by associations with stalking, and obsessive behaviours. Perception of fanaticism as an act of privacy invasion is particularly telling. Fans expressed strong disapproval, with one stating, *"It's crazy how some fans get, invading his privacy by sending stuff to his personal home address is a criminal offense and a whole level of nutsy."* Another fan echoed this sentiment, insisting, *"(...) please give them proper jail time!! Otherwise, they won't even understand what's wrong with invading and threatening someone's privacy is* 😳*."* The seriousness of privacy invasion was further emphasized by a fan who remarked, *"It's one thing to admire someone but to just full-on invade someone's privacy & harass them continuously is another."* Similarly, the perception of fanaticism associated with stalking underscores a severe breach of personal boundaries. As one fan described, *"This is no child's play, this is stalking on steroids and criminal behaviour/delusional fixation."* Another pointed out the misplaced priorities by saying, *"If you have so much money go donate, there are people who need food, give it to them instead of stalking and violating someone's privacy."* Reflecting a broader concern for the wellbeing of idols, a fan hoped, "*I sincerely hope we as fans can come to the realization that these men (idols) are also humans. Stalking is a huge NO!!!"* Lastly, the perception of fanaticism linked to obsessive behaviours reflects a deep unease within the fandom. One fan candidly stated, *"...the amount of obsession these days is just... disgusting."* Another expressed alarm, saying, *"...these actions are not driven by love, but obsession that is alarming and terrifying."* A newer fan shared their disappointment, *"I was a baby army last year, but I never was this obsessed. Still love BTS and it breaks my heart how toxic the fans are (...) They ruin the reputation army has and the love towards army from the members themselves."* The association of fanaticism with profoundly negative sentiments among ARMYs, as consistently observed in the research findings, is hardly surprising. Within the BTS fandom, fanaticism is directly linked to invasive privacy breaches, stalking, and obsessive behaviours. Given that fanaticism itself is viewed as an extreme behaviour, it follows naturally that such serious transgressions align with this concept

for ARMYs. Throughout the research, it has been repeatedly emphasized that these actions are unacceptable, dangerous, and likely indicative of individuals who are mentally unwell. The depth of devotion required to be labelled a fanatic holds no positive connotations within the fandom. ARMYs strive to distance themselves from such behaviours, particularly because they do not wish for their beloved idols to endure the repercussions of encounters with individuals like *sasaengs* who exhibit this level of fanaticism.

The examination of discussions across various platforms indicates a nuanced approach to the concept of fanaticism among ARMYs. While Twitter/X emerges as a prominent platform for addressing the phenomenon, particularly in discussions concerning BTS as a collective entity, fanaticism also garners considerable attention in conversations centred around individual members like Jungkook and V. This underscores the pervasive nature of the phenomenon within the fandom, with discussions on Twitter/X reflecting a widespread recognition of its significance. On Instagram, while fanaticism may not be the primary focus, discussions related to Jungkook's and V's cases demonstrate substantial engagement, suggesting that while not dominant, the topic still holds relevance among fans. Similarly, on allkpop, discussions surrounding fanaticism in both Jungkook and V's cases highlight its significance in shaping perceptions and discourse surrounding instances of stalking within the BTS fandom. In summary, despite variations in emphasis across different platforms, the recurrence of this sub-theme highlights its relevance and the need for continued examination and understanding of its implications for both idols and fans alike. These examples collectively illustrate the complex and often troubling facets of fanaticism within the ARMY community, highlighting significant concerns over privacy, stalking, and obsessive behaviours.

Fanaticism, as discussed by Ardhiyansyah et al. (2021, pp. 66-68), originates from a sense of admiration and is often associated with excessive enthusiasm, emotional attachment, and a persistent interest in the fanatical entity. This can manifest in extreme behaviours, including invasive acts of privacy violation and stalking. Cahyani and Purnamasari (2019, p. 167) further elucidate that celebrity worship, a form of parasocial relationships, entails individuals developing an obsession with celebrities, with intense adoration potentially resulting in detrimental consequences. This obsession can drive fans to seek personal information about their idols, sometimes leading to illegal activities, such as sending items to personal addresses or continuous harassment (Cahyani & Purnamasari, 2019, p. 168). Ardhiyansyah et al. (2021, p. 69) also highlight that K-pop fans are often viewed as extreme, with their fanaticism being expressed through active participation in fan communities that disseminate personal information about idols. This intense enthusiasm is not merely superficial but deeply emotional and long-lasting (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 68). Moreover, fanaticism tends to foster a mindset where fans insist on their views, disregarding conflicting facts or arguments - this rigid belief system can escalate into aggressive behaviours, such as verbal aggression (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 68). Jia et al. (2021, p. 2174) caution against the consequences of blind fanaticism, emphasizing the need for proper guidance within fan cultures to

prevent the negative consequences associated with excessive fandom. The compulsive need to know everything about their idols, as described by Cahyani and Purnamasari (2019, p. 168), can drive fans to actions that violate personal boundaries and legal norms, illustrating the fine line between admiration and harmful obsession. Thus, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of fanaticism within the ARMY community and how they perceive these conducts. The intense emotional investment and extreme behaviours observed reflect broader patterns of celebrity worship and parasocial interactions, necessitating ongoing examination and intervention to mitigate the potential negative impacts on both fans and idols.

4.2.3 Of and/or towards Idol and its relationship with ARMYs

The exploration of the fans' broader relationship with idols and their perceptions of this dynamic within the context of the covered cases provides valuable insights into the emotional and psychological dimensions of fan-idol interactions. Positioned as the third most prominent sub-theme within the fans' perception's theme, this topic delves into the diverse spectrum of emotions and sentiments that define the bond between fans and idols, shedding light on the complexities inherent in this relationship. Among the most prominent manifestations within this sub-theme, the top three codes include a sense of protection towards the idol from the fandom, empathetic feelings towards the idol and the situation they faced, and an overall sense of closeness in the relationship perceived by ARMYs. These perceptions highlight the deep emotional investment and attachment that fans feel towards their idols, emphasizing the role of idols as sources of inspiration and support within the fandom.

In the realm of this research, parasocial relationships have predominantly been scrutinized for their adverse effects, focusing primarily on the negative aspects of the spectrum. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize the positive dimensions of these relationships. When delving into the perceived bond between ARMYs and BTS, particularly in light of the cases outlined in this study, it becomes apparent that sentiments such as a protective instinct towards the idols, empathy towards their experiences, and an overarching sense of closeness are evident in the data. When cultivated effectively, parasocial relationships are known to alleviate feelings of loneliness, bolster self-esteem, and instil individuals with motivation drawn from the inspiration they derive from their idols (Stein et al., 2022, p. 21; Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 3). The relationship between ARMY and BTS is marked by a profound intimacy; the members of the K-pop group consistently engage with the fandom on social media, deliver heartfelt speeches at concerts and awards ceremonies, and express gratitude for the unwavering support of their fans. The members often refer to ARMY as their "biggest love," "eternal youth," "biggest voice," and "wings," among other endearing terms. Moreover, the group has composed multiple songs dedicated to ARMYs. For many fans, these seven individuals evolve into virtual-friendship figures, deeply embedded in their lives. Consequently, it is unsurprising that fans harbour concerns and extend empathy towards BTS, particularly in instances of stalking incidents,

treating them with the same care and protectiveness as they would a real-life friend. Consequently, the fandom's desire to shield BTS from such situations and ensure their safety at all times is deeply rooted in this profound bond.

For instance, a sense of protection towards the idol from ARMYs is vividly expressed in statements such as *"STALKING IS A CRIME!!! Please protect Tae at any cost," "I hope he is fine! I don't understand how could anyone stoop soo low,"* and *"I truly don't know how any of the members deal with these type of things (...) I just hope and pray they each have a solid support network and that they can feel safe and are safe."* These examples underscore the fans' strong desire to safeguard their idols from harm and ensure their well-being. Similarly, empathetic feelings towards the idol and the situation they faced are reflected in comments like *"I would go nuts if I were him. He probably feels awful (...) That he has to speak out about this is just sad"*, *"These fans are getting way out of hand (...) This needs to be stopped. It's creepy and can seriously affect someone's mental health,"* and *"I feel bad for him this is so stupid."* These sentiments reveal fans' deep empathy and concern for the emotional and mental health of their idols. An overall sense of closeness in the relationship with the idol perceived by the fandom is articulated through remarks such as *"Jungkook shares so much already so why do this? He shouldn't have to keep asking for privacy."*, *"He is so kind to us and gives us so much love. Please respect his privacy and space,"* and *"He always tries to comfort and distract his fans whenever bad things happen (...) I have the utmost love and respect for this man who always puts the happiness and well-being of others first."* These statements illustrate the profound connection and mutual respect that fans feel towards their idols.

Discussions surrounding the fans' relationship with idols offer valuable insights into the emotional intricacies and dynamics of fan-idol interactions. Despite slight variations in prominence and intensity across platforms and cases, the recurrence of this sub-theme underscores its significance in shaping fan perceptions and experiences within the BTS fandom. Fans often feel deep empathy towards their idols, leading them to believe they share a unique and special bond with these celebrities - this emotional connection can be so intense that fans experience the events affecting their idols as if they were happening to themselves (Cahyani & Purnamasari, 2019, p. 168). In some cases, this profound connection can escalate to borderline pathological levels, highlighting the depth of these relationships. The concept of parasocial relationships further highlights the complex dynamics between fans and their idols within the K-pop realm - these one-sided relationships allow fans to feel deeply connected to their favourite idols, providing a sense of belonging and emotional fulfilment. Such connections are particularly beneficial for individuals with low self-esteem, as they offer the positive aspects of real relationships without the risk of rejection (Elvery, 2022, p. 479). Moreover, engaging in parasocial relationships with media figures can alleviate feelings of severe loneliness and negative emotions while boosting social self-esteem (Stein et al., 2022, p. 21). These interactions significantly contribute to personal growth and development. For example, the concept of self-expansion, which is the drive for "personal growth", is a major factor behind fans' fascination

with celebrities (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 3). Therefore, the fans' relationship with their idols in the BTS fandom is not just about admiration but also involves deep emotional investments and psychological benefits. These dynamics underscore the idols' roles as sources of inspiration and support, crucial for the fans' emotional well-being and personal development.

4.3 Fandom Demands

Analysis of the data across platforms and specific member cases reveals variations in the prominence of discussions surrounding fandom demands. Jungkook emerges as the focal point for these demands, with the highest prominence on both Instagram and Twitter/X. V follows a similar pattern, though with less prominence, showing varied levels of engagement across platforms. Conversations surrounding fandom demands in the context of BTS as a band on Twitter/X take the next prominent place, highlighting the collective nature of these expectations. However, discussions on platforms like allkpop, particularly concerning Jungkook and V, exhibit the lowest prominence. This disparity may be attributed to the nature of these platforms, with Twitter/X and Instagram serving as more personal spaces where fans feel inclined to express their emotions, frustrations, and wishes more openly, while platforms like allkpop, with a journalistic focus, tend to elicit less emotionally charged responses.

Table 6 presents a recording of codes grouped under the Fandom Demands category.

Theme	***Sub-themes***	***Open Codes***
Fandom Demands	Demands	Respect Privacy
		Respect
		Stop this Behaviour
		Leave Idol Alone

Table 6 - Theme: Fandom Demands

4.3.1 Demands

Fandom demands, as explored within the scope of this research, delve into the expectations and desires expressed by the BTS fandom regarding the instances under analysis. This thematic area underscores the frequency and significance of discussions surrounding fan expectations and calls for action within the community. The consensus on demanding action highlights the cohesive nature of the fandom, as it exerts substantial pressure to address underlying issues and meet fan expectations effectively.

Among the most prominent codes within this theme, the top three demands include the insistence on *sasaengs* respecting the idols' privacy, advocating for the overall respect of idols as

individuals, and urging *sasaengs* to cease their stalking behaviours entirely. These demands reflect the fandom's commitment to protecting the well-being and privacy of the idols, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect and boundaries within fan-idol relationships. For instance, regarding the demand for respecting idols' privacy, sentiments from fans include: *"Be mindful of what you share (…) respect their words, & their privacy, for once,"* and *"Respect the members' privacy I'm begging omfg* (oh my f*cking god). Similarly, in advocating for the overall respect of idols as individuals, fans express sentiments such as: *"Treat others the way you want to be treated. If you want to be treated with respect, treat others with respect ✊ (…) I don't think those are hard to give and share with someone we truly adore and "love" 💜 💜 💜."* Furthermore, the urgency in encouraging *sasaengs* to cease their stalking behaviours entirely is evident in comments like: *"This is so sad and scary. I hope all sasaengs and stalkers go to jail. I hope people stop this and realize BTS R HUMANS,"* and *"People better stop treating them like they are friends. Fans are not friends. If it continues, those crazies need to be arrested."*

The demands for *sasaengs* to refrain from intruding on the idols' personal lives are evidenced by comments like*: "Jungkook has said multiple times to respect his privacy. Respect him and leave him alone,"* and "*Yes they are idols but damn they are still regular people. Leave them be!"* Moreover, requests for boundaries to be respected, are articulated through statements such as*: "(…) let's not be creeps! Soo rude, stop crossing the line! You are a fan! Stay that way!"* and *"People need to respect his privacy and the boundaries as a fan."* Finally demands for punishment for *sasaengs* engaging in stalking behaviours are expressed with concern and determination, with fans stating: *"I feel so sickened by the stalker situation. I really really need bighit to take serious action (…)"* and *"That woman deserves to be out in jail! She has a history of stalking Tae so this isn't the first time. This is madness!!!"*.

These demands underscore the seriousness with which the fandom views instances of *sasaeng* behaviour and its determination to see appropriate action taken to address these issues effectively. Their persistent presence and substantial grounding across various platforms not only highlight the fandom's unwavering commitment to advocating for meaningful change and protection of their beloved idols but also serve as a testament to their proactive stance (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 66). According to Archer (2021, p. 559), the profound devotion to an idol often propels fans to take actions aimed at safeguarding their idol's reputation. Furthermore, Cahyani and Purnamasari's (2019, p. 169) findings on celebrity worship, suggesting that fans experience deep personal feelings towards their idols, including sadness and concern during distressing situations, offer valuable insights into the emotional investment driving the fandom's demands. Moreover, fandom members' active engagement in various fandom activities, including online arguments and demands justified as defensive and protective measures towards the group they follow, further illustrates the lengths to which fans are willing to go to uphold their idols' integrity and welfare (Maros & Abdul Basek, 2022, p. 293). Thus, these theories not only enrich but also aptly relate to the discourse on the theme

of fandom demands, underscoring the interconnectedness between fan devotion and their advocacy efforts.

5. Conclusion

In this study, a thematic analysis was conducted to address the main question: *"How do K-pop fans actively engage with and interpret instances of parasocial relationships amidst controversies surrounding their favourite idols?"* and its sub-questions: *"What are the perceived boundaries of expected fan behaviour in the context of parasocial relationships with K-pop idols?"* and *"How do fans feel that the artist's company's response aligns with their expectations?"* Analysing 625 comments, the study identified three primary themes: fans' reactions, fans' perceptions, and fandom demands. The first theme, fans' reactions, highlighted ARMYs' emotional responses, calls for action, and assessments of both idols' and management companies' responses to controversies, particularly around stalking incidents. The second theme, fans' perceptions, explored the understanding of *sasaeng* motivations, the concept of fanaticism, and the broader relationship between the fandom and the idols. The third theme, fandom demands, focused on the expectations for artist protection and consequences for *sasaengs*, reflecting fans' frustration with the management companies.

A recurring central theme was fans' reactions, underscoring the significance of fan-driven initiatives and their protective instincts towards BTS. Despite numerous assurances from Big Hit and Hybe about investigating potential threats, persistent incidents have led to growing frustration and a loss of trust within the fandom (Lee, 2024, para. 1; Kim & Kim, 2024, para. 1-3). This reflects the significance of the emotional bonds and continued commitment of ARMY to advocate for better protection measures and professional handling of concerning situations (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 68; Raw, 2020, p. 10; Malik & Haidar, 2020, p. 363; Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 66). Reactions towards idol response explored the fandom's perceptions and sentiments regarding BTS members' reactions to instances of stalking. This sub-theme provided insights into fan expectations and the dynamics of idol-fan interactions during challenging situations. Although less prominent, it revealed the intricate dynamics of fan engagement and the complexities of "idol life" experienced by BTS members (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p. 194). Furthermore, feelings towards stalking, situated prominently within the theme of fans' reactions, offered a comprehensive exploration of the emotional responses evoked by these incidents. This sub-theme provided understanding of the profound emotional impact of stalking on ARMY. Its prominence across various platforms underscored the universality of these emotional responses and emphasized the critical importance of addressing the psychological well-being of both idols and fans in navigating instances of stalking and intrusive behaviour, often connected to the concept of celebrity worship (Cahyani and Purnamasari, 2019, p. 169).

Within the fans' perception's theme, an examination of *sasaengs* perceptions offered a nuanced exploration into the collective mindset of BTS fans regarding intrusive behaviours. It revealed a complex interplay between fan loyalty and concerns over privacy breaches, shedding light on the psychological outcomes of such behaviours on both idols and fans. Despite its limited prevalence in the discourse, this exploration emphasized the importance of understanding the

underlying motives of *sasaeng* behaviour to mitigate potential harm. Delving deeper into the motivations of *sasaengs*, the analysis unveiled a multifaceted picture characterized by attention-seeking and a quest for power. This deeper understanding highlighted the intricate dynamics of parasocial relationships within the K-pop ecosystem, emphasizing the need for preventive approaches to address issues of boundary violation and emotional well-being (Williams & Ho, 2015, p. 82; Williams, 2016, p. 85). Similarly, the examination of fanaticism within the fandom revealed a variety of perceptions and understandings regarding obsessive behaviours. These insights provided valuable context for the broader discussion on celebrity worship and its implications for both fans and idols. The intense emotional investment observed among fans underscored the profound impact of parasocial interactions on fan identity and well-being, underscoring the need for ongoing research and intervention (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, pp. 66-68). Finally, the exploration of the fans' relationship with idols within the context of the covered cases illuminated the intricate emotional bonds that underpin fan-idol interactions. It highlighted the transformative power of these relationships in shaping fans' self-concept and emotional landscape and how idols serve as important sources of inspiration and support, playing a key role in fans' emotional health and personal growth (Stein et al., 2022, p. 21; Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 3).

The data analysis revealed a notable aspect: the expectations of the fandom. Throughout all the gathered data, fans' hopes and requests emerged prominently, influencing discussions and interactions within ARMY. These fandom expectations, as examined in this study, encompass the desires and anticipations expressed by the BTS fanbase regarding the situations under scrutiny. The consensus on these expectations underscores the unity within the fandom. This emphasis on expectations highlights the seriousness with which the fandom views instances of *sasaeng* behaviour and their determination to witness appropriate action taken to tackle such matters. The consistent presence of these expectations across various platforms not only reflects the fandom's unwavering commitment to advocating for meaningful change and protecting their idols but also serves as a testament to their proactive stance (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021, p. 66; Archer, 2021, p. 559). The deep emotional connections fans share with their idols, experiencing emotions such as sadness and concern during challenging times, offer valuable insights into the emotional investment that underpins the fandom's expectations (Cahyani and Purnamasari, 2019, p. 169).

Additionally, the data analysis highlights the influence of *Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave, and South Korea's soft power strategies in the context of K-pop fandom. The global reach of BTS and the engagement of an international fanbase underscore the effectiveness of K-pop as a tool for cultural diplomacy (Lee, 2011b, p. 85; Chen, 2016, p. 27). The presence of English-written comments reflects K-pop's penetration into a global language and community, emphasizing the international factor of *Hallyu*. This also suggests that the values and behaviours promoted by K-pop idols resonate with diverse audiences worldwide, enhancing South Korea's cultural influence (Lee, 2011a, p. 140; Chung, 2019, p. 138). Furthermore, the accountability of management companies, such as Big Hit

and Hybe, also plays a crucial role in maintaining the image of idols and, by extension, the country's soft power. While fans express frustration with the companies' responses to *sasaeng* behaviour, there is a noticeable difference in how BTS, as a major act, can address these issues compared to smaller groups. The expectation for stricter consequences for sasaengs and better protection measures reflects fans' desire for management to uphold the values and image projected by the idols. More importantly, it underscores the fans' deep concern for the idols' safety and well-being. As the idols are under the care of their management companies, fans believe it is the company's responsibility to ensure their safety.

In conclusion, this study delved into the dynamics of K-pop fandom, particularly within the context of parasocial relationships and the challenges posed by instances of intrusive behaviour towards idols. Through thematic analysis of fan responses, perceptions, and demands, several key insights emerged. The enduring commitment of ARMY to advocate for the protection of BTS reflects not only a deep emotional investment but also a collective determination to hold management accountable for addressing concerns effectively. The intricate interplay between fan loyalty, privacy concerns, and the psychological impact of sasaeng behaviour underscores the complexity of parasocial relationships within the K-pop landscape. Moreover, the prominence of fandom expectations highlights the cohesive nature of the community and its proactive stance in driving meaningful change. Ultimately, this research underscores the need for ongoing dialogue, research, and intervention to safeguard the well-being of both idols and fans amidst the evolving dynamics of fan-idol interactions in the digital age.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

Despite the thorough nature of this study, some limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, while the data collected provides significant insights, it is inherently limited and cannot be entirely representative of the broader phenomenon. Future research could benefit greatly from the inclusion of more detailed information through qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups. These would be particularly interesting and beneficial for several reasons. They allow for a deeper exploration of the participant's perspectives and experiences, which can provide richer and more nuanced data. Incorporating these qualitative methods could significantly expand the findings by uncovering new themes and sub-themes that were not evident through the initial data collection. They would allow researchers to delve into the complexities of the phenomenon, offering a more comprehensive understanding. Moreover, these methods could validate the current findings, enhancing the overall robustness and credibility of the research.

The analysis was conducted by a single coder, which, despite rigorous methods to ensure reliability and validity, introduces the possibility of personal bias affecting the results. Future studies should consider employing multiple coders and implementing inter-coder reliability tests to ease this risk and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Additionally, groundedness can also be part of

the limitations due to the involvement of a single coder. The interpretation of groundedness, represented by the number of quotations coded for each category, is inherently subjective and reflects the researcher's individual perspective. This subjectivity could influence which themes were emphasized and how data segments were classified. Incorporating multiple coders in future research would provide a more balanced interpretation of groundedness, ensuring that the coding and categorization processes are more objective and reflective of diverse viewpoints. Furthermore, this study was limited to data written in English, excluding contributions from non-English-speaking fans, particularly those communicating in Korean. Including multilingual data in future research would provide a more inclusive view of global fan communities, as this study may reflect a predominantly Western perspective. Although the data does not explicitly identify the fans' geographical origins, there appear to be differences in how fan groups respond to these situations. Western fans often seem to demand more immediate actions, using stronger language, while South Korean cultural values of politeness may lead to a more restrained approach. Future research could investigate these potential differences more thoroughly, examining how cultural backgrounds influence fan behaviour.

Moreover, while the sample size of 625 pieces of data is substantial, expanding this sample size could yield more robust results. Future research should aim for larger datasets to enhance the representativeness and generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, it is important to note that the platforms analysed were limited to Twitter/X, three Instagram pages, and one K-pop news website. Including additional platforms could have enriched the research and provided a more comprehensive understanding of fan interactions online. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the platforms selected for analysis may introduce a certain bias in the data. Different platforms attract distinct demographics, and the exclusion of other platforms may limit the range of perspectives captured in the study. Future research could aim for a more diverse selection of platforms to mitigate this bias and ensure a more representative sample of fan interactions across various online spaces.

Fan studies and technological advancements are dynamic fields that continually evolve and intersect and exploring the various branches within these topics offers numerous opportunities for valuable research. As rapidly advancing communication technologies and emerging virtual spheres continue to reshape the way fandoms interact, this area remains promising for further investigation. This study serves as a foundational step, but there is still much to learn. Continued research in these evolving domains promises to yield interesting and significant conclusions. In summary, while this study provides a valuable starting point, addressing these limitations and expanding the scope of future research will be essential for gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics within fan studies and technological advancements.

While this study acknowledges some limitations, it is important to recognize its overall contribution to the field of fan studies and parasocial relationships. Despite the constraints imposed by the data's inherent limitations and methodological considerations, this research serves as a foundational step towards understanding the intricate dynamics within online fan communities. By

providing valuable insights into fan interactions on selected platforms, it adds to the existing body of knowledge and lays the groundwork for future investigations. Furthermore, by highlighting the need for more inclusive methodologies and broader data sampling, this study prompts critical reflections on the evolving nature of fan studies and the complexities of online fandoms. Thus, while there is still much to explore and refine, this study represents a significant contribution to the ongoing dialogue surrounding fan culture and the phenomenon of parasocial relationships.

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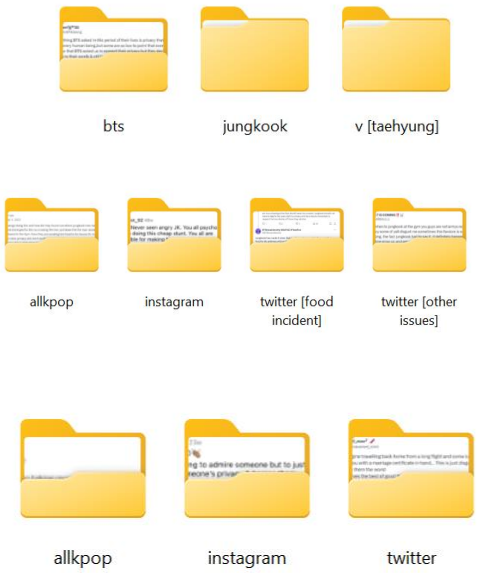
Appendices

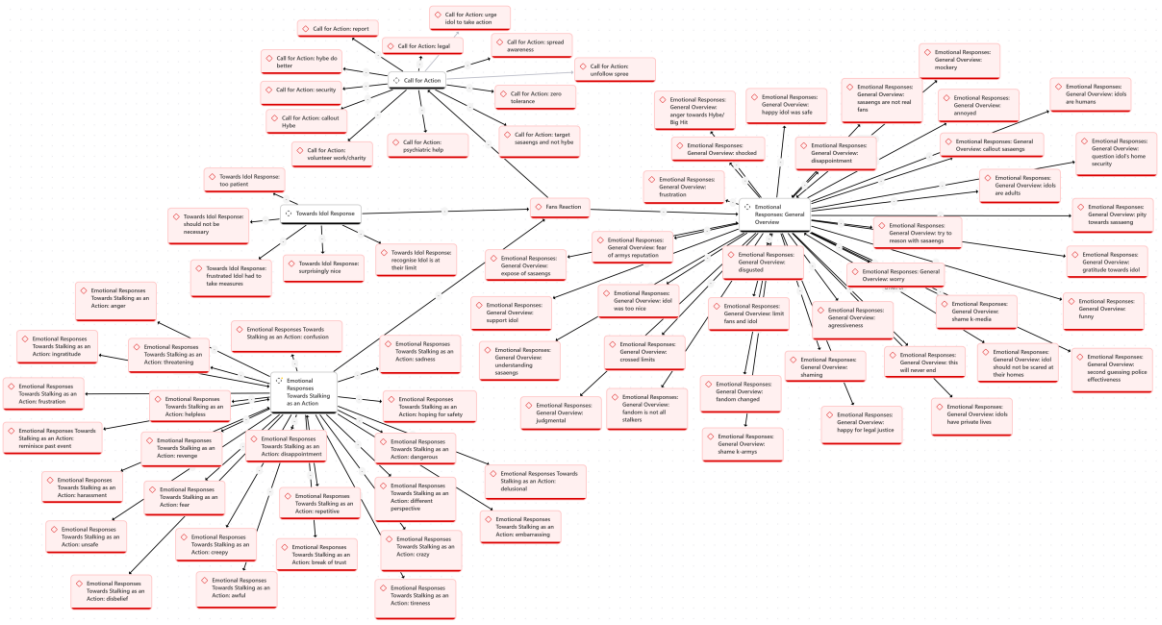
Appendix A

Data Organization: separate folders - organized by platform, event, and the BTS member affected



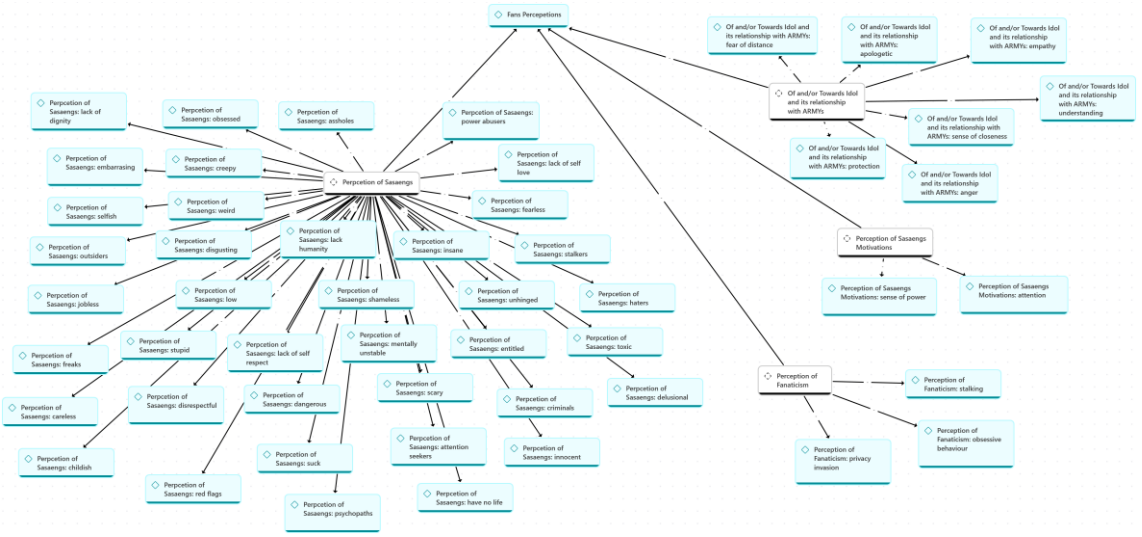
Appendix B

ATLAS.ti Network: Fans Reactions



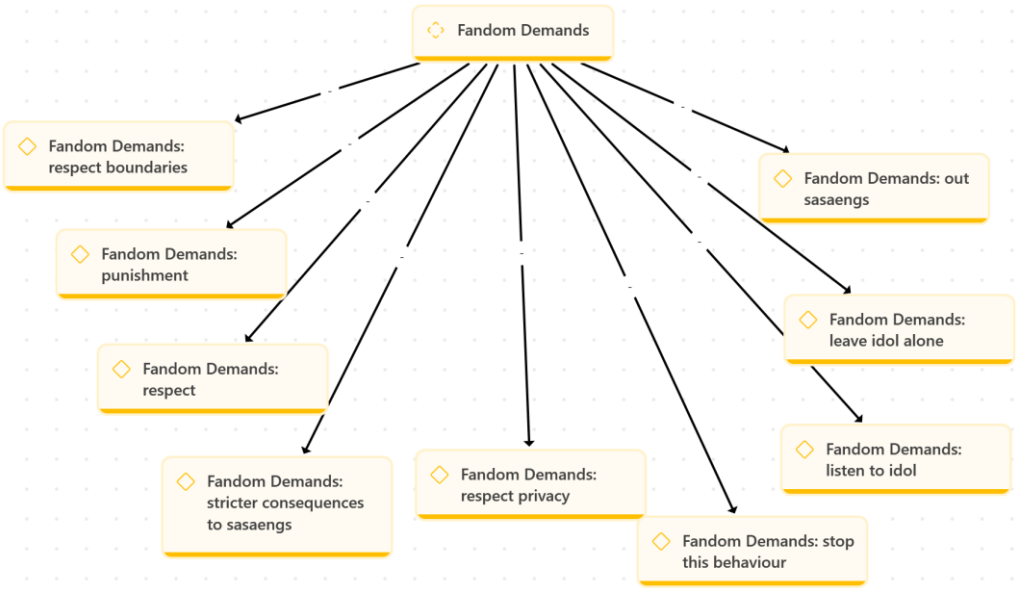
Appendix C

ATLAS.ti Network: Fans Perceptions



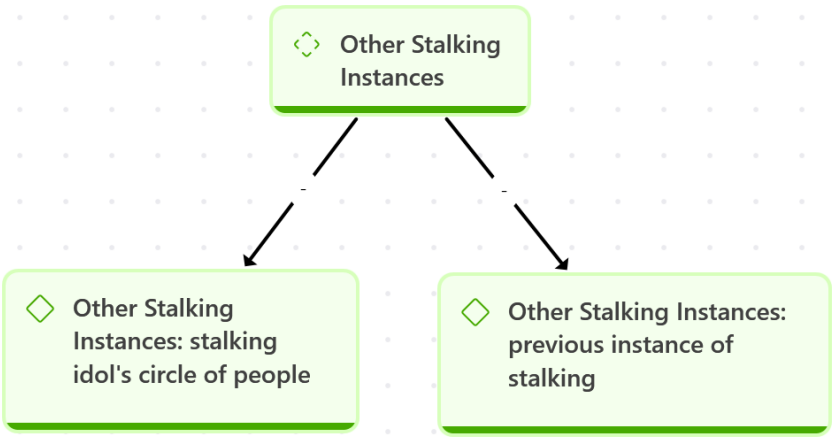
Appendix D

ATLAS.ti Network: Fandom Demands



Appendix E

ATLAS.ti Network: Other Stalking Instances



Appendix F

Coding Table: Themes, Sub-Themes and Open Codes

Themes	***Sub-themes***	***Open Codes***
Fans Reaction	Call for Action	Callout Hybe/BigHit
		Expose *sasaengs*
		Hybe/Big Hit do better
		Legal
		Psychiatric Help
		Report
		Security
		Spread Awareness
		Target *sasaengs* and not Hybe/BigHit
		Try to reason with *Sasaengs*
		Unfollow Spree
		Urge idol to take action
		Charity Work
		Zero Tolerance

	Emotional Responses: General Overview	Aggressiveness
		Anger towards Hybe/BigHit
		Annoyance
		Callout *Sasaengs*
		Crossed limits
		Disappointment
		Disgust
		Endless stalking
		Fandom changed
		Fandom is not all stalkers
		Fear of ARMY's reputation
		Frustration
		Funny
		Gratitude towards idol
		Happy for Legal Justice
		Hapy idol was safe
		Idol should not be scared at their home
		Idol was too nice
		Idols are adults
		Idols are humans
		Idols have private lives
		Judgement
		Limits fans and idol exist

		Mockery
		Pity towards *sasaengs*
		Question idol's home security
		Sasaengs are not ARMY's
		Second guessing police effectiveness
		Shame K-ARMY's
		Shame K-media
		Shaming
		Shock
		Support idol
		Understanding *sasaengs*
		Worry
	Reaction Towards Idol Response	Frustration that idol had to take measure
		Recognition that idol is at their limit
		Response should not be necessary
		Surprisingly nice
		Too patient
	Emotional Responses Towards Stalking as an Action	Anger
		Awfulness
		Break of trust
		Confusion
		Crazy

		Creepy
		Dangerous
		Delusional
		Different (not negative) perspective
		Disappointment
		Disbelief
		Embarrassment
		Fear
		Frustration
		Harassment
		Helpless
		Hoping for safety
		Ingratitude
		Reminisce past instance
		Repetitive
		Revenge
		Sadness
		Threatening
		Tiredness
		Unsafe
Fans Perceptions	*Sasaengs*	Assholes
		Attention Seekers
		Careless
		Childish

		Creepy
		Criminals
		Dangerous
		Delusional
		Disgusting
		Disrespectful
		Embarrassing
		Entitled
		Fearless
		Freaks
		Haters
		Have no life
		Innocent
		Jobless
		Lack of Humanity
		Lack of Dignity
		Lack of self-love
		Lack of self-respect
		Low
		Mentally Unstable
		Obsessed
		Outsiders
		Power abusers
		Psychopaths

		Red flag
		Scary
		Selfish
		Shameless
		Stupid
		Suck
		Toxic
		Unhinged
		Weird
	Sasaengs Motivations	Attention
		Sense of power
	Fanaticism	Obsessive behaviour
		Privacy invasion
		Stalking
	Of and/or towards Idol and its relationship with ARMYs	Anger
		Apologetic
		Empathy
		Fear of distance
		Protection
		Sense of closeness
		Understanding
Fandom Demands	Demands	Leave idol alone
		Listen to idol
		Out *sasaengs*

		Punishment
		Respect
		Respect boundaries
		Respect privacy
		Stop this behaviour
		Stricter consequences to *sasaengs*
Other Stalking Instances	-	Previous instance of stalking
		Stalking idol's circle of people