Affective and Intimate Ties Between BTS and ARMY:

K-pop, Fandom, and the Feminine Gaze

Erika Schestak

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Abstract

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Erika Schestak, York University & Toronto Metropolitan University

K-pop as a part of global popular culture, has had its texts viewed through the lens of local norms and imaginaries in many national contexts, sometimes to the detriment of idol groups and their fans. This thesis examines how race and gender have shaped the reception of K-pop in North America using BTS and their fans, ARMY, as a case study. Through a content analysis of BTS' music videos and interviews with Canadian ARMYs, this study found that the aesthetics and gendered embodiment in BTS' music videos align with a feminine gaze and that there is an affective and intimate bond between BTS and ARMY founded on shared (digital) space. Additionally, this thesis concluded that in North American contexts, male K-pop idols are entangled in racial and sexual imaginaries and stereotypes and that young and feminine K-pop fans are infantilized and pathologized by 'fangirl' discourses.

Keywords: fan studies, gender studies, popular culture, digital media, affect theory

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—

Thank you, mom, for believing in me. Thank you to my younger brother, too, for quietly admiring.

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—

I want to acknowledge BTS and ARMY here too. After stumbling upon BTS in 2014, I really leaned into fandom during my adolescence. During that turbulent and confusing time, having a place that felt safe and familiar meant everything to me. I may never return to that time, but what a tender time it was.

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I. Introduction

Transnational & Transcultural Fandom in Canada

The last time I saw BTS, a seven-member South Korean idol group, live in concert was on September 20, 2018, at FirstOntario Place in Hamilton, Ontario. At the back of the dark stadium, I watched in awe as they performed in front of thousands of little bright lights. The energy of both BTS and all the fans who had come to see them, myself included, seemed to cut through the haze of the smoke machines and fill the air with electricity. Now, nearly five years later, that beautiful experience seems all the more surreal as, at perhaps the height of their stardom, BTS announced their hiatus in 2022 (or "temporary break," as their record label, HYBE, later defined it) to allow the group members to fulfill their mandatory military service (Luna, 2022; Norwin, 2022). As a fan, my love of BTS began as something very private as my peers in middle school unabashedly declared that Korean pop music (hereafter K-pop) and, by extension, fans of it were weird. As a preteen, I did not quite understand the dislike so many of my Canadian peers had for K-pop. Still, now, as an academic, I have the opportunity to be critical of how gender and race shaped the reception of K-pop and the treatment of K-pop fans in North America.

If you have spent time on social media in the last decade, you have probably seen some content related to K-pop. Whether it be people swooning over photos of South Korean idols, memes created from colourful music videos or idols' appearances on variety shows, K-pop-related content is almost everywhere. Generally, K-pop refers to a specific genre of Korean pop music known for its often colourful and playful aesthetics and sounds. It is performed mainly by K-pop groups of same-sex members (commonly called 'idols') who are recognized for their signature choreography and music videos (Yoon, 2019). K-pop had a surge in popularity outside of Asia throughout the 2010s as more and more young people worldwide became K-pop fans (Oh, 2015; Yoon, 2019). Scholars have noted that a significant factor lending to the success of K-pop outside of Asian markets was the development of Web 2.0 (Iwabuchi, 2010; Jin, 2016; Y. Kim, 2013; McLaren & Jin, 2020; Yoon, 2019). In other words, the popularity of K-pop outside of

South Korea was facilitated by "fan-based, new media-driven, transnational flows of youth culture, which extend beyond racial, cultural, and/or linguistic proximities" (Yoon, 2019, p. 176-177), which did not require dissemination by traditional media outlets.

Facilitated by fans and the affordances of new media, K-pop has traversed regional boundaries and made its way into mainstream markets in North America, including Canada. A large and passionate group of Canadian fans have embraced K-pop's sounds and aesthetics despite much criticism and hatred from non-fans who publicly share their dislike of K-pop on social media platforms such as Twitter (Khan, 2019). For non-fans who had their first taste of K-pop in 2012 when PSY's "Gangnam Style" became the first globally popular K-pop song, the idea that all K-pop sounds like "Gangnam Style" and is manufactured (i.e., "inauthentic" or "fake) and "weird" or "unusual" may have stuck (Houssari, 2019). This notion that K-pop is "weird" stems from an Orientalist view that prevented K-pop from initially being accepted into mainstream Western markets (Houssari, 2019), and it continues to have some non-fans unwilling to engage with any K-pop texts. Of course, non-fans who simply do not enjoy K-pop should be thought of as separate from hateful non-fans who make racist and homophobic remarks about K-pop groups.

Why BTS & (Canadian) ARMY?

BTS is a South Korean male idol group signed to HYBE (previously known as Big Hit Entertainment). The group comprises seven members who, in chronological order from oldest to youngest, go by the stage names: Jin, Suga, J-Hope, RM, Jimin, V, and Jungkook. Throughout this paper, all members will be referred to by their stage names to account for the fact that, in BTS, they are performers with personas. The group name, BTS, is an acronym for "Bangtan Sonyeondan," meaning "Bulletproof Boy Scouts" in English (Pham, 2021). BTS fans are affectionately called ARMY, which stands for "Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth" (Partosa, 2021). The name was given to fans by BTS in 2013, shortly

after their first single, "2 Cool 4 Skool," was released (Pham, 2021), and now it has become something of a self-identifier for fans who refer to themselves as ARMY or as part of the ARMY.

Canada is an interesting country to study in terms of K-pop fandom. First, the Canadian media is not always representative of the cultural and ethnic diversity of the nation, leaving many Canadians unable to see themselves or their experiences, identities, and worldviews reflected in the media. In other words, despite "being one of the most multiethnic countries in the Global North, the Canadian mediascape has been reliant on Western content" (Yoon, 2019, p. 180). The media gaze that permeates mainstream Canadian media is embedded with "ideas and ideals about what is normal and acceptable concerning race, gender, and class that media representations of diversities and difference are invariably raced, gendered, Eurocentric, and classed" (Fleras, 2014, p. 36). Therefore, not only do many Canadians not see themselves represented – whether they are not *accurately* represented or not represented *at all* – but they may find the limited range of identities, experiences, and aesthetics less than attention-grabbing. Acknowledging this local context is crucial to exploring and understanding K-pop fandom in Canada, as it is primarily consumed via alternative and new media where individuals have more agency and freedom to seek out and consume media that resonates with them.

Second, the dedication and passion of Canadian ARMYs are noteworthy, given how infrequently they are able to attend concerts and meet-and-greets. BTS has not held a concert in Toronto since 2015 and has only held three shows in Hamilton at the FirstOntario Centre in 2018 (Marfo & Grant, 2022). They made a total of four concerts in Canada since the band's debut in 2013. Ironically, although BTS has held a few shows in Toronto, Vancouver has been "recognized as one of the major K-pop fan-populated Canadian cities" (Yoon, 2019, p. 180). TWICE, a famous female K-pop group even filmed some of their music video for their song "Likey" in Vancouver, which led to Canadian news media enthusiastically proclaiming Vancouver as blooming into a new K-pop fanbase (Yoon, 2019). Still, K-pop artists tour the

United States much more frequently than in Canada (Benjamin, 2016), despite its close geographical proximity and energetic and enthusiastic fans. BLACKPINK, a popular female K-pop idol group, for example, scheduled six shows in the United States for their 2022 World Tour "Born Pink," and only one in Canada (*BLACKPINK WORLD TOUR [BORN PINK] Official Website*, n.d.; To, 2022). Like BTS in 2018, BLACKPINK also held their concert at the FirstOntario Centre in Hamilton, Ontario, meaning that Canadian fans who do not live in and around the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area have to pay for transportation and perhaps even lodging near the venue in addition to concert tickets, or not go at all.

The high cost of the tickets alone may prevent fans from attending K-pop live events. During my interviews, my participants discussed struggling with financial barriers and I, too, have similar experiences. Alongside two friends, I attended the concert BTS held at the First Ontario Centre in Hamilton in 2018. When tickets initially went on sale, some seats were as low as $80 CAD, while floor seats went up as high as $325 CAD (Guevara, 2018). Despite the best efforts of my friends and I, even though we bought tickets within hours of them going on sale, we found ourselves having to shell out over $300 CAD each to attend. Coming from a lower-class family and being only 19 with limited savings myself, this was a huge cost to pay and had my friends not been as gracious as they were to pay a portion of my ticket as well, I would not have been able to attend. But not everyone is so fortunate. The high demand for tickets makes them an economic venture for some and the consequence for fans is they get resold at much higher prices. For that concert back in 2018, resale prices on Ticketmaster were over $1400 CAN (Guevara, 2018), so snagging some for $300, while still expensive, was a much better deal than we realized at the time. This trend has only worsened now that initial ticket prices have increased along with BTS's popularity. Currently, tickets can be anywhere from $70 to $1000 USD, with VIP packages that include seats in the front few rows or a meet and greet opportunity can be cost up to several thousand dollars (*BTS Ticket Prices | CloseSeats.Com*, n.d.; Mulligan, 2022). Financial and geographical

barriers mean that unlike other ARMYs, even those who live in Western nations, Canadian ARMYs may have fewer chances to engage with idols in a way that is not digitally mediated.

Nonetheless, Canadian ARMYs remain passionate, dedicated, and eager to partake in anything BTS-related. On August 31st, 2022, for example, fans quickly made their way to a pop-up shop called Space of BTS in the Eaton Centre, a shopping centre in downtown Toronto, Ontario selling BTS-related items (Marfo & Grant, 2022). Hundreds of fans waited in anticipation, some even "camping out on lawn chairs overnight and sleeping on the mall floor" (Marfo & Grant, 2022) as early as a day in advance to try and get their hands on some merchandise. In preparation for the droves of fans, the mall hours were extended from 8 am to 11 pm, and still, the line of fans waiting to enter the pop-up store stretched through the mall. It could be argued that perhaps some of this eagerness to stop by pop-up shops is due to the lack of official K-pop events in Canada. Also speaking to this point is the fact that some Canadian ARMYs have even organized and funded or fund-raised their own BTS-related events in Toronto (*BTS LOVE YOURSELF*, n.d.; *Yet To Come*, n.d.). The LOVE YOURSELF: Toronto Exhibition, for example, took place in June of 2019 with an art gallery, music, giveaways and other activities for fans to share and connect (*BTS LOVE YOURSELF*, n.d.). Fans' willingness to attend official events and even create their own events to connect over their shared affinity for BTS speaks to their dedication and passion.

BTS and ARMY are also notable subjects because of what they may allow us to understand or uncover about the gendered and racialized aspects of K-pop fandom in North America. K-pop was accepted into mainstream markets in other East Asian countries, such as Japan, before becoming a niche market in North America. K-pop remained a niche market for years because its reception was shaped by the racism and homophobia of North American audiences in ways that it was not within Asia. Due to its origin in South Korea, K-pop had a greater cultural and social distance to travel to penetrate North American markets. Consequently, it was met with xenophobia from North Americans who were not accepting of its

sounds and aesthetics. Xenophobic comments have been made by non-fans on social media, such as on Twitter (Khan, 2019), and by individuals in the public eye, such as radio personalities and comedians (Khan, 2019; J.-H. Kim, 2021; Ringland et al., 2022; Rolli, 2021b). Levels of anti-Asian hate have risen in North America since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Balintec, 2022; Cabral, 2021; Gover et al., 2020), and as East-Asian performers, BTS, too, have been effected. Since 2020, remarks have been made associating BTS with COVID-19 (J.-H. Kim, 2021; Rolli, 2021a), further perpetuating and normalizing anti-Asian hate. BTS was even mocked by Tucker Carlson, a host on Fox News, an American conservative news platform, for speaking against anti-Asian hate (Guy, 2021; Harvey, 2022). The xenophobic comments and discrimination BTS have faced in North America underscore the importance of accounting for the racialized aspects of K-pop's reception outside of Asia.

In North American contexts, race also shapes how gender is made sense of. Here it must be noted that in the dominant culture in North America, Whiteness[1] is central to masculinity (W. Han, 2016; Kimmel, 1997) since masculinity is understood "in opposition to a set of 'others' – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women" (Kimmel, 1997, p. 224). This has led to North Americans scrutinizing and criticizing BTS' masculinity and sexuality (Wong, 2018). Surrounding BTS and BTS-related content, whether it be comment sections or Twitter threads, there is almost certainly a handful of comments remarking that the members look too feminine or speculating about their sexualities. In 2020, the hosts of Dzien Dobry TVN, a Polish morning television show, created a whole segment dedicated to why BTS should not have been at the top of TC Candler's "100 Most Handsome Faces" list, one of the hosts remarking, "he [Jungkook of BTS] is not very masculine… More like a little boy than a man" (*Why BTS*

[1] "White" has been capitalized as not capitalizing may "frame Whiteness as both neutral and standard" (Nguyen & Pendleton, 2020, n.p.) and it is imperative to acknowledge the shared cultural experience of White individuals as having the "ability to move through life oblivious to our race and to the safety and status it generally confers" (Zorn, 2020).

Triggers White Supremacy around the World, 2020). These critiques show that BTS are not primarily judged as musicians and performers in North America, but also through racial stereotypes.

BTS' great success has made them a part of the popular culture scene in the West, but not all Westerners are happy about it. The more popular BTS has become, the more critics and non-fans voice anger, hatred, and even White supremacy. The degree of White fragility is seen every time one of BTS' many accomplishments has been met with racism, devaluation, or dismal – and these hateful comments do not only come from trolls on social media hidden under masks of anonymity – Western comedians, news anchors, and other individuals with platforms have participated in the scrutinizing, othering, and criticizing of BTS. For example, Australia's Channel 9 dismissed and trivialized BTS's role as UNICEF ambassador at the United Nations in 2018 by insinuating the band "talked about hairspray" at the event (S. Choi & Baudinette, 2019). Co-hosts of *20 to One*, an Australian television show, Erin Molan and Nick Cody, referred to BTS as "the South Korean One Direction" (Hollingsworth, 2019), and Jimmy Carr, a British-Irish guest comedian said, "when I first heard something Korean had exploded in America, I got worried, so I guess it could have been worse – but not much worse" (Rolli, 2021a).

ARMY has also been on the receiving end of its fair share of criticism and cruelty, often in the form of sexism, misogyny, and infantilization. Although ARMY is an incredibly diverse group of fans with varying intersectional identities (*2022 Results*, n.d.; Partosa, 2021; Ringland et al., 2022), critics tend to paint them with the same brush. One of the main reasons for this criticism is due to the assumption that BTS fans are all "immature girls" (S. Choi & Baudinette, 2019; Khan, 2019) who engage in "bot-like" behaviour (Partosa, 2021). ARMY specifically has been called "bot-like" because of their group efforts to stream songs on Spotify and YouTube and to vote for BTS whenever they are nominated for an award. This criticism, that young and feminine fans are "bot-like," forming an uncritical, unthinking, emotional mass is long-held in the form of the sexist 'fangirl' discourse. The 'fangirl' discourse paints girls and

women who engage in fandom as highly emotional, irrational, and motivated by desire and has long since been used to devalue and dismiss young and feminine fans, their participation in fandom, and their fannish behaviours (Click, 2009; Dare-Edwards, 2015; Ehrenreich et al., 1992; Gerrard, 2022; L. A. Lewis, 1992). While it is not true that most fans are minors (nearly 70% are over the age of 18 (*2022 Results*, n.d.)), as purported by some critics (S. Choi & Baudinette, 2019; Khan, 2019), a survey of over 500,000 self-identified ARMY found that approximately 96% of the respondents identified as female (*2022 Results*, n.d.), confirming that most ARMY are indeed women (Oh, 2015).

What is important to note is not whether or not comments made by critics have validity, but the misogyny of 'fangirl' discourse and how it works against BTS ARMY and any other public figure(s) or texts with a predominately female fanbase. The pathologizing 'fangirl' discourse works to undermine and invalidate BTS's success and popularity by virtue of their fanbase. Yet, despite criticism, racism, xenophobia, misogyny and infantilization, from non-fans and critics, BTS ARMY have made history. With the support and dedication of ARMY, BTS has played a hand in reshaping and redefining the space for Asians in the entertainment industry in North America through accomplishments such as becoming the first K-pop group to receive a Grammy nomination (McCurry, 2020), and the first Asian act to win "Artist Of The Year" at the American Music Awards (Shim, 2021). BTS has frequently been compared to the Beatles (Bruner, 2019; Murphy, 2019; Rolli, 2020; "The Beatles v BTS," 2019), the definition of a super group since the 1960s, but by fighting past all the barriers in their way, BTS is defining a new generation.

Although many South Korean idol groups have dedicated fans in North America, this study will explore the intimacy, affect, and gendered ways of seeing that have contributed to BTS's success and the intense and intimate bond between them and their fanbase, affectionately known as ARMY. Despite most K-pop fans being women, little scholarship centers on women and their opinions and ideas concerning K-pop. As such, this paper seeks to address this gap by examining how K-pop may align more closely with a

feminine gaze than the male gaze, giving it a unique appeal to young Canadian women embedded in a society where the mediascape is dominated by media created by and for the male gaze. While the visual qualities of K-pop are appealing to fans and thus should not be overlooked, the relationship between idols and fans is equally significant. For example, fans report that BTS's authenticity has drawn them (Hawthorne, 2020). As such, although the aesthetics of K-pop, namely the visuals in BTS' music videos, will be explored, this paper also gives weight to the intimate connections between BTS and ARMY. To understand K-pop fandom, the intensity, emotionality, intimacy, and affect experienced by fans is crucial and thus a central part of this study. Overall, this research was guided by two research questions: the first, how do BTS' music videos align with a feminine gaze, and the second, what facilitates the affective and intimate bond between BTS and ARMY?

This paper begins with chapter one, "Introduction," which provides contextual information about BTS and the fandom that surrounds them. Chapter two, "Methods," will outline how the content analysis and interviews were conducted and explain the rationale for each methodological decision. Chapter three, "Literature Review," situates BTS ARMY in K-pop studies and underscores the importance of studying the reception of K-pop in Western contexts for what it may reveal about the racial and gendered aspects of these texts. Chapter four, titled "The Good, The Bad, and The Bigoted," provides a roadmap of what participation in K-pop fandom may include, from fans' political and feminist activities to the activities and events they participate in for fun. It also delves into the racial and gendered aspects of K-pop to argue that the reception of K-pop in North America has been shaped by racism and homophobia directed at South Korean idols and has been bolstered by the mistreatment, infantilization, and pathologizing of young and feminine K-pop fans. The fifth chapter, "Ways of Looking," begins with Laura Mulvey's (1975) conceptualization of the male gaze to expand on more recent definitions, explorations, and criticisms of the notion of the female gaze. This chapter will also introduce my conceptualization of a feminine gaze which will act as a framework to explore how ARMY may gaze at BTS. Chapter six,

"Analysis and Discussion," assesses how BTS' music videos appeal to a feminine gaze and contextualizes and expands on the experiences and opinions shared by Canadian ARMYs during interviews to underscore the challenges and joys of being an ARMY in North American contexts. The takeaways from the content analysis and interviews are then used to answer the central research questions. Finally, the seventh and final chapter, the "Conclusion" chapter, provides a brief overview of the thesis, the conclusions drawn with regard to the research questions, and suggestions for future research.

II. Methods

To explore the research questions, in addition to my research and analysis on how race and gender have shaped the reception of K-pop in North America, the two methods I used were content analysis and interviews. The purpose of the content analysis was to explore research question one, how do BTS' music videos appeal to a feminine gaze, and the interviews were designed to tease out an answer for the second research question, what facilitates the affective and intimate bond between BTS and ARMY? The content analysis was conducted prior to the interviews and included only music videos released from 2015 to 2023 at the time of writing. Videos released before 2015 were not included due to the notable change in genre, visuals, and the recognition that such videos were released before BTS' international success, thus not useful for understanding their mainstream success in the latter half of the 2010s and onward. As the popularity of the group as a unit is the focus of this paper, and members' solo music videos are not unified in terms of genre or aesthetics, only music videos including all group members were included. Additionally, any music videos for their Japanese songs were not included as they are created and marketed to a different demographic (i.e., specifically a Japanese audience rather than a Korean and international audience). This resulted in 21 music videos for the content analysis.

Once I had narrowed down my sample size to 21 music videos, I analyzed them using 7 variables: make-up, clothing and accessories, colour, setting, dance style, emotionality, skinship, sensuality and bare skin,

and objectifying or humanizing. These variables were selected to explore the aesthetics of BTS' music videos with consideration being paid to how these visuals may align with my conceptualization of a feminine gaze. It is important to be clear that this content analysis is assessing how the visuals present in these music videos may be received within a Western context where masculine behaviours and aesthetics are measured against a White, heterosexual baseline (Irvin, 2016; Kimmel, 1997; Yoo, 2022). Furthermore, my assessment of the significance of certain aesthetics or characteristics of these music videos is shaped by my own identity and experiences as a cisgendered, White woman in the Greater Toronto Area in Canada. Future studies may benefit from dedicating a space to discuss the socio-cultural norms pertaining to aesthetics, gender, and gender performance in South Korea and how that shapes the creation of K-pop texts and how specifically Canadian fans who make up a South Korean diaspora may engage with these texts in ways distinct from Canadian fans with different ethnic and racial backgrounds. The purpose and focus of this content analysis is solely on how K-pop texts may generally be viewed from within the Western context Canadian K-pop fans are situated in.

To explore the research questions, interviews with ARMYs and a content analysis of BTS' music videos were conducted. Given the time and length constraints of the master's thesis, the study was only open to five self-identified ARMYs to inquire about their experiences in the fandom and with BTS and the media they release. To qualify for the study, participants had to be women with residence in Ontario between the ages of 18 and 30 and willing to participate in a 35 to 45-minute-long interview on Zoom. The study was trans-inclusive – any who use she/her pronouns were invited to participate. Future studies may benefit from broadening the range of participants. However, for the purpose of this study examining how and why male K-pop groups may appeal to Canadian women, the study was not open to men. Furthermore, the study made no mention of sexuality. Participants were not excluded based on sexual orientation as the study is not focused on (hetero)sexual attraction to the idols but rather on the potentially gendered ways of seeing them.

To locate participants, I utilized advertising and snowball sampling because of the interconnected nature of the fandom. I uploaded the poster I designed to my public Instagram in January 2023 to advertise my study and some colleagues from my program were gracious enough also to upload it to their accounts throughout January. I found that this advertising was relatively ineffective, but snowball sampling proved very useful. I learned that many friends and acquaintances of mine have friends and acquaintances who are K-pop fans and know other ARMYs. Although all participants were strangers to me, we had a mutual acquaintance or friend. Given this interconnected nature of K-pop fandom, future studies may also benefit from snowball sampling.

The data that prompted the decision to interview ARMYs between 18 and 30 years of age was the result of the 2022 BTS ARMY consensus, which found that approximately 54% of BTS fans were between 18 and 29 (*2022 Results*, n.d.). Additionally, this large window was thought to allow for a richer understanding of the perspectives and opinions of ARMYs by potentially including both new fans and long-term fans. As it turned out, all participants were working adults in their mid-to-late twenties. Although I did not explicitly ask any participants for their ages or occupations, this information naturally surfaced during the interviews as participants shared their age in relation to the members of BTS or BTS' debut. All of the participants also happened to be long term fans who had been an ARMY for five to ten years. While I was initially hoping to interview both long-term and new ARMYs, participants were able talk candidly about the changes in K-pop fandom in Canada over the course of their fandom and compare K-pop fandom in the early 2000s to the present and had many fandom-related stories and ideas to share. Such insights proved to be useful.

Many studies have utilized interviews to ask K-pop fans about their experiences, identities, and ideas in relation to their fandom with favourable results (Istad et al., 2022; Jenol et al., 2022, p. 7; J. Kim, 2017;

McLaren & Jin, 2020; Yoon, 2019). For my own interviews, I chose a length of approximately 35 to 45 minutes to allow enough time to probe and clarify with follow-up questions to ensure a thorough understanding of the information, ideas, and opinions expressed by participants (Davis & Lachlan, 2017). Furthermore, the decision to conduct semi-structured interviews was made for the style's ability to give researchers a degree of flexibility and adaptability within the interview (Brinkman, 2018) which would be useful to make the most of the interview time with participants of different ages and experiences within the fandom. With this in mind, the interview guide was designed.

Since interviews ought to be designed to facilitate a natural conversation (Davis & Lachlan, 2017), more personal and sensitive topics were not broached until towards the end of the interview unless a participant addressed such topics independently first. As such, the interview guide was composed of 12 questions, beginning with more broad questions about when and how participants found out about BTS and what their initial impressions were, and then gradually moving into specific questions about experiences and opinions they have had in relation to fandom. Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked if they had ever experienced any stereotyping or heard other negative remarks because of their status as an ARMY, although most participants volunteered this information earlier on in the interview. Overall, the interview guide was designed to encourage participants to share what their participation in fandom looks like on any given day, while also allowing them to shed light on the reality of being a fan of K-pop which is “doubly marginalized” for its status as a pop culture (rather than high culture) text and for its racial implications (Yoon, 2019).

In terms of the interviews themselves, all of them lasted between 35 and 50 minutes, excluding the time spent at the beginning and end of the interviews where we got acquainted, engaged in small talk, and thanked each other for setting aside time to talk. All of them were conducted over Zoom except for one which was done on Discord to accommodate the participant’s comfort level. I went about the interviews

as an "acafan" (an academic and a fan), as it is sometimes called (Jenkins, 2011; K. Lee, 2021; Raw, 2020). During the interviews, this identity was one that I openly and deliberately expressed, rather than concealed. It has been argued that "to recognize and claim the position of an acafan […] is to take on a different and, perhaps, considerably more complicated ethical negotiation about one's identity and power than the scholar who does not claim such an allegiance" (K. Lee, 2021, n.p.). This is because expressing an acafan identity in fannish contexts can foster relationships with other fans as it communicates that you are an insider and privy to the culture, but it is not without drawbacks as it may also make fans wary that they will be misrepresented, misunderstood, or that the research will be circulated to unintended audiences (Raw, 2020).

After careful consideration, I recognized that as an ARMY myself, I wanted the other ARMYs to know that I grew up alongside BTS as they did. This felt especially important since "ARMY as a community has a history of being marginalized … [and] of outsiders seeking to cause harm or use ARMY and BTS for their own profit or agenda" (Ringland et al., 2022). I believed that the best way to foster a safe space for participants to speak openly and comfortably about BTS and their experiences in ARMY was to let them know that I, too, share a similar fan identity. This was done to minimize the potential for participants to fear I was another outsider trying to tear the fandom open and look inside. It also seemed to allow them to casually use fandom specific vocabulary without having to break their momentum to explain themselves. Overall, the decision to present myself an acafan, as I had hoped, seemed to placate any fear that their fannish activities would be pathologized or stigmatized, as ARMY tends to be (Choi & Baudinette, 2019; Ringland et al., 2022), and thus facilitated enthusiastic and rich interviews.

After transcribing all my interviews, I coded them. To code the text I used highlighting, bolding, and underlining. I used five different colours to highlight the text: pink to mark mention of aesthetics (either of K-pop aesthetics in general or of a member's appearance), purple to mark mention a member's

personality, blue to mark mention of emotions, green to mark mentions negative experiences in the fandom or as a fan, and yellow for positive ones. These were aspects of the interviews that I felt would best allow me to explore my conceptualization of a feminine gaze by bringing to light some of the ways participants thought about and gazed upon BTS, as well as allow me to explore my second research question pertaining to the affective and intimate relationship between ARMY and BTS. I also bolded words that I noticed reoccurred and that I felt were uncovering something about the fandom. For example, several participants mentioned words like "youth" and "nostalgia," and having a "stan Twitter," which is a Twitter account made specifically for participating in fandom, so I bolded these words. Finally, I underlined sections that I thought I may want to quote. These were sections I felt were poignant and relevant and ought to be quoted, rather than summarized or paraphrased. These were statements by participants that I felt were intimately connect to the contents of this paper and may help answer my central research questions as well as exemplify the experiences of some ARMYs.

The findings of the interviews helped shed light on the second research question and some remarks from participants also connected to the first research question. Overall, I used coding to draw lines between each of these separate individuals and find areas where their ideas, experiences, and opinions overlapped as well as to make note of any important differences. Broadly, this paper has three methods, the synthesizing of my knowledge as a K-pop fan and the research I have conducted as an academic to bring to light and analyze the racial and gendered facets of K-pop, the interviews I conducted with Canadian ARMYs, and the content analysis I did of BTS' music videos.

III. Literature Review

This literature review will introduce some of the major themes throughout the thesis which will be returned to and discussed in more depth in the following chapters. It is intended only to give a brief

overview to contextualize the topic of K-pop as it relates to race and gender in Western contexts. There is plenty of scholarship on K-pop. Intrigued by its ability to transcend cultural and geographic borders and even language barriers, many scholars have examined K-pop and its reception using a variety of theories and methodologies. Scholars have delved into K-pop from linguistic and cultural angles (Ahn & Kiaer, 2021), transnational and transcultural fandom (Yoon, 2019; Yoon & Jin, 2016), fan's motivations and opinions (J. K. Cho, 2017; McLaren & Jin, 2020; Yoon, 2017), as well as fan's feminist, activist, and political activities (M. Cho, 2022; Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021; J. Kim, 2017). Additionally, research done in North America on how North Americans make sense of South Korean male idol groups has explored how male idols are perceived in relation to Western hegemonic notions of masculinity (J. J. Lee et al., 2020; Song & Velding, 2020).

In a similar vein, some studies present alternative ways to conceptualize the masculinity of male K-pop idols. Chuyun Oh (2015), for example, suggests that when male K-pop idols dance with their "androgynous bodies" they "cross gender lines by performing both unconventional and conventional heterosexuality/homosexuality and femininity/masculinity" (p. 70-71). This she calls "liminal masculinity" (Oh, 2015). Sun Jung (2010), too, introduces her own term, (pan-East Asian) "soft masculinity," which refers to the "visual image of the male stars, which is highly associated with feminine aesthetics" (p. 149). Both terms refer to a masculinity which departs significantly from the rigid norms of hegemonic North American masculinity. In addition to research done in scholarly circles, newspapers and magazines have published their fair share of articles detailing records broken by the K-pop fandom (A. Lewis, 2021), and articles on BTS's accomplishments in particular (Benjamin, 2022; Herman, 2020; Hicap, 2021; McIntyre, 2022; Suggitt, 2021).

Fandoms

Fandoms have been defined as communities that are created around the shared enjoyment of, interest in, and affinity for a given text or person(s) (Jenol et al., 2022). Since fandoms are not homogeneous groups, the specific activities fans do and exactly what their involvement looks like will depend on the individual fan. It should also be noted that fans do not necessarily have to be active to be considered fans (Harrington & Bielby, 2005). Harrington and Bielby (2005), for example, argue that more than being a "doer," "the acceptance and management of a fan identity" (p. 843) is central to fanship. In the case of Canadian ARMYs, there are additional layers to their fanship as K-pop texts must traverse national borders and make their way into new national and cultural contexts. In other words, the study of ARMY in Canada is a study on transnational and transcultural fandom. Transcultural fandoms may be defined as those communities (made of individuals with varying identities) and connections that form around a shared interest (Annett, 2014). For the present study, BTS can be considered the centre point around which groups of individuals from varying backgrounds (ARMYs) come together and form meaningful communities and connections with each other. In this case, these connections may be with each other and BTS.

Some scholars have noted that within fandom studies, work on border-crossing media and the fans surrounding it are often pushed to the periphery of the field (Chin & Morimoto, 2013; Morimoto, 2018) and that scholarship tends to privilege Western media and audiences (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). Consequently, there is still not much work done on transnational and transcultural fandom (Yoon, 2019). The research that has been done thus far has examined how transnational fan practices may be a way for fans to imagine new possibilities or lives for themselves (Allison, 2006; B. Han, 2017; Jenol et al., 2022). It has also focused on the pleasure which may be derived from these fannish activities (Harrington & Bielby, 2005), and how fandom may offer spaces or communities that allow people to think of themselves as being 'at home' (Morley, 2001, p. 425), In this way, engaging in this media can feel empowering or

exciting as it offers individuals new ways to experience or conceptualize identity and can provide comfort and community within transnational and transcultural contexts.

While Lee Harrington and Denis Bielby (2005) have argued that "audiences engage with media texts through the local cultural frames they bring to viewing, listening, or seeing" (p. 837), it is essential not to put too much importance on national identity in the case of transnational and transcultural fandom. In other words, although nationality may influence how fans engage with media texts, it is important not to position fans' national identity as their *primary* identity (Hills, 2002, emphasis added) but rather to consider "the gender, sexual, popular, and fan cultural contexts which fans consume and create" (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, p. 93). Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto (2013) argue that considering these contexts – and I would say perhaps even more intersectional identity markers such as race and class – is crucial to understanding "how and why fandoms arise almost regardless of borders both geographical and cultural" (p. 93).

Chin and Morimoto (2013) also note Matt Hills' (2002) work on Japanese anime fans in the West for his notion of 'transcultural homology' which foregrounds "the possibility that a fannish orientation may (at times) supersede national, regional and/or geographical boundaries" (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, p.99). During his work on American and British anime fans, Hills' (2002) found that they used the term "otaku" to identify their fanship, despite it being "hegemonically devalued both in Japan and 'the West'." This finding allowed him to delineate how transnational and transcultural links were formed between Japanese and non-Japanese fans. In other words, Hills (2002) argued that "fan identity is prioritised over national identity [and that] this identification can be read as an attempt to 'naturalise' fan identities by implying that fandom is an essentially transnational/transcultural experience" (p. 12). Chin and Morimoto (2013) find this concept of 'transcultural homology' useful since it "frees fandom from the constraints of national belonging" (p. 99). They go on to argue that rather than focusing specifically on nationality, when it

comes to fans' identity, it is better to recognize nationality as "but one of a constellation of possible points of affinity upon which transcultural fandom may be predicated" (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, p. 99). Furthermore, they highlight that affective investments in characters, stories, and fan subjectivities may exceed national orientation (Chin & Morimoto, 2013).

To summarize, recent research emphasizes that nuanced discussions about transnational and transcultural fandoms "must account for…how and why such media circulates outside its own industrial or national context" (Morimoto, 2018, p. 283). In this way, recent work in the field points to the need to recognize the affective affinity fans have for border-crossing media texts in a way which does not paint fans as interesting topics of study *just because* they are interested in media originating outside the nation in which they reside. This may mean leaning into a 'third wave' concern of fan studies which focuses on the pleasures and motivations of fans (Morimoto, 2018) and the "'messy' world of affect" (Chin & Morimoto, 2013, p. 97). Considering the above arguments, this research will highlight the motivations, emotions, identities, and affective affinities of ARMY in Canada without overemphasizing the participant's nationality as a defining identity marker.

Fan's Motivations & Opinions

Being a part of K-pop fandom is not without its difficulties in terms of adverse reactions from peers and stereotyping, which includes, but is not limited to, assumptions that K-pop fans are immature or that they fetishize East Asian idols (Yoon, 2019). ARMY, in particular, is "a largely misunderstood community … [that] experiences biases, stereotyping, and oppressions that intersect across the different identities and interests of people in [the] fandom" (Ringland et al., 2022). Given that ARMYs are aware of the often-adverse opinions of non-fans, it is essential to interrogate fans' motivation to continue participating in the K-pop fandom despite the potential for judgment and criticism.

Recent research examining the affective and potentially positive effects of participation in the K-pop fandom has highlighted the enriching and beneficial relationships some fans have with K-pop. Using a mixed-methods approach to study BTS fans, Sydney Rubin (2021), for example, found that SEMs (Strong Experiences with Music) contributed to ARMYs' personal growth since they used BTS' music for purposes such as improving mood, self-soothing, and motivating themselves. Jin Ha Lee et al. (2021) noted that listening to BTS' music made ARMYs feel comforted, understood, and safe and even "led to opportunities for introspection, self-acceptance, and self-growth" (p. 4). Some research has also found that fans show increased feelings of happiness, self-esteem, and social connectedness (Laffan, 2021), and some fans also report overcoming personal hardships through BTS (McLaren & Jin, 2020).

Some of these positive psychological effects may be attributed to K-pop fans' personal connection with their idols (J. K. Cho, 2017; J. H. Lee et al., 2021; McLaren & Jin, 2020; Yoon, 2019). BTS and ARMY have collaborated on what artists and community members call the "Magic Shop," which is a "socially playful place in-person and online … [founded on] people and their shared values, transcending the physical space to online and emotional or abstract places" (Ringland et al., 2022, n.p.). While the Magic Shop is currently "anywhere BTS and ARMY are together" (Ringland et al., 2022, n.p.), such as at concerts or on Twitter, the term began with BTS song "Magic Shop" on their 2018 album titled *Love Yourself: Tear*. The song "describes Magic Shop as a place of refuge for the heartbroken, a place of healing for the disturbed, and a place of love for those who are lonely" (Ruqayya, 2021, n.p.). A popular reading of the song lyrics is that the Magic Shop "is a place where voices will be heard, and no one shall be left out" (Ruqayya, 2021, n.p.). Put another way, the Magic Shop is not necessarily any one space, but rather any space (in relation to fandom) where ARMY feels heard and safe, and where they may feel connected to BTS. The Magic Shop is a safe space for fans to be themselves and to connect with others through a shared love of BTS. It is there that inside jokes, connections, and memories are formed. The Magic Shop speaks to the community and affective space between BTS and ARMY. There are also some

unique subcultures within K-pop fandom, such as the notion of maturing or growing alongside the idols (J. K. Cho, 2017; Yoon, 2019), which may intensify these feelings of closeness or connectedness between fans and idols.

Many K-pop texts are rich with imaginative and aesthetic imagery that sometimes sparks inspiration in fans. This is reflected in some studies that have found that participation in K-pop fandom may encourage fans to try new things and develop new skills. Fans may be motivated to learn Korean, have a new-found interest in fashion inspired by idols' outfits, or try out artistic and creative activities such as fanart (Jenol et al., 2022). Dance is also a central part of K-pop which has encouraged many fans to try to learn some of the choreography from their favourite groups (Yeung, 2021). Ultimately, "being a K-pop fan is a way for someone to express themselves and discover their talent" (Jenol et al., 2022, p.9). K-pop can even have a positive impact on identity since some fans, through their affinity for K-pop idols, are able to "(re)imagine a new sense of social identity" (B. Han, 2017, p. 2262) which can be liberating, especially for fans in environments with rigid social or cultural norms. Overall, much research has noted positive and affective relationships between K-pop fans and their favourite idols, fans and K-pop music, and fans and their practices and activities. As such, this present study adds to ongoing discussions about fan experiences and identities, which has the potential to continue to help to destigmatize or de-fanaticize K-pop fans, especially young and feminine fans who are the most likely to be pathologized by gendered fan stereotypes (Click, 2009; Gerrard, 2022).

North American Views on K-pop Idols' Masculinity

The popularity of BTS has certainly been contested in North America, with plenty of people unable to see the appeal, likely due to the fact that racialized men are used as a comparison point to uphold or reassert Western White hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 1997). Since the mid-20th century, Asian men have often been positioned in this way and "were seen as small, soft, and

effeminate—hardly men at all" (Kimmel, 1997, p. 236). This stereotyping has continued in Western contexts as Asian men are still "portrayed as effeminate, emasculated, weak, and sexually undesirable" (Azhar et al., 2021, p. 285). Idols are understood by and through Western hegemonic notions of masculinity when received in the West (J. J. Lee et al., 2020; Song & Velding, 2020). For example, a study by Jeehyun Jenny Lee et al. (2020) found that some participants expressed romantic attraction to male K-pop idols but admitted their soft masculinity would not be accepted as an everyday portrayal of masculinity in the United States. In other words, although Western (primarily female) fans regard K-pop idols' masculinity as desirable, refreshing, and fashionable (Bennett, 2016; Yim, 2018), the embodiment and aesthetics of these idols does not align with Western notions of masculinity that privilege Whiteness and hyper-masculine stereotypes. Some scholars have argued that the opinions and reactions some Western audiences have to K-pop may be "inadvertently contributing to the maintenance of the binary opposition of Asian and White masculinity" (J. J. Lee et al, 2020, p. 5914).

Even within Asia, male Korean idols' masculinity is appealing and yet marginalized. A small study of Indonesian women in their 20s found that for participants, "makeup and feminine appearance are tolerable only if they are applied on stage" (Ayuningtyas, 2017, p. 56). These findings imply that the performance of gender can be modified to meet specific purposes, in this case for entertainment and aesthetics, but not in daily life. Such findings may underscore the conclusion drawn by J.J. Lee et al. (2020) that the masculinity expressed by idols on stage is not yet disrupting hegemonic notions of masculinity. However, what these male idols may possess, especially as the popularity of K-pop continues to surge in the West, is transformative power. As male idols appear in mainstream media embracing a variety of aesthetics and modes of embodiment that may not neatly fit into existing gender binaries, they may begin to play a hand in expanding the terrain of masculinity all together.

Gendered Gazing

Most K-pop fans are women, yet few studies centre women or account for how gendered ways of being, seeing, and doing may influence fans' experiences in and around K-pop fandom. The findings of some of these studies do not underscore the necessity of accounting for these gendered experiences. Kirsten Younghee Song and Victoria Velding (2020), for example, found that familiarity with K-pop and sex were the only statistically significant predictors of how participants perceived band members' masculinity (p. 11), and Chuyun Oh (2015) found that unlike the male critics of K-pop, female fans "actively embrace male dancing bodies and destigmatize the notion of men dancing" (p. 66). While these studies do point to different gender-based ways of seeing and feeling, the notion of a gaze is not discussed, thus leaving a gap which may be filled by introducing a feminine gaze.

Since Laura Mulvey (1975) first coined the term "male gaze," the female gaze has "been haphazardly defined more often by what is it not than by what it is" (Benson-Allott, 2017, p. 65). To address this gap, I have conceptualized a feminine gaze which will be introduced in chapter five, "Ways of Looking," to foreground the exploration of it in the content analysis of BTS' music videos in the following chapter, chapter six, "Analysis and Discussion." The feminine gaze I introduce in "Ways of Looking" will draw from the definition of the female gaze that focuses on seeing and feeling that television creator, director, and writer, Joey Soloway's (2016) presented at the Toronto International Film Festival, and is informed by the critiques of the female gaze voiced by feminist film and television critics (Benson-Allott, 2017; Cohen, 2017; Nussbaum, 2017; Smith, 2022).

While it would be a mistake to assert that BTS is popular because of their looks – as underscored by the amount of success and professional recognition they have received (Herman, 2020; Hicap, 2021; Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021; Marfo & Grant, 2022) – many fans also do admire their appearances (Bennett, 2016; Oh, 2015; Yim, 2018). Whether BTS's "look" is "good," or "bad," masculine or feminine, or

attractive or unattractive will largely depend on who you ask. This is where the difference in gaze becomes crucial. In other words, when Western critics question male idols' masculinity and sexuality (Yoon, 2019; Choi & Baudinette, 2019), one can guess who does such questioning. It may be beneficial to explore what these women who make up the ARMY make of the aesthetics and images BTS offers and if and how their opinions and ways of seeing differ from that of the dominant male gaze that is guided by hegemonic North American masculinity. Therefore, introducing my conceptualization of a feminine gaze may help give the space necessary to explore these gendered ways of seeing.

Chapter Conclusion

Transnational and transcultural fandom is still understudied (Yoon, 2019) and K-pop fans, perhaps ARMY in particular, often still find their fandom stereotyped and their fannish activities stigmatized or devalued (Ringland et al., 2022). This research will examine the reception of K-pop in North America from a new angle by bringing the gendered and racialized facets of K-pop to the forefront. By pulling together existing scholarship on fans motives, opinions, and political involvement, this chapter highlights the inaccuracies of the image of the K-pop fan as a "bot-like" "immature girl" (S. Choi & Baudinette, 2019; Khan, 2019; Partosa, 2021) who is blinded by her love for K-pop idols. Furthermore, while previous scholars have conceptualized South Korean idol's masculinity (Jung, 2010; Oh, 2015), this research instead focuses on how hegemonic notions of masculinity which privilege Whiteness have shaped the reception of K-pop in local North American contexts. Finally, this research will address a gap in the scholarship which has persisted since the introduction of Laura Mulvey's (1975) "male gaze" by introducing a way to conceptualize a "feminine gaze." This feminine gaze will be used to bring gendered gazing to the centre of the discussion in the context of K-pop and its reception.

IV. The Good, the Bad, & the Bigoted

Chapter Introduction

K-pop fans have certainly garnered attention for their Guinness world record-breaking number of views on K-pop music videos on YouTube (A. Lewis, 2021), and for securing awards for artists, such as BTS' first Billboard Award in 2017 (in the Top Social Artist category) which was won by fan votes (Liu, 2017), but K-pop fans also come together to participate in activist movements. Whether through sharing resources, donating money, or hashtag activism, fans have not hesitated to work together to further socio-political agendas (Basbas, 2021; M. Cho, 2022; Kwon et al., 2020; Rawnsley, 2021; Yadav, 2021). Yet, the stereotype that K-pop fans are young, immature, and do not think for themselves is still often invoked to devalue and dismiss them. As such, this chapter will focus on BTS ARMY to outline a range of political and fun fannish behaviours and activities to capture the complexity, nuance, and diversity of fan experiences. From there, the gendered and racialized aspects of K-pop and its reception in North America will be discussed. To understand the harmful racist, xenophobic, and homophobic comments about BTS that some Western critics have made, I will draw from Michael Kimmel's (1997) conceptualizations of masculinity and recent studies on racial stereotypes in North America. To examine how and why critics so frequently dismiss ARMY, I will draw on research on fandom's pathologization and the gendered stereotyping of fans.

Fandom Activities: Political, Feminist, & Fun

Joining Forces for Justice

Fans are still often characterized as awkward or dysfunctional individuals (Reysen et al., 2016), but this could not be further from the truth for countless fans worldwide. The same energy and passion fans put into their fandom is sometimes used for activism. With their shared affinity for a person or object of popular culture, fans have been recognized for participating in social and political movements (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). K-pop fans are certainly no exception. K-pop fans have shown their capacity to facilitate social change in various cultural and national contexts, from supporting sexual assault survivors

(Anwaya, 2021), making a political statement by disrupting Trump's Tulsa rally in 2020[2] (Evelyn, 2020), to mobilizing to get protestors through court cases and out of jail in Thailand[3] (Rawnsley, 2021). Whether they are setting new streaming records on YouTube or Spotify (Suggitt, 2021) or raising money for social or political causes, such as BLM (Tubiera, 2020), fans have shown time and time again that they can organize, mobilize, and cooperate in establishing and even surpassing their political goals.

Since their debut, BTS "has been associated with various philanthropic activities for humanitarian causes, emergency situations and youth empowerment" (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021, p. 341-342), and their incredibly large fanbase has also shown that they are passionate about participating in activist movements. For example, after Typhoon Ulysses (known as Vamco internationally), ARMYs all over the Philippines came together to raise money for communities heavily affected (Tubiera, 2020). They raised over 4 million pesos (83,000 USD) that was put towards aid for heavily affected communities in the Philippines (Tubiera, 2020). K-pop fans of many different idol groups have made great efforts to show and offer their support during moments of political unrest, natural disasters, or other crises, but global media have primarily recognized BTS ARMY because of the comparatively large scale of their activities (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021). For example, if a K-pop group has 100,000 fans and 20% of them donate $1 to a cause, they will raise 5000 dollars. On the other hand, BTS, who at the time of writing has 42 million Twitter followers, has a much larger fanbase which means a much larger capacity for collective action. While there are likely bots following BTS' official Twitter account, let's say we make a conservative estimate that at least 30 million of those followers are fans. Therefore, if 20% of those 30 million fans donate $1 to a cause, they will raise $1,500,000. As such, even if the percentage of fans

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[2] The Tulsa Rally, held in Oklahoma, was the first campaign rally former US President Donald Trump held since the COVID-19 lockdown started in the United States (Zurcher, 2020).

[3] Anti-government protests began in Thailand in February 2020 after the "Constitutional Court's Constitutional Court's dissolution of the Future Forward Party (an upstart opposition party which advocated greater democracy and was critical of Thailand's military-backed government)" (Rawnsley, 2021, n.p.).

participating in philanthropic or political activities is roughly the same, the difference in output is quite notable. It is also worth mentioning that from their debut, BTS "has been associated with various philanthropic activities for humanitarian causes, emergencies and youth empowerment" (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021, p. 341-342), making them role models for ARMY. As young people often gravitate to media and artists whose messages resonate with them, BTS' willingness to speak up for and about human rights, social justice, and self-love may lend to the fact that ARMY is so willing and proactive when it comes to activism.

K-pop fans do not hesitate to use their digital skills for justice. One platform on which they are particularly active is Twitter, where "hashtags are trended for philanthropy and creating awareness around social issues" (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021, p. 339). While it may be worth noting that some fans participate in these social causes to promote the artists they love and not just for the sake of philanthropy (Jung, 2012), it remains true that these efforts can and do have positive social outcomes, regardless of the intent, and that many fans participate for altruistic reasons. While much activism takes place in or originates from digital spaces, it is not true that it ends there without offline effects. For example, following the call for protest on Twitter and TikTok (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021) against former US President Donald Trump, K-pop fans sought to disrupt the Tulsa rally on June 20th, 2020 (Evelyn, 2020). K-pop fans and TikTok users frustrated by Trump's "attempts to disenfranchise millions of Americans" claimed tickets to the Tulsa rally without any intention to attend (Evelyn, 2020, n.p.). The result was hundreds of empty seats in the 19,000-capacity venue (Evelyn, 2020). Joined by Alt ("alternative") TikTok users, K-pop fans' collaboration allowed them to succeed in upstaging Trump and poignantly showing their disdain for his White supremacist policies.

K-pop fans also used floods of fancams to disrupt the service of an American police app (Tan, 2020). The app, called iWatch, based in Dallas, Texas, was spammed with K-pop fancams following the posting of a

tweet by the Dallas police encouraging users to report “any illegal activity from the [Black Lives Matter] protests” (Tan, 2020). K-pop fans quickly recognized the threat posed by this civil surveillance and sought to disrupt and disable these carceral efforts to protect protestors and their right to protest. Although the Dallas police did not confirm if it was strictly due to the efforts of these fans, they tweeted that the app had crashed not long after K-pop fans tweeted at each other, encouraging everyone to participate in spamming the app with K-pop content (Tan, 2020). It would have been possible to overload the system by spamming with any content, and it is unlikely that fans were attempting to convert White supremacists into K-pop fans. Hence, the use of K-pop-related content also warrants consideration. It may be argued that by using K-pop-related content, which fans have previously explained brings them comfort (Laffan, 2021; J. H. Lee et al., 2021; McLaren & Jin, 2020), fans were perhaps able to find a semblance of hope throughout an otherwise dismal period.

K-pop & BLM

Perhaps the most notable example of BTS and ARMY’s political engagement is their support of the Black Lives Matter movement. After BTS donated a million dollars to the cause, ARMY continued to contribute to the BLM movement on Twitter by leading a campaign using the hashtag #MatchAMillion (Tubiera, 2020). The campaign led by ARMYs raised over a million dollars (Kwon et al., 2020; Tubiera, 2020). Beyond capital contribution, K-pop fan accounts on Twitter used K-pop-related content to redirect attention and disrupt hashtags which misrepresented or harmed the BLM movement, such as the #WhiteLivesMatter hashtag (M. Cho, 2022). K-pop fans were able to “hijack attention and render hashtags like #whitelivesmatter unusable to anti-BLM actors who attempted to rally support on the platform” (M. Cho, 2022, p. 271) by using gifs and fancams (short video clips of K-pop performances). This quick mobilization by fans showed that they had a collective goal, political commitment (in this case, that of an anti-racist K-pop fan), passion and compassion. By spamming the hashtags with K-pop-

related content, they managed to break up some of the racist discourses related to the Black Lives Matter movement on Twitter.

Emerging from K-pop's BLM-related actions were also difficult conversations addressing cultural appropriation and the not-so-subtle racism within the fandom and K-pop industry itself. While these conversations were happening long before the waves of BLM protests in 2020, they were brought to the forefront, forcing many to be critical of the industry and the fandom they were a part of. From idols "saying the N-word, wearing blackface, and donning Black hairstyles for 'hip hop concepts'" (Mulenga, 2022, n.p.), there have been many instances where fans have been angry, hurt, and disappointed by idols actions. Many fans, likely those who were not victim of the cultural appropriation and racism, do not point fingers at the idols – instead, they criticize the management companies in charge of styling and promotional decisions (M. Cho, 2022). The responsibility then falls on fans who try to, or feel they must, "become industry monitors who intervene on behalf of both the communities affected by racism and the idol performers who are often thought to be innocent of negative intent" (M. Cho, 2022, p. 273). As K-pop continues to gain popularity on a global scale, it is the hope of many that companies and their stylists will learn from past mistakes, acknowledge and apologize for their offences, and cease the inappropriate and hurtful coopting of Black culture (amongst others) and stop relying on (primarily Black) fans to fill the role of educator.

The fandom does not always offer refuge for fans hurt and disappointed by the cultural insensitivity and appropriation perpetuated by the K-pop industry. In 2018, hashtags like #BlackARMYSMatter and #BlackARMYSEquality trended on Twitter after Black ARMYs lamented that there was racism within the fandom (Reddy, 2020). This is not a problem unique to BTS ARMY either – fans of many K-pop groups have expressed disappointment and hurt because of the racism within their fandoms (Reddy, 2020). For some Black fans who have previously left the fandom due to the exclusion, abuse, and

harassment they were forced to endure (Reddy, 2020), the fan activism during BLM may have created new tensions. For example, Twitter user @TamarWrites tweeted, "I really do love the fancam activism, but it's frustrating to see the widespread praise without a single mention of the pervasiveness of racism & doxxing towards black fans in kpop spaces happening this week (& always) by outlets. Editors need to assign stories not trends" on June 3, 2020 (Reddy, 2020, n.p.). The reality is that there is a serious need for many K-pop fans and artists alike to get educated on how to be anti-racist and to be better allies so that they can open up spaces for Black fans in the fandom. These are long overdue changes and should not only be prioritized during large-scale social movements. They should be everyday politics to make the fandom a safe and welcoming space for all fans.

Black fans have worked hard to open up spaces for themselves in extractive fandom communities (and industry) that have stopped them from taking up space that they have contributed to creating. This effort to carve out space for Black fans within the fandom points to how predominately White it is. In the introductory chapter of her book, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, and Others*, Sara Ahmed (2020) talks about how, in order to find our way, we must be able to extend into a space. She explains that "the work of inhabitance involves orientation devices; ways of extending bodies into space that creates new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space" (Ahmed, 2020, p. 11). Importantly, Ahmed (2020) argues that certain bodies are invited to inhabit and participate in particular spaces while others are left out. This orientation or disorientation to space is a way to conceptualize the ongoings in the K-pop fandom. BTS fandom spaces are dominated by White bodies and thus, these spaces extend easily and freely to those fans. In doing so, these same spaces do not leave room for Black fans to extend in similar ways.

These spatial limits potentially create unwelcoming and disorientating space as it is through the extension of bodies into space that the strange is made familiar. If this extension fails, disorientation occurs

(Ahmed, 2020). In other words, the K-pop fandom will not become a comfortable and safe place for all fans until Black fans can extend freely into these spaces. They must be given room to create new folds and contours, as Ahmed (2020) describes, which cannot be facilitated without more fans becoming anti-racist allies who, through recognizing how Whiteness takes up space, can use the space they have to amplify marginalized voices and not only support anti-racist movements during times of upheaval. White fans must be also be willing to relinquish some of the space they have taken. Given that much fandom activity takes place online and algorithms often work against people of colour (Noble, 2018), this allyship may look like White fans consciously and deliberately engaging with content posted by racialized K-pop fans, proactively reporting the accounts of users who upload racist or otherwise harmful content, and speaking up for racialized fans who may have their messages suppressed and against the platforms suppressing them. All in all, praise for the K-pop fandom's anti-racist efforts must not overshadow the fact that much work still needs to be done within the community and industry. The large-scale efforts made within the fandom during BLM are a start, but that momentum must not be lost moving forward.

The K-pop Community Support During the COVID-19 Pandemic

K-pop fans have also been “major contributors to charity during COVID-19” (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021, p. 338). These efforts, especially on behalf of ARMY, have been global. For example, an India-based BTS fan club called Bangtan India posted a donation link on Twitter on April 23rd, 2021, imploring local and international fans to donate whatever they could spare for COVID relief in India (Yadav, 2021). The fundraiser raised more than Rs. 20 lakhs for COVID-19 relief in under 24 hours (Anwaya, 2021). The money raised was given to “various NGOs and organizations to provide free oxygen cylinders, medical supplies delivery and boost the kitchen that is providing meals to COVID-19 patients at home and homeless” (Anwaya, 2021, n.p.).

Outside of financial contributions, some research has also shown that the K-pop fanbase was a key promoter of "positive health practices on a global scale" (Chang et al., 2021, p. 3). In particular, BTS and ARMY were recognized for their ability to help proliferate the health-related hashtag #WearAMask (Chang et al., 2021). ARMY was active in proliferating this message, encouraging everyone to wear masks to keep themselves and others safe. Moreover, although BTS did not directly issue any explicit statements, Dr. Tedro, the president of the World Health Organization (WHO), made a tweet thanking BTS for "reminding #BTSARMY and the rest of us to #WearAMask and take care of our health and well-being…" on August 21st, 2020 (Chang et al., 2021). Compared to similar tweets, the mention of BTS notably improved the proliferation of Tweets, indicating that "the inclusion of K-pop not only increased the depth of diffusion but also toward more diverse and traditionally under-served areas both globally and domestically" (Chang et al., 2021, p. 10). Therefore, even non-grassroots activism has proven to have measurably positive social effects.

Additionally, there is a culture of raising funds or contributing to social good to celebrate artists' birthdays or song releases within the K-pop fandom (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021). Once again, BTS ARMY is notable for the grandiose scale of their activities. In 2021, before V's birthday on December 30th, ARMYs worldwide celebrated through philanthropy. For example, Chinese ARMYs partnered with the China Youth Development Foundation to organize fundraisers to help build a primary school in rural China, many ARMYs shared links to various charities seeking to provide food and shelter for the homeless in Bangladesh on Twitter, and Canadian ARMYs organized a fundraiser to plant trees in Northern British Columbia to support the wildlife there (Basbas, 2021), to name just a few fan-led projects. Of course, some fans celebrate privately or not at all, but a sizable group of fans strive to make the world a more equitable place to show their support and adoration for idols.

Hashtag Activism: Feminist K-pop Fans

K-pop and K-pop fans are stigmatized and stereotyped in Western contexts. In general, female fans are frequently devalued and pathologized (Click, 2009; Dare-Edwards, 2015; Gerrard, 2022) and K-pop fans specifically are often viewed as childish and immature (Choi & Baudinette, 2019; Khan, 2019), while male K-pop idols are met with xenophobic, racist, and homophobic comments (S. Choi & Baudinette, 2019; Harvey, 2022; Khan, 2019; J.-H. Kim, 2021). Since it seems as though Western critics of K-pop idols and fans, BTS ARMY included, will use anything they can to devalue and criticize the community, fans may hesitate to shine a light on ignorant or misogynist lyrics or comments made by K-pop idol out of fear that it may give more ammunition to already vocal non-fans and critics.

When K-pop idols express misogynist beliefs of opinions, it can be very disappointing, hurtful, and shocking for fans, especially feminist fans. For long-term fans, this disappointment and frustration may run even deeper. Although such situations may be difficult to navigate for fans as they must critique the lyrics, statements, or behaviours of someone they looked up to, there are feminist K-pop fans who call attention to and speak out again the misogyny in the industry. While some feminist fans have used hashtags to mobilize and speak out against idols for lyrics or statements made during appearances on variety shows, interviews, and the like (Y. Lee, 2019), being an active feminist does not go without punishment. In the past, feminist fans have received criticism which quickly escalated into cyberbullying (Y. Lee, 2019). Therefore, not only is it challenging to navigate these complicated feelings of betrayal and disappointment, but voicing these criticisms often means opening oneself up to hateful and angry replies.

The difficulty fans may experience when critiquing their favourite idols is not just due to personal conflict. There is a powerful sense of unity and sacrifice within the fandom because fans are considered central to an idol's success (Y. Lee, 2019). While criticism from outsiders can be fought against, criticism from inside the fandom goes against the fan’s prescribed role of maintaining and managing the fandom’s

public image and keeping it “clean” (Y. Lee, 2019, p. 37). Since the fandom operates largely as a collective, “anyone who goes against that collective becomes a kk-ppa, which translates to ‘fans who criticize’” (Y. Lee, 2019, p. 37). This sense of unity, sacrifice, and personal responsibility to ensure K-pop idols achieve success and keep a “clean” image of the fandom may further complicate female fans' feminist critiques of male idols in Western contexts.

Nonetheless, there are fans who *do* participate in feminist hashtag activism and who *do* ask idols to do and be better. In recent years on Twitter, some hashtags used for feminist movements include #WeWantBTSFeedback and #IamNotFlutteredAnymore. #WeWantBTSFeedback called for feedback regarding some of the lyrics in RM’s mixtape released on March 20, 2015, called “Joke,” which fans criticized for “reinforcing patriarchy and social dominance over women” (Y. Lee, 2019, p. 24). Fans also used #IamNotFlutteredAnymore to identify “parallels between media romanticization of dating violence and the messages by K-pop idols” (Y. Lee, 2019, p. 31). Being a globally accessible platform, anyone can participate in hashtag activism on Twitter, but fans have spoken out specifically in South Korean contexts too. One example is when fans bravely spoke out against Yu Chun of the group JYJ, an idol many fans had spent the majority of their youth idolizing (J. Kim, 2017). In June 2016, after news broke about Chun’s sexual assault allegations, fans settled on voting to decide their stance and reaction (J. Kim, 2017). This resulted in fans creating a statement voicing their disdain for Chun’s actions and revoking their support (J. Kim, 2017). These fans, some of whom had been dedicated fans for over a decade (J. Kim, 2017), stood in solidarity with the victims despite the emotional turmoil, pain, and disbelief the news initially brought them. What is evidenced by this solidarity and fans political engagement in general is that the stereotypical view of K-pop fans as blinded by adoration for their idols, “bot-like,” and “immature” (Choi & Baudinette, 2019; Khan, 2019; Partosa, 2021) is oppositional to the complex roles fans navigate in order to participate in fandom while living out active socio-political lives.

The Politics of Fun

The aesthetics of K-pop may be what catches the attention (both of fans and critics alike), but K-pop is just as much about music as it is about anything else. While critics may try to boil BTS's success down to good looks, the frequency of their songs hitting Number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 singles (Marfo & Grant, 2022) and their slew of awards and nominations (McIntyre, 2022) shows that ARMY is listening to BTS just as much as they are looking at them. Much of the research exploring how K-pop fans are influenced by their consumption of K-pop found that listening to K-pop has various positive effects on fans (Laffan, 2021; J. H. Lee et al., 2021; McLaren & Jin, 2020; Rubin, 2021), pointing to a significant appeal for fans. K-pop fans even show increased feelings of happiness, self-esteem, and social connectedness (Laffan, 2021) after joining the fandom. The remainder of this section will further explore the appeal of K-pop, specifically the music and lyrics of BTS.

In the age of streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music, music choices seem almost infinite, yet ARMY has chosen to listen to BTS. One of the reasons is the diversity of BTS's extensive discography, which includes songs in various genres, including rap, pop, R&B, EDM, hip-hop, and ballads. This musical diversity allows fans to select music fitting to the mood they are in or the activity they are doing (J. H. Lee et al., 2021). Therefore, it is no surprise that the majority of K-pop fans listen to K-pop either every day (approximately 60%) or several times per week (approximately 34%) (Laffan, 2021). In this way, BTS becomes a constant, an element of fans' lives that is predictable, and predictability can bring comfort, especially during turbulent times. In this way, BTS's music may function as an anchor, explaining how fans self-soothe, find encouragement and comfort and feel understood (J. H. Lee et al., 2021) through listening to BTS's music.

An analysis of BTS' lyrics reveals how and why some fans feel comforted and understood by listening to BTS. BTS have been recognized for their lyrics which include social commentary (Y. Kim, 2019;

McLaren & Jin, 2020). Some notable songs are "Baepsae" (BTS, 2015) (often translated as "Silver Spoon" or "Crow-tit"), "which discusses the economic hardships facing youth compared to their parents' generation," and "Am I Wrong" (BTS, 2016), which "comments on global inequalities and the lack of action to address them" (McLaren & Jin, 2020, p. 111). These songs are not an exception to the rule either – an analysis of BTS' song lyrics reveals that many of their songs feature socially conscious topics (Y. Kim, 2019). In addition to the growing wealth gap and global inequalities, some of the socially conscious topics BTS has explored include consumerism and materialism (see "Go Go" (BTS, 2017) and "Spine Breaker" (BTS, 2014)), the loneliness that permeates much of modern society (see "Whalien 52" (BTS, 2015)), and the immense pressure on students to be academically successful (see "N.O" (BTS, 2013)) (Kelley, 2017). In "Go Go" (BTS, 2017), for example, some lyrics include, "No money but I wanna go far away/ I don't have money but I wanna relax" and "Pinching pennies to spend it all on wasting it/ Leave me be, even if I overspend." The song is intended to engage in "criticism of the materialism rife in society through parody" (Kelley, 2017) through the dissonance between the serious lyrics and upbeat sound of the music. Finally, their song "21st Century Girl" (BTS, 2016) has been considered one of the most feminist songs in the industry for its emphasis on women's strength, encouraging listeners with lyrics such as, "tell them you're strong" and "tell them you're enough" (Kelley, 2017). Their music also includes "themes of youth, overcoming challenges, and self-discovery" (McLaren & Jin, 2020, p. 112), which likely resonate with the majority of their fanbase who are transitioning into adulthood (*2022 Results*, n.d.)

Some ARMYs say they have been able to overcome hardships through BTS (McLaren & Jin, 2020), such as daily anxieties and fears over interpersonal issues, work, or school. This may be in part due to the fact that BTS's music also includes themes that support mental health and encourage self-love and empathy (Blady, 2021; McLaren & Jin, 2020). These themes allow fans to feel safe and partake in self-reflection that may lead "to opportunities for introspection, self-acceptance, and self-growth" (J. H. Lee et al., 2021). It may be thought that since BTS's music is accessible (i.e., available for streaming on many

services), fans can reflect on these messages in spaces that feel safe for them, such as in the comfort of their homes. Furthermore, since many of us listen to music on mobile devices we carry throughout the day, it is possible for fans to both metaphorically and literally bring BTS along with them in their daily lives, which may help fans anchor themselves during uncomfortable, scary, or difficult times. In this sense, BTS is a home away from home – or home when the house does not feel like home.

Some studies have found that K-pop may lead fans to wander down new creative avenues. As previously mentioned, BTS has an extensive and diverse discography, often with creative and stimulating music videos to accompany them, meaning plenty of potential inspiration for ARMYs. As such, fans may uncover new talents, passions, or interests that were latent until they became K-pop fans. For example, after interviewing K-pop fans who spoke of their newfound desire to learn Korean, their decision to begin creating fanart, or their recent interest in fashion after feeling inspired by idols' outfits, Mohd Jenol et al. (2022) concluded that "being a K-pop fan is a way for someone to express themselves and discover their talent" (p. 9). The fact that K-pop idols are often looked up to for their talents and work ethic may lend to fans desire to try out new things in an attempt to emulate them. Since K-pop is a global phenomenon, this has manifested in unique ways as local and global sensibilities mesh. In Latin America, for example, the "virtues encapsulated in K-pop stars, such as hard work, resilience, patience, and dedication required in fulfilling one's dream, are internalized into the personal lives of Latin American fans" (B. Han, 2017, p. 2262). As such, these idols become role models that then help fans "(re)imagine a new sense of social identity as an everyday and modern cosmopolitan subject that frees them from the constraints of society" (B. Han, 2017, p. 2262). Therefore, K-pop can work as an alternative text, offering fans new imaginaries, ideas, and possibilities that may allow them to envision a life they may not have thought possible before becoming a fan.

Connection & Community

Scholar Lynn Zubernis (2012) has argued that "in order for a media text to be a successful cultural attractor, there must also be a way in for fans, with meaningful ways to participate" (p. 3). This may lead one to ask how international K-pop fans can enjoy meaningful participation in fandom despite geographic and cultural distances. Although Canadian fans may lament that K-pop groups, BTS included, often skip over Canada, most Western fans do not – or are not able to – attend K-pop concerts. A survey of nearly 1500 K-pop fans from predominantly Western countries found that only approximately 34% of these fans had attended a K-pop concert in the past, and even more telling is that more than 50% of the respondents did not attend *any* K-pop-related events, whether it be concerts, workshops, or themed events (Laffan, 2021). These findings thus point us to where meaningful participation most often occurs, and this is online.

K-pop fans, especially outside of South Korea, generally participate in fandom in digital spaces. The survey mentioned above found that most fans in Western countries participated in several online fandom groups, primarily those on Reddit and Twitter (Laffan, 2021). Fans engage with official content, such as music videos and idol appearances on variety shows, with creative work done by other ARMYs, and with each other. Creative expression by ARMY takes on various forms, from playfully created memes to painstakingly created fan art; there is a massive pool of content related to BTS because of ARMY's creative labour. Inspired by BTS (whether it be their music, music videos, personalities, etc.), ARMYs have created artwork, baked goods, jewelry, video edits, poems, clothing designs, online trends, stationary, and fan fiction, to name just a few.

As previously mentioned, fans may find BTS's music feels like home, and the communities built within the fandom may have similar effects. David Morley (2001) conceptualizes home as not just a physical space but as the "'spaces of belonging' (and identity) at different geographical scales – the local, national,

or transnational communities in which people think of themselves as being 'at home'" (p. 425). This conceptualization of 'home' may help understand how ARMYs feel safe and welcome in online fandom spaces. This notion is encapsulated in the 'Magic Shop.' The Magic Shop is founded on BTS and ARMY's shared values, and because it transcends physical space, it "can exist anywhere BTS and ARMY have the potential to play" (Ringland et al., 2022, n.p.). This play originates with BTS, who engage in activities, conversations, or content creation that ARMY may engage with through editing, commentary, in-group humour, and other playful activities (Ringland et al., 2022). ARMY has created a space around BTS, with their music being "the first point of contact and the common 'language' used throughout the community" (Ringland et al., 2022, n.p.). For long-term fans who have spent years consistently engaging in fandom these feelings of being at home may be even stronger because of the degree of familiarity they feel and the fandom-specific knowledge they have accumulated. With a device to connect to the Internet or access saved images or files, no matter where they are, ARMY has a place they can always go home to, lending to the intense affective intimacy between BTS and ARMY.

One of the ways intimacy is fostered between idols and fans is through live streams because they allow fans to share time and (digital) space with artists. For the majority of fans who are unable to attend concerts, viewing live streams while they take place may be one of the only times they can connect with an idol in "real-time" rather than consuming content after the fact. The most popular streaming platform is V Live. V Live was launched in 2015 by South Korea's renowned Internet company, Naver, and was designed with K-pop fans and artists in mind (S. Kim et al., 2021). The platform encourages artists to do live streams in waiting rooms, cars, or at home (S. Kim et al., 2021), allowing them to interact with fans in comfortable, casual, and intimate settings. Idols regularly appear glamorous and polished on stage and during public appearances, but during V Lives they often have an opportunity to speak casually and candidly (relative to scripted public appearances) in environments that seem to cut through the idol persona and showcase more of their personality in a humanizing way. V Live also creates an opportunity

for fans and idols to engage in conversation as viewers may send questions and comments for the idols to reply to. For many fans, this may be the only chance they have to directly communicate or be acknowledged, and the thrill of potentially being heard alone may be motivation enough to get fans tuning into the V Live. As of 2019, Naver stated that 85% of V Live users were not in Korea (Jun, 2019), meaning international fans who may not have access to K-pop-related events in their countries can enjoy intimacy and community with idols and fans via live stream.

Some live streams done by BTS are then uploaded to the verified YouTube channel BTS LIVE with English subtitles. These uploads give ARMY more agency in how they watch the stream, and the comment section provides community and connection for them to share things they noticed, thought, or felt while watching the stream. For example, a stream uploaded to BTS LIVE on April 16, 2022, called "[ENG SUB] BTS V, JIMIN & J-HOPE LIVE VLIVE (2022.04.16) BTS VLIVE AFTER CONCERT" includes comments such as "17:19 Taetae's laugh so cute 😂💜" (user @Yam Sacramento) and "Hobi's smile is so contagious and his laugh is music to my ears.." (user @Biko Piko). Comments that specify a timestamp allow fans to share a moment despite temporal and geographic differences, and ARMY may feel connected to other fans by reading their thoughts, comments, and stories in the comment section, in addition to the intimate connection they feel with BTS through the viewing of live streams. In short, V Live facilitates digitally mediated intimacy between idols and fans by allowing them to share (digital) space and the comment features on YouTube allow even more fans to connect with BTS and with each other.

Racial & Gendered Reception of BTS in North America

A study of K-pop in Canada, or Western contexts in general, would be incomplete without interrogating the gendered and racialized aspects that shape the reception of and reaction to K-pop and K-pop fans in local contexts. Even after BTS's professional recognition, Western critics maintain that they are confused

and cannot believe BTS could become so popular. What is usually argued, either implicitly or explicitly, is that BTS's popularity is not due to their music but because of their looks or the immaturity of the so-called 'fangirls' who support them (Khan, 2019). Critics also do not hesitate to question the members' sexuality or masculinity (Choi & Baudinette, 2019) or make xenophobic or racist remarks. For example, following BTS Billboard win in 2017, racist comments "reducing the group to 'these Asian f*cks' and an 'Asian One Direction'" (Khan, 2019, n.p.) littered social media. Perhaps more worrisome is the fact that online trolls do not only make ignorant and harmful comments, but even public figures have also taken part in unjustly criticizing BTS (Khan, 2019). In other words, it is evident that the reception of male South Korean idol groups, BTS included, is shaped by racism and homophobia. The reaction to young female K-pop fans stems from a long cultural history of devaluing and pathologizing fans, often young and feminine fans (Click, 2009; Dare-Edwards, 2015; Gerrard, 2022). Given the almost unheard-of level of fame and success reached by BTS and the huge, active, and visible nature of ARMY, BTS ARMY provides ample material to study these racialized and gendered elements of K-pop in Canada.

North American Stereotypes About Asian Men

In her foundational text *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990) introduced the theory of gender performativity. She argued that gender is not natural or internal, it is not who you are, but rather it is what you *do*. As such, it is through the ritualized repetition of performances of gender that create gender itself. Importantly, these performances are in accordance with social norms about gender expression, which works to legitimize and naturalize said norms. Working adjacent to Butler's theory of gender performativity, Michael Kimmel (1997) conceptualized masculinity as a social construct and conceptualized it as a set of meanings constantly in flux. He theorized that these meanings were constructed through relationships with the self, others, and the world. As such, notions of masculinity are never static, and they do not exist on their own, but rather masculinity is understood via comparisons and relationships. In other words, masculinity is constructed "in opposition to a set of 'others' – racial

minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women" (Kimmel, 1997, p. 224). Consequently, within the dominant culture in North America, masculinity that "defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men" (Kimmel, 1997, p. 228) sets the standard to which all other men are measured.

In the mid-20th century, Asian men became the primary "other," representing a 'non-man' from which American men could assert their masculinity (W. Han, 2016; Irvin, 2016; Kimmel, 1997; Yoo, 2022).There is a long history of Asian male bodies being femininized by Western discourse and images (Boone, 1995; Yoo, 2022). This history goes back as far as colonization, when, as Joseph Boone (1995) explains the sexual politics of the time labelled "Oriental" men as feminine while simultaneously constructing European men as masculine, thus beginning the legitimization of Whiteness as being inherently masculine. Hyun Joo Yoo (2022) explains that in North America, these beliefs were then perpetuated and naturalized through negative portrayals of Asian men in American popular culture:

> "In particular, during the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movements that followed, the American mass media, largely controlled and regulated by the white majority, effectively maintained the hierarchical power structure of white male dominance and Asian male subordination through the exclusion of Asian males from popular conceptions of manliness" (p. 163).

Asian men were also often depicted in popular media as working traditionally devalued, feminized forms of labour, which worked in tandem with portrayals of Asian men and their bodies as being small, thin, and weak (W. Han, 2016; Yoo, 2022) to uphold White masculinity as the norm or the standard. These images have had a lasting impact on the North American imaginary. A study concluded that in the United States, "API [Asian American and Pacific Islander] men are perceived to be weak and asexual," and both API men and women are "the objects of racialized violence and sexual harassment" (Azhar et al., 2021, p. 289). Due to systemic heterosexism, sexism, and transphobia, those who do not conform to traditional conceptualizations of gender or sexuality are often subject to discrimination (Nadal et al., 2015). These media images of and stereotypes about Asian men which use their racialized bodies as comparison points

to uphold White masculinity have played in hand in how BTS is perceived by North Americans who scrutinize their masculinity and sexuality.

It should be noted that this way of thinking is, unfortunately, not unique to North America. In Pakistan, a billboard of Jungkook from BTS was quickly down by the Islamist political party stating they had received complaints as BTS “promotes homosexuality” (Rude, 2021), and a printer in Russia declined to print images of BTS and Stray Kids, another male K-pop group, stating they had enough “normal” clients so they did not need to print images of the idols who were not “hiding their orientations” (Padgett, 2021). BTS has broken industry norms in South Korea by speaking up for LGBTQIA+ rights (J.-H. Kim, 2018), but decisions to remove images of the idols are largely based on how they look, not knowledge about the inclusive values BTS stands for. In other words, based on their appearances, assumptions about BTS sexuality and masculinity have been made in countries that have historically had rigid gender norms and disdain for the queer community at large, such as Russia (Khazan, 2013; Reid, 2023), Pakistan (Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2020; *Pakistan*, 2019), and the United States (Kane, 2022), underscoring the widespread perception that male K-pop idol groups, like BTS, do not perform gender in ways that are expected of men.

As levels of anti-Asian hate rose during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cabral, 2021; Gover et al., 2020), xenophobic and racist comments became more aggressive. Matthias Matuschik, a German radio host, compared BTS to the coronavirus, suggesting they needed to be eradicated with a vaccine (Rolli, 2021). Sal Governale, an American actor and crew member on *The Howard Stern Show*, also accused BTS of having the virus (J. Kim, 2021), and Tucker Carlson, an American Fox News host, mocked BTS for speaking about anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States (Harvey, 2022). The discriminatory rhetoric spewed on prominent media platforms inevitably filters down into smaller venues, such as social media. During an interview, one of my participants said she had seen racist comments on Instagram and

suggested that I take a look at the NBA page. BTS member, Suga, attended a basketball game on January 12, 2023, and following his attendance, the official NBA Instagram account made five posts featuring him on Instagram over a few days. After spending some time scrolling through the comment section, I recognized there were generally three types of comments on these posts: professions of love and support from fans, racist and homophobic remarks from non-fans, and comments expressing contempt for BTS fans. Some racist comments included "Yao Ming's daughter" (by user @ur_xxxxx) "Squid game😱😱😱" (by user @natxxxxx), "who cares, he eats bats and caused covid" (by user @dabxxxxx) and "Bro looks like Tachibana from Yakuza 💀" (by user @tfnxxxxx). Many of these comments include references to Asia, but incorrectly, and likely deliberately. Yao Ming is a Chinese basketball executive and former professional player. Squid Game was a popular South Korean show that aired on Netflix (that BTS was not a part of). References to Yakuza are references to Japan, not South Korea. Comments about COVID-19 underscore the lingering effects of another instance of racist finger-pointing in connection to a pandemic. Comments such as these underscore, yet again, how non-fans employ racism and homophobia to harass BTS online.

Infantilizing & Pathologizing Fans

Bong Joon-Ho, the South Korean director of the Oscar-winning film *Parasite*, has received immense praise and recognition for his filmmaking since the release of his film in 2019. While they have different crafts, Bong and BTS are both artists who have been recognized for the notable impact of their work and its sociopolitical themes. However, in North American contexts, the reception of Bong and BTS have been all too different. While many critics based in the United States have declared *Parasite* a "masterpiece," BTS's music, "even the group's most well-received, expertly crafted albums – remains unfairly related to pop culture fluff by many seasoned critics" (Russell, 2020, n.p.). Perhaps the most significant difference between Bong and BTS is the perceived age and gender of their fans. While fans of Bong's fans may be imagined to be mature, educated adults (such an imaginary may exist due to the

sociopolitical themes of *Parasite*), ARMY is conceived of as being almost exclusively excessively emotional and immature 'fangirls.' The result is that the value of Bong's work increases as it is appreciated by the "right" audience in comparison to BTS' work which is enjoyed by the "wrong" audience. In other words, the significance of BTS' achievements and influence are being devalued not only because of the belief that popular culture is below high culture, but by virtue of their young and feminine fanbase. The infantilization and pathologization of girls and women consequently marks the objects of their affection as deviant and immature by association which also shapes BTS' reception negatively.

There is a long cultural history of devaluing and pathologizing young and feminine fans. Ysabel Gerrard (2022) argues that the "devaluation of girlish fandoms [is] based on a unique intersection of gender *and* age" (p. 1045, emphasis in original). That is to say that it is not simply that a fan is a woman, but that they are a *young* woman or a girl. This dynamic is so pervasive and sticky that it is even observed in intra-fandom behaviour. Middle-aged female fans may be quick to distinguish or differentiate their fanship from younger fans, situating their fanship as more mature or "rational and acceptable" (Gerrard, 2022, p. 1051) due to the stigma surrounding young feminine fanship. Adding to the desire to distance oneself from such an image is the stigma stemming from the fact that fans have long since been categorized as those with low self-esteem, weak social bonds or no friends at all, and those with a dull 'real' life (Lewis, 1992, p. 18). Lisa Lewis (1992) argues that categorizing fandom as risky or even dangerous allows fans to be painted as deviant and thus disreputable. This leads to fans being treated as 'others,' or the "deranged version of 'us'" (Lewis, 1992, p. 11). Fans can be categorized as such because "the division between worthy and unworthy is based in an assumed dichotomy between reason and emotion" (Lewis, 1992, p. 21). The enthusiastic, lively, vocal fan is seen as less worthy because they engage in 'emotional' behaviour. This passionate and emotional behaviour is seen as less reasonable, thus less worthy, and sometimes even dangerous.

These gendered discourses of fandom as irrational or overly emotional have changed over the years, but seemly only for male fans. As such, what must be further interrogated is why young and feminine fans are the ones still belittled with words such as “obsession,” “madness,” and “hysteria” (Click, 2009; Ehrenreich et al., 1992) in the media. While male fans may engage in the same or similar behaviours, such as paying large sums of money to attend events and then cheering and shouting throughout, purchasing merchandise, and consuming content related to the object or person(s) of their affinity, they are seldom pathologized or devalued in the same ways as female fans. The social and cultural acceptance of male fannish behaviour and rejection of female fannish behaviour may be in part due to Lewis’ (1992) notion that fans are decided worthy or unworthy, ‘normal’ or pathological, based on whether or not the behaviour is seen as cool and rational or hot and emotional. In this context, women will likely always be seen as exhibiting unworthy, pathological fanship because in Western cultures, the belief that women are more emotional than men is one of the strongest and most enduring gender stereotypes held (Shields, 2002). This incorrect but nonetheless salient culturally ingrained stereotype that women contain and express disruptive emotional excesses while men remain ‘unemotional,’ behaving in only rational and logical ways (Brescoll, 2016; Carnevale et al., 2019; Fielding, 2021; Frasca et al., 2022), may point to why men, even those engaging in similar fannish practices, are not pathologized in the same way female fans are. This pathologization based on widely held gender stereotypes may also discourage women from exploring and enjoying the pleasure gained through fannish behaviours and curtails serious explorations of what makes the objects or subjects of female fans’ affinity appealing (Click, 2009).

The pathologizing and devaluing of young and feminine fans can be observed in how ARMY is talked about – whether by media members or by critics of BTS. Despite being a very diverse group of individuals (Partosa, 2021; Ringland et al., 2022), ARMY is frequently devalued and dismissed by being described as being young and immature (S. Choi & Baudinette, 2019; Khan, 2019). The gendered terms

used to describe ARMY are not to be overlooked since it is that discourse of 'fangirl' that is commonly used to devalue young and feminine fans and their fannish behaviours (Click, 2009; Dare-Edwards, 2015; Gerrard, 2022). Although any young and feminine fan may be subject to infantilization and sexism, race is also central to how fans are received by non-fans (Yoon, 2019), meaning that positionality may affect the stickiness of these derogatory and devaluing 'fangirl' images. Prevailing Western stereotypes that Asian women are submissive and passive, docile, and cute and small (Dewey, 2016; Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018; Ro, 2020), to name just a few, may deepen the perceived link between their fanship and the 'fangirl' discourse. That is to say that since many stereotypes about Asian women are *already* infantilizing, the infantilizing 'fangirl' association is deepened, thus increasing the stickiness of these associations for Asian fans more than their White counterparts.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter sought to showcase a few of the myriad of ways participation in K-pop fandom adds happiness, comfort, and pleasure to fans' lives. Fans positive experiences in K-pop fandom and with K-pop texts may also be thought to contribute to the affective intimacy formed between fans and idols as fans learn to recognize fandom as a safe space. Furthermore, this chapter aimed to highlight that the standard critique of young female fans as "immature girls" (Choi & Baudinette, 2019; Khan, 2019) is at odds with the reality of these K-pop fans' involvement in activism. ARMYs' involvement in furthering socio-political agendas and philanthropic initiatives underscores the degree of cooperation, compassion, intelligence, drive, and hope these fans have. ARMY are not idle dreamers; they have shown on numerous occasions that they recognize the incredible power they possess as a collective and have mobilized in any way they can to contribute to making the world more equitable. Although critics may try to dismiss or devalue their labour, efforts, and intellect, ARMY has continued to work towards its goals. Perhaps retweeting, amplifying, engaging, and donating with the speed, efficiency, and success that ARMY has made them fitting of the critique that they engage in "bot-like" behaviour (Partosa, 2021).

However, it certainly is not aligned with these criticisms' negative connotations, given all the social good ARMY has, and continues to, fight for.

This chapter also called attention to the racial and gendered aspects of K-pop, which have shaped its reception in Western contexts, Canada included. It has presented numerous cases where critics of BTS resort to racist, xenophobic, and homophobic comments to try to diminish their fame and success. Such instances should shed light on the fact that, as Kimmel (1997) theorized over 20 years ago, Asian men are still often used as points of comparison for White men to uphold their hegemonic notions of masculinity. Given the recent findings that API men are still perceived to be “weak and asexual” and “the objects of racialized violence” (Azhar et al., 2021, p. 289), the ignorant and hateful comments BTS has received are not surprising, but they are still upsetting and disappointing. As this chapter has shown, ARMY, too, has nasty comments thrown at them. The long cultural history of devaluing, dismissing, and pathologizing young and feminine fans is far from over. Nonetheless, as this chapter has shown, ARMY has continued to show their love and support for BTS, regardless of what non-fans or critics say, which, again, speaks to the affective and intimacy of K-pop fandom.

V. Ways of Looking

Chapter Introduction

What women desire is a question that seems to elude some men. With the proliferation of social media, many women have been vocal about what they like and want, yet these desires are still met with disbelief and confusion. Some recent discussions online highlight how widespread this confusion is, such as the topic of “the distinguishable pattern of women being attracted to so-called ‘ugly’ men” (Woehle, 2023). The so-called “ugly” men that women have expressed attraction to publicly are often celebrities who depart from conventional aesthetic and behavioural ideals for men in North American contexts. American actor and comedian Pete Davidson is one such man. Davidson’s openness about his struggles with his

mental health, his self-deprecating sense of humour, and his thin tall frame (Kirkpatrick, 2021; Peyser, 2021; Serna-Diez, 2021) have many men questioning his appeal to women.

An example often referenced to showcase this phenomenon of women turning their attention toward the "wrong" man is the case of Marvel's Loki. Instead, I argue that the popularity of Marvel's Loki underscores that more and more audience members have a desire to see expansive concepts of gender that push beyond hegemonic ideals. After the release of *Thor: The Dark World* in 2013, the fact that so many feminine and queer fans flocked to Loki rather than Thor caused quite a stir (Beaton, 2021; Jacobbs, 2013) as Thor seemed to embody an attractive masculine ideal. Since elements of the North American masculine ideal include power, control, and strength (Kimmel, 1997; O'Connor & Kelly, 2006), and concealing emotions such as fear and sadness (Cleary, 2012; Kimmel, 1997; River & Flood, 2021; Underwood & Olson, 2019), Thor (played by Chris Hemsworth), who is a main character in the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) with pronounced muscles and undeniable strength and power as a superhero was predicted to be popular since he exhibits the ideals of North American hegemonic masculinity.

It was a surprise that many women expressed their attraction to and love for the thin, comparatively weak and emotionally vulnerable Loki (played by Tom Hiddleston) instead – even though he had far less screen time. Unlike Thor, Loki is not even a hero (Jacobbs, 2013), and acting as binary with Thor, Loki represents "all that is othered: the feminine, the genderfluid, the atypical male, the queer" (Beaton, 2021, n.p.). It may be this departure from hegemonic masculinity that is precisely what makes Loki so appealing to many audience members who are eager to see less rigid and more expansive masculinities in contemporary popular culture texts. In short, the reactions to the MCU's Thor and Loki are but one example of many where women gravitate towards a male character that would be considered the "less appealing" option in Western contexts because of their proximity to the feminine, the queer, or the other –

all of which are in opposition to hegemonic notions of masculinity but were thoroughly enjoyed by audiences.

BTS ARMY have been subjected to similar confusion and questioning by non-fans. While some men mock them, sometimes saying they look like an "LGBT group" (Wong, 2018), ARMY has expressed their admiration, affection, and attraction to BTS in numerous public venues, whether on Twitter, Tumblr, or in YouTube comment sections. This chapter explores gender-based differences in gaze to understand how BTS's predominately female fan's gaze may differ from those who criticize BTS. To do so, this chapter begins where the conversation about gaze started, with the term "male gaze." After defining the male gaze, this chapter discusses alternatives to the male gaze, namely the notion of the "female gaze[4]." Unlike the male gaze, which has a clear definition and application, the female gaze is still in the process of being conceptualized and is a term with both social and aesthetic connotations, making it harder to pin down. Moreover, the utility and validity of the concept itself is still being debated (Benson-Allott, 2017; Cohen, 2017; Nussbaum, 2017; Smith, 2022; Stoeckert, 2022). As such, this chapter outlines Soloway's (2016) definition of the female gaze, as well as various applications and criticisms of it. I then introduce my own framework for conceptualizing how gender shapes the way we see to explore how ARMYs have found pleasure in watching BTS dance in socio-cultural contexts where men's dancing bodies are often stigmatized.

[4] The categories "male" and "female" may reify gender binaries, and so it must be made clear that sex is not, and must not, be thought of as a binary (Ainsworth, 2015; Blakeman, 2020; Hyde et al., 2019).

Additionally, sex must not be conflated with gender which also cannot be confined to a binary, but rather is a continuum or spectrum (Lopez, 2016; *Understanding Gender*, n.d.; *Understanding Nonbinary People*, 2023).

Defining the Male Gaze

Discussions about the female gaze began after the notion of a dominant male gaze was established. British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey originally coined the male gaze in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In her essay, Mulvey (1975) describes the male gaze as follows:

> "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." (p. 11).

The result is women and the feminine form being objectified on screen. Mulvey (1975) also presents three parts of this gaze: the person behind the camera, the characters in the film, and the spectator, that is, the audience. This gaze may be dominant simply due to the comparatively high number of men working in the film industry compared to women (Dirse, 2013). For example, if a film's director, writer, and editor are all men, they shape the way women are captured with the camera and how characters within the film view and interact with them. Consequently, the spectator is made to see the characters in the film through the male gaze.

The Female Gaze

Defining the Female Gaze

While the male gaze was defined as early as 1975 by Laura Mulvey, the definition of the female gaze is still developing, and its value and validity as a term and concept are still being debated. Caetlin Benson-Allott (2017), for example, has argued that the female gaze "has been haphazardly defined more often by what it is not than by what it is. It is not the male gaze, the patriarchal organization of film language and narrative for (heterosexual) male pleasure" (p. 65). This is a central issue facing the female gaze – it has primarily been defined in opposition to the male gaze rather than having a radical feminist conceptualization of its own. At present, scholars and critics alike have agreed that the female gaze must

be feminist and intersectional (Benson-Allott, 2017; Soloway, 2016), but the issue of exactly how to define the term remains. The term female gaze is simply not expansive enough to encompass the myriad meanings and feminist hopes for the transformative power its widespread application could bring about. For the same reason, a clearer definition of the term is beneficial, for ease of use and trajectory – if gaps are found adjacent terms and concepts can be defined and then worked into future feminist work.

At the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), Joey Soloway, an American television creator, writer, and director, gave a keynote address on the topic of the female gaze. During this keynote, they outlined three aspects that constitute the female gaze in film. Firstly, they define the female gaze as a way of "feeling seeing," which "uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling, rather than seeing — the characters" (Soloway, 2016, n.p.). Secondly, they argue that the female gaze uses the camera to "take on the very nuanced, occasionally impossible task of showing us how it feels to be the object of the gaze" (Soloway, 2016, n.p.). Taken together, these facets of Soloway's female gaze are humanizing rather than objectifying – they encourage, if not force, empathetic viewership.

The goal here of this female gaze is to ensure "the emotions are being prioritized over the action" (Soloway, 2016, n.p.), which shifts the focus away from how women *look* in action, to *why* they are in action. After communicating how it feels to be the object of a gaze, finally, the female gaze "dares to return the gaze… it says I don't want to be the object any longer, I would like to be the subject, and with that subjectivity I can name you as the object" (Soloway, 2016, n.p.). Subjectivity is a central tenant of this conceptualization of the female gaze, one that is a "privilege generator" for its ability to make viewers see, feel, and empathize with a woman as the subject (Soloway, 2016). An important goal in terms of the application of the female gaze, is that it will facilitate "cultural critique" and "generate empathy as a political tool," thus giving the gaze the power to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about gender roles and expression and bring real stories and experiences to the screen in a way that unites

women (Soloway, 2016). This definition may lead those working in the film industry towards more nuanced, complex, and realistic portrayals of women on screen.

The female gaze is not the only term to fall victim to being watered-down, misused, or broken down online; it is only one of the latest. Although Soloway (2016) has presented a nuanced definition of the female gaze, this definition is only sometimes put forward when used within popular culture. The issue then lies in applying the term outside the film industry since "in this confused, commercial, and not-quite-intellectual environment, 'female gaze' simply functions according to its users' needs" (Cohen, 2017). Perhaps as a consequence of the lack of a popularized definition and application of the term, there have been instances where some women herald something as "the female gaze" while others could not disagree more. A recent example of this occurred in late 2022 when a man named Kevin, a content creator on TikTok using the handle @strangek3vin, made a TikTok in which he lip-synced the song "Boyfriend" by Justin Bieber (Smith, 2022; Stoeckert, 2022). He began the lip-synching TikTok awkward and nervous before suddenly unleashing a confident persona by the end of it (Smith, 2022; Stoeckert, 2022). He quickly gained a female following who gushed over his videos, leaving comments and stitching his videos, and some women even said he was "the perfect example of the 'female gaze'" (Stoeckert, 2022, n.p.).

Once the TikTok (and stitches of it) started appearing on more and more "for you" pages, it was not long before many women began to comment on, stitch Kevin's TikToks, or make their own TikToks to say they found his videos uncomfortable, strange, and anything but the female gaze. More to the point, the videos produced by @strangek3vin and the discourse surrounding them took place on TikTok, and in such digital spaces, terms like the female gaze become aesthetic issues rather than social ones (Smith, 2022). Such applications of the term have stripped it of its socio-political connotations, resulting in the female gaze being used as a way to reference instead a visual many women find appealing or attractive,

rather than empowering, representative, or positive. This short case study proves Cohen's (2017) critique of the female gaze – that the term is so malleable that it conforms to individual needs. This may further complicate the ongoing difficulty in coming close to a consensus on the definition, application, and value of a term like the female gaze.

Critiques of the Female Gaze

In addition to its ambiguous and often subjective definition(s), the term has also been criticized. Emily Nussbaum (2017), a television critic, says that she rejects the female gaze due to "the notion that the camera lens, which has been trained to ogle and dominate, can change, in female hands, launching a radical new aesthetic" (Nussbaum, 2017, n.p.). She also underscores that an issue with a term like "female gaze" is that it is essentialist since it supposes that "women share one eye: a vision that is circular, mucky, menstrual, intimate, wise" (Nussbaum, 2017, n.p.). Cohen (2017) also voiced criticism, arguing that the term has become a "shorthand to describe work by women that focuses on human subjects" (n.p.). Furthermore, she claims that some applications of the female gaze (such as in film and art) can be simplifying and even reductive when it "segregates art made by women instead of taking it seriously and judging it by the same standards as work made by men" (Cohen, 2017, n.p.).

In addition to criticisms of the practical application of the term, the term has also been criticized due to its use of the word "female." While some female-driven television dramas embrace feminist principles, they do not necessarily classify as showcasing the female gaze (Benson-Allott, 2017). More to the point, some women create work just as sexist as work created by men (Benson-Allott, 2017; Hudson, 2022). So, if not all women create media distinct from the male gaze, and some men have prominent roles in media that portray women in ways that may be considered the female gaze, might a word like female be inaccurate? Rather than boiling a way of seeing down to sex, pivoting to a term like "feminine gaze" may be more appropriate as it shifts the emphasis to gendered ways of being and seeing that are less rigid. Additionally,

the term "feminine gaze" may be empowering for its potential inclusivity. The feminine gaze, unlike the female gaze, has the ability to open up a space for broader, more flexible forms of being and expressing for it has the capacity to exist without being tied to a specific sex or gender.

Media Appealing to/ Operating Within a "Female Gaze"

There have been, however, some general agreements on media that operate outside the objectifying frameworks of the male gaze, which may even be considered fitting of the title "female gaze." One of these works is the movie *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* (2020), particularly for the portrayal of the character Harley Quinn (played by Margo Robbie) when compared to her portrayal in its predecessor, *Suicide Squad* (2016). *Birds of Prey* starred women and was created by women who, through writing, directing, and custom designs, presented the characters in a non-objectifying way by allowing Harley to tell her own story (Bucksbaum, 2021; Ridlehoover, 2019; Sollosi, 2020; Wardlow, 2020). While the portrayal of Harley Quinn in *Suicide Squad* is hypersexualized, in *Birds of Prey,* she is "newly liberated … subject, not object" (Sollosi, 2020, n.p.) in a way that audiences and critics alike have pointed out is distinct from the male gaze.

In *Suicide Squad*, Harley Quinn wears a skin-tight, distressed baseball tee with the words "Daddy's Lil Monster" stamped across her chest, whereas in *Birds of Prey*, she wears a loose-fitting t-shirt covered with her own name, Harley Quinn, in bold capital letters (Wardlow, 2020). Such symbolic costume decisions underscore Harley Quinn's empowerment from a figure of male fantasy and control to an autonomous woman. Even details such as the shorter (and less "grabbable") pigtails Harley sports in *Birds of Prey* were not missed by fans. The actress who portrays Harley Quinn on screen, Margo Robbie, also addressed the changes in the films, speaking to the press about how *Birds of Prey* was "less male gaze-y" than its predecessor (Ridlehoover, 2019). Another critical aspect of the film that differentiated it from the "male gaze-y" Suicide Squad was the depiction of positive and supportive female relationships,

which is seldom represented on screen but is reflective of many women's lived experiences (Burt, 2020). However, while it is true that lots of the people working on and in the film were women, director Cathy Yan made it clear that they "actually had male camera operators, so it's not black-and-white, it's not completely based on gender" (Burt, 2020, n.p.). This point echoes criticisms of the term "female gaze" due to its overemphasis on the importance of sex in terms of gaze.

White Gazes & Fetishizing Gazes

The reception of K-pop in North America has been, as still is, inevitably both gendered and racialized. This is because idols "visible identities as Asian inevitably placed them within the entanglements of race and sexuality in America's popular imagination" (Y. Kim, 2013). One example of this is the early marketing of K-pop in North America. In the early 2010s in the United States, female idol groups were more aggressively marketed by their management companies than their male counterparts were (Y. Kim, 2013). When it came to marketing these female groups, Youna Kim (2013) explains companies capitalized on Westerners eroticized images and imagined desires for Asian women by "exploiting what they [Westerners] believe to be ingrained stereotypes of Asian females as irresistible seductresses, docile, dominating, or both" (p. 109). In order to appeal to White Western imaginaries and desires, management companies "actively exploiting the idols' images, racy (and racial) and sexual, in their music videos" (Y. Kim, 2013, p. 107). Thus, some of the first female idol groups to try to break into Western markets, such as Wonder Girls and Girls' Generation, were made to cater to White audiences (i.e., by their management companies) in the hope that the groups would be financially successful in the West.

Male South Korean acts were also shaped by Western imaginaries and stereotypes of Asian sexuality. PSY's music video for "Gangnam Style" went viral in the West after its release in 2012. For some time, it was the most-watched video on YouTube, and has now been viewed over 4.7 billion times. Scholars have since questioned if, perhaps, more than the catchy and upbeat tune, the image of PSY "dancing and

singing while fully clad in colorful and flamboyant outfits" (W. Han, 2016, p. 62) was comical and sexually unthreatening, thus confirming what Western audiences already believed about Asian men (W. Han, 2016; Y. Kim, 2013). That is to say that he did not pose a threat to White hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, we see that the success of both male and female artists in North America has often hinged on their ability to play into White imageries, stereotypes, and desires in regard to Asian sexuality and gender.

Giving space to discussions about racial fetishization is of significant import when discussing a text like K-pop. In postcolonial contexts, "racial 'Otherness' in the realm of sexuality came both to titillate and to repel … At the same time, race itself has been eroticized. More particularly, non-white races have been, and still are, essentialized erotically by whites" (Y. Kim, 2013, p. 108). bell hooks, too, has spoken to this point in a way that is particularly salient in the context of K-pop for its relation to commodification and consumerism. hooks (2015) explained that:

> "[T]he commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight. more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (p. 21).

For White individuals seeking the erotized racialized "Other," the "doubly marginalized" (Yoon, 2019) status K-pop has in North America may seem like the "alternative playground" (hooks, 2015) they desire to play out these fantasies.

To combat the dominant White and fetishizing gazes of some North American fans, White K-pop fans must avoid "colourblindness" (Yoon, 2022) in the context of their fandom. Acknowledgement and anti-racist awareness are crucial in these contexts where there is a tendency for White individuals to "eat the Other," as hooks (2015) explains:

> "Mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based

> on denial and fantasy. For it is the ever present reality of racist domination, of white supremacy, that renders problematic the desire of white people to have contact with the Other" (p. 28).

It is especially important for White fans to be critical of their engagement with K-pop texts, their gaze, and their privilege in fandom spaces given the racialized imaginaries and stereotypes pertaining to Asian sexuality and gender that infantilize and hypersexualize Asian women all the while marginalizing and de-sexualizing Asian men, and the prevalence of racism and White privilege within the K-pop fandom (J. K. Cho, 2017; Reddy, 2020; Yoon, 2022).

Queering Canon: Fanfiction and a Feminine Gaze

As this chapter has underscored, male-dominated industries, like the film industry, continue to produce media which promotes the male gaze. Put another way, most popular media lacks a feminine gaze. However, there may be one space where a feminine gaze is predominant: fanfiction. Most fanfiction writers and readers are women (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020; Woehle, 2023), meaning that the medium offers a space for women's perspective in viewing male characters. Exploring these spaces dominated by women may offer some insight into what a feminine gaze looks like for some. The subcategories of fanfiction that may further highlight the complexities of the feminine gaze and desire are slash fiction and shōnen-ai or yaoi ("boys' love"/BL).

Slash fiction refers to "fanmade media that portrays two fictional male characters in non-canonical sexual or romantic relationships," and "Boys' love" "encompasses both commercial and fanmade media where romantic or erotic fictional homosexual relationships can be canon or non-canon" (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020, p. 183). Unlike adult-authored YA ("Young Adult") fiction that depicts queer relationships with a focus on the "discourse of homosexuality," fanfiction tends to focus more on sensuality and sexual attraction (Duggan, 2017). As such, it may be thought that those who engage with this fanfiction "enjoy the 'physical acts of gay men'" (Duggan, 2017, p. 40), which are less frequently found in commercialized YA fiction. This may point to an interest in exploring corporeal desire and pleasure, which is markedly

more queer than the “discourse of homosexuality” that Duggan (2017) explains is central to YA fiction. Perhaps it is because these desires are not fulfilled by adult-written fiction, youth turn to work created by other fans or take up the task of authoring it themselves.

While fanfiction offers a space for writers and readers alike to explore gender and sexuality free from the confines of the often-heteronormative commercialized source material, not all fanfiction is feminist, progressive, or positive in nature. While some texts are lighthearted or “fluff,”[5] slash and BL often include depictions/ descriptions of explicit sexual acts, sometimes even those which are aggressive or violent, such as rape and assault (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020). Above all else, these texts “are meant to arose and entice” (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020, p. 193), so depictions of romance and sexuality are often unrealistic and unhealthy. Although this is the case, it is essential to be aware that these are works of fiction and spaces to explore desire, fantasy, sex, and sexuality and need not be demonized. For many, fanfiction is a space to explore feminine desires, the other, and the queer – a space seldom offered in commercialized media and texts. It should also be noted that although slash fiction and BL portrays queer relationships, they must not be confused with or considered interchangeable with LGBTQ+ literature. While slash fiction challenges the heteronormative gender roles upheld in contemporary society, it is often written by women who identify as heterosexual (Kustritz, 2003). In other words, since these texts are generally made by and for (heterosexual) women, even though they may appeal to queer audiences, they are generally not the creators nor the imagined audience for these texts (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020).

These fan-made fictional texts which explore male gay sensuality, romance, and eroticism have a long – yet under-researched and relatively undocumented – history. Nonetheless, some digging will reveal this history. The origins of slash fiction are in the Star Trek fandom in the 1960s when Captain Kirk and Mr.

[5] In the context of fanfiction, “fluff” generally refers to a genre of fanfiction that is light-hearted romance that is free of heavy or depressing themes.

Spock became the first slash pairing (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020). Since the 1970s, there has been a steady increase in the amount of slash fiction created and the fan community surrounding it. Still, serious academic inquiries were not made until many years later, in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020). Some of these early inquiries into fandom and slash fiction were Constance Penley's 1989 work on feminism and pop culture and Henry Jenkin's book *Textual Poachers* in 1992 (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020). Likewise, BL *manga* (Japanese graphic novels) grew in popularity in fan communities long before they were given academic and commercial legitimacy. BL *manga* also emerged in the 1970s (although in Japan) along with the rise of the first female *manga* artists but were not published until 30 years later in the US in the fall of 2003 (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020).

Early BL *manga* generally focused on the romantic aspects of a gay relationship. Still, as the BL fandom became more popular, fans began to create and share their own works (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020). These works, called *doujinshi*, resembled those found in Western slash fiction communities insofar as they parodied canonical source material by putting the characters in homoerotic relationships (Enriquez & Lippert, 2020). I want to highlight that these fans and their fan works emerged from patriarchal contexts in which gender norms are fixed and rigid, and portrayals of women are generally done via the male gaze. As such, these practices gave women a space to explore their own desires and to create stories through their own feminine gaze. The lack of validation and legitimization of these fictional works by women should also be noted. This may be yet another instance of young and feminine fans' desires, interests, and ways of seeing being pathologized, devalued, and erased. The existence of a woman-dominated space like fanfiction that is full of erotica, desire, and fantasy may indicate what the feminine gaze looks like for some. The women who produce and consume slash and BL show that some women at least are enticed by blurring boundaries, ambiguity, and fluidity.

BTS, too, has a robust fanfiction community. On one of the most popular platforms to read and upload fanfiction, Archive of Our Own, or A03, which is a "fan-created, fan-run, nonprofit, noncommerical archive for transformative fanworks" (*Home | Archive of Our Own*, n.d.), there are nearly 2 million works under the category BTS. While there has yet to be any academic inquiry into BTS fanfiction specifically and conducting a content analysis of BTS fanfiction is beyond the scope of this study, I used Archive of Our Own's filter and search features to uncover that within the BTS fandom, too, BL is prevalent. After searching "BTS" and clicking categories I found that, as of 2023, there are 1.5 million "M/M" ("male/male") works of fanfiction and just 25 thousand "F/M" (female/male") works of fanfiction. Furthermore, by searching by most viewed first, I saw that the first page of results (20) is almost exclusively BL aside from 2 fanfictions – one that pairs a member of BTS with "you," the reader, and another that pairs a member of BTS with an original female character (*방탄소년단 | Bangtan Boys | BTS - Works | Archive of Our Own*, n.d.).

The top BTS BL work on Archive of Our Own alone has over 17 million reads, and while the portion of the ARMY who reads BL fanfiction about BTS may be a minority, they are providing another example of fans exploring sexuality and desire in spaces they have created themselves. I do, however, think it is important to note in conclusion that writing fanfiction about real people (as opposed to fictitious characters) has been, and continues to be, a highly debated topic within the fanfiction community. Critical thought should be given to how writing celebrities into scenes that include sexual, often violent acts, may have serious consequences for the individuals inserted into the stories without their consent including, but not limited to, emotional distress, feelings of hopeless, and discomfort.

Gazing at Idols: The Dancing Bodies of Men

A big part of K-pop is choreographed dance (Vandenberg, 2020). While men dancing is normalized within the K-pop fandom, it is an aspect of K-pop that is often mocked by Western critics. In the West,

sports have long-standing gendered associations (Colley et al., 1987; Craig, 2013; Koivula, 1995, 2001; Matteo, 1986) – and dance is one such sport. To explore how a feminine gaze may shape how ARMYs make sense of BTS' dancing bodies, this section will begin by underscoring the significance of dance to K-pop groups and fans alike. After that, it will present the endurance of the gender-typing of dance in Western contexts. Finally, to highlight ARMY's feminine gaze, this section will discuss the type of dance featured in BTS' music videos and how K-pop fans celebrate male dancing bodies despite larger socio-cultural norms that insist men ought to stand still.

Idols undergo gruelling training before they debut, and part of this is intensive dance training (Chong, 2020). With every new single released, there is a new dance to be learnt, polished, and presented to fans with clean and synchronous movements. Both male and female idol groups dance, but generally, male idol groups get to explore more range in their dance. This can mainly be attributed to the fact that in patriarchal South Korea, female idol groups are designed to cater to male fantasies, meaning the "activities of girl groups become formulaic due to the social expiration date imposed on them… aspects of this formula include hyper sexualization and infantilization to manifest the male gaze's hegemonic sexual fantasy that girls and young women around 16-25 years of age are the most desirable" (Jonas, 2022, p. 234).

As a result of the formulaic approach the industry takes to female groups, they often get pigeonholed by their company. Generally, they get stuck portraying one of three concepts: cute, hip-hop, or sexy (Jonas, 2022). In other words, female groups' dance routines tend to lack the technical, experimental, and complex choreography that male groups often have. While male idol groups demand the audience's attention with performances that include acrobatics or flips, choreography for female idol groups "resembles an arsenal of synchronized swimming techniques" (Jonas, 2022, p. 236). This should not be attributed to a lack of skill, only to a lack of social flexibility. Simply put, male idol groups are free from

many constraints that restrict female idol groups, allowing them to portray a range of concepts in their music videos and choreography. However, male groups certainly use cute, hip-hop, and sexy concepts, too; it is just in addition to others that female groups are often not permitted to dabble in.

Idol & Fan: One Through Dance

Dance is so central to K-pop that many music videos are released alongside a separate "official choreography music video" or "performance video" that highlights the choreography by removing the storyline or filler from the original official music video (Vandenberg, 2020). Dance practice videos are usually low-budget videos recorded using a single camera facing the group performing the choreography while they are still "learning" it in the studio (Vandenberg, 2020). This speaks to the appeal of dance within the fandom. The fact that fans will deliberately watch a dance practice video in addition to the more polished, aesthetic, and entertaining music video points to an affinity for the male dancing body. Further affirming this point is that there is not much benefit in streaming a dance practice for the idols or groups themselves. Fandoms have tried to ensure their favourite group wins an award or breaks a record by streaming an official music video on YouTube repeatedly, but there are no such efforts for dance practice videos. Therefore, it may be assumed that when fans watch dance practice videos, they do it for their own pleasure or enjoyment, not to try to get their favourite artists professional recognition.

Fans not only enjoy watching BTS dance; many love the choreography so much they learn the dances themselves. Fans have made it easy for themselves and others to learn K-pop choreography by taking the aforementioned dance practice videos and flipping and mirroring them to create a dance video they can copy exactly to learn from. Learning choreography may be another way for fans to share space with BTS. They may feel connected to BTS by picking a group member to learn the dance from as they will have to carefully watch and mimic their movements as closely as possible. Successfully learning choreography is then another way for ARMY to feel close to BTS despite spatial and temporal distance. Since BTS'

choreography is designed to be performed as a group, it also leaves space for fans to dance together, creating an opportunity for fans to connect with each other over their love of BTS.

Not all of BTS' official music videos have accompanying dance practices, but the ones that do generally get millions of views. "Baepsae" (title often translated as "Silver Spoon" and sometimes as "Crow-tit"), for example, has no official music video, but it does have a dance practice with over 40 million views. The mirrored dance practice, however, has over 221 million views. Of course, not everyone who learns the choreography of popular K-pop songs will record and showcase themselves dancing, but some fans do. Such dance covers can be found on social media, such as YouTube and TikTok. Lisa Rhee, for example, alongside couple Ellen Min and Brian Li, upload their dance covers to YouTube and have approximately 3 million subscribers each (Yeung, 2021). They have even been presented with professional opportunities by uploading their dance covers (Yeung, 2021). For example, Min and Li perform and host events at KCON (an annual convention to celebrate Korean music and culture) throughout the United States and online globally (Yeung, 2021).

The popularity of dance practices and mirrored dance practices shows both the acceptance of the male dancing body and also a celebration and appreciation of it. The fact that BTS dance – and Western fans find pleasure in viewing and learning these dances – is significant due to the gendering of the sport. In the West, sports have come to be stereotyped as feminine, masculine, or gender-neutral based on social conceptions about gender, gender difference, and commonly held beliefs about the appropriateness of participation based on gender (Colley et al., 1987; Koivula, 1995, 2001; Matteo, 1986). Sports that allow women to abide by the expectations of femininity, such as being graceful, nonaggressive, and aesthetically pleasing, are generally considered appropriate for women to participate in and are frequently labelled as feminine (Koivula, 2001). Dance is usually included in this category, although the degree to which it is considered feminine may depend on the type of dance (Koivula, 2001). Ballet, for example, is

considered feminine since it is regarded as graceful and elegant. In contrast, hip-hop features sharper, more powerful, and aggressive movements, causing it to be considered a more masculine dance.

Getting Caught in the Gendered Web of Dance

Although the gendering of sport is a long and enduring social construct, some hold onto this belief more firmly than others. Research in the 80s and 90s revealed that when it came to gender-typing sports, men did so to a greater extent than women (Colley et al., 1987; Koivula, 1995, 2001; Matteo, 1986). While those statistics are now outdated, more recent studies have shown that this pattern still lingers in contemporary society. In the 2010s, for example, men were rarely shown dancing in American mainstream media since dance was (and sometimes still is) associated with femininity (Craig, 2013). Given that Whiteness, masculinity, and sexuality all go hand-in-hand in the popular American imaginary, men who dance may consequently have their sexuality questioned as well as their masculinity (Craig, 2013). As such, it is no surprise that even in the 2010s, there was a widely held assumption that 'real men do not dance' (Craig, 2013, p. 213). More recent studies on K-pop specifically have similarly found that sex is a significant determinant of whether or not someone will perceive a sport as masculine or feminine. For example, a recent study found that the only statistically significant predictors were sex and familiarity with K-pop/Korean culture regarding the perception of an idol's gender expression (Song & Velding, 2020). The study revealed that "female respondents tended to perceive band members' masculinity level higher than their male counterparts … [and] were likely to be more accepting of their chosen femininity level of band members than their male counterparts" (Song & Velding, 2020, p. 11). Even more to the point, where men may disapprove of male idols dancing, "K-pop female fans, however, actively embrace such male dancing bodies and destigmatize the notion of men dancing" (Oh, 2015, p. 66).

A brief example which highlights the gender-typing of sport and how it shapes the reception of K-pop is the commentary under the NBA's (National Basketball Association) post on Instagram that featured BTS

member Suga. As a member of BTS, Suga is recognized by basketball fans as a figure who has no place at a basketball game, least of all being featured on the official NBA website. I argue that this is due to his perceived proximity with femininity. This proximity to femininity renders him incompatible with the perceived masculinity of basketball – or so the comments revealed as I scrolled through them. One commenter, @naxxxxx, alludes to the fact that they believe Suga is not supposed to be there by stating, "basketball is a men sport [sic]. idk why that singer is here." This comment associates the South Korean idol so closely with femininity that his masculinity is completely erased. To this commenter, he has no authority (and perhaps no right) to be in a "man's" space. Furthermore, although they have used the word singer, their logic does not seem to exclude other celebrities who sing that have also recently publicly attended a NBA game, such as Pharrell Williams (Amurao, 2023). Therefore, this comment exemplifies the racial and gendered stereotyping of East Asian men, such as that they are feminine and weak (Azhar et al., 2021).

Another comment on the NBA post by @pexxxxx, states, "bro never watched basketball in his life." This is once again an assumption based on Suga's appearance and perceived proximity to that which is feminine, and thus that which is not compatible with basketball. Another notable comment I came across, by user @notxxxxx, said, "Bro kpop stans need to stop bro… your opinion doesn't matter in the basketball world." This comment clearly draws a metaphorical line in the sand, one between us and them, masculine and feminine, and belonging and intruding. It makes clear that the K-pop world, one inhabited by women and girls, is separate from and it not permitted to overlap with the basketball world inhabited by boys and men. Overall, the Instagram comment section is littered with racism, xenophobia, and a disconcerting amount of homophobic and transphobic comments such as "Bruh get this girl out of the feed for God sake [sic]," (by user @vloxxxxx) and "WHAT IS THAT???? MALE? FEMALE? SHEMALE??? [sic]" (by user @infxxxxx).

In terms of performing masculinity, Chuyun Oh (2015) points out that “male bodies in motion should reflect a modality of erectness, rigidness or stubbornness, for flexibility, softness and curviness are easily connected to femininity” (p. 64-65). In this context, BTS does not strictly adhere to genres of dance that are generally considered masculine, as their choreography blends sharp and powerful hip-hop styles with more fluid, soft, and graceful movements borrowed from modern dance. While BTS’ music videos do include hip-hop dance, these videos make up nine out of the fifteen videos that include dance. However, it is not so cut and dry. Of those nine, three (“FAKE LOVE” (BTS, 2018) “IDOL” (BTS, 2018) and “Save Me” (BTS, 2016)) also feature other styles of dance, such as modern and jazz. “IDOL” (BTS, 2018), for example, includes sharp and quick movements and the sort of pop-and-lock choreography associated with hip-hop. However, the video also features smooth, fluid, and graceful movements, such as the jumps performed at 2:37 by all members apart from J-Hope. The majority of their music videos cannot easily be put into one box in terms of choreography. They include high and low energy, sharp and quick, and slow and fluid movements. This may be precisely where their appeal lies and what allows their talents to shine – their ability to fluidly move between movements and dance styles regarded as masculine and feminine.

Moving to my Own Conceptualization of a “Feminine Gaze”

The conceptualization of a feminine gaze I will put forward is a framework from which to explore the gendered ways of seeing and feeling in the context of Canadian ARMY fandom. This framework builds upon Soloway’s (2016) conceptualization of the female gaze. While this conceptualization is informed by the experiences and perspectives participants shared with me during interviews it is also shaped by my experiences as an academic and a fan and by my identity as a White woman embedded in suburban Ontario, Canada. This definition cannot, and does not presume to speak for, all, or even the majority of BTS fans, least of all the majority of women. Still, it will offer a framework from which to gauge whether certain aspects of BTS music videos appeal to this notion of a feminine gaze. Finally, for this study, the

term “feminine gaze” will be used rather than “female gaze” to account for the fact that sex is distinct from gender.

The fluidity and ambiguity following the deconstruction of Western perceptions of normalcy based on gender allow a space of renegotiation, exploration, pleasure, and freedom for Canadian ARMYs. I have underscored that some women are comfortable with and enjoy media and texts that break heteronormative gender norms and rules through reference to fanfiction, a space dominated by the feminine gaze. Similarly, I have hypothesized that many ARMYs find the lack of rigid boundaries in terms of gender norms in BTS music videos appealing. This means that the feminine gaze is not concerned with fixed expressions of gender but instead finds appealing the subversive, honest, and expressive performances of gender. In other words, the feminine gaze embraces a broader range of gender performances, especially the feminine, regardless of the fleshy body performing them. As a non-objectifying gaze, the feminine gaze prioritizes emotionality and subjectivity. That is not to say that the feminine gaze is without eroticism or desire. Still, it is a gaze that pleasurably regards the bodies of persons without stripping them of humanity, subjectivity, or personhood.

While hegemonic notions of masculinity restrict and condemn the feminine, particularly when performed by men, the feminine gaze does not. In the case of Canadian ARMY and BTS specifically, this manifests an embrace of male K-pop idols' expression through aesthetics, movements, and performances of gender that are closely associated with the feminine in Western contexts. Specific examples of this will be further explored in the analysis and discussion chapter of this paper, as well as briefly in the next portion of this chapter on how the feminine gaze destigmatizes and finds pleasure in watching the dancing male body.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter began by briefly covering Mulvey's (1975) conceptualization of the male gaze, a term which has since become an important tool in the feminist arsenal of social critique. From there, the definition – or lack thereof – of the female gaze, as well as how it has been complicated and problematized by scholars and film critics, was introduced. In agreeance with critiques that the term "female gaze" can be simplifying and reductive by presuming women share one eye (Nussbaum, 2017) and that it can work to segregate women's work in professional settings (Cohen, 2017), I introduced my conceptualization of a feminine gaze. The definition put forth in this paper sought to shift the focus from film and more towards subjective and intimate ways of seeing, which will serve as a framework from which to explore ARMYs' way of seeing BTS. This notion that women may be gazing out at the world in markedly different ways than men is further emphasized by looking at the importance of dance in K-pop and K-pop fandom.

VI. Analysis & Discussion

Content Analysis

My content analysis of all 21 of BTS' music videos from 2015 to present, apart from member's solo projects and music videos for their Japanese singles, was conducted to explore if they may appeal to my conceptualization of a feminine gaze. I analyzed each video through multiple viewings, paying careful attention to nine categories, make-up, clothing and accessories, colour, setting, dance style, emotionality, sensuality and the appearance of bare skin, and whether or not the music video was objectifying or humanizing. Using contextualizing research on gendered expressions and garments and descriptions and screen shots of scenes, the work below examines how BTS' music videos depart from Western hegemonic notions of masculinity or a male gaze, and how they instead align with a feminine gaze.

Make-up

In all 21 music videos, BTS wears base make-up in the same style. This base make-up is presumably BB cream (BB stands for "Beauty Balm" in Western markets and is designed to serve as a foundation, moisturizer, and sunscreen) or a hydrating foundation which reduces the look of blemishes, pores, and any redness or discolouration. Since they are exclusively shown clean-shaven the result is all members appearing to have bright, dewy, and smooth skin. Although it may not initially read as make-up, upon viewing behind the scenes footage from any of their music videos, one will find brief clips of make-up touches performed on the members by make-up artists. Even in music videos where they are intended to look rugged and dirty, such as in "ON" (BTS, 2020), "dirt" (presumably eyeshadow) is applied on top of their base make-up, keeping the appearance of flawless skin. Another consistent aspect of their makeup is eyebrows. In all music videos, their eyebrows are shaped, and any sparse patches are filled in. There are two unique cases, one in which Jin's eyebrows are lightened with eyebrow gel to match his bleached hair (see "FIRE" (BTS, 2016), and another where they are lightened to a warm brown colour (see "Yet To Come (The Most Beautiful Moment" (BTS, 2022)), however generally their eyebrows are made dark and full.

While stylists keep BTS' base make-up consistent, there is more variation when it comes to their eye make-up. BTS wear obvious eyeshadow in 20 out of 21 of their music videos, but it is more evident in some than others. As a rule of thumb, their make-up is tailored to match the theme of the music video. In "ON" (BTS, 2020) they spend the majority of the video outside in what appears to be the remains of a battle, and so their make-up is very subtle to reflect the theme of hardship and struggle. In "Blood Sweat & Tears" (BTS, 2016), however, they are in highly embellished and regal spaces, and to accompany this air of magnificence their make-up and dress, too, are embellished. However, it should be noted that eye make-up is used regardless of genre. That is to say that they some members wear dark eyeshadow in

music videos with hip-hop concepts, such as “Not Today” (BTS, 2017) and “Mic Drop (Steve Aoki Remix) (BTS, 2017)” as well as in pop videos such as “Butter” (BTS, 2021).

Additionally, Eyeshadow is not put on the members evenly; rather certain members appear in darker eyeshadow more often than others. Jimin, V, and sometimes RM are the members who are most often made up with the darkest eyeshadow. Dark eyeliner is also used to compliment these eyeshadow looks and so is typically applied in the waterline and concentrated in the outer corner of the eye. In terms of colour, eyeshadow is always matte brown, gray, and black, and is often subtle. There are very few exceptions in which closer inspection reveals a member is wearing a subtle shimmer, such as Jimin in “FAKE LOVE” (BTS, 2018) and Jin in “Life Goes On” (BTS, 2020) but these largely go unnoticed (unless you are looking for them, as I was), unlike the brown, gray, and black matte eyeshadows and eyeliners which immediately read as make-up.

HYBE LABELS, 2016. *BTS (방탄소년단) '피 땀 눈물 (Blood Sweat & Tears)' Official MV* [screenshot]. YouTube.

The lip products used on BTS are generally light in colour and thus are rather subtle. They are likely being made up with lip tints in light pinks and corals and sometimes appear to be wearing lip glosses. The result is lips which appear full and hydrated, but do not always read like lipstick. The vibrancy of the

filter used on the music video may also influence how the colour of their lips comes across. While their lips have a shine to them in most music videos, some music videos with high saturation make their lips appear much warmer in colour than others, such as in "Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021). It may be assumed that the goal of the make-up artists in terms of lips is to make BTS appear healthy and well-groomed, not to make their lips command the most attention. Rather, I would argue that their eyes are made to be the focal point as they are accentuated with eyeliner, eyeshadow, and sometimes colour contacts.

This category revealed that BTS wear more make-up than would be thought to align with Western notions of masculinity. Although historically, men, particularly upper-class powerful men, have dawned make-up – even as early as the rulers in ancient Egypt (Anbouba, 2020; Waugh, 2022), these aesthetic displays are stigmatized today. Make-up began to be imbued with gendered implications in addition to the pre-existing socio-cultural ones in the 1800s. By the 1920s, "as women entered the professional world, they were encouraged to wear makeup to compete against men for jobs" (Waugh, 2022). This shift marked the increase in Western society on the focus on the sexual beauty of women (Waugh, 2022) and make-up was positioned as a way to enhance it.

Make-up has a long history and its value and utility have been debated by feminists for years (Waugh, 2022). While public discussions about make-up have been changing shape over the last decade, up until then, and even to some extent today, make-up largely remains closely associated with femininity (Elan, 2020), and thus supposedly "off limits" for men. This tie between femininity and make-up is beginning to be severed as more men – and people of all gender-identities – experiment with and begin to use make-up even in their daily lives (Elan, 2020). Nonetheless, due to the history of men who wear make-up being marked as "transgressive" and having their masculinity and sexuality questioned (Elan, 2020; Jacobs, 2019), this category was important to include. Especially since much of the make-up for men is marketed

as subtle (Elan, 2020), and since men wearing make-up is still stigmatized to a degree in North America, this category has shown that in many cases, BTS wears make-up that may cause their masculinity and sexuality to be questioned by viewers but is in alignment with a feminine gaze as it embraces aesthetics associated with the feminine, regardless of the fleshy body sporting them.

Clothing & Accessories

Colours, patterns, and silhouettes – it is a challenge to find a style of clothing or type of garment BTS has not worn in their videos. My content analysis revealed that although in 13 out of 21 music videos BTS appear in casual or street wear consisting primarily of denim jeans and loose-fitting tops, they have worn many different styles and often within the same video since most of their videos feature at least one costume change. In "Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021), for example, BTS dance in Western style outfits featuring embroidered Western shirts with fringes, leather chaps, as well as cowboy boots and hats. After a costume change, they keep the cowboy boots but bring in jean jackets, distressed denim jeans, and cream-coloured t-shirts and loose button up shirts for a more modern look. Some of the other styles they have worn include 1970s and 80s inspired retro looks featuring bell bottoms (see "Dynamite" (BTS, 2020)), loungewear and pyjamas (see "Life Goes On" (BTS, 2020)), and formal wear that one of my interviewees described as a "princely" and "high fantasy" look (see "Blood Sweat & Tears" (BTS, 2016)). In addition to the variety of clothing they wear, another aspect of their wardrobe that heightens the aesthetic of their music videos is that each member is made to wear something unique, but since stylists stick to a specific style and colour, all their outfits are complementary and unified.

BTS' fresh and unique looks are often accomplished through embellishing "traditional" or simple garments. For example, although BTS have worn suits in several music videos, they are not your average black and white suits. In "Life Goes On" (BTS, 2020) they wear solid white suits with unique textures and sequins and in "IDOL" (BTS, 2018) their suits are heavily patterned and brightly coloured. This trend

is also notable in the large variety of textiles BTS has worn. From leather to sequined to sheer mesh – sometimes all in the same music video (see “Butter” (BTS, 2021)) – stylists have not relied exclusively on jewelry to catch and reflect light and to spice up their visuals. For instances where BTS has worn garments that feature rhinestones and sequins see videos “Butter” (BTS, 2021), “Black Swan” (BTS, 2020), “ON” (BTS, 2020), and “FAKE LOVE” (BTS, 2018).

Accessories were counted based on the number of music videos they appeared in, not the number of members wearing the item. For example, in “Save Me”, both Jin and RM are wearing baseball caps, but this was not counted as 2 baseball caps, rather this was counted as 1 music video in which baseball caps were featured. The most common accessories were earrings, which were featured in every video (21), then hats (19), bracelets (18), and rings (16). Of the 18 videos where hats were featured, there were baseball caps (8), cowboy hats (2), berets (2), beanies (2), bucket hats (2), a visor (1), a plastic crown (1), and a top hat (1). In all 21 music videos, the majority of the group is wearing earrings. Generally, all members aside from J-Hope (who does not have his ears pierced) and occasionally Jin (who sometimes does not wear earrings, for example in “RUN” (BTS, 2015), “FIRE” (BTS, 2016), “Blood Sweat & Tears” (BTS, 2016), and “Boy With Luv” (BTS, 2019)) wear earrings. There are a few exceptions, such as RM not wearing earrings in “DOPE” (BTS, 2015), and J-Hope being given clip-on earrings in “FAKE LOVE” (BTS, 2018) “Dynamite” (BTS, 2020), and “Butter” (BTS, 2021). However, including exceptions, in all music videos the majority of the group wear earrings.

BTS has also worn a large variety of accessories. To be precise, in the 21 music videos, there were belts (10), colour contacts (8), sunglasses (6), bandanas (4), suspenders (4), chokers (4), lollipops (3), loose neck ties (3), fingerless gloves (3), eyebrow piercings (2), satin scarves (2), chains hanging from belt loops (2), a feather boa (1), an umbrella (1), a black thigh garter (1), a leather band worn on the upper-arm

(1), a leather corset (1), a leather harness (1), a leather collar (1), a lip ring (1), a flower broach (1), a feathery folding fan (1), and a headband (1).

HYBE LABELS, 2021. *BTS (방탄소년단) 'Butter' Official MV* [screenshot]. YouTube.

The wide range of accessories BTS is fitted with for their music videos does not always comply with Western notions of masculinity. Although historically men lived embellished lifestyles – wearing ornaments and investing in making themselves and their surroundings unique and beautiful – wardrobes became more staid and serious in the 20th century (Goh, 2023). This departure from flashy, embellished ways of living has continued for North American men apart from some subcultural trends (Laux, 2019). Even still, some of these subcultural trends offered little room for flexibility and exploration through accessorizing. For example, while it became fashionable for men to wear earrings during the 60s and 70s as the Hippie movement took shape in North America, it had to be only one stud earring and only on one side – lest your sexuality, and consequently masculinity, be questioned (Laux, 2019). While the market for men's jewelry is opening up as men follow the styles of celebrities such as Harry Styles and Lil Nas X (Goh, 2023) – who both frequently wear accessories from necklaces to earrings – these displays do not go entirely unquestioned or unpunished. In 2019, for example, actor Jake Gyllenhaal appeared on a red-

carpet wearing a thin gold chain that promptly sent Twitter into a frenzy, leading Vogue.com to publish a story titled “Leave Jake Gyllenhaal’s Necklace Alone” (Goh, 2023).

HYBE LABELS, 2020. *BTS (방탄소년단) 'Dynamite' Official MV* [screenshot]. YouTube.

Along the same line of thought, another area worth highlighting is the frequency that members wear jewelry that is more explicitly marked as feminine. For example, in 2 music videos members were shown wearing a watch, which is an accessory with more masculine associations (Laux, 2019), in comparison to the 16 videos where they were shown wearing bracelets, which are less closely associated with masculinity. Additionally, although in most videos BTS members wore either small hoops, or studs, they wore dangly earrings in 9 out of the 21 videos. I have classified “dangly” earrings as any which hang below the earlobe, thus differentiating them from the studs and small hoop earrings BTS often wear. In this context, where men sporting even subtle jewelry may raise some eyebrows, BTS appearing heavily accessorized in their music videos departs from Western notions of masculinity, but largely accepted by a feminine gaze, and thus may be appealing as an alternative text for K-pop fans in North America.

Colour

The colour category was used to make note of the colours outside of BTS wardrobe designs, that is, the set design and filters. Throughout their 21 music videos, BTS is certainly not shy to play with colour. The most common colours throughout the music videos are dark colours such as black, red, and blue, and more muted and earthy colours such as beige and green, and then finally white. A variety of filters were also used throughout, such as black and white (see “Butter” (BTS, 2021), “Life Goes On” (BTS, 2020), and “MIC Drop (Steve Aoki Remix) (BTS, 2017)), cool toned (see “Save Me” (BTS, 2016) and “MIC Drop (Steve Aoki Remix)” (BTS, 2017)), desaturated (see “I Need U” (BTS, 2015) and “RUN” (BTS, 2015)), highly saturated (see “Butter” (BTS, 2021), “FAKE LOVE” (BTS, 2018), “IDOL” (BTS, 2018), and “Not Today” (BTS, 2017)), and even pastel (see “Dynamite” (BTS, 2020)). Colour is experimented with via filters, through wardrobe, set design, and even hair such as V’s blue hair and Jimin’s pink hair in “Boy With Luv” (BTS, 2019), Suga’s mint-coloured hair in “RUN” (BTS, 2015), and RM’s neon yellow hair in “Permission to Dance” (BTS, 2021), to name a few.

The high degree of diversity in terms of colour across the music videos makes it difficult to pinpoint a trend of any sort. Instead, it may be argued that throughout their videos BTS have used colour to create an aesthetic complementary to the genre and theme of the song and video. Their music video “Save Me” (BTS, 2016), for example, is set outside on a grassy plane on a cloudy day. To enhance the sullen mood the gray sky and dark grass invoke, a desaturated, blue-toned filter is used. Also lending to the mood is the wardrobe as the group is dressed in black, white, and gray, allowing them to reflect the sorrow and anguish of the song and the atmosphere. Conversely, the energy and playfulness of pop songs such as “Boy With Luv” (BTS, 2019) are enhanced by blues and warm pinks and oranges that are incorporated into the set and wardrobe. The video also features pastel colours and a soft, almost blurring filter, which adds to the warmth and flirtation of the song and video alike. BTS also have several music videos which

are almost overwhelmingly filled with colour, such as “Blood Sweat & Tears” (BTS, 2016), “DNA” (BTS, 2017), and “IDOL” (BTS, 2018) which offer a stimulating aesthetic experience for viewers.

HYBE LABELS, 2018. *BTS (방탄소년단) 'IDOL' Official MV* [screenshot]. YouTube.

Setting

In addition to being rich with colour, BTS music videos feature scenes in a variety of locations, both indoors and outdoors. Out of 21 music videos, 4 include shots only outside, 4 include shots only inside, and the majority – 13 of them – include scenes shot both inside and outside. Some reoccurring locations are on stages (4), inside warehouses (3), on basketball courts (3), inside a bedroom (3), inside laundromats (2), in the desert (2), at a café (2), at a gas station (2), and on train tracks (2). Overall, there is a great range of sets and locations with BTS appearing in spaces as distant as a dilapidated house (see “FAKE LOVE” (BTS, 2018)) as well as a regal and decorative mansion (see “Blood Sweat & Tears” (BTS, 2016)). It is through this variety of sets and locations that BTS is able to construct different narratives for each of their videos. Like colour, setting is used to convey tone, bringing viewers into the unique space BTS has constructed for their songs.

HYBE LABELS, 2017. *BTS (방탄소년단) '봄날 (Spring Day)' Official MV* [screenshot]. YouTube.

One facet of BTS sets that is particularly interesting is the few that include abstract and surrealist images. In “Spring Day” (BTS, 2017), for example, the members are shown lounging on a massive mound of laundry against a cloudy blue sky while flower petals float down around them. Also in “Spring Day” (BTS, 2017), J-Hope is shown in a room filled with children’s toys laying on the floor, which is completely covered with Snickers bars, and in “FAKE LOVE” (BTS, 2018) V is in a dark hallway with walls covered in flashing cellphone screens. In “Blood Sweat & Tears” (BTS, 2016), all the members are dressed in white, sitting around a white clothed table covered in lavish looking silverware for what appears to be a tense tea party taking place in a clearing in the woods against a pink-orange sky.
The two videos which feature the most abstract and surreal scenes are “DNA” (BTS, 2017) and “IDOL” (BTS, 2018), with the former including scenes compromised of geometric and celestial elements, and the latter including a variety of mind-bending scenes. Some of these scenes include all members sitting in the centre of an unfurling flower made of traditional folding fans Jimin standing in a vortex of the all the members animated faces, and BTS performing within a stage resembling a cage atop a forest against a dark red sky where giant animated versions of the members walk about.

HYBE LABELS, 2018. *BTS (방탄소년단) 'IDOL' Official MV* [screenshot]. YouTube.

Dance Style

I found that out of 21 music videos, hip-hop choreography was most common (9). These videos, such as "Not Today" (BTS, 2017), "FIRE" (BTS, 2016), and "ON" (BTS, 2020) included fast-paced, high-intensity, choreography that consisted of strong, sharp, and stiff movements, free-styling, and popping. The next most common style of dance was modern dance (4). In these videos, such as "Black Swan" (BTS, 2020) and "Blood Sweat & Tears" (BTS, 2016), choreography included elements of interpretive dance with fluid, smooth, graceful, and elegant movements. Finally, 3 videos included retro, groovy, jazz-inspired choreography, such as in "Butter" (BTS, 2021) and "Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021). In a similar fashion to the previous categories, many of BTS' music videos feature a blend of these styles. "FAKE LOVE" (BTS, 2018) for example, includes the popping and locking, free-styling, sharp and quick high-energy movements associated with hip-hop dance as well as slower and smoother turns, spins, and jumps more closely associated with modern dance. These movements are more closely associated with dances constructed as feminine in Western contexts, but they are accepted and admired in the K-pop fandom and align with my conceptualization of a feminine gaze because they bend and break (binary) gender norms. Finally, although fans often speak of BTS dance skills, 6 their videos did not include any

dance. Instead of dance, these videos focused more heavily on narrating a story and showcasing interactions between the members of the group, such as in “Life Goes On” (BTS, 2020) and “Spring Day” (BTS, 2017). This is not to say that videos that have choreography do not have narrative elements, as most of them do, only that videos with no dance have more space and time to develop a story to accompany the song, and so they generally do.

Perhaps one of the most striking features of BTS’ choreography is its unity. Despite the technical complexity and speed of much of their choreography, the group remains very synchronized. What is particularly enticing as an audience member, however, is not only their synchronization but their interactive and harmonious choreography. Many of their dances include movements where members open a space amongst themselves for another member to fill and moments where they push, pull, or guide each other. Such choreography makes it seem as though one member is “controlling” all the others. One video which stands out in terms of interactivity is “DNA” (BTS, 2017) since the choreography for the chorus features the group gathering in the centre of the stage, linking hands, and passing a current of energy between themselves. It is this interactive choreography that makes BTS appear like pieces of a whole and creates an intensely satisfying and affective experience as a viewer. Choreographers have also ensured BTS utilize the full stage they are one, as well as a variety of levels, which, in combination with the variety of styles they blend together and the fact they move together as a unit, makes their dance incredibly engaging and pleasing to watch.

Emotionality

For the purpose of this study, the category emotionality, which is more speculative than the other categories, is included to examine the showing of a range of emotions with attention to sadness and fear, which are stigmatized when exhibited by men in Western contexts where masculinity is constructed as concealing and suppressing such emotions (Cleary, 2012; Kimmel, 1997; River & Flood, 2021).

However, the category was also used to make note of emotionality in general and includes all displays of emotion. The content analysis revealed that BTS has shown a range of emotions throughout their music videos in accordance with the narrative and tone of a given video. In order from most to least displayed are playfulness (12), anger, aggression, and frustration (7), sadness and sorrow (6), loneliness and wistfulness (6), happiness (5), confidence (5), flirtation (5), seriousness (4), apathy (3), fear (3), pain (3), and nostalgia and sentimentality (2). They were also shown crying (2).

Most videos feature several of these different types of emotional displays. For example, in “Spring Day” (BTS, 2017) some scenes feature members of the group looking sad and lonely, and other scenes show them happy and joyful; in “I Need U” (BTS, 2015) members can be seen happy and playful with each other and also looking apathetic, angry, and crying, and in “RUN” (BTS, 2015) members once again appear happy and playful with each other at times while other times getting into physical altercations with each other. “RUN” (BTS, 2015) is, however, the only video to feature blood and depict physical altercations, so it is an outlier in that regard. Overall, most of their music videos depict them being playful, but a significant amount of their music videos shows them struggling with painful emotions, which fits the theme of especially many of their earlier music videos that dealt with the difficulties of adolescence as well as socio-cultural and political topics. This category revealed that BTS are expressive in many of their music videos, even expressing emotions such as fear and sadness, which do not align with Western hegemonic notions of masculinity, which insist on concealing these types emotions (Cleary, 2012; Kimmel, 1997; River & Flood, 2021). Since the feminine gaze is about seeing and feeling, emotional scenes which expose the vulnerabilities and difficulties of the characters BTS portray within their music videos instead aligns with my conceptualization of a feminine gaze for it embraces performances of gender that do not abide by (heteronormative) gender norms.

Skinship

Skinship, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is a portmanteau of the words “skin” and “kinship” and, especially in Japanese and Korean contexts, skinship refers to touching or physical contact between lovers or friends that is used to express affection or strengthen an emotional bond (“Skinship, n.,” n.d.). While this term is far less used in Western contexts, it is frequently used within the context of K-pop fandom. While BTS certainly engages in more skinship outside of their official music videos, there are still many videos in which the members of the group touch one another. Out of the 21 music videos analyzed, most of them had just a little bit of skinship (9), then skinship (7), and then no skinship at all (5). A music video that had “a little bit of skinship” was classified as videos in which an instance of skinship (e.g., hugging, resting a head on a shoulder, etc.) was shown one to two times. If there were three or more instances where the group members made physical contact, it was classified as a video which featured “skinship.” Music videos in which the members made no physical contact were classified as videos with “no skinship.” Some of the skinship shown in music videos such as “Life Goes On” (BTS, 2020), “Spring Day” (BTS, 2017), and “I NEED U” (BTS, 2015) includes tossing arms around each other, hugging, resting heads on each other’s shoulders, and jumping on each other’s backs. A lot of the skinship in their videos which appears the most intimate happens in domestic settings, such as in living room sets. While not all skinship is initiated by the members themselves – some of their choreography features moments where they must lean on each other (see “FAKE LOVE” (BTS, 2018)) and grasp each other’s wrists or hold hands (see “DNA” (BTS, 2017)) – within their music videos BTS engages in skinship in a casual and open way which may be another element that is appealing to ARMYs who find the rigidity of Western hegemonic masculinity restrictive and unappealing.

Exemplifying K-pop fans' acceptance of skinship is the number of web queries talking about skinship amongst idol groups, fan-made articles on which idols practice skinship the most, and fan-made compilation videos on YouTube of idols’ skinship as well. Searching “BTS skinship” on YouTube will

provide one with many fan-made videos compiling clips of BTS being close to and touching each other. The top video on YouTube, titled, "bts being touchy and close" uploaded to a channel called Fandoms Unite has 5.8 million views, underscoring fans' interest in seeing BTS touch each other. The video features clips of the members giving each other massages and scratches, sitting and laying on top of each other, hugging, and giving each other kisses. The highest-voted comment has 9 thousand likes was posted by @Nezumi99 and reads: "The title should have be 'BTS having a friendship y'all are jealous of' [sic]." Several comments that also have thousands of likes celebrate this sort of touching between men. For example, @exthxr_04x21 said, "They're a perfect example of going against toxic masculinity. We need more celebrities like this." As such, this category was included to assess the interactions between the members of BTS since a notable portion of the K-pop fandom appears to accept and enjoy these displays. Although most comments express delight to see men interacting with each other in a way that is not normalized in their local contexts, it must be mentioned, however, that a portion of viewers of this type of content may seek it out to gaze upon the members in a sexualizing or fetishizing way.

Sensuality & the Appearance of Bare Skin

For this category, sensuality refers to images or scenes that, through appeal to the senses, express or suggest "physical, especially sexual, pleasure or satisfaction" (*Sensual*, 2023). Most BTS' music videos do not contain any sensual or suggestive scenes or images, except for two notable exceptions: "Blood Sweat & Tears" (BTS, 2016) and "Black Swan" (BTS, 2020). The mood, wardrobe, choreography, and aesthetics of these music videos make them markedly more sensual than any other music videos in the sample. Some sensual scenes in "Blood Sweat & Tears" (BTS, 2016) include dripping wax, splattering paint, RM running his hand across his mouth as he exhales white smoke, and thin translucent sheets cascading over V's face and body. The music video also features items associated with eroticism such as blindfolds, lollipops, and apples. The significance of these erotic items is reinforced through editorial decisions such as the inclusion of several shots of Jimin struggling while being blindfolded and bound to

a door by this same silky cloth at the peak of the tension in the song. This video also features the only kiss that is shown in the sample since the music video draws to a close with Jin gently touching the cheek of a statue before leaning in to kiss its lips.

In "Black Swan" (BTS, 2020) the sensuality is primarily evoked through set, lighting, wardrobe, and choreography. The music video is set on dark elaborate stages with gold and red details and the members are positioned in the middle of pools of light while the rest of the frame is filled up with mostly dark negative space. Shadows dance on the walls behind them, their skin appears to almost glow against the dark backdrops and being backlit in a dark room makes the movement of their bodies stand out as silhouettes. Their wardrobe also adds to this sensual atmosphere with a variety of textiles such as sequins which catch the light and mesh, feathers, and silk which draw up erotic imaginaries on their own. Their wardrobe for this video also features some plunging necklines and leather corsets which accentuate the curves of their bodies. Choreography for "Black Swan" (BTS, 2020) is also more erotic than that of other videos as it features more sexualized movements such as hip thrusts, body rolls, and running one's hands down one's body. This video also features more modern dance that displays BTS' ability to dance gracefully and elegantly which adds the sensuality of the video. However, outside of these music videos, the rest of the sample does not include sensual, erotic, or suggestive content.

Plenty of male idols appear shirtless either on stage or in their music videos, but BTS has never appeared shirtless in their music videos. The fact BTS do not regularly show bare skin is not lost on fans either, there are searches pertaining to the topic on Quora, which is a question-and-answer website where users can collaborate and share knowledge through answering questions posted by other users. Some questions include, "Why are BTS members not allowed to show skin" and "Why does BTS swim with shirts on." As such, this category of the content analysis was designed to record instances of showing bare skin to analyze how BTS present themselves in their videos. For the purposes of this study, "bare skin" was

counted as anytime skin on the body other than the face, neck, and hands was shown because of the frequency that most members of the group wear long sleeves, long pants, and shoes in their videos. Like the previous categories, the numbers in the bare skin category do not refer to every time bare skin was shown by a member of BTS, but rather each time a video featured bare skin. For example, if three members of the group are wearing shorts in a given video, that was not counted as three shorts, but rather one music video in which bare skin (legs) were shown. Over the course of 21 music videos, BTS showed their forearms arms in short sleeves (9), their lower legs in shorts (8), their bare feet (5), their whole arms in sleeveless shirts (4), their bare shoulders (4), their midriffs (3), and a bit of their chests in low-neckline shirts (2). There were also a few videos where they showed no bare skin at all (2). As the hairlessness of male South Korean idols is a point that North American interviewees have remarked on in other studies (Song & Velding, 2020), it may be noted that in BTS music videos, any bare skin that is shown is hairless, whether it be arms, legs, or underarms.

Stylists' generally do not have BTS show their midriffs or shoulders via costume designs, but rather anytime this bare skin is shown it is because of their choreography. Only one music video features choreography in which a midriff is purposely shown (see "FAKE LOVE" (BTS, 2018)). Other instances, such as those in "Boy With Luv" (BTS, 2019), appear relatively organic as members have to reach above their heads while dancing and their midriffs are exposed for a moment during this movement. The showing of shoulders occurs in a similar fashion. This makes the showing of bare skin seem incidental, rather than deliberate (i.e., as in music videos where artists appear shirtless). The only exception in the 21 music videos is at the end of "Blood Sweat & Tears" (BTS, 2016) in which V's shoulders are shown from behind. Rather than having him completely remove his shirt, he is posed kneeling on the ground with his shirt pulled down to just below his shoulder blades. While it may have been done for fan service, the shot is also central to the narrative of this particular music video as V's back is shown for the scars (done with make-up) between his shoulder blades where he supposedly had wings. Overall, it is clear that BTS is not

a group who openly or frequently show their skin in their official music videos. This could be for a number of reasons, including but not limited to, the group member's personal preferences, company or entertainment industry rules or norms, and socio-cultural norms or pressures pertaining to one's public image in South Korea.

Objectifying or Humanizing?

This category was designed to think critically about the representation of bodies and whether the people who appear in BTS' music videos are objectified or not, including BTS themselves. Oxford Reference defines objectification as "the dehumanizing reduction of a person (or in representation, a depiction of a person) to the status of a thing, an anonymous body, or a fetishized body part" ("Objectification," n.d.). There is plenty of research on the negative effects exposure to sexually objectifying music videos and other media may have on girls and women's self-esteem (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Mischner et al., 2013; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012) and how these images may also lead to self-objectification (Aubrey & Gerding, 2015; Karsay & Matthes, 2020; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Research has also been done on how sexually objectifying portrayals of women in music videos and other video clips may negatively influence how men view and treat women (Aubrey et al., 2011; Bernard et al., 2018; Galdi & Guizzo, 2021; Karsay et al., 2018). Overall, exposure to sexually objectifying media may increase feelings of body shame, appearance anxiety, and self-consciousness in relation to the body during physical intimacy with negligible relation to gender (Aubrey, 2007). Since objectifying images can be harmful, particularly for girls and women, and because as Asian artists BTS are vulnerable to fetishization in North American contexts due to their entanglement in Western imaginaries of race and sexuality (Y. Kim, 2013), this category was included.

In the sample, only two music videos notably featured women. Those were "Boy With Luv" (BTS, 2019), which is a collaboration that featured American singer and songwriter, Halsey, and "Permission to

Dance" (BTS, 2021) which featured several women as extras. While several other music videos featured back up dancers (such as "IDOL" (BTS, 2018) and "Not Today" (BTS, 2017)), they are not given any solo screen time and since backup dancers are shown in groups wearing similar or same outfits, they are not presented in the same way as those in "Boy With Luv" (BTS, 2019) and "Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021). It may be worth interrogating the lack of women in BTS music videos, as well as being critical of how many men, in comparison to women, are selected to be back-up dancers, in future studies. The women who are shown in BTS' music videos are not portrayed in a sexually objectifying light. The women in "Permission to Dance" (BTS, 2021) are never shown in a fragmented way (such as only capturing their legs or chest in a frame), nor were they made to wear clothing markedly different from the male extras or from BTS themselves. Some solo shots are full body shots which show them playfully dancing and close up shots (from the shoulder and above) that show them smiling. All portrayals are humanizing rather than sexually objectifying. Likewise, Halsey is never portrayed in a fragmented way, nor is she made to dance any differently from BTS. Assuming her wardrobe was picked by stylists on the BTS team, rather than herself, she is made to show more skin than BTS, but the framing of the video does not exploit the wardrobe decisions (i.e., close ups of her bare legs, zooming in to show her body in fragmented ways) and so it is humanizing rather than objectifying.

Like the portrayals of women in their videos, BTS themselves was not shown in a fragmented objectifying way. While BTS was shown in a humanizing way in the majority of their videos (17), there were a couple (4) which were less humanizing and leaned closer to objectifying the members. These were videos, such as "Black Swan" (BTS, 2020) which incorporated more sexualized choreography, such as body rolls and hip thrusts, and included fewer narrative elements, which help to humanize the group members by letting their individuality, personality, and emotions become central aspects of the video. While their portrayal even in such videos is perhaps not reductive enough to be truly objectifying, these videos appear less humanizing than the majority of their music videos, so making mention of them is

important. It should be noted, however, that regardless of how BTS is portrayed within their music videos, there may still be fans who sexualize, and in some cases, fetishize, them.

Conclusion

Through this content analysis, I have concluded that BTS' music videos showcase expressions of gender broader than those which can be contained in the small boxes of the gender binary. Instead, I find the aesthetics, movements, and performances in their music videos align more closely with my conceptualization of a feminine gaze. Through their make-up, clothing and accessories, dance, emotionality, and skinship, BTS embraces performances of gender that are associated with the feminine in Western contexts. Such gendered performances of seeing and feeling bend and break gender norms and thus are embraced by a feminine gaze. Furthermore, their music videos align with a feminine gaze because while the music videos are not without sensuality and desire, BTS is portrayed in a way that prioritizes emotionality and subjectivity, rather than objectifies them. From their evident eyeshadow, dangly earrings and corsets, to their depiction of a range of emotions from joy to sorrow, to their casual and playful touching of one another, BTS has shown no hesitation to perform gender in ways that embraces the feminine.

Interviews

"Watching Something Grow": Youth, Nostalgia, & Being a Part of Something (Bigger Than Yourself)

After completing my content analysis and concluding that BTS' music videos do align with my conceptualization of a feminine gaze I conducted interviews. I interviewed five Canadian ARMYs who were located through advertising and snowball sampling to inquire about their experiences, opinions, and ideas as K-pop fans. The interview guide was designed to explore research question two, how is an affective bond formed between BTS and ARMY, and to find areas where my conceptualization of a feminine gaze and the experiences and opinions my participants shared with me overlapped. During

interviews, all of my participants sheepishly told me that they were no longer at the peak of their involvement in fandom. For all my participants, much like myself, life had pushed and pulled them in different directions, and they no longer had as much time to dedicate to fandom as they did in their adolescence.

As all my participants were working women in their mid-to-late-twenties, their days in fandom in middle school, high school, and university are a time they now look back on with fondness. Two central themes that emerged in most of the interviews were discussions about youth and nostalgia. Youth and Nostalgia, incidentally, are common themes in BTS' music during that era as well, as marked by the release of albums such as *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life Pt.1* in 2015, and *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life: Young Forever* in 2016. Most of my participants felt that they had, in one way or another, grown up with BTS. This finding reconfirms previous research that found K-pop fandoms have a subculture of "growing up together" (Yoon, 2019). Several of my participants mentioned their age in reference to BTS debut date, the age of the group members, and the peak of their participation in fandom, underscoring how their perception of time and self is entangled with fandom. Currently, all members of BTS are between 25 and 30 years old, and at the time of their debut in 2013 they were between 15 and 20, making them close in age to my participants. This closeness in age likely amplified these feelings of growing up together as participants and BTS went through their adolescence and early adulthood, in a sense, alongside each other.

In addition to watching the members of BTS grow and mature, my participants spoke of the significance of watching BTS flourish from industry underdogs to a group with international presence, praise, and prestige. Participant 5 articulated the feeling as follows:

> "… especially people who are there from – maybe not the beginning – but for a while, it's the common theme of watching something grow from being small and kind of, uh… for lack of a better word, broke and not with many prospects, to something, like, huge and culture and world

> transcending. Watching that kind of thing happen makes you feel like you're being a part of history, even if it's not something you had anything to do with or it's not, like, a socio-political thing maybe, but it feels cool. It feels like you're part of something bigger and I like that."

In a similar fashion, participant 1 explained how it makes her happy knowing BTS is loved globally and that it is gratifying to see that they have made an impact on the industry as a whole. Such comments underscore the connection ARMY feels to BTS because they have grown up beside them. A large portion of their youth has happened to the soundtrack of BTS' voices. This culture of growing up together is central to the intimate and affective relationships between ARMY and BTS. More to the point, notable discrepancies in age may create distance between fans and artists. Participant 4 stated that she does not like the "fourth wave" of K-pop groups and then spoke reflexively about why she may feel that way. She explained that she "doesn't *love* how young the new idols are," and that since she is getting older and there is a tendency for new groups to debut even younger than a decade before, "that age gap is growing" in a way that makes her uncomfortable and unable to relate to the artists.

"We Could All Be Really Good Friends": Community & Connection

Criticizing certain aspects of the fandom had negligible impact on the fondness my participants felt for their active days as an ARMY. All of them spoke of the positive experiences they had as a part of the community, the wonderful people they met and the friendships they still maintain thanks to their time in the fandom. Participant 1 said that it was easy to become friends with someone once she knew they liked BTS as well since they immediately had something in common. This notion was echoed and expanded on by participant 5 who described being a part of the fandom as follows:

> "… it is such a cool friendship opportunity. It's like you're standing in a room full of people and you're like, 'every single one of these people in here could be my friend. We could all be really good friends.' You just don't know it yet. You're just waiting and that could be it. I love that. It feels like a big field of potential friends."

Upon listening to the stories my participants told me, it became evident that the potential to find friends was often realized. Participants 1 and 5 both gleefully told me that they still have friends around the globe that they met through BTS fandom. The potential for friendship and connection is a benefit perceived and experienced by Canadian ARMYs.

Participants warmly recalled times they spent connecting with other ARMYs and how positive a space the fandom was during its infancy. Participant 2, for example, explained that in the beginning, when she was most involved in the fandom, "[it] feel like it was very welcoming and like uplifting and supportive and everyone was kind of, you know like, really friendly." In terms of making friends, participant 5 mentioned the fact the ARMY is comprised of primarily women and girls as a positive:

> "I love that it's so female-dominant. Like, it's so woman-heavy and while a lot of people you may meet you start to bond over your initial interest, but then you realize you get along for a whole bunch of other reasons and you talk about other stuff and it's like, 'oh my god! Now I actually have a really good friend'!"

It may be easy for non-fans and critics to pathologize and infantilize young and feminine fans, but comments such as these underscore the fact that fandom is much more complex, nuanced, and purposeful than they may be willing to acknowledge. For my participants, it seemed that ARMY offered a gateway into friendship but that the shape the friendship may take after passing that threshold depended on the individuals involved. Particularly in contexts where young and feminine fans especially face ridicule and stigma, BTS fandom offered these women safe spaces of mutual understanding, interest, and respect. Overall, all the women I spoke to expressed that they had met many people they never would have should they not have become an ARMY. They were grateful for the experiences they had in relation to fandom and the friendships that bloomed thanks to a shared affinity for BTS.

While participants' fannish activities took place both on and offline, most of them told me that the majority of their fannish activities took place virtually. Three participants told me they had, or still have, a

Twitter account for their fandom, which they referred to as a “stan Twitter.” I asked exactly what they did on these accounts, and most used them to read other fans' opinions and ideas regarding all things BTS and to look at BTS-related media. Participant 2 said the thing that she found most interesting on Twitter was “analysis of like, the songs, music videos, and like, the meaning behind them,” saying it was “interesting to read different perspectives and how other people connected with the music.” Only one participant explained that she mostly participated in K-pop fandom in person, such as annually attending events such as Korean conventions and Korean outdoor festivals. My other participants also mentioned partaking in fandom offline, but that this was secondary to their online fannish activities. Some activities done offline included going to karaoke, talking to friends about BTS or listening to music together, and going to concerts and fan events. It seems as though by and large, K-pop fandom, especially K-pop fandom in Canada, takes place primarily online.

“That is Something I Found Blossomed, My Confidence”: Finding Comfort, Confidence, & Connection

The findings from my interviews are in line with the findings of previous studies that concluded being a part of K-pop fandom may induce positive emotional and psychological effects from listening to music (J. H. Lee et al., 2021; Rubin, 2021) and from the connection fans have with idols (J. K. Cho, 2017; McLaren & Jin, 2020; Yoon, 2019). The women I spoke to found comfort in BTS’ music, saying their song lyrics were “super motivational” and “very inspiring” (participant 1), and that they “felt close to [BTS] in the sense that they created music that is really meaningful to me and like the things that I was going through. So, when I think of them it’s like a very warm, like, friendly memory” (participant 2). Participants explained that listening to BTS’ music and their lyrics brought them comfort and made them feel understood and less alone.

One particularly poignant interaction I had that encapsulates the comfort BTS’ music is able to bring to ARMY during difficult and painful times was with participant 5. She told me that a friend of hers passed

away during her adolescence, and during that period of time she listened to BTS' album *Wings*, specifically Suga's solo song, "Begin," "over, and over, and over again." She bravely opened up to me, telling me that at one point in that song, you can hear the artist smile and the effect that had on her:

> "Just the thought that, I can hear a human being, through time and space and I'm listening to him smile in a language I don't understand… and something about it just made me feel safe and kind of relaxed and I was like, you know, even when I was really freaked out about the fact that my friend was gone and I was– I didn't really know what to do with myself– It was… It sort of felt like… It's so cliche but it was like nothing really dies because I'm here experiencing it and I'm here thinking about it […] I do actually associate that whole album now with an intense period of- of comfort and very quiet introspective melancholy but also like, 'you're going down to the valley at the bottom but then you're going to come back out.' That whole album does really feel like that."

She beautifully captured this sentiment of feeling connected through music in a way that is transformative, healing, and comforting. Such a story also points to a potential appeal of transcultural media products – their distance. Rather than being put off by the cultural, linguistic, and geospatial distance between herself and the artists, this participant drew comfort from it because it is proof of distance travelled and traversed and of intimacy and connection persisting and existing in the unlikeliest of places. Furthermore, she explained that unlike a friend, she did not have to worry about burdening BTS her emotions, saying with them, it is "whatever manifestation of love you can kind of imagine and there's no guilt for not reciprocating. It was literally– It felt […] completely unconditional." Overall, my interviewees had all gone through periods of loneliness and heightened emotional distress and, to varying degrees, found comfort and connection through BTS' music and the members themselves.

Some participants also talked about how BTS's positive and uplifting messages resonated with them, leading to personal growth in the form of increased confidence, self-acceptance, and self-love. Participant 2, for example, said that "during the era where they were talking a lot about self-love, I feel like that really helped me love myself more, just by like you know, just by being in that space," and participant 1 said BTS "helped [her] see like the positivity in life and everything." Participant 1 was so moved by BTS'

“love yourself” message that she got a tattoo of the symbol from the *Love Yourself: Answer* album cover. In terms of BTS messaging, participant 5 expressed that “the idea that you are worthy of love and you are worthy of affection and you are worthy of gentleness and kindness no matter who you are – that felt huge for me especially in times of turmoil” and that that is a big part of what makes BTS ARMY such a source of comfort for her. It is evident that for these women, these intimate and affective relationships with BTS were nurtured over years of being in fandom and listening to BTS’ voices and consistently being met with comfort and understanding. BTS was a constant and reliable piece of their ever-changing lives. Given that adolescence is a turbulent and confusing period in one’s life, having BTS be steady and “familiar” (participant 5) is the foundation from which these affective intimacies can flourish.

“It is Expensive to be an ARMY Sometimes”: Pressure to Dedicate Time & Resources

Much like myself, all of these women spent multiple years being active in the fandom during their adolescence before their lives got busier and left them less time to participate in fandom. Participant 5, for example, says that she has “sort of moved away from their stuff” but clarified that this was done “not purposefully or anything” and participant 3 explained “because I’m like a young professional especially I don’t have as much time to dedicate [to fandom]”. This notion of dedication weaved its way through most of the interviews. These findings are in line with the findings of previous scholars who studied K-pop, such as Yena Lee (2019), who underscored the pressure on K-pop fans to be unified with each other and willing to make sacrifices to ensure the success of the idols they support. There is an intra-fandom expectation that fans will push their favourite idols into the spotlight, whether it be through concerted efforts to spread awareness and encourage people to vote for a group or stream their music (Blake, 2018), and, in some cases, using thousands – even tens of thousands – of dollars to pay for ad space to place billboards of idols in places as famous as Times Square (Herman, 2017). While that is an extravagant example, it is well acknowledged that having tech-savvy, dedicated, and active fans can make an artist and that ARMY helped BTS become a household name (Blake, 2018; Ming, 2017).

These expectations may unfortunately place an undue amount of pressure on individual fans, lending to some feeling as though they must pour resources into their fandom in order to call themselves a fan. Participant 4, for example, explained that while she supports BTS insofar as she enjoys what they produce, she did not like their last three songs and so did not continue to engage with them, which "disqualifies [her] from being an ARMY." She explained that to be an ARMY is "proactively pouring [one's] love and attention into them, even if [you] didn't like what they put out." In her understanding, being an ARMY is to "unconditionally support and love the boys." This sentiment is in line with Lee's (2019) findings that K-pop fans may feel pressured to go to great lengths to support idol groups. This feeling may be intensified in a group as large and diverse as ARMY as the fans with the most resources to contribute may set a standard. Participant 2 described a hierarchy amongst fans based on perceived dedication and willingness to make sacrifices saying that "if you're not as involved or you're not spending all your time and resources on BTS you're not really, like, as strongly in the community." She described this as "unhealthy" since it meant that your fanship was sometimes questioned or you were singled out if you did not have the time or money to appear as dedicated as other fans.

In relation to the frustration of having fanship be based on the availability of resources you are willing or able to expend in relation to fandom, some participants also lamented that "it is *expensive* to be an ARMY sometimes" (Participant 3). The most recent album BTS released, *Proof*, can be purchased online from weverseshop.io for $22.99 USD for the compact edition, $69.90 USD for the standard edition, and $259 USD for the collectors edition. In addition to albums, BTS has an abundance of official merchandise, a lot of which is made in collaboration with BT21. Launched in 2017, BT21 is a brand and seven characters "born from a collaborative project between LINE FRIENDS and BTS" (*BT21*, n.d.). On the official merchandise store alone products range from plush toys, to lamps, to season's greetings packages (LINE FRIENDS INC, n.d.). A plush toy, for example, retails on the website for $48.95 USD. A poignant example is K-pop light sticks. According to Sage Anderson (2019) light sticks look like:

> "… a cross between a magical girl anime wand and a souped-up flashlight, these LED sticks are powered by AAA batteries, include Bluetooth capability, and have captured the burning hearts (and wallets) of thousands of adoring fans. Not only do they define the idols' group identity, they define the community behind them."

Unsurprisingly, they have become something of a concert must-have for many fans – but most official light sticks retail for between $40 and $60 USD (Anderson, 2019) but many cost upwards of $100 (*Kpop Light Sticks | All Official Kpop Lightsticks*, n.d.). While there are certainly ways fans can show their support and dedication outside of purchasing BTS and BT21-related goods and merchandise, for fans with limited funds to spend on hobby and leisure activities, economic participation in the fandom may not be an option, which may potentially find them lower on the hierarchy participant 2 described. Moreover, for many fans, owning BTS-related goods may give them a sense of pride and joy, so having these items be out of their financial means not only prevents them from "proving" their fanship in hierarchical fan spaces, but may deprive them of an enjoyable aspect of K-pop fandom.

These financial barriers seemed to disappoint some of my participants as well. Participant 4, for example, said that she was able to attend the first concert BTS did in Toronto when they were still a small group, but that to her disappointment, BTS was rapidly becoming farther and farther away:

> "I remember RM explicitly saying, 'don't worry guys, we're coming back to Toronto,' but then, by the time they came back it was like, when they were popular, so obviously I couldn't, a. *get* tickets, or b. really *afford* tickets… so… yeah."

Participant 1 echoed this, saying that she connects with music and artists through concert-going, so now that tickets are more expensive and BTS is so famous "they kind of feel really far away." Such comments underscore my participants' desire to partake in fandom in corporal ways. Given that my participants reside in Ontario, most of their opportunities to partake in fandom are online. This makes the excitement of potentially seeing them in person – and the disappointment of being unable to – even greater.

The dedication fans are expected to display in regard to BTS may be a cause of the volatile and sometimes aggressive behaviours of some ARMY. This is an aspect of K-pop fandom that my participants were very critical of. As criticizing the fandom or the group goes against the fans prescribed roles, some of these comments were voiced with hesitation. For example, participant 4 admitted, "I… I find the modern ARMY kind of terrifying." I told she could be honest if she would like. She then elaborated that she found ARMY "very, very, very cult-like," and went on to clarify:

> "I mean, I'm all for, like, defending the boys, protecting the boys, whatever, whatever… but it is very, I don't know… it just seems like a lot all the time. Yeah, I don't know, I just don't know if I would identify with the way that they do things sometimes because I think that there's a very toxic… Well, I feel like ARMYs used to be the least toxic group because BTS was sort of unknown for like 4 or 5 years, and then now I think that they're one of the most toxic fandoms."

This aspect of BTS being unknown at the beginning of their career is central to the changes in the fandom for two reasons. First, as previously discussed, the reception of BTS in North America is shaped by local prejudice, racism, and xenophobia, and the reaction to the ever-growing ARMY was shaped by misogynist rhetoric that infantilizes and pathologizes primarily young and feminine fans. Given the affective and intimate bond many fans have with BTS, it should not come as a surprise that when public figures make racist or homophobic remarks about BTS, many ARMYs do not hesitate to demand acknowledgement and an apology. However, this demand for reflection and remorse is harmful and misguided when it is exercised on individuals who simply personally just do not like BTS and do not have the platform, resources, or support systems to cope with being barraged by a group as large as ARMY. The massive size of the group as well as the diversity of its members makes it is impossible to say ARMY behaves in one such way, however ARMYs' desire to protect and defend BTS from hateful or unflattering comments is well known and observable behaviour (Barrionuevo, 2022; Li, 2022; Wong, 2018). On a related note, the second reason is simply the size of the fandom. Participant 3 also used the word "toxic" to describe the fandom, saying that you may be likely to run into a "toxic stan" due to the large size of the ARMY, commenting that, "that's just how probability works." Even if only 2% of fans

engage in cyber-attacks against those who say they do not like BTS on social media, with a group as large as ARMY that could be potentially thousands of people.

The size of the ARMY in combination with the pressure and expectation that K-pop fans be dedicated and willing to make sacrifices to ensure idol groups success create an environment where this sort of so-called "toxic" behaviour is, on some level, encouraged. This behaviour has not only caused rifts with other fandoms and non-fans but can create tension within the fandom. Participant 4 was not the only one who complained of the "cult-like" behaviour of ARMY and the chilling effect it may have. Participant 2 explained that she felt pushed away from the fandom because "if you make any critiques towards them, the fans get really angry and they start ambushing you on social media." These comments from my participants underscore the tensions and pressures originating from within the group itself that one may experience in the fandom. It is worth noting that none of the interview questions encouraged participants to express these critiques. The subject of the "toxic" and "cult-like" aspects of the fandom originated from the participants themselves, which may point to fans discomfort with ARMY's reputation and a desire to distance themselves from it through acknowledgement and self-distancing, and to the fact that my participants do not promote or condone such behaviour. Overall, all of the women I interviewed expressed that ARMY, just like any other group, has some disruptive fans who have tarnished the reputation of the whole group. Nonetheless, they all agreed that they have had both positive and negative experiences in the fandom, which they regarded as to be expected in a group the size of ARMY.

"People Think I Just Like Them Because They're Pretty": Fetishization, Fanship, & Race

While the interview was not designed to tease out such answers, the topic of fetishization in the K-pop community did arise. However, participant 4 was the only participant who commented on it directly and used the word "fetishize." She was also the only participant who explicitly stated during the interview that

she herself is East Asian. When I asked if she had ever experienced any negative reactions or stereotyping due to her status as a K-pop fan, she explained:

> "I'm also, like, East Asian, so I guess growing … In terms of people not liking the things I like, I've always felt that to some degree, so I don't know if I felt it even more because of K-pop because I was already kind of used to it."

All but one of the participants were racialized fans, but aside from one East Asian participant, no one overtly speak on the racialized aspects of K-pop in North America. On the topic of the fandom being "toxic" participant 4 hesitantly said:

> "I personally also think it's because the old fans and the new fans treated BTS differently. Um… like, I don't like… Yeah no, I believe this. I think the new fandom, to be honest, they … in a weird way, they kind of fetishize BTS more. Like, yes, they're idolized more, but they're also just objectified – treated as objects a little bit more. Yeah, that's my opinion."

To further articulate this point, she referenced a fan-cam clip that she had seen pop up numerous times on her Instagram page of a wardrobe malfunction in which one of the member's shirts had accidentally been torn or ripped off. Her tone conveyed her shock, disappointment, and upset that other ARMY would view and share a clip such as that, exploiting a presumably vulnerable, embarrassing, and upsetting moment for the artist. While not overtly mentioned, Participant 1 spoke of having to validate and legitimize her fandom, explaining that "a lot of people still think that I just like them because they're pretty, when no, their music means a lot to me and there's so much more to them than just being 'pretty Asian boys'". Such a statement points to a discourse of K-pop fans fetishizing and reducing K-pop idols status down to "just being pretty Asian boys." Such a discourse underscores, once again, the racial and gendered aspects of K-pop in North America.

While all of the participants, at one point or another, spoke of how polished, good looking, or cute BTS is, they did not make these comments defensively or in a way so as to distance themselves from fans who do fetishize K-pop idol groups like some participants in previous studies have done (see Yoon, 2019),

even if they made reference to the racialized aspects of K-pop. Participant 5, for example, said, “they’re all very beautiful human beings […] the East Asian beauty standards are so specific and so rigid that they do all end up looking extremely beautiful. Like, inhumanly so. You look at just about any idol and you’re like, ‘oh okay. Us mere mortals could never.’” This comment underscores her understanding of beauty standards being socio-cultural rather than universal and how South Korean beauty standards are understood within North American contexts. Participant 1 said that the members' looks were what originally caught her attention when she was a teenager, saying “I was like, ‘oh wow, you’re really cute! Let me see what group you’re from.’ All of them were freakin’ adorable so I was like, ‘wow, ok sign me up.’” She largely attributed this to her age, however, explaining that “when I was younger, I like… how do I put it into words… I looked up to them then and now, but [when I was] younger I was very immature when looking at them and it was a lot of like [about how] attractive they are, whereas now I’m like I love them as people and look up to them as people because I want to be like that.” Participant 2 also spoke about how relationship with BTS and with fandom changed as she matured into an adult, saying that young fans ought to be viewed with more sympathy and kindness as they are still growing up.

The participants' experience with BTS should not be flattened. While I have made note of instances in which they spoke of the member’s appearances, such utterances were greatly outnumbered by the instances they spoke of the members personalities and talents. When asked if they had a bias, which is a term for one’s favourite member of a K-pop group, all participants began speaking about the ways the members had inspired them, comforted them, or facets of their personalities they admired, saw in themselves, or hoped to emulate. Participant 1 said in terms of personality, Jimin was her bias as he is the one she “*wants* to be most like” while J-Hope was her bias in terms of musicality. This trend of having a different bias depending on the category or occasion was not uncommon. Participant 2 could not choose, saying their personalities and fashion sense give her a different reason to like each member. Participant 3 mentioned initially being a Suga bias because of his “vulnerability and willingness to open up about

struggles with mental health," but also loving RM for his thoughtfulness and outlook on life. Participants 4 and 5 were both Jungkook biases. Participant 4 was a Jungkook bias for some time because of his talents at singing, dancing, and rapping, and participant 5 said being close to age in Jungkook and watching him grow from a "sort of gawky, insecure" stage in life into the mature adult he is today endeared him to her. Overall, participants' reference to specific facets of the member's personalities that they admire or wish to emulate rather than their appearances points to the intimate and affective relationships that bloomed between them and BTS during their adolescence. Still, they reflexively acknowledged the fact that although they may feel close to BTS, their relationship to them is filtered and mediated.

"You Look Like You Would": Judgement, Stigma, & Stereotypes

The findings from my study were in line with previous findings that K-pop fans report being subject to stereotyping and judgement from non-fans in Western contexts (Yoon, 2019). The present study has added to these conversations by interviewing long-term fans who have experienced fandom for up to a decade. The length of their participation in K-pop fandom allowed them to make comparisons and offer insights on the changing socio-cultural norms regarding K-pop. All of the participants encountered at least some stereotyping and judgement during their time in the fandom in the early to mid-2010s but said that in general K-pop fandom seems to be less stigmatized as of late. When it came to K-pop fandom in the early and mid-2010s, a theme I found common throughout interviews was that my participants practiced a sort of deliberate secrecy and selection. Participants generally concealed their involvement in fandom and only expressed it in fannish spaces, such as on Twitter or Tumblr, or only amongst others they recognized as being accepting of their fandom (these were often other K-pop fans). Participant 5, for example, told me that in the past that when she spent time in the car with friends, she played separate playlists for K-pop fans and non-fans. Participant 3 also kept her fandom private, explaining that she would "never speak of a word of it, especially in a professional setting," and participant 1 explained "if I

found out you didn't like K-pop I would *never* bring up BTS or talk about BTS or anything K-pop related ever again" because she assumed she would be made fun of.

Participant 3 told me that people tend to assume she is a K-pop fan because of her appearance, or say "ah, I knew it," when they learn she is an ARMY. She explained, "so I have purple hair, lots of piercings, I'm into anime and gaming right. So, when people know those things about me, they automatically go one step further and say, 'oh you probably listen to K-pop.'" This participants experience is curious for what it may tell us about the essentialization of Asianness in the Western imaginary – i.e., by liking anime, which are Japanese animations, it is assumed Participant 3 must also like Korean pop music. This comment also underscores the stickiness of the stereotypical image of a "K-pop fan" as one who deviates from normative expressions, hobbies, and interests. Such comments may make fans feel dismissed or ostracized.Moreover, because of the somewhat negative impression of ARMY in the popular imagination, fans may be even less inclined to be open about their fanship. Participant 3 felt that a lot of this negative image of ARMY is a consequence of unflattering and sensationalizing media coverage:

> "As a whole, I think that ARMY gets a bad rep […] because BTS is such a worldwide sensation and ARMY is such a worldwide sensation people really can't wrap their heads around it […] People love to hear about bad things, negative things, crazy fans, crazy stans, you know? So, they're not going to talk about, 'oh, BTS has the Love Yourself Foundation with UNICEF'... they're not really going to touch upon that, um, because it's not nearly as interesting as sensationalizing a headline and saying, 'BTS fans camped outside the concert venue for 3 days' and stuff like that. Even though people do that for One Direction and Ed Sheeran and stuff like that too! It's just more entertaining for people to jump on that bandwagon that ARMY is kind of crazy, right."

The sort of reporting participant 3 described may be yet another example of the pathologization of young and feminine fans. While there are important critiques that should be made about K-pop fandom, such as fetishization and racism within the fandom, fans need not be painted as "crazy" for active and emotional engagement with fandom. Such rhetoric only reinforces the dismissive and devaluing 'fangirl' discourse which may work to discredit the philanthropic and socio-political efforts ARMY has made.

Conclusion

I conducted interviews with five ARMYs to inquire about their experiences, ideas, and opinions regarding their fandom to explore research question two, how is an affective bond formed between BTS and ARMY. Through my interviews, I confirmed that despite geographic and cultural distance, fandom is often very intimate. I argue that it is this intimacy that forms the base of the affective bond ARMYs have with BTS. There cannot be intimacy without honesty, and BTS is widely regarded by fans as authentic (McLaren & Jin, 2020). The fact that BTS created an abundance of content which tackles sometimes difficult to discuss topics such as mental health, socio-cultural issues, and personal struggles and hardship has resonated with many fans, my participants included, who feel that this is authentic. Furthermore, based on the stories my participants shared, BTS' positive and uplifting messages about self-love and acceptance have changed the trajectory of their lives in meaningful ways, which also contributes to the intimacy and bond they feel with BTS.

As my interviews have shown, fans have deeply personal connections with BTS after spending years sharing (virtual) space (i.e., watching live streams, interviews, music videos, etc.) and even feel as though they have grown up with BTS. The age of my participants may be particularly relevant here as they are all very close in age to BTS and so in a literal sense they did in fact grow up alongside the group. Importantly, BTS was a big part of their adolescence, a time of great change, confusion, and internal turmoil for many, including the women I interviewed. That is to say that BTS was a constant in their life during a time of upheaval and instability. What my participants seemed to agree on is that BTS was always familiar – their content always a safe space, especially during the group's infancy. As such, participants formed an affective bond with BTS as they struggled and overcame the challenges of their youth side by side.

Findings of the interviews also shed some light on my participants fanship and a feminine gaze. The feminine gaze I conceptualized is one in which aesthetics, movements, and performances of gender that are associated with the feminine are accepted and even embraced, regardless of the body they are on. I found that participants were accepting of BTS' gendered performances, even those which leaned closer to the feminine in their North American contexts, such as the fact they wear notable eyeshadow and dance. A feminine gaze is also one which may contain eroticism or desire but does not objectify, and I found participants' comments about the group members were consistently humanizing, tender, and fond.

VII. Conclusion

This project was born from the recognition that as a popular culture text, K-pop is marginalized in North America as it is received through a framework of racial stereotypes and imaginaries about Asian men and that K-pop fandom is stigmatized by virtue of its fanbase comprised of primarily women and girls. To perform this analysis on K-pop (both its fandom and its reception in North America), BTS ARMY was looked at as they are one of the largest and most visible K-pop groups and fandoms in contemporary popular culture. In other words, BTS ARMY served as a case study of K-pop and K-pop fandom in North America. To fill a gap in the literature, this study centred women's perspectives and introduced my conceptualization of a feminine gaze to account for the potentially gender-based differences in seeing and feeling. Overall, this study sought to explore the following research questions: one, how do BTS' music videos appeal to a feminine gaze, and two, how is an affective and intimate bond formed between BTS and ARMY? This was explored using three methods. First, my research and analysis as an acafan which brought together my in-group knowledge about K-pop and the findings of scholars in a variety of areas such as critical race studies, masculinity studies, and fan studies, second, my content analysis of BTS' music videos, and third, my interviews with five ARMYs.

A content analysis of all 21 of BTS' music videos released from 2015 onward was conducted to assess if the aesthetics of their music videos may appeal to the conceptualization of a feminine gaze that was introduced in chapter five, the "Ways of Looking" chapter. The music videos were analyzed using nine categories: make-up, clothing and accessories, colour, setting, dance style, emotionality, skinship, sensuality and bare skin, and whether they were objectifying or humanizing. Due to the length and time constraints of the master's thesis, the present study was primarily focused on how the reception of K-pop in North America is shaped by Western notions of masculinity and racialized imaginaries, desires, and stereotypes, so it lacked the space to discuss how South Korean norms and ideals pertaining to aesthetic and gender expression shapes K-pop texts. As such, future studies may benefit from broadening the scope of the research to examine the factors shaping the creation of K-pop texts, in addition those which shape its reception.

Through the content analysis, it was found that BTS' music videos contain elements which depart from Western hegemonic notions of masculinity and instead appeal to a feminine gaze which embraces gender expressions and aesthetics that transcend normative gender roles and centres feeling as much as seeing. Such elements included male bodies wearing obvious make-up, such as eyeshadow, skinship, expressing emotions such as sadness and fear, engaging in dance, and donning accessories and jewelry associated with the feminine in Western contexts. In addition to aspects of the videos appealing to a feminine gaze, BTS' music videos were found to overall be texts rich in aesthetic value and visual and emotional stimulus, giving them appeal to a variety of audiences due to the myriad of settings, narratives, and genres. For example, throughout the music videos, BTS wear a large variety of garments that blend modern and classic elements and sensibilities, resulting in unique aesthetic displays. They do not shy away from experimentation when it comes to colour either. The set designs, wardrobes, and filters used give each and every video a notable colour scheme which enhances the narrative and musical aspects of the video.

To explore the research questions, interviews were also conducted with five women who self-identified as ARMY in Canada. To further explore potentially gendered ways of seeing, future studies may benefit from interviewing both men and women and doing a comparative study to ascertain if there are any notable differences in how participations make sense of the aesthetics and gender expressions in K-pop texts. My interviews revealed that my participants likely see BTS through the feminine gaze I conceptualized. This conclusion was drawn based on my participants personal, emotional, and intimate ways of describing BTS and their long relationships with them as well as their acceptance of BTS' gendered performances. I had anticipated many comments about the members' looks, but in reality, when asked why they like BTS, only two participants even mentioned their appearance, and furthermore, no one mentioned their appearance without also expressing appreciation and admiration for the personalities and talents of the members. In other words, participants valued the member's personalities and talents and admired their bodies in a non-objectifying way, showing that they had adopted the seeing and feeling of a feminine gaze.

I also found that there is, indeed, a deeply intimate and affective bond between BTS and ARMY. Based on the contents of the interviews, I concluded that there are four main facets of BTS fandom that facilitate this bond. The first is the fact that fans have grown up alongside BTS. All of my participants made reference to the timeline of their life through BTS and expressed the momentous feeling of watching something grow. This may be particularly salient for long-term fans close in age to K-pop idols (as my participants were). This is also especially noteworthy for BTS ARMY as BTS was an under-funded industry underdog at the start of their career and have reached almost unheard-of stardom and success. The second is BTS' positive messaging, including but not limited to, their "love yourself" message. Participants spoke about how these messages were uplifting and helped them accept and love themselves during their turbulent and confusing years as adolescents. The third element is the comfort fans draw from

BTS due the one-sided nature of the relationship. Participants expressed that in times of distress, loneliness, or sorrow, BTS offered comfort by being “familiar” and not asking for anything in return. Participants could always turn to without worrying about emotionally overloading them or not being reciprocal themselves. Finally, the fourth is feeling a very personal connection to the members. Although participants were critical of the fact that they do not personally know any of the members of the group and expressed awareness of the fact that BTS’ image is filtered, given that they are celebrities, this did not stop them from speaking about specifics of the members’ personalities that they found endearing. There was an almost overwhelming volume of content created by BTS; whether it be official appearances, casual live streams, or behind-the-scenes footage, the high amount of content allows fans to begin to get a sense of who BTS are as individuals. Whether polished and filtered or not, this feeling that to some extent, they know who BTS are, is a large factor in the intimate and affective bond they grew to feel over the years.

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Appendices

Appendix I. Content Analysis Chart

Music video (view count and year uploaded)	**Yet To Come (The Most Beautiful Moment)** 153 million views June 9th, 2022	**Permission to Dance** 537 million views July 8th, 2021	**Butter** 815 million views May 20th, 2021
Make-up	Eyebrows shaped and filled, subtle pink and neutral lip glosses, subdued brown eyeshadow	Eyebrows shaped and filled, subtle pink and peach coloured lip tints and glosses, subtle orange eyeshadow (V), brown eyeshadow used like winged liner to define and elongate eyes, and light colour contacts	Eyebrows shaped and filled, pinky and peachy lip gloss, warm brown eyeshadow, dark brown eyeshadow used like winged liner to define and elongate eyes (most notable on Jimin), and colour contacts
Accessories & clothing	Earrings (hoops), rings, necklaces, lip ring (Jungkook), beret (Yoongi), sunglasses (RM), baseball cap (J-Hope), tattoos (Jungkook + Jimin) All white outfits featuring white shirts with white blazers or button ups over them, with white pants and white shoes	Earrings (hoops, studs, and dangly ones), bracelets, rings, necklaces, suspenders, belts, bandana on belt loops (V), bandana on head (Suga), silver chains on belt loops (V), sunglasses (Jin), cowboy hat (Jungkook + V), and eyebrow piercing (Jungkook) Mostly black, white, and earth toned Western vintage style button up long sleeve shirts with fringes, slim fit pants (some with fringes), chaps (J-Hope), and ankle high leather boots Blue denim pants and white shirts (* V stands out as the only member in solid deep red)	Earrings (dangly and hoops), rings, bracelets, sunglasses, necklaces, belts, two stick-on gems to look like an eyebrow piercing (Jungkook) Classy, silky looking modern suits in black, grey, and white for some scenes and suits in more bold colours like rich blue and orange in others Track suits in red, blue, white, green, and yellow
Colour	Colours are washed out and subdued (aside from a vibrant blue sky) Limited colour palette consisting of primarily	Saturated, warm filter that makes the whole video seem rosy and soft	Black and white filter on some scenes while others are very saturated with a filter that makes colours appear very bright and bold

	blue, beige, white, and black	Purple balloons are notable through the whole video (around BTS themselves, used on the set (ex. in the laundry machines instead of clothes), and around extras)	
Setting	Inside – N/A Outside – Desert (solo scenes feature items that play homage to previous music videos and concepts (ex. V dressed as a schoolboy holding a rose, and Jungkook in front of a dilapidated amusement park swing ride)	Inside – Laundromat Outside – Desert (in front of a white and orange building, a graffitied truck compartment, and a tall graffitied piece of cement wall) Extras are shown inside a school, waiting at a bus stop, in a cafe, in an office, on the street in front of a mail delivery truck, and at a basketball court	Inside – elevator, basketball set, lit up stage, members part of criminal line up, glossy pink and orange set Outside – N/A
Dance style	No dancing in this video	Casual, playful, groovy and jazzy and relatively simple (compared to some of their more technical choreography)	Cute and flirty choreography (ex. kissing back of their hand), energetic, fast-paced, groovy and fun
Emotionality	Nostalgic, somber, sentimental, happy, serious	Happy, playful, carefree	Playful, flirty, fun, confident
Skinship	A little bit of skinship – only Jimin wrapping his arms around RM and Suga and V holding the back of J-Hope's neck briefly	A little bit of skinship – only Jungkook briefly putting his hand on Suga's shoulder at 1:38	A little bit of skinship – V leaning on Jungkook's back, Jin and Jungkook leaning into each other with their temples pressed together and V and J-hope holding hands (2:09)
Sensuality and the appearance of bare skin	Knee length shorts (J-Hope)	J-Hope's bare arms are visible in a sleeveless button up shirt, and all members show their forearms in short sleeves or rolled up long sleeves during at least one shot	Shorts (Jimin, J-hope, Jungkook, + RM), sleeveless shirts (V + J-Hope), and Jimin in a see-through mesh shirt (with a white tank top under it)

			V pressing a lollipop into his lips and later pretending to apply cologne to his neck and chest with the insides of his wrists and J-Hope slowly eating food off a fork in the final shot of the MV before coyly looking toward the camera
Objectifying or humanizing	Humanizing	Humanizing	Humanizing

Music video (view count and year uploaded)	**ON** February 27th, 2020 315 million	**Black Swan** March 4th, 2020 423 million	**Dynamite** August 20th, 2020 1.5 billion
Make-up	Eyebrows shaped and filled, brown eyeshadow concentrated around the outer corners of the eye, pink and neutral lip tints, "dirt" smudges on face	Eyebrows shaped and filled, buffed out brown eyeshadow in place of winged eyeliner, subtle brown eyeshadow, pink lip tints	Eyebrows shaped and filled, subtle eyeshadow in light brown and grey colours, light coloured contacts, and pink lip glosses
Accessories & clothing	Earrings (RM + Suga + Jungkook), fingerless gloves (J-Hope), thick rhinestone choker (V) Tattered and dirty peasant clothing consisting of white and beige loose-fitting shirts, brown and beige and brown vests and jackets, and loose pants and boots Fitted black pants (some distressed) with loose black or grey hoodies or long sleeve shirts decorated with	Earrings (hoops), rings, belts, bracelets (RM), necklaces (V), leather corset (Jimin + Jungkook) Almost entirely all white semi-formal outfits of fitted pants, fitted shirts, and blazers (black feather fringe on one side of Jimin's blazer) All black semi-formal outfits of fitted pants, fitted shirts, and blazers featuring varying light-catching rhinestones, and glossy dress shoes	Earrings (hoops and dangly), necklaces, bracelets, rings, belts, sunglasses, tattoos (Jungkook), beret (V), bucket hat (J-Hope) Retro style outfits composed of bell bottoms and denim on denim Casual outfits of loose-fitting t-shirts, long sleeves, and open button ups with straight leg pants

	rhinestones and running shoes		
Colour	Predominantly cool earth tones including greens, blues, beiges, and browns which offset the end of the video which features a dark night scene with mostly black, red, and blue	The video is dark with mostly blacks, golds, and deep reds	Soft blurring filter which washes out colours, leaving lots of muted and pastel colours (primarily pinks and blues)
Setting	Inside – Place of worship, shabby warehouse full of birdcages Outside – Grassy battlefield filled with fallen soldiers surrounded by grassy mountains, in the forest, in front of a shipwreck on the grass, a creek	Inside – On a grand empty stage Outside – N/A	Inside – in a bedroom, record store, retro club, and cafe Outside – at sunset, in front of gas station, in front of an ice cream truck, on a basketball court, on a plain white flat stage surrounded by grass as the sky behind them fills with bright colours
Dance style	A powerful, fast-paced, energetic hip-hop style	Technically challenging, many fluid and smooth movements with some choreographing including elements of modern dance and ballet while others include quick, sharp movements	Playful, disco inspired jazz and pop style that is upbeat, energetic, fun
Emotionality	Desperation, aggression, loss, fear, exhaustion, hope	Desperate, sensual, frustrated	Joyful, flirty, very playful and fun Members smiling and laughing throughout, winking and smirking
Skinship	No skinship between the members	A little bit of skinship – mostly just choreographed touches (Ex. Jungkook pulling Suga by the hand at 0:47)	A little bit of skinship – Jimin jumping on Jungkook's back and members dancing in a line, each one with their arm on the next one's shoulder

Sensuality and the appearance of bare skin	Due to loose-fitting shirt and choreography, Jimin's midriff is exposed at 4:27	All members are barefoot with slightly exposed chests (ex. see-through black mesh shirt under blazer (Jin), no shirt under blazer (Jimin) dress shirts not fully buttoned (V)) Choreography features commonly sexualized movements such as hip thrusts (ex. 1:16), and accentuates their necks and hands, Jimin's dance solo (approximately 2:42-2:44 and 2:48-2:54) features him laying back to the ground and pushing his hips upwards, and Jungkook tosses his head back at 2:56	Bare arms in short sleeves (Suga, V + J-Hope) and some bare shins in shorts (J-Hope, Jimin, + RM in shorts)
Objectifying or humanizing	Humanizing	Likely objectifying	Humanizing

Music video (view count and year uploaded)	**Life Goes On** November 19th, 2020 479 million	**Boy With Luv** April 12th, 2019 1.5 billion	**FAKE LOVE** May 18th, 2018 1.1 billion
Make-up	Eyebrows shaped and filled, subtle brown eyeshadow, darker eyeshadow in place of winged eyeliner to accentuate eyes, subtle brown shimmer eyeshadow (Jin), and coloured contacts (Jimin)	Eyebrows shaped and filled, subtle brown and grey eyeshadows to define the eyes, colour contacts, and subtle pink lip tints and glosses	Eyebrows shaped and filled, light brown eyeshadow, smoked out black eyeliner, blue and brown colour contacts
Accessories & clothing	Earrings (hoops and dangly earrings on Jimin), beanie (RM) Casual at-home wear (crewnecks, plaid PJ pants, and fleece	Earrings (pearls, dangly, hoops), rings, necklaces, and bracelets, satin scarf on belt loop (Jimin), feather boa (V), baseball cap (Suga), short top hat (RM),	Earrings (dangly, hoops), leather strap around upper arm (Jimin), rings, necklaces (both loose and chokers (J-Hope + Suga)), bracelets, tight leather harness around torso and neck + leather cuffs around wrists (V), loose leather harness around waist and

	flannels) and matching pyjama sets (Jin) All white suits and white shoes	belts, umbrella (RM), flower broach (Jungkook) Pink and white outfits composed of silky open button up shirts or robes, loose fitting tees, and loose fitted pants Casual outs of denim skinny jeans, jean jackets, sweaters, open button ups over t-shirts, and running shoes (Converse) Formal wear composed of black fitted dress pants, dress shirts and blazers	neck (RM), belts, flannel around waist (Jungkook) Dark casual and semi-formal clothing including animal print shirts, dress shirts, sequined sparkly jackets, tight fitting pants, glossy dress shoes Casual outfits composed of jean jackets, jeans (distressed, covered in paint splatters, white), loose fitted t-shirts and button ups, leather jackets, sweaters, and running shoes (Converse)
Colour	The filter makes colours appear washed out and dull Black and white filter for final scene of the MV	Soft blurring filter makes colours appear warm and pastel Vibrant sky of pink, orange, and purple mixing paint	Desaturated and appear washed out (mostly blacks, greys, whites, and reds) Saturated with blue tint
Setting	Inside – In a single house (washroom, living room, balcony, bedroom), and a separate final scene on a large stage with tens of lights behind them Outside – Driving in a car	Inside – Retro diner, Suga dancing on light up piano keys in a black room Outside – Movie theatre set in front of blue evening sky with some clouds, watercolour painted evening cityscape with streetlights	Inside – In various rooms in a dilapidated house (ex. dark room with several long windows covered with red drapes, dark room with artwork/sculpture of white hands behind them, black hallway with walls covered in flashing cell phone screens and empty picture frames) Outside – N/A
Dance style	No dancing in this video	Energetic, playful, more fluid, flowy, and pop-y than some of their other (hip-hop) dances	Energetic, hip-hop, sharp and fast movements Fluid, graceful, and sensual movements including body rolls

Emotionality	Happy, playful, content, silly, relaxed, calm, nostalgic, wistful, and sentimental Apathetic, blasé, and bored	Playful, flirty, and fun	Desperation, sadness, fear, resignation, introspection, pain, frustration
Skinship	Skinship – Everyone in PJs huddled on the couch together playing video games, they're shown hugging each other's shoulders, tossing arms around each other, smiling at and leaning on each other, and the 7 of them sharing 2 beds	A little bit of skinship – aside from Jimin having his arm around Jin (2:44), and members having their arms around each other's shoulders for the final shot	A little bit of skinship – some choreography includes skinship (Ex. V holding up Jungkook on his back (0:37), grasping each other's wrists and leaning on each other as the song ends)
Sensuality and the appearance of bare skin	Some members are in bare feet RM dragging two fingers along a bike seat to check for dust, then blowing off his fingers	Short sleeves (RM + Jimin), and Jimin's midriff is shown when he raises his arms for choreography (0:40, 1:20)	Short sleeves (Jimin + J-Hope), and choreography + wardrobe exposes members midriffs briefly (Ex. Jimin + Jungkook at 1:48, RM at 4:10, Jimin at 4:22), in addition to raising a shirt as part of choreography at 4:26 (Jungkook)
Objectifying or humanizing	Humanizing	Humanizing	Likely objectifying

Music video (view count and year uploaded)	**IDOL** August 24th, 2018 1.1 billion	**Spring Day** February 12th, 2017 493 million	**Not Today** February 19th, 2017 553 million
Make-up	Eyebrows shaped and filled, brown and grey eyeshadow concentrated around the outer corners of the eyes, lip tints (most evident on V and J-Hope), colour contacts	Eyebrows shaped and filled, light brown eyeshadow, smoked out deep brown eyeshadow, subtle pink lip tints and gloss, colour contact lenses	Eyebrows shaped and filled, smoky eyeshadow in grey, black, and brown

Accessories & clothing	Earrings (hoops, dangly), necklaces, bracelets, rings, glasses (V + J-Hope), suspenders (V), bandanas tied around heads (V + Jin), visor (J-Hope), belts, scarf tied around shoulders (Suga), baseball cap (Jimin), feathery folding-fan (Jimin), necktie (V + Jin) Brown and beige safari-esque or boy-scout-esque clothing (vests and jackets with pins, plain running shoes) Heavily patterned and brightly coloured suits Dark coloured long silky robes Casual and streetwear composed of sweaters with collars, distressed denim jeans, jerseys, cardigans, and converse	Earrings (hoops), bracelets, winter hats, plastic crown (RM), fingerless gloves (V) Casual clothing composed of cardigans (fills on V's), jeans, loose fitting shirts, turtleneck sweaters, hoodies, jackets (denim, bomber, blazer), and running shoes (Converse)	Earrings (hoops), rings (Jimin), bracelets (V + Jungkook)), baseball cap (J-Hope), bandana around head (RM + V), scarf tied to waist (V), belts, metal rings on belt loops (Jin + J-Hope) Hip-hop and casual style clothing in mostly black, red, and white and composed of mostly black tight-fitting pants (some leather), bomber jackets, hoodies, loose button ups and t-shirts, and running shoes
Colour	Muted earth tones (brown, beige, navy green, and cream) Vibrant and overwhelming saturated colours	Saturated colours Makes use of scenes with both warm and cool colours	Saturated colours – MV appears to have a purple-red filter on it
Setting	Inside – N/A Outside – surrealist, sitting around a table with a bunch of giraffes behind it, video feels psychedelic at times	Inside – Train, motel room, laundromat, laying on a massive pile of clothing, empty spiral staircase Outside – Snowy train station and tracks, beach, motel, on top of a train with the sun setting behind them, all of them on the pile of clothing against a blue sky filled with cherry blossoms	Inside – Abandoned parking garage Outside – Rooftop (orange and pink sunset behind them), running through and beside mountains, and dancing on a flat chunk of ice surrounded by mountains

Dance style	Energetic, hip-hop, stiff Fluid and smooth movements, some graceful jumps in the choreography	No dancing in this video	Energetic, hip-hop style, lots of complicated footwork, very fast, powerful, and sharp movements
Emotionality	Playful, flirty, serious and confident	Sorrow, sadness, loneliness, joy, isolation, happiness, emptiness, tiredness	Desperation, anger, passion, confidence, fear, pain
Skinship	Skinship – group squished into a small couch (RM's arm around V, V's hands on Jungkook's shoulders), Suga and Jungkook sitting with their backs pressed against each other (2:18)	Skinship – Jin piercing Jimin's ear, members leaning on each other and resting their heads on each other's shoulders, everyone sleeping together on top of a shared bed, and huddled up on the couch together	No skinship between the members
Sensuality and the appearance of bare skin	J-Hope in a sleeveless vest, shorts (Jungkook + RM), and jeans with notable slits in the thighs (Jin + J-Hope)	Shorts (Jimin, J-Hope, Jin)	No bare skin at all
Objectifying or humanizing	Humanizing	Humanizing	Humanizing

Music video (view count and year uploaded)	**DNA** September 18th, 2017 1.4 billion	**MIC Drop (Steve Aoki Remix)** November 24th, 2017 1.2 billion	**FIRE** May 1st, 2016 342 million
Make-up	Eyebrows shaped and filled, soft brown eyeshadows (most evident on Jimin and V), colour contacts, lip gloss	Eyebrows shaped and filled, smoked out brown eyeshadow to define eyes, colour contacts	Eyebrows shaped and filled, smokey eyeshadow and eyeliner, glossy pink lips, colour contact lenses, and faux freckles (Suga)
Accessories & clothing	Earrings (dangly, hoops), rings, bracelets (Suga), loose necktie (V), baseball cap (Jin), loose satin scarf around neck (Jungkook)	Earrings, rings, bracelets, necklaces, long chains on pants, bucket hats (J-Hope + Jimin), bandana around head (Suga + J-Hope), headband (V),	Earrings (hoops), watch (RM), sunglasses, bracelets, rings, black thigh garter (Jungkook), necklaces, baseball caps, belts, hoodie tied around

	Casual clothes like loose fitting tops, jean and bomber jackets, distressed and bleached denim, track suit pants, sweaters, crew necks, and hoodies, and running shoes Business casual with fitted pants, silky dress shirts and blazers Some tie-dye and sequences	fingerless gloves (J-Hope) Casual baggy street clothing including loose fitting t-shirts, hoodies, crewnecks, loose fitting joggers, bomber jackets, and boots and running shoes	shoulders (Jimin), loose necktie (Jin) Casual wear including black distressed denim jeans (all) and blue jeans, loose fitting t-shirts and short sleeved button ups with running shoes or shiny black boots
Colour	Very saturated and bright (bold colours – mostly blue, purple, green, yellow, and red)	Cool toned blue filter over majority of the MV with most clothing being black, red, white, or grey Black and white filter	Soft filter but the colours still pop Primarily black, blue, dark green, some red, some orange, some pink
Setting	Inside – Surrealism (rooms in space, colourful backdrops, etc.) Outside – Galaxies, dancing in the yellow metal frame of a warehouse against an impossibly bright blue sky	Inside – Boardroom with lots of microphones left on a table behind them, in a completely black room, in a recording studio, in a photo developing studio Outside – On the road in front of lots of cars with explosions in background	Inside – Dancing in an empty swimming pool, an underground club (also features some fire in the background) Outside – Behind a building with pink walls and scuffed up cement (fire and burning car in the background in some scenes)
Dance style	Very interconnected, energetic, bold, powerful, sharp, pronounced, hip-hop	Hip-hop, very energetic and powerful, sharp	Very energetic, hip-hop, lots of sharp and fast movements
Emotionality	Playful and flirty Serious, confident	Fiery, aggressive, and confident	Playful, fun, rowdy, charismatic, confident, energetic, aggressive
Skinship	A little bit of skinship – the only skinship is facilitated by the choreography which includes them grasping each other's hands	No skinship between members	Skinship – Playfully hitting each other on the shoulder, J-Hope throwing an arm around RM's shoulders (2:25), Jungkook wrapping his

			arms around Jimin's stomach from behind (3:00)
Sensuality and the appearance of bare skin	Bare arms (RM in a sleeveless shirt) and bare shoulders at 3:41 (Jimin + Suga), and Jimin in shorts	Jimin is wearing a tank top under a jacket, and a few dance moves expose his bare shoulder	Short sleeves (RM, J-Hope, Jimin, Jin), and shorts (RM, J-Hope, Jimin, Jungkook)
Objectifying or humanizing	May be objectifying	Humanizing	Humanizing

Music video (view count and year uploaded)	**Save Me** May 15th, 2016 682 million	**EPILOGUE: Young Forever** April 19th, 2016 52 million	**Blood Sweat & Tears** October 9th, 2016 901 million
Make-up	Eyebrows shaped and filled, pink lip tints	Eyebrows shaped and filled, brown eyeshadow, some dark eyeliner in the water line	Eyebrows shaped and filled, smoky eyeshadow, black eyeliner framing outer corners of eyes and water lines, neutral pink lip gloss, colour contacts
Accessories & clothing	Earrings (studs, hoops), necklaces, baseball cap (Jin + RM), bracelet (Jin + Suga) Casual clothing in all black, white, and grey including baggy t-shirts, loose long sleeves, hoodies and jackets all paired with (mostly) distressed black skinny jeans and running shoes or boots	Earrings (mostly hoops and studs), rings, bracelets, necklaces, hats (RM), loose necktie (V) Simple, classy outfits of black fitted dress pants with a flowy shirt tucked neatly into it and shiny dress shoes worn by all members	Earrings (hoops, dangly), rings, silk neck scarf as a choker, leather collar (Jin), bracelets, necklaces Formal wear composed of flowy button-up dress shirts, open blazers, black dress pants and tight black pants, and shiny dress shoes
Colour	Desaturated cool blue toned filter over the video makes colours appear muted and dark Mostly black, blue, white, and grey	Soft filter, very dreamlike, mostly blues, pale yellows, and pinks	Soft beige filter – primarily black, navy blue, red, and white Oversaturated and overexposed warm colours (pink, red, orange, and purple)

Setting	Inside – N/A Outside – in a dreary field against a cloudy grey sky	Inside – N/A Outside – wandering around a maze made of metal fences on concrete against a blue sky, running towards the setting sun down a plane runway *"Flashbacks" to previous MVs	Inside – Gives a regal air inside a museum and/or an art gallery, and rooms which seem like they're in a fancy and highly decorated mansion Outside – On a balcony
Dance style	Energetic, very fast paced, elements of hip-hop and modern dance, lots of jumping	No dancing	Graceful choreography combines high energy and slow and sensual movements
Emotionality	Moody, frustrated, sad, wistful	Melancholy, loneliness, serious and wistful looks Joyful, playful, free	Anguish, sorrow, pain, sadness, crying
Skinship	No skinship between the members	A little bit of skinship – only clips aside from clips of "memories" or "flashbacks" that show them with arms around each other, squeezed in together to take photos in a photobooth (clips are from RUN)	Skinship – Scenes of them smiling at one another and throwing their arms around each other's shoulders, reading to one another with their shoulders pressed together, and everyone covering Jin's eyes at 1:16
Sensuality and the appearance of bare skin	No bare skin (only their knees showing through ripped jeans)	T-shirts (Jimin, RM)	Some sensual imagery (ex. dripping wax, Jungkook licking off his finger, blindfolds, apples, thin sheets cascading over V's face) Plunging v-neck dress shirts (Jimin + J-Hope), bare feet (V), and emphasis on hands, bare shoulder (Jimin 3:06), Jin caressing the face of a statue, then kissing it (5:23), V's back (5:21)

Objectifying or humanizing	Humanizing	Humanizing	May be objectifying

Music video (view count and year uploaded)	**I NEED U** April 29th, 2015 232 million	**DOPE** June 23rd, 2015 732 million	**RUN** November 29th, 2015 172 million
Make-up	Eyebrows shaped and filled, black eyeliner in water lines, smoked out dark eyeshadow on eyelids and around waterline	Eyebrows shaped and filled, black eyeliner in water lines, eyes framed with dark smoked out eyeshadow (most notable on Jimin and Suga), pink and neutral lip gloss	Eyebrows shaped and filled, black eyeliner in waterline, light and dark brown and black eyeshadow, neutral and pink lip tints and glosses
Accessories & clothing	Earrings (hoops and studs), rings, beanie (V), baseball cap (RM), necklaces, suspenders, lollipop (RM), bracelets, belts Casual daily wear composed of fitted dark wash jeans rolled up at the ankles, flannels, bomber and leather jackets, loose fitting tops, hoodies, and boots	Earrings, glasses (Jimin + V), rings (Jimin), bracelet (RM), watch (Jimin) Members all have matching outfits of a fitted white dress shirt, black necktie, fitted black dress pants, and glossy black dress shoes Each member also has their own "work" related outfit (Ex. J-Hope as a race car driver, V as a detective, Jin as a doctor, etc.)	Earrings (hoops), necklaces, choker (V), lollipop (RM + Suga), bracelets, sunglasses (Jimin + RM), small beanie (RM), cowboy hat (Jungkook), suspenders Casual wear including jackets (leather, bomber, trench), cardigans, white shirts and fitted jeans (some distressed) with boots
Colour	The filter desaturates the MV, making things appear almost foggy or smoky at times Features mostly blues, whites, dark greens and greys	Warm filter Primarily black, white, and red	Desaturated Lots of cool colours
Setting	Inside – A bedroom	Inside – in a warehouse and in select working	Inside – In a room partying

	Outside – Train tracks, tunnels, urban streets, gas station, around a campfire	scenes constructed within that warehouse (doctor, race car driver, detective, etc.) Outside – N/A	Outside – Train tracks, running through urban areas, road, tunnel, field, a port
Dance style	No dancing	Hip-hop, very energetic with sharp and precise movements and lots of footwork	No dancing
Emotionality	Sadness (Jin crying at 0:15 and 2:22, Jungkook at 0:19), apathy, frustration, anger Joyful, playful, content *TW: (implied) substance abuse and suicide, domestic violence	Fun and playful	Happy, playful, energetic, and lighthearted, smug Loneliness, anger, apathy, sadness, even being rowdy, unruly, and spiraling out of control *TW: blood
Skinship	Skinship – Pulling each other into a train, arms around each other sitting around a campfire, hugging and tickling each other, running together and jumping on each other's backs	A little bit of skinship – only Jin briefly colliding with V and putting his hand to V's ear to whisper something to him (1:36)	Skinship – sleeping on each other's thighs, hugs, and a physical altercation between Suga and Jungkook in which they're pushing and hitting each other (Jungkook appears to try to end the fight by hugging Suga, who pushes him away again at 2:30)
Sensuality and the appearance of bare skin	Bare feet (Jin, Suga), bare arms and shoulders (Jimin in a white tank top), bare arms in t-shirts (J-Hope), and bare legs (Jin in shorts above the knee)	Bare arms (Jungkook in short sleeves) and bare legs (V in shorts)	Jimin in a t-shirt, bare feet (V + J-Hope)
Objectifying or humanizing	Humanizing	Humanizing	Humanizing

Appendix II. Interview Guide

1. When did you first become a fan of BTS?
    a. How did you find out about them?
    b. What was it about them that initially captured your attention?
2. Of BTS' music videos, do you have a favourite?
    a. What do you like about it?
3. What activities do you participate in as an ARMY?
4. What do you enjoy most about being part of the fandom?
5. Was your impression of K-pop different before you became an ARMY?
6. Do you feel close to BTS?
    a. If yes, what makes you feel close to BTS?
7. Do you have a *bias? (*K-pop fandom specific term meaning favourite member)
    a. What is it about this member that makes them special to you?
8. Has your identity as an ARMY changed your life in any way?
9. How would you describe ARMY?
    a. Do you think being an ARMY is different from being a BTS fan?
10. Was there a difficult time that BTS helped you through?
11. Have you ever experienced any stereotyping or other negative remarks once you revealed you were an ARMY to someone?