

- **Hyunshik Ju**
Sungkyul University, South Korea

Premediating a Narrative of Growth: BTS, Digital Media, and Fan Culture

This article explores the landscape of fan engagements with BTS, the South Korean idol group. It offers a new approach to studying digital participation in fan culture. Digital fan-based activity is singled out as BTS's peculiarity in K-pop's history. Grusin's discussion of 'premediation' is used to describe an autopoietic system for the construction of futuristic reality through online communication between BTS and ARMY, as the fans are called. As such, the BTS's live performance is experienced through ARMY's premediation, imaging new identities of ARMY as well as BTS. The way that fans engage digitally with BTS's live performance is motivated by a narrative of growth of BTS with and for ARMY. As an agent of BTS's success, ARMY is crucial in driving new economic trajectories for performative products and their audiences, radically intervening in the shape and scope of BTS's contribution to a global market economy. Hunshik Ju graduated with Doctor of Korean Literature from Sogang University in South Korea. He is currently a full-time lecturer at the department of Korean Literature and Language, Sungkyul University.

Keywords: BTS, digital media fan culture, liveness, premediation

Introduction

A South Korean (hereafter Korean) idol group called Bulletproof Boy Scouts (hereafter BTS) delivered a speech at the launch of "Generation Unlimited," United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) new youth agenda, at the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 24, 2018. In his speech, BTS's leader Kim Nam Jun (also known as "RM") stressed the importance of self-love by stating that one must love oneself wholeheartedly regardless of the opinions and judgments of others.¹ Such a message was not new to BTS fans, since the group's songs usually raise concerns and reflections about young people's personal growth. In other words, the BTS leader's speech reflected what their own fans dreamed of and what they wanted to tell the world.

BTS is an idol group that officially debuted in South Korea in 2013 with the lead single “No More Dream” from the mini-album *2 Cool 4 Skool*. The group has seven members: RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, V, Jimin, and Jungkook. The name “Bulletproof Boy Scouts,” meaning a group of boys that is impenetrable to bullets, reflects BTS’s artistic vision of exuding positive energy to consumers of their albums. This vision includes sharing their music in a way that delivers the group’s messages of hope for protecting young people from troubles, social prejudice, and oppression. The group’s debut album, *2 Cool 4 Skool*, was released on June 12, 2013, and on July 9, 2013, their fans formed “ARMY,” (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth), a fan club dedicated to the group. In 2014, they released their first full-length album *Dark & Wild*. After some mini-albums, including *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Part 1* (2015) and *Part 2* (2015), the group released *Wings* in 2016 and *Love Yourself: Tear* in 2018, their second and third full-length albums, respectively.

BTS achieved commercial success in 2015 and international recognition in 2017-2018. In 2017, they became the first K-pop group to perform at an American music awards and won their second Artist of the Year award at the Mnet Asian Music Awards. In 2018, the group won the Top Social Artist award at the Billboard Music Awards, and received their first Double Platinum certification from the Recording Industry Association of Japan (RIAJ) for their single “Mic Drop/DNA/Crystal Snow,” which was the only album by a foreign artist in 2017 to sell over 500,000 copies in Japan and receive certification on the Oricon Chart.² In addition, on November 9, 2018, *Love Yourself: Answer* became the first Korean album in the United States to be certified Gold (over 500,000 units sold), and BTS became the first Korean group to receive a Platinum certification (over 1,000,000 units sold) with the single “Mic Drop.” In December 2018, BTS ranked eighth on *Billboard*’s year-end Top Artist Chart in the United States. In 2019, they attended the 61st Grammy Awards, where they presented one of the awards during the ceremony. Their 2019 album *Map of the Soul: Persona*, won first place on the official US and UK album charts, in addition to taking the fifth place on the charts of France and Italy, and the third place on Germany’s chart, where non-vernacular songs are usually unable to advance.

Why BTS, a Korean idol group, is currently one of the most popular in the world is of great interest to popular entertainment studies. To address this question, this article explores the landscape of fan engagements with BTS and offers a new approach to the study of digital participation in fan culture by addressing the following points. First, digital fan-based activity is singled out as BTS’s peculiarity in K-pop’s history. Second, Grusin’s discussion of ‘premediation’ is applied to describe an autopoietic system for the construction of futuristic reality through online communication between BTS and ARMY. Third, as such, the BTS’s live performance is experienced through ARMY’s premediation, imaging new identities of ARMY as well as BTS. Fourth, the article argues that the fans’ digital engagement with BTS live performance is motivated by a narrative of growth of BTS with and for ARMY. Lastly, as an agent of BTS’s success, ARMY is crucial in driving new economic trajectories for performative products and their audiences, radically intervening in the shape and scope of BTS’s contribution to a

global market economy. This article provides new perspectives on the complex web of star and fandom, the local and the global, and the production and consumption of popular culture in a digital era.

BTS in K-pop

In K-pop's history, BTS is emblematic of idol groups growing into a fan-oriented use of social media. In fact, almost all Korean idol groups promote themselves by broadcasting live performances and posting group-related information on social media. However, BTS's social media use is different from that of other groups. While BTS's social media is managed with, for, and even by its fan club ARMY, other groups usually use social media as a means of contact with fans to increase their commercial value by strengthening the intimate fan-artist relationship. In other words, the growth of BTS as artists has run in parallel with the trajectory of ARMY's identity development on social media.

A brief account of K-pop history will help distinguish the peculiar characteristics of BTS. The current star system of Korean idol groups emerged in the late 1990s. Previously, when former military men, such as Park Chung-he, Jeon Doo-hwan, and Roh Tae-woo, had presidential power, popular Korean artists underwent governmental censorship and surveillance to justify the political regime. Integrated into a government project that required popular culture agents to follow administrative commands and raise typical citizens, these artists were expected to promote national cultural politics and disseminate the anti-communist ideology; otherwise, playing their songs would be forbidden.³ For example, songs from 1970s Korean folk singers, such as Song Changsik, Yang Eunhui, and Han Daesoo, were listed as forbidden songs because their lyrics included implicit messages of resistance against the government. As a result, by the mid-1990s, the Korean popular music market was unable to export songs to markets overseas, except for the rare case of the 1980s superstar Cho Yongpil's songs, which were exported to Hong Kong. However, foreign music imports continued to compete with Korean local music in the domestic market.

K-pop and its idol system emerged in the late 1990s, as the censorship of popular culture began to wane following the election of the non-military politician Kim Youngsam as president in 1992. When Korea plunged into massive bankruptcy at the national level following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the country borrowed \$40 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stabilise its currency, leading the government to re-examine industrialization and modernization as economic strategies. According to global communication specialist Kim Youna, the Korean government adopted popular culture as an alternative motivator for exporting national commodities in order to address the IMF crisis. The three major entertainment companies SM (founded in 1995), YG (founded in 1996), and JYP (founded in 1997) could then increase their influence on the popular music market, sponsored by the government policy aimed at developing the Korean culture industry as a national project for gaining competitive advantage in the global market.

In the late 1990s, the term “idol” emerged along with the debut of the first generation of idol groups, including H.O.T, Shinhwa, Sechskies, S.E.S, Fin.K.L., and Baby V.O.X. Along with the dissemination of Korean dramas and movies abroad, the export of media products of the idol groups contributed to the advent of the *Hallyu* (“Korean Wave”), a term first coined by the Chinese news media to describe the sudden aspiration of Chinese young people for Korean cultural commodities that took place in 1998.⁴ In the early 2000s, the second generation of idol groups emerged with groups such as SS501, Big Bang, Super Junior, Wonder Girls, and Girl’s Generation, which were organised to target overseas markets of popular songs more than the first generation. At this point, the term K-pop (abbreviation of “Korean pop”) became popularised, displacing the term *Gayo*, which refers to Korean domestic pop music.⁵ In the 2010s, the third generation appeared with groups such as EXO, BTS, TWICE, and Red Velvet, characterised by an active use of digital social media such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, AfreecaTV, and Naver V Live.

Members of an idol group must submit to the so-called “idol system” or “star system” whereby a major entertainment company manages, coaches, and controls them for the group’s debut. These companies hold recruitment contests targeting teenagers to become idol group members. To become successful stars, selected candidates must then undergo hard training until their debut, which includes rigorous testing and supervision, in addition to repetitive exercises and instructions related to music, dance, acting, fashion, appearance, diet, and even romantic relationships. Regardless of their success as K-pop stars in the entertainment industry, idols practically retire by their mid-20s, because they begin to lose popularity to new teen idols as they age. Accordingly, the idol or star system can be regarded as a type of post-Fordist production system that methodically manufactures profitable star commodities.

Although BTS was born into the K-pop culture, comments posted by ARMY fans on Twitter insist that “BTS does not do K-pop, but BTS-pop” or claim that “there are many swimmers in the K-pop pool, but there is only #BTSPop;” “BTS is not even K-pop.”⁶ These statements articulate the porous boundary between stereotyped K-pop and BTS. According to Kim Youna, “the Korean Wave ambivalently leads to a new version of Orientalism, which can be a unifying cultural signifier for many, if not all, Asians, despite their attempt to defy and decentralise Western hegemony.”⁷ For example, in Youna’s terms, visual images of Psy in the Gangnam Style music video standardise Asian men as humorous and silly, the androgynous appearance of K-pop boy bands amusingly attracts French teenagers, and Girls’ Generation looks depict typical Asian women as submissive, sweet, and sexy.⁸ A common impression of K-pop stems from the assumption that Korean idols are stereotypically produced under the idol system of entertainment companies and are limited to light love story songs and musical-like presentations designed to appeal to the global audience.

Nevertheless, ARMY says that “BTS has shattered the image of K-pop bands as heavily manufactured by entertainment companies. They are taking over the world with their music, with lyrics that speak of contemporary issues, and with

their authenticity.”⁹ This suggests that BTS’s distinction in the history of K-pop lies in its members’ artistic initiatives toward writing their songs and producing their albums by themselves, while dealing with themes such as contemporary educational problems, generational issues, depression, and self-esteem. Furthermore, in expressing the value of BTS music on social media, ARMY’s fanship may be considered a distinctive feature of the group. According to Korean culture and art specialists Chang Woongjo and Park Shin-Eui, the ARMY’s fanship, shaped through the most expressive social media, presents “the emergence of a new and unprecedented, yet realistic, social model for the digital era.”¹⁰ In short, the relationship between BTS and ARMY on social media is distinguished from other Korean idol groups in the history of K-pop.

Premediating the Reality of the Future

A reading of the term “premediation,” coined by media theorist Richard Grusin, broadens the analysis of ARMY’s digitally engaged participation. The interpretative frame offered by Grusin’s term lays the ground for the discussion of how, online, ARMY and BTS comprehend each other as a mutual and collaborative entity, extending beyond the opposition between online mediation and offline liveness towards a more nuanced analysis. Grusin explains that:

Premediation is in some sense a fundamentally American response to 9/11, in which the United States seeks to try to make sure that it never again experiences live a catastrophic event like this that has not already been premediated. [...] 9/11 can be seen to have marked an end to (or at least a repression or sublimation of) the U.S. cultural desire for immediacy [...] and to have replaced it with a desire for a world in which the immediacy of the catastrophe, the immediacy of disaster, could not happen again—because it would always already have been premediated.¹¹

In other words, the cinematic and televisual mediation of the sense of danger or urgent preoccupation with the catastrophe of impending terrors since 9/11 has transformed the United States into the society of the premediated future. However, Grusin insists that, “unlike prediction, premediation is not chiefly about getting the future right. Premediation is not like a weather forecast.”¹² Rather, his perspective on premediation is flexible and open as he argues that the reality of the premediated future could be imagined as many of the possible worlds or paths. He mentions that premediation works something like the logic of designing a video game in that it is about attempting to arrange many possible futures.¹³

Although Grusin’s explanation of premediation addresses the representation of futuristic disaster by mass media, cinema, and television in order to prevent audiences from the anxiety of an imminent trauma, it can be applied to the account of ARMY’s online engagement and participation in the production of BTS. In this regard, any particular individual or collective uses of social media by ARMY indicate a desire to build a world for the future with BTS. The premediation captures “the moment when the future emerges into the present, that is, the moment when the future has already become the past, by extending our

media networks into the future.”¹⁴ Grusin’s view on premediation, which is grounded in the continuous mediation between present and future, can be seen to run through ARMY’s online activity. For example, ARMY has been practising an implicit contract amongst themselves to intentionally create BTS hashtags on Twitter and ensure that they trend worldwide. Hashtags are used when BTS releases a new album, participates in a talk show, celebrates a member’s birthday, and for other such events. The online activities aim to draw public attention to BTS and build their popularity. In this way, ARMY’s online activity premediates the future with BTS.

ARMY’s Premediation and Imaging New Identities

BTS has a global following. According to one report, the demographic breakdown by country of BTS’s YouTube views in 2018 is as follows: 552 million Americans, 426 million Vietnamese, 362 million Indonesians, 337 million Japanese, 325 million Mexicans, and 300 million Koreans.¹⁵ Although the group sings in Korean, their popularity worldwide surpasses the boundaries of the Korean cultural zone. Another report states that, as of August 2019, BTS’s social media following included 22 million YouTube subscribers,¹⁶ 21.9 million Twitter followers,¹⁷ 15.6 million Naver V Live followers,¹⁸ 9.5 million Facebook fans,¹⁹ and 4.4 million followers on Chinese Weibo.²⁰ It is particularly worth noting that in 2017 BTS was the most mentioned celebrity on Twitter. They were mentioned two times more than the combined tweets relevant to Donald Trump and Justin Bieber.²¹

The online relationship between BTS and ARMY can be characterised as follows. First, through these million-follower social media channels, and whenever they are afforded an opportunity, BTS members express their love and affection for ARMY. At all awards ceremonies they attend, they attribute their success to the ARMY’s existence. The BTS members themselves express this sentiment most strongly: “We love ARMY. We cannot share enough love for ARMY;” “Thank you, ARMY, for helping us win this award;” “We could not survive without ARMY;” and “All the awards we receive, we win with ARMY.”²² Whether on an airplane, at a press conference, in a green room, or at their accommodations, they proclaim their appreciation and love for ARMY. Then, through social media, these scenes are streamed to ARMY.

Second, BTS’s music videos are shared across social media, piquing ARMY’s curiosity. Music video is an earlier form of promotion, now distributed by sharing on social media. For instance, a large portion of the “Blood Sweat and Tears” music video is devoted to presenting various visual symbols. The song is based on a motif from the German writer Hermann Hesse’s novel *Demian*, which can be summed up as follows: “The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Who would be born must first destroy a world.”²³ To foreground this theme, the music video displays works of art including Herbert James Draper’s *The Lament for Icarus*, Pieter Brueghel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, Michelangelo di Buonarroti’s *Pietà*, and classical bronze statues of *Perseus* and *Demeter*.²⁴ The appearance of these works of art in the idol group’s music video makes ARMY

ponder what these ambiguous and enigmatic references might imply, leading to divergent interpretations. In fact, one ARMY member uploaded his interpretation of the song on YouTube.²⁵

Third, through social media, BTS provide various amusements for ARMY. For example, at the Hwagae Market Site on V Live, BTS members perform comic dialogues using Korean dialects.²⁶ At #RM on Twitter, RM, one of the group's members, regularly recommends music for ARMY.²⁷ *Golden Closet Film*, a short film produced by Jungkook about BTS's trip to Tokyo, was uploaded onto YouTube for ARMY.²⁸ "Eat Jin" is a food show available on YouTube and V Live in which group members humorously chat about food.²⁹ Even more content is uploaded online to entertain ARMY, such as "BTS V's Log," an individual member's self-filmed diary;³⁰ "Burn the Stage," a concert tour documentary;³¹ and "BTS Bomb," a self-produced reality show.³² For ARMY's amusement, a wealth of BTS media content is produced and disseminated online.

Fourth, ARMY produces its own media content that is relevant to BTS. This content can be classified as "reaction video, theory video, cover dance video, lyrics-translating video, and remix video."³³ "Reaction videos" refer to ARMY's surprise or acclamation for BTS's live performances, music videos, and trailers. ARMY's enthusiasm for BTS can be seen in this style of video.³⁴ "Theory videos" deal with resolving the meanings of various symbols in BTS music videos, searching for intertextual relations across BTS's pop content such as the previously mentioned ARMY member's interpretation of the *Blood Sweat and Tears* music video uploaded on YouTube. Through "cover dance videos" on social media, recordings of ARMY members mimicking BTS's dances are shared online. In "lyrics-translating videos," ARMY members translate BTS's songs from Korean into other languages, including English, Spanish, and Chinese, and then upload their completed translations online. As a result, Korean pronunciations and the meanings of the songs are shared among ARMY members worldwide, regardless of language barriers.³⁵ ARMY's "remix videos" attempt to re-edit BTS's visual materials in a way that BTS's music videos are deconstructed then reconstructed using ARMY's chosen visual materials.³⁶ Ultimately, ARMY's self-produced media content reflect the intensity of their emotional fervor for BTS.

To summarise, social media functions as a playground for the relationship between BTS and ARMY. It has become an affective machine that glues them together, reaching across physical, linguistic and temporal-spatial constraints. By engaging through social media, ARMY can potentially premeditate BTS's future live performances.

From the outset, ARMY consistently demanded the revision of lyrics of BTS songs that promoted misogyny. For example, the lyrics of "Hormone War" included: "ah I think I've gone crazy (cough cough) by the way girls dress, all showy showy [...] my eyes keep rolling, over this girl's tummy (yup). [...] girls are equations, us men are the sum (yup), women are the best present present,"³⁷ and the "Boy In Luv" music video showed a male student sexually abusing a female student.³⁸ In response, ARMY members opened the Twitter accounts "@bts_female_fan1"³⁹ and

“#BTS피드백을원합니다”⁴⁰ in 2016, which were devoted to explaining how such lyrics and music videos conveyed misogyny, criticizing them, and asking for answers from BTS and Big Hit Entertainment, the entertainment company managing the group. As a result, in the same year, Big Hit Entertainment made a public apology and BTS members began reading feminist books. In addition, in 2017, RM released the song “Always,” which contains a reflection on BTS’s guilt regarding their misogyny in the following lyric: “I want someone to kill me in this loud silence. I live to understand the world but the world has never understood me; why, No, that half is missing. It’s trying to hurt me.”⁴¹

Anti-racism within the ARMY fandom also premediates BTS’s live performances. In 2018, black ARMY members reported being harassed and attacked online with racial slurs.⁴² After that, black ARMY members established an anti-racial community within the fandom, which created the hashtag #BlackARMYequality.⁴³ In line with the anti-racial movement within ARMY, in 2018 BTS eliminated some words from their new album *Fake Love*, such as 니가 and 내가, which are pronounced *niga* and *naega*. Although these words mean “you” and “I” in Korean, respectively, they sound racist in English pronunciation as they are similar to words used to discriminate against African-Americans.

ARMY’s online activity has made a major contribution in premediating BTS’s success in the American music industry. At first glance, BTS seems to be an unconventional pop group. The group is made up of seven young Asian boys who sing in Korean when performing for foreign fans. In addition, they attempt to combine the typical image of an idol group with the hip-hop genre, which is regarded as outside the mainstream in Korean pop culture. Big Hit Entertainment is also smaller than the so-called “Big Three” entertainment companies in Korea, namely YG, SM, and JYP. Therefore, for companies that are affiliated with the Big Three, BTS was initially unable to attract significant sponsorship or sufficient opportunities to appear in their domestic and international mass-media broadcasts.

BTS’s success in the American music industry initially seemed impossible. However, ARMY stepped in to remedy this situation in 2017 by launching an online campaign in the United States to widely promote BTS among DJs at local radio stations. Because the Billboard Chart rankings measure the total number of album sales and streaming in the United States, to enter “the charts” it was essential that BTS’s music be aired in the country. To achieve this, ARMY organised “BTSx50states,”⁴⁴ a digital promotional fanbase for pushing BTS’s tracks to local radio stations. ARMY even distributed online tactical manuals outlining maneuvers for cases where a station either accepted or refused their selection of music. However, ARMY did not stop here; they started campaigning online for BTS to appear and perform on American television.⁴⁵

ARMY’s digital engagement online shows that the future of BTS’s live stage can be mediated before it happens. Borrowing Grusin’s words, ARMY’s participations are “trying to premeditate as many of the possible worlds, or

possible paths”⁴⁶ of BTS’s performance. ARMY’s premediated participation leans heavily toward emotional engagement and activates the role of social and political agent in conflict with the mainstream identity of manhood, whiteness, and neoliberal capitalism. As Kim Youna points out, digital fan cultures like ARMY create an alternative space where the self can be expressed, contested, and reconfirmed in a relationship with global cultural others, as an interface between the dominant macro power and the minor micro power.⁴⁷

In the Pursuit of Growth: Building the World with ARMY

At this point, two questions remain: why does ARMY try to spark, help, and care for BTS’s future through social media, and what motivation do they have for venturing to form their premediated participation? The answer is that ARMY and BTS together seek a narrative of their communal growth, building the new world.

With participants in the millions, the composition of ARMY overcomes barriers of nations, races, regions, ages and genders. However, it is a fact that many social differences among ARMY members are also causes of conflict. For example, the collaboration between BTS and a Japanese producer in 2018 was aborted due to the opposition of the Korean ARMY.⁴⁸ The Korean ARMY opposed such cooperation because the referred producer is a right-wing extremist who supports the Japanese occupation of Korea’s Joseon Dynasty in the first half of the 20th century.⁴⁹ Still, foreign ARMY members criticised Korean ARMY for not taking a reasonable stance on the issue.⁵⁰ Although this conflict has been mitigated via online dialogue and discussion between the Korean ARMY and the foreign ARMY, it shows many heterogeneous subtypes of ARMY as a group.

Despite internal conflicts, ARMY members generally share a strong sense of solidarity as they are growing together with BTS. Social media provides BTS and ARMY with an affectionate and emotional virtual status of being together as friends. Through social media, the exchanges of intimate feelings between BTS and ARMY can be repeated, circulated, and intensified. This intimacy results in ARMY’s endeavors to promote, care for, and help grow BTS’s influence. This exertion of efforts extends from fostering BTS to nourishing ARMY themselves. In fact, “army” in English and “ami” in French are pronounced similarly, even though the meanings are completely different—“army” means “military forces” in English, and “ami” means “friends” in French. In other words, the relationship between BTS and ARMY is not a straightforward star-fan relationship; they are comrades “fighting together” against social barriers that try to keep them from growing. ARMY and BTS care for each other, help one another, and are maturing together via social media. This special friendship is infused with premediating the reality of ARMY and BTS’s future. In Grusin’s words, their virtual community on social media can be understood as constituting an autopoietic gathering for the construction of their fully developed reality.⁵¹ The virtual community creates a desire for their ripe future in two ways.

Firstly, the BTS music world presents a narrative of growth. The close reading of BTS’s music by Korean popular culture specialist Lee Jihang sheds light

on this. According to her, the world of BTS music structures the BTS Universe, namely “BU.” The BU began with the release of the album *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Part 1* (2015) and extended to the album *Love Yourself* (2018). BTS members star in the albums’ music videos and enact the respective dark personal stories of drug addiction, attempted suicide, epileptic seizure, arson, and violence. In one of the videos, they have a good time together and then plunge into a difficult time. Next, one of them dives into the sea and passes away. After this accident, they hear the sound of breaking ice coming from the lake and realise that their respective present moments are false. This makes them question themselves about who they are while keeping an eye on themselves and their masks. Eventually, they remove their masks and unveil their faces, thereby becoming aware of the self that they should love.⁵² Remarkably, this growth story is not limited to the fictional world. As mentioned earlier, BTS has never been a mainstream idol group, as it is affiliated with a small management company (Big Hit Entertainment) and has a hip hop-like image that is unusual in K-pop. In reality, as a predicted loser in idol contests, BTS is expected to incessantly seek its actual growth through training, self-cultivation, and self-expression to survive in the idol world.

Secondly, the minority status of BTS in both the fictional and real worlds could encourage more attention, support, and empathy from ARMY towards BTS. Let us consider how fans identify with a popular star. The dream about a bright star motivates and inspires the fans to achieve a better future. Fans try to link their actual experiences with that of their favourite stars. In this way, the popular star’s identity helps the fans understand their own experiences with clarity. Thus, the image of a popular star works as a reflexive model that the fans use to reflect on their past and present life, thereby imaging their unshaped possibility. For example, one member of ARMY uploaded her reaction video on YouTube after she listened to BTS’s “The Truth Untold” that contains lyrics about the story of an ugly man who hides in an old castle alone, resembling BTS’s identity as an underdog. The song’s theme of “loving yourselves,” something that the man did not do, touched her heart, and the scene in which she is shedding her tears for not having loved herself was filmed.⁵³ Production of the footage could be similar to a psychotherapy session for this member of ARMY, reflecting on her actual personal life and relating it to BTS’s music. These self-made videos on social media contribute to invigorating a sincere relationship between stars and fans, thus promoting the popularity of BTS. Accordingly, a logic of premediation operates in social media in the sense that the futuristic dream of communal maturing of BTS and ARMY is brought very much to life prior to offline meetings at BTS concerts.

In other words, the growth trajectory in both the fictional BU and the actual identity formation of BTS coalesced within the ARMY’s growth-seeking process in response to BTS pop. For instance, one young French member of ARMY said in an interview that BTS’s songs include a message for everyone, because BTS pop delivers lyrics about how she should express and love herself the way she is. In the same interview, a French woman in her 50s said that BTS pop made her realise who she is, and it changed her life; she meets and speaks with ARMY of various ages, at a concert or via the Internet. Therefore, she stressed that ARMY

are the community of sharing and changing.⁵⁴ Their confession encompasses the reason why ARMY love BTS pop: ARMY change, transform, and grow with BTS.

It is through this narrative of growth that ARMY members identify with BTS. There are other examples as follows: a 52-year-old man in Japan, who is a director of a company, danced to BTS's 'DNA' and shared the video on social media in 2018.⁵⁵ This shows his attempt at surpassing the social conventions of ageing. In 2018, the ARMY in the Bantan Moms and Noonas Facebook Group was open for older female ARMY, such as the generations of Noonas (elder sisters) and Ajummas (middle aged women).⁵⁶ This Facebook group wanted to prove via their online activities that they are still youthful and spirited. Moreover, the LGBTQ group of ARMY created the tag of #LGBTQARMYSelcaDay in 2019 for ARMY's different gender and sexual identities, thanking BTS for giving positive messages on LGBTQ in their music. The tag has been used so that LGBTQ ARMY can encourage each other to protest together against sexual discrimination.⁵⁷ These examples are manifestly the outcome of premediation derived from the trial of maturing together via uses of social media that aim to refashion an autopoietic system for the construction of ARMY's future together.

As ARMY's premediation of BTS changes and grows, the process includes fans from different nations, races, regions, ages and genders. It is more focused on their online participations, though, and is often backed with provocative ideas about the growth story of BTS, in the fictional and real worlds. ARMY's endeavors to promote, care for, and help grow BTS's influence are aimed towards a mature future for both. Their attempts are directed through a transformative identity development toward a potential future and can therefore be understood as the act of pursuing growth by premediating possible scenarios of their future.

Premediating a narrative of growth along with BTS leads ARMY members to become not only consumers but also social agents. However, the modality of ARMY premediating online is in contrast with Grusin's perspective on premediation. Grusin insists that the premediation of the second war in Iraq, in the media, played a role in generating and maintaining a low level of anxiety to prevent the possibility of the recurrence of a trauma like 9/11.⁵⁸ Thus, Grusin views premediation as a governmental tool for securing a safe future. Unlike the premedial "desire that the future never be free from mediation,"⁵⁹ ARMY's premediating the growth narrative with BTS is to enjoy branching out to other identity terrains of ARMY.

ARMY's interests in premediating their own change, transformation and growth are to advance themselves into experiencing the immediacy of future events as fruitful identity formation. Such online premediation is an emancipatory endeavor to shape themselves in more flexible ways. Messy arrangements and scattered fragments of identity on social media describe the complexity of status for fans in a digital era, who are the social agents of digital play. Their online photographs, texts, and videos are brought together from both motives, that is, to mature along with BTS and enjoy the virtual community. For those who are ready

to enjoy a playful digital space, ARMY's premediation of BTS reflects the desire for the transformation of fans as agents of a cultural revolution in the digital age.

Conclusion

In January 2018, the controversy surrounding the Myeongdong Theater, operated by the National Theater Company of Korea (hereinafter NTCK), marked the cultural status of K-pop in Korea as now secondary to the music itself. NTCK was founded as an affiliate of the National Theater of Korea, established in 1950 by the government of South Korea and located in Jangchung-dong, Seoul. In 2010, in its 60th anniversary year, NTCK separated from the National Theater of Korea, the umbrella organisation for national performing arts companies, and set out on a new journey as an independently incorporated foundation. As one of the nation's oldest flagship theater companies with a long history of 65 years, NTCK has produced contemporary Korean and international plays.⁶⁰ The Myeongdong Theater is one of three exclusive theatres run by NTCK and located in Myeongdong, one of Seoul's "hot spots." Myeongdong business owners reportedly requested that the government replace the traditional theater with an exclusive commercial K-pop venue because they wanted to attract more foreign capital to the district. When the theatrical world strongly opposed this plan, insisting that the mecca of Korean national theater be protected, the government announced that it would not approve this change in the theater's use.⁶¹

This event suggests that K-pop and its fan culture operate according to the principles of neoliberal capitalism. While ARMY gained their status as the agent of the cultural revolution in the digital era, this status has not yet been fully realised. That is, K-pop is still recognised by most Koreans not as a popular art with its own distinct aesthetics, but as a commercial business with massive profitability, thus serving Korean cultural exports and boosting the national brand of Koreanness. This bias may be linked to the myth of cosmopolitan K-pop. Thanks to the locality of Koreanness, global fans can use cosmopolitan K-pop to connect with other places and escape the confines of their national territory.⁶² Foreign fans can become enthusiastic supporters for BTS pop, because they seek to single out a universal space to articulate themselves by consuming BTS pop in other localities, especially across Asia. BTS pop may be employed by the international ARMY to explore the flip sides of their deemed normal identity and venture into its under-discussed aspects. This provides a warning that the ARMY emerging in the world of BTS pop cosmopolitanism may be a shadow of new economic trajectories that consume the dynamics, entanglements, and flexibility of cultures.

Nevertheless, one crucial point must be emphasised: when BTS and ARMY exclaim, "we are all ARMY," we catch a glimpse of the ontology of premediation, or in Grusin's words, "[the world] becomes impossible for anything to happen outside of its premediation."⁶³ The practical use of digital or computerised devices can be observed anywhere and anytime as our day-to-day life is proliferated with media technology such as mobile phones, iPads, and tablet PCs. The ubiquity of digital media enables all users to construct their reality through the prior mediation of digital technology. That is, we live a life commensurate with the virtuality of digital

media; hence, our desire for fabricating imminent moments in terms of present media practices also works in innumerable ways. BTS and ARMY offer a typical case in point, and the scope can be broadened into the general popular culture. In other words, we are all ARMY, beyond BTS fans, in the digital era of premediation, as long as our digital media practices navigate divergent yet overlapping layers of the present and the future.

We live in times of ever-evolving technology and its associated innovative artistic forms, generating new performers and audiences. BTS and ARMY's revolution of K-pop may be just one of the first signs of the popular culture yet to come. More importantly, as the digital era progresses, it will become increasingly interesting to observe how popular culture becomes even more conversant with emerging media technologies.

In this paper, all Korean names will be written according to the Korean way, surname before given name. Names will appear in the Western style in the endnotes. All quotations from Korean sources, including articles, books, programs, newspapers, and internet materials, are my own translation (unless otherwise noted) and will be marked with [K].

¹ Kim Nam Jun (RM), "We have learned to love ourselves, so now I urge you to 'speak yourself,'" *UNICEF*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/we-have-learned-love-ourselves-so-now-i-urge-you-speak-yourself>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.

² Oricon Inc., established in 1999, is the holding company at the head of a Japanese corporate group that supplies statistics and information on music and the music industry in Japan. The Oricon Albums Chart is the Japanese music industry standard albums popularity chart issued daily, weekly, monthly and yearly by Oricon. "Oricon Albums Chart," *Wikipedia*, August 29, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oricon_Albums_Chart. Accessed on August 20, 2019.

³ J. Elfving-Hwang, "K-pop idols, artificial beauty and affective fan relationships in South Korea," in *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, ed. A. Elliott (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 191.

⁴ Youna Kim, "Introduction: Korean media in a digital cosmopolitan world," *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, ed. Youna Kim (London: Routledge, 2013), 1-4.

⁵ "Korean Popular Music (K-Pop)," *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*, ed. The Academy of Korean Studies, <https://terms.naver.com/entry.nhn?docId=2458624&cid=46662&categoryId=46662>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/hashtag/btspop?lang=en>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.

⁷ Youna Kim, "Introduction," 20.

⁸ *Ibid*, 20.

⁹ <https://twitter.com/hashtag/btspop?lang=en>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.

¹⁰ WoongJo Chang and Shin-Eui Park, "The fandom of hallyu, a tribe in the digital network era: A case of ARMY of BTS," *Kritika Kultura*, 32 (2019), 280.

¹¹ Richard Grusin, "Premediation," *Criticism*, 46.1 (Winter 2004), 21.

¹² *Ibid*, 28.

¹³ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

¹⁵ "BTS YouTube Stats Prove How Global They Are," *Koreaboo*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.koreaboo.com/news/bts-youtube-stats-prove-global/>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.

¹⁶ "Subscribercounter.com,"

<https://subscribercounter.com/channel/UCLkAepWjdylmXSltoFvsYQ>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.

- ¹⁷ “Socialblade.com,” https://socialblade.com/twitter/user/bts_twt/realtime. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ¹⁸ “BTS Vlive,” <https://channels.vlive.tv/FE619/home>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ¹⁹ “@bangtan.offical,” <https://www.facebook.com/bangtan.offical/>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ²⁰ “BTS official,” https://www.weibo.com/BTSbighit?is_hot=1. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ²¹ Nam-Kook Kim, *BTS Insight: Jalhamgwa Jinsim*, (Seoul: Bimilsinseo, 2018), 188 [K].
- ²² “방탄수상소감 아미모음 防彈得獎感受-阿米合集,” *MondaySUN*, December 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiBQMWrtsQU>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ²³ I quote the phrase from one ARMY member’s interpretation on *Blood Sweat and Tears*. ChocolateAstatine, “Chapter 5 THE BIRD FIGHTS ITS WAY OUT OF THE EGG,” *Wattpad.com*, <https://www.wattpad.com/309513951-demian-by-hermann-hesse-chapter-5-the-bird-fights>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ²⁴ “BTS (방탄소년단) '피 땀 눈물 (Blood Sweat & Tears)' Official MV,” *ibighit*, October 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmE9f-TEutc>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ²⁵ “Blood Sweat & Tears: What Does it All Mean?,” *Don't Worry I'm Not Afraid*, January 28, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tlgAUE6yjg>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ²⁶ “BTS 화개장터 1회 [요지부동],” *BTS Vlive*, <https://www.vlive.tv/video/6121/BTS-화개장터-1>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ²⁷ “#RM,” @BTS_twt, https://twitter.com/BTS_twt/status/1017065974904774656. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ²⁸ “G.C.F in Tokyo(정국&지민),” *BANGTANTV*, November 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrTNLkqGrIc>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ²⁹ “Eat Jin,” *BANGTANTV*, December 27, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fzswWLFang&list=PL5hrGMysD_Gul2yY_d_zOxx25e2vXMAYA. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ³⁰ “BTS V Log,” *Jungkookie*, November 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvQSSaxEo.Y>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ³¹ “BTS: Burn The Stage, S1 E1,” *BANGTANTV*, March 28, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6zWwAoEi_w. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ³² “[BANGTAN BOMB] Jacket shooting in the bathroom – BTS,” *BANGTANTV*, October 12, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77xw_pmLRX0. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ³³ I refer to Lee’s classification of fan-made contents. Ji-young Lee, *BTS Artistic Revolution* (Seoul: Parrhesia, 2018), 71–81.
- ³⁴ “[BTS IDOL MV] THE MOST EXCITING REACTION,” *Army in China*, August 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSX0xztOhoo>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ³⁵ This video is typical of the lyrics-translating type. “I PURPLE U (보라해) LYRICS [HAN/ROM/ENG] ARMY’s Song for BTS,” *Irma drew*, July 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RArnow2xYMk>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ³⁶ See this video: “BTS (방탄소년단) I NEED U X Seesaw Remix "Short film,” *모니모니*, September 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVL6WV765P4>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ³⁷ Lyrics-translating in English at Clara Schauman, “Hormone War,” *Musixmatch.com*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.musixmatch.com/ko/lyrics/BTS/%ED%98%B8%EB%A5%B4%EB%AA%AC%EC%A0%84%EC%9F%81/translation/english>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ³⁸ “BTS (Boy In Luv) Official MV,” *ibighit*, February 20, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XyPdnTz_Q0&list=PLYUhuVVAynnzV_WYkcBr0rZAIK9v3jb-g&index=27. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ³⁹ https://twitter.com/bts_female_fan1. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁴⁰ “bts피드백을원합니다,” <https://twitter.com/hashtag/bts피드백을원합니다>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁴¹ Lyrics-translated in English at *Genius.com*, <https://genius.com/Rm-always-lyrics>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁴² P. Claire Dodson, “The BTS Army Is Using #BlackARMYsMatter to Call Out Racism and

- Harassment Within the Fandom," *Teenvogue*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/bts-army-using-blackarmymatter-to-call-out-racism-harassment-within-fandom>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁴³ <https://twitter.com/hashtag/blackarmysequality?vertical=news&src=hash>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁴⁴ *BTS in the U.S.* at <https://www.btsxusa.com/>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁴⁵ Ji-young Lee, *BTS Artistic Revolution*, 66-69.
- ⁴⁶ Grusin, "Premediation," 28.
- ⁴⁷ Youna Kim, "Introduction," 14.
- ⁴⁸ "K-pop boy band BTS agency under fire for working with Japanese producer Yasushi Akimoto," *Korea Times*, September 18, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/people-events/article/2164649/k-pop-boy-band-bts-agency-under-fire-working-japanese>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ One international ARMY said that KARMY's jealousy will destroy BTS's market in Japan. This controversy can be identified in the following websites, https://twitter.com/search?lang=en&q=japan%20bts%20jealousy%20until%3A2018-09-30%20since%3A2018-09-10&src=typed_query, and https://twitter.com/onlyyou_bts0613/status/1041320823171178498. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁵¹ Richard Grusin, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 51.
- ⁵² Ji-hang Lee, *BTS and ARMY Culture* (Seoul: Communication Books, 2019), 128.
- ⁵³ "BTS - The Truth Untold (전하지 못한 진심) (feat. Steve Aoki) REACTION (i cried smiling)," *SoFieReacts/SoFie*, May 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eL4-OREP47M>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁵⁴ "#ARMY's Responses to #BTS Paris Concert," *Salon de coiffure Saerom*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vazmv4P668k>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁵⁵ "DANCING TO BTS DNA - 52 YEAR OLD MAN DIRECTOR OF COMPANY IN JAPAN," *AdorkableBTS*, June 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCW3WL0g-3g>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁵⁶ "BangtanMoms," <https://www.facebook.com/groups/BangtanMoms/>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁵⁷ Luke Waltham, "The BTS ARMY Celebrates Pride Month," *Celebmix*, June, 2019, <https://celebmix.com/bts-army-celebrates-pride-month/>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁵⁸ Grusin, "Premediation," 29.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid, 26.
- ⁶⁰ "Introduction," *NTCK*, <http://www.ntck.or.kr/en/ntck/intro>. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁶¹ Mi-young Kim, "Ministry of Culture announcing the Myeongdong Theater would be the exclusive theater ongoing... without alter of its use," *Hankyoreh Newspaper*, January 17, 2019, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/culture_general/878764.html. Accessed on August 20, 2019.
- ⁶² Refer to the myth of the cosmopolitan K-pop at Youna Kim, "Introduction," 19
- ⁶³ Grusin, "Premediation," 29.