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**DIGITAL COMMUNICATION, THE K-POP ARMY, AND THE FILIPINO
COLLECTIVE PSYCHE**

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Acceptance Page:

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Biographical Sketch

I, Karina Angela Biales Ligeralde, was born on September 14, 1993 in Quezon City, Philippines. I completed my primary and secondary education at St. Paul College, Pasig, and earned my undergraduate degree, Bachelor of Fine Arts major in Advertising at the University of Santo Tomas, Manila in 2015.

After graduating, I pursued a career as an Account Officer and Project Development Manager in a start-up digital communications agency where I managed corporate and government accounts. I then worked in a public relations agency as a Senior Account Executive under the experiential marketing division and I was later promoted to Account Manager handling international and local experiential marketing clients such as the Asian Development Bank, National Nutrition Council, Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, Shell, and the Embassy of France.

At present, I am a Senior Health Program Officer in the Communication Office of the Department of Health under the Office of the Secretary where I head the Communication Governance and Policy Section. My role as a health communicator focuses on governance communication, policy development on communications, internal communications, and capacity development to deliver equitable, accessible, and timely health information to the Filipino people.

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Dedication

I wholeheartedly dedicate this research to my lola, Felita, for her endless love and trust (*and for always reminding me to finish my graduate studies every chance she gets*).

I am finishing this whole race as promised, lola!

I also dedicate this research to my parents, Hector and Geraldine, for their immeasurable support and patience. Thank you for pushing me to pursue (and finish) this academic feat!

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Abstract

The arrival of the *Hallyu Wave* made a big impression globally and was warmly received by Filipinos. South Korean pop culture introduced K-pop, a music genre famously known for its impressive lyricism and deliberate production which captured the interest of listeners. As literature suggests, music is a powerful driving force that has the ability to enable a group or community to move or think as one unit, such as how jazz musicians harnessed the power of music to communicate their social struggles. Deriving from this premise, the question this study aimed to answer was *“How does digital communication shape the K-Pop Army that translates to the Filipino Collective Psyche?”*

I explored my lived experience as a member of the K-pop army by employing an autoethnographic study. I used vignettes to synthesize what it meant to be a member of the K-pop army, acclimatized its culture, and made sense of my K-pop journey. Each experience discussed in vignettes showed a clear picture of the journey that thickened the discussion throughout the research.

The vignettes served as an example of how the Filipino Collective Psyche was shaped. More than the provision of world-class entertainment and global popularity, the K-pop Army follows their K-pop idols because of their altruism and actions to address social issues which have always been evident in digital communication platforms. With the proliferation of social media and the K-pop Army's exposure to these communication platforms especially during the time where being “connected online” was the norm, it was evident that the fandom moved as if with one mind, reflecting the very essence of the Filipino Collective Psyche.

Keywords: Digital Communication, Filipino Collective Psyche, K-pop, Army

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Music is regarded as an effective form of communication or language that a person or groups of people universally understand as pronounced by American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (*Gottlieb, 2023*). A Harvard University study conceived by Samuel Mehr, Manvir Singh, and Luke Glowacki concluded that music is present in every society and is associated with the everyday behaviors of people such as care, healing, love, and dance (*Gottlieb, 2023*). Mehr and his fellow researchers discovered how music with similar features shares behavioral functions, such as lullabies for infant care and mellow melodies for love songs. In an article written by Frances Wilson (*Interlude HK, 2018*), music has a distinct way of telling an emotion that even when the lyrics or the music seem unfamiliar, listeners can still “decode” the message of the music. Despite the differences in genre and musical taste, music is an integral part of society.

The oppression or political and social struggles experienced by the Black community in the United States of America, predominant between 1877 and 1950 (*Urell, 2022*), led Black musicians to use music as a source of inspiration and a venue for their voices to be heard to fight for self-expression, equality, and inclusivity. Jazz musicians like Nina Simone, Sam Cooke, and James Brown became influential for fearlessly upholding the rights of the community and resisting oppression (*National Civil Rights Museum, n.d.*)

In the Philippines, socio-politically charged music puts the spotlight on social issues that Filipinos faced throughout the years. Among the classic original Pinoy music

(OPM) songs that underscored the powerful political system in the country is Bamboo's *Tatsulok. Spoliarium* by the Eraserheads, on the other hand, shed light on the sexual abuse and violations actress Pepsi Paloma allegedly went through from influential celebrities in the 1980s (Gonzalo, 2016). Nica del Rosario's *Rosas* was a popular and powerful song for former Vice President Leni Robredo's presidential campaign in 2022 that ignited hope and solidarity among Robredo's supporters in the fight for truth and transparency during the election (Bodegon-Hikino, 2022). These are just some of the modern-day Filipino songs that mainly send the message of how social issues remain rampant and unresolved in society, and how Filipinos come together to express their thoughts and emotions.

Nowadays, Filipinos have become more receptive to popular culture from different nations. Notably, Filipinos have embraced the *Hallyu Wave* or Korean pop culture, where various cultural aspects have become a trend to Filipinos such as Korean dramas, food, fashion, and beauty. One of the popular aspects of this culture is mainstream music called K-pop. This genre has gained immense popularity and following as the case of the K-pop powerhouse, BTS, who have successfully penetrated the global music scene with their well-written lyrics, relatable music, and loyal fanbase. The group's songs were masterfully crafted to tackle social issues such as youth, violence, social anxiety, societal ills, tragedy, mental health issues, self-love, and class struggles (Herman, 2018). Their fandom, ARMY, is among the biggest fandoms to exist with millions of followers on the septet's individual and group social media pages (Moon, 2020). On popular social media platform, Instagram, alone, the followers of BTS' fan page amounts to 73 million people. ARMY is a culture of its own; it can move collectively and has a distinct character that sets it apart from other fandoms. Yet this begs the question: how did ARMYs

become ARMY? Aside from the evident reason that ARMY started because of BTS, the question of how ARMYs decided to form and join the “ARMY culture” remains unclear. How did ARMY come together and begin to move as one unit? Previous social struggles forged people to form groups or a following through music because this deeply expresses the messages they wish to convey. The establishment of fandoms such as ARMY allows fans who share the same passion to come together but there is little research or study on how the ARMY culture comes to fruition.

This research dove deeper into my rich personal experiences as a member of the ARMY, to understand how I became an ARMY, how I imbibed the ARMY culture, and study the Collective Psyche of the fandom, generally called ‘K-pop Army’ throughout the study, about the ARMY culture to understand how they moved as one.

Statement of the Problem

The incredible popularity of the Hallyu Wave which took the country by storm presents how culture plays an important role in society and how it shapes the life and thinking of a society. With its big splash on Philippine shores in the early 2000s, Korean culture like drama, beauty, fashion, food, travel, and music became trends and norms that received acceptance and positive reviews from Filipinos (*The Freeman, 2016*). These prompted Filipinos to know more about the culture and experience the “hype” first-hand.

In my experience, I first became a fan of Korean dramas when I began watching romantic comedy series, emotion-filled dramas, and movies that depict the early history of South Korea. These interesting and thought-provoking genres drove me to research and understand their colorful culture even more. I then began to explore

other facets of Korean culture such as trying the food available locally, trying simple Korean skincare such as wearing face masks, and listening to K-pop. What drove me to have a penchant for Korean culture was when I began to listen to BTS regularly and eventually to other K-pop groups that I found interesting and amusing.

When BTS rose to popularity during the pandemic, many new fans, including myself, turned to BTS to listen to their music, watch their shows, and support and follow their activities. Their loyal fanbase, ARMY, grew over the years and became one of the biggest communities in K-pop. The fandom operates as a single unit. An insight penned by Chen May Yee and Pang Tiak Hui (2020) underlined how fandoms are more than just people idolizing celebrities; they are a community that mobilizes quickly on the causes they espouse, raising and donating money for charity, and shining a spotlight on social and political issues. When BTS donated USD 1 million to the *Black Lives Matter* campaign, the ARMYs matched the band's donation because of social media. Similarly, ARMYs jumpstarted different community pantries in their respective communities to help fellow ARMYs and families who needed food and supplies during a series of lockdowns and quarantines over the pandemic.

The study attempted to explore the reason why and how ARMYs think collectively and how this collective action shapes the way they operate, think, or interact in their communities. Studying the culture, fandom, and its Collective Psyche will allow future researchers to understand how ARMYs think and operate collectively and explore how culture and communication drive the way they act, think, and engage in their community. Subsequently, the study will provide an opportunity to harness or utilize the power of the Collective Psyche and apply its concepts in developing communities or societies which can be used to unite people and provide positive contributions to their communities. Lastly, the study will allow fandoms to maximize

their reach and influence to encourage others to collectively do the common good and become catalysts for positive change for themselves, their peers, and their communities.

Without addressing the gap in the study, it will deprive communities to develop, improve, and welcome positive changes that will benefit and help them reach their full potential. It will also miss the opportunity to harness the potential of community members who can contribute to the overall development of their communities.

Individuals will also fail to practice critical thinking and will blindly follow personalities who are not credible as well as fall victim to misinformation and disinformation, a problem that has been plaguing society ever since. Lastly, it would be ideal to maximize the use of communication, especially digital or emerging media, to develop societies. Thus, the study in general aimed to answer the question: *how does digital communication shape the K-Pop Army that translates to the Filipino Collective Psyche?*

Objectives of the Study

The study is being conducted to understand the ARMY culture and how it stirs the Collective Psyche of the K-pop Army. It aimed to:

1. Describe my becoming and being as a K-pop Army through my lived experiences;
2. Examine how communication and the K-pop culture shaped the way I act, think, and move; and
3. Analyze how my lived experiences represent the Filipino K-pop Army and form the Filipino Collective Psyche.

Significance of the Study

The study touched on aspects that are highly significant and are great contributions to the body of knowledge such as:

- **“Collective Psyche” of the K-pop Army.** Fandoms have always been present in Filipino culture. Understanding their dynamics by studying how and why they move as a collective unit will help fellow and future researchers to understand their community, its behaviors and characteristics, and its influence on society. With communication as a lens, this allows researchers to be knowledgeable on how the community harnesses the strengths and opportunities of communication they use in their fandom in moving a social cause forward.

- **The Culture of K-pop and its Fandoms.** K-pop is one of the best examples of fandoms as this community is driven by millions of fans worldwide. Studying the diverse culture of K-pop will open doors for researchers to understand how the community operates.

The study in K-pop allows for a more engaging conversation and knowledge-sharing between fans and fandoms. Therefore, the study is significant in analyzing the active participation of fans and fandoms, their contribution in maintaining a positive and supportive community of artists, groups, fans, and fandoms, and recognizing how K-pop can help unite and mobilize people to do the common good as a catalyst for collective action.

- **Development Communication.** Understanding and researching the K-pop Army may help organizations such as key national government agencies and development organizations craft development campaigns that harness the power of fandoms. For instance, famous artists may be tapped for health campaigns to

encourage the public to be vaccinated. National government agencies and other institutions may leverage social media as a tool to spread awareness and increase engagement for national campaigns especially now that Filipinos are digitally connected. The huge following of the artist may jumpstart the campaign's successful run and eventually empower the public to be vaccinated against vaccine-preventable diseases. With the large following, the information may reach the grassroots level, too.

- **Develop Critical Thinking.** The research may encourage the public to think critically and be vigilant about the artists they follow. The public will be encouraged to address pressing social issues around them, thereby eradicating or alleviating the impact of these social issues especially on the vulnerable sectors of society. Lastly, the public may also gain insightful knowledge to discuss topics substantially and without prejudice.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Communicating through music

American poet and Harvard professor Henry Wadsworth Longfellow expressed that “music is the universal language of mankind.” The study conducted by Samuel Mehr at Harvard found that music is associated with behaviors such as healing, love, and mourning, and songs that share the same behaviors tend to have similar musical features (*Gottlieb, 2019*). Furthermore, Mehr shared that “musical meanings transcend cultural boundaries and be universally human” (*Reuell, 2018*). Emotions can be felt, from upbeat tempos to mellow sounds, emanating from the music that makes it palatable and relatable to the listener. Music is deemed timeless across generations; what was once culturally popular in the 1990s may still be relatable today. It is remarkable to think that, in the cultural context of music, people can feel and understand it regardless of the language used; it can move, inspire, and engage people to come together for a common purpose.

Popular Culture: An Overview

Long before the rising popularity of pop music, independent films, and other works of entertainment, popular culture, more commonly known as “pop culture,” can be traced back to the 1920s when the United States of America introduced the flapper, automobiles, jazz music, movies, and nightclubs post-World War I (*OpenLab, 2021*). The succeeding years saw the rise of music, fashion, rock and roll, to name a few. Music, in particular, has been widely used by society to protest the atrocities, inequalities, and violence they have experienced which further spread the message

about civil rights, human rights, and resistance. Dr. Siobhan McEvoy-Levy (2018), a Political Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies professor at Butler University, Indianapolis, raised that “pop culture is a vehicle for education that helps shape the views of society.”

Jazz: The Music of Democracy

Music has always been present in society. Different genres convey different melodies, tempo, meaning, and character. An article written by Emmanuel Mamadi (2022) entitled “The Role of Jazz in Political Participation in the Mid-20th Century” explained how music shaped the political stance of the black community. Jazz music and musicians were two of the most important aspects in achieving the goals of the African American community. Hence, the community was proactively involved in political activism and the rise of the New negro era.

In the podcast episode of “News & Notes” entitled “The Intersection of Jazz and Musical Protest” (NPR, 2008), host Forai Chideya talked about jazz as a type of social protest and how this was forged by social struggle. The program guest, Dr. Robert O’Meally, a Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and the founder and former director of the Center for Jazz Studies, highlighted how jazz artists convey their political statements; that the black community celebrates their race, and that itself is their political statement and self-expression.

Dr. O’Meally further enumerated prominent jazz musicians like Louie Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Nina Simone, Charles Mingus, and Jelly Roll Morton who have cemented their careers through jazz music. They played a critical role in forwarding

their stance and support of the black community and used the power of music to prove their point on social justice instead of resorting to violence.

Former United States of America President, Bill Clinton, described how jazz is the music of democracy in his podcast, “Why Am I Telling You This? With Bill Clinton” (*Clinton Foundation, 2021*). The premiere episode featured renowned jazz artist Wynton Marsalis who talked about his life, his father who inspired him to pursue jazz, and his firm belief in standing up for what is right. He shared how his late father, who was also a jazz artist, was passionate about equality and social justice, and how he talked about racism, retaliation, and human conditions as a whole. These topics were incorporated into jazz music.

Marsalis talked about how Southerners grew up with prejudice, ignorance, and segregation, and how jazz opened his eyes to democracy. To him, he does not want everybody to have the same opinion; he would want everyone to be forced to harmonize to make choices. He likened his advice to trumpet players who individually play the instrument distinctively but when put together, they make the best harmony ever played. As former President Clinton said, “Jazz music shows how we can find harmony with one another and work together to become a more inclusive, kinder, and equitable nation.”

As jazz is synonymous with harmony or uniting people, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated April 30 as *International Jazz Day* in 2011 to highlight the diplomatic role of jazz in uniting people globally and underscoring the importance of international dialogue and mutual respect to promote peace, cultural exchanges, mitigate segregation, advance equality, and forward freedom of expression (*Untivero, 2019*).

In the Philippines, jazz was introduced in 1898 and the country was once called, “The Jazz Capital of Asia.” Popular Filipino jazz artists have also had the time to showcase their talent, however, with the proliferation of popular music in the later years, the classical pizzazz of jazz was soon put out of the spotlight (*Untivero, 2019*).

Pop culture in the Philippines and its influences

In his overview of pop culture and social media rise in the Philippines, AJ Garchitorena (2015) puts forward that it started in the country during the colonial period when Spaniards used literature to win the hearts of the natives and promote the Catholic Church. Through the years, pop culture in the Philippines has evolved and covered relevant topics during that time – propaganda, Hollywood influences, and even modernization. Pop culture was further propagated by society through the use of mass media.

Just as the American culture produced jazz to portray the voice of the oppressed, the Philippines also had its share of various classical music that shared colorful and meaningful messages. *Sarswela*, hailing from the traditional Spanish musical play, was present as early as the 1900s. Sarswela is a form of attraction in gatherings or occasions to entertain guests and audiences. *Kundiman* was modeled after the Sarswela and this type of ballad depicts love songs used in radio or cinema (*Dioquino, n.a*).

Long before the existence of post-processed films, modern-day production houses, and entertainment agencies, the country has seen the ‘Golden Era’ of Philippine Cinema (*Villano, 2019*). The 1930s and the succeeding years brought about classic Filipino films from the “Big 4,” namely; Sampaguita Pictures, LVN Pictures, Lebran Pictures, and Premiere Productions. These production houses produced veteran

actors and actresses, such as Fernando Poe, Jr., Nida Blanca, Susan Roces, Eddie Gutierrez, and Dolphy, and cemented the success of the Philippine entertainment industry on large and small screens.

The Collective Psyche of Fandoms in the Earlier Years

It is said that the Fandom Phenomenon, a result of the Collective Psyche, can be attributed as part of the Participatory Culture. Bermudez et al.'s (2020) *"The Filipino 'Stan' Phenomenon and Henry Jenkin's Participatory Culture: The Case of Generation X and Z"* derived the definition of participatory culture from Henry Jenkins as "cultures that grow from interest-based interactions and establish norms for contributions and communications." The Collective Psyche (also known as the Collective Mind), or the ordered group of individual minds, happens when a group collectively synergizes and functions as one unit (Flor & Flor, 2019). People with similar interests gather and contribute to their community, collaborate, and share ideas. As Jenkins wrote in his paper entitled *"Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century,"* he theorized that participatory culture is a form of resistance as it gives fandoms the ability to speak about pressing social issues that they encounter such as gender equality, identity, racism, and stereotyping (Grinnell College, n.a.). Jenkins further defined participatory culture as "one with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; supportive of creating and sharing one's creations with others; involves a type of mentorship wherein the experienced shares his or her learnings to newer members of the community; where members believe that their contributions matter; and where members feel social connection towards one another."

In the Philippines, fandoms vary from love teams, music bands, artists, influential individuals, and other forms of entertainment. Cosplayers are often seen in major malls with anime conferences, love teams have solid fanbases, and musicians or bands have fandoms as their foundation. A classic example of fandoms with an evident Collective Psyche in the earlier years was the rise of Nora Aunor and Vilma Santos as the in-demand actresses of their generation. These fans, known as *Noranians* and *Vilmanians*, respectively, have been big followers of both movie stars since the 1970s. Their rivalry often led to fan wars. To this day, these fans have upgraded their support to social media channels to protect their idols (*Requintina*, 2023). Santos' recent film, "When I Met You in Tokyo" with leading man, Christopher De Leon, was among the selected films to enter the Metro Manila Film Festival in 2023. Unfortunately, Aunor's "Pieta" was not able to join the festival which irked the Noranians and took their frustrations to social media platforms. The negative banter between the two fandoms urged Santos to speak up and encourage Vilmanians to refrain from engaging in these fan wars and instead celebrate the opportunity of being selected as one of the film entries for the annual film festival. This scenario shows how the fandom phenomenon works in the country. Avid supporters are protective of the celebrity they choose to follow and will continue to support and protect their idols throughout.

Another example of earlier fandoms was that of Sharon Cuneta and Gabby Concepcion. *Love teams*, whose purpose is to have an actor and actress pair up and display themselves as a romantic couple on screen, were already present in the 1950s. These love teams attract groups of fans to follow and support their projects which in turn provide revenue to their respective management and entertainment companies – a powerful marketing stint proven effective over time. Perhaps some of

the most popular love teams on the big and small screens were Pancho Magalona and Tita Duran (*Kahimyang, n.a.*), Aga Muhlach and Lea Salonga, and former young couples such as Kathryn Bernardo and Daniel Padilla.

As one of the most sought-after and incredibly famous celebrity love teams on and off screen, Cuneta and Concepcion have a large following, particularly the *Sharonians* who avidly followed the Megastar. The former couple first starred in the 1981 movie, “Dear Heart” and eventually wed in 1984, before welcoming their daughter, actress KC Concepcion, in 1985 (*GMA, 2023*). Before social media, the marriage of Cuneta and Concepcion was impactful which sealed the “from reel to real” relationship for their fandom (*Ramos, 2018*). While it is unfortunate that the marriage did not work, *Sharonians* are still looking out for a possible reunion of the two. Both flourished, though, in their careers individually, thanks to their solid fan base throughout the years.

Fandoms Today

One of the most popular fandoms in the local entertainment scene was the emergence of the “AIDub” phenomenon in 2015. The duo that played this love team was Alden Richards and Maine Mendoza, more popularly known as “Yaya Dub,” while the portmanteau of their love team was derived from their popular names, “Alden” and “Yaya Dub”. The pair became popular when they were cast as one of the hosts of the longest-running variety show, *Eat Bulaga!* (*Campos, 2016*) Before their hosting stint on the show, Richards had been an actor in his home network, *GMA 7*, playing minor roles in *teleseryes*; Mendoza had been an internet sensation on the social media platform, *Dubsmash*, through her series of short video clips imitating or

lip-syncing celebrities online and has since gained a significant following from netizens.

What started as a simple hosting segment for the two became the most sought-after story in the noontime variety show. Richards was tasked to host the segment in the studio, while Mendoza was out in the field along with the other program hosts, Wally Bayola, Jose Manalo, and Paolo Ballesteros, to visit different families and barangays nationwide. The pair's initial point of contact was through the split screen of the segment that allowed both the in-studio and field hosts to interact. The budding "romance" and excitement between the two were slowly becoming evident by their natural display of affection, much to the delight of its fans collectively called *AIDub Nation*, and soon enough their teasing and innocent flirting turned into a whole new plot that kept viewers in and out of the country glued to the screen. In addition to the seemingly addicting and "unscripted" plot that Filipinos came to love in *Kalyeserye*, Filipino values such as respect for elders, obedience, and patience were taught to remind the viewers, especially children, to wait for the right moment to commit to someone (*PhilStar*, 2015).

Eventually, their love story culminated in the record-high episode of "*Tamang Panahon*," where Richards and Mendoza finally had the chance to meet out of the split screen and see each other face to face. According to the records obtained by the Philippine Star (2015), the AIDub nation filled the 55,000-capacity Philippine Arena in Bocaue, Bulacan which entered them into the Guinness Book of World Records. The episode also garnered traction online with tweets amounting to 27.2 million and the love team's fandom had planned to reach 36 million tweets to commemorate the 36 long years of Eat Bulaga. The episode was aired in different parts of the globe and was live-streamed to various locations in the Philippines.

Lastly, the total ticket sale revenue amounted to PhP 14,000,000.00. The ticket sales were used to construct school libraries and help typhoon victims. Not only did Richards and Mendoza capture the hearts of global audiences but they were also able to give back to the community by teaching Filipino values and putting these into practice, providing opportunities for children and the youth to learn, and extending assistance to those displaced by the typhoon. Even after the *Tamang Panahon* fever had subsided, several fans continued practicing the values imparted by the show such as providing happiness and entertainment to the elders in a retirement home (*GMA News Online, 2015*). Their phenomenal chemistry and the solid foundation of their fandom were the perfect mix to exemplify what the Collective Psyche is all about.

Social Media: The Future of the Collective Psyche and Fandoms

The AIDub Phenomenon became a great success because of how social media played to its advantage. Each episode was aptly named based on its plot and was given hashtags, a word or phrase preceded by a number sign to categorize and identify the specific topic or content (*Smith, 2023*). When used or shown repeatedly, hashtags trend locally or worldwide depending on the number of users who use the hashtag and how often this hashtag is used.

In 2021, the Philippines' was dubbed the "*Social Media Capital of the World*" with 89 million active social users as reported by then-Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) Secretary Ramon M. Lopez at the Philippine Digital Convention 2021 (*DTI, 2021*). Former Secretary Lopez elaborated on the Global Social Media Use Ranking citing that the Filipinos ranked 6th on Facebook, 10th on YouTube, 11th on Twitter, and 18th on Instagram. The report highlighted the current digital landscape

composed of young and tech-savvy individuals with a median age of 25.7. Such data shows how the country has progressed in the digital age and how its citizens respond to innovation and digitalization.

Popular video streaming platforms such as YouTube provide users with videos with different themes, contexts, and ideas that capture a number of people with diverse interests. The popularity of “vlogs” or video logs, short videos that social media users consume through video streaming platforms, and the Philippines is no exception to this trend. According to the 2023 Global Digital report released by Meltwater and We Are Social, Filipinos ranked 4th in spending time on social media, garnering 3 hours and 43 minutes in total. Filipinos are also among the most dedicated to watching vlogging content and video games. This might interpret how Filipinos support “vloggers” or content creators nowadays. The same report cited that 60.4 percent of users aged between 16 and 64 years old watch vlogs every week and that 51.4 percent of users follow influencers online, more than the global average. This presents how Filipinos became the biggest consumer of video content and have the strongest influencer culture globally (*Goodfellow, 2022*).

Forbes Magazine (2019) featured an article on “The Psychology of Influencer Marketing” which explained the behaviors and perceptions of individuals who follow their chosen influencers. In the article, author Bradley Hoos identified how influencer marketing shaped the decision-making process of individuals, elaborating that they connect deeply with their influencers because they see these creators as someone reliable and relatable. These content creators have created a deep and meaningful connection with their followers, making their relationship personal and grounded on trust. As Hoos concluded, “the digital world has found a way to tap into the natural tendencies and personal or human connections” of people.

An article on Medium (2023) showed how the Philippines fares as a hub of influencers. The article forwards that the country's population is highly active on social media, an avenue for connection, self-expression, and entertainment. Another reason is that Filipinos engage with people who share the same passion and interests such as travel, music, films, and lifestyle. Influencers who are aligned with these interests are more likely to become popular on social media because they protect the interests of their intended audience and they are aware of the latest trends and innovations. Influencers are easily relatable because they speak the language of their followers, making them more engaging and easier to connect with. Lastly, influencers have the power to drive change and be an inspiration to their followers. They can become advocates for various social causes and be game changers in addressing social issues that matter to their community and country.

The likes of prominent Filipino influencers such as Ivana Alawi, CongTV, Doc Willie Ong, and Small Laude are another example of individuals with huge following with thousands and millions of fans who watch their video content and follow their lives as internet celebrities. CongTV or Lincoln Cortez Velasquez, started his stint on YouTube in 2008 and gained popularity in the succeeding years through his comedy videos, funny antics, and relatable content. His fame was further fueled by the presence of his partner, Viy Cortez, a famed vlogger, and their group of vloggers called, "*Team Payaman*." However, the couple started at the bottom of the food chain. Their story was not an instant shot to fame and both worked their way up to achieve the status they enjoy today. Both used to live a simple life; Cortez used to sell eggs and cars for a living while Velasquez played minor roles on TV (*Licup*, 2022). As Velasquez's and Cortez's fame finally started to pick up, their number of followers grew immensely and their popularity rocketed, amassing a total of 11.6

million subscribers on YouTube and gaining 1,683,678,573 total views out of the 543 videos uploaded to their page (*CongTV, 2024*). Their comedic duo, entertaining group, and relatable content became the recipe for their success as they progressed over the years and became one of the most sought-after vloggers in the country with many brands, organizations, and sponsors who partner with them and the millions of followers they inspire and engage with. It is evident that their fandom has since grown and is continuing to grow with every video content uploaded. This could be attributed to the deep and respected connection CongTV gives to their loyal followers and the aspirational rags-to-riches story that projects the message that anything is possible with hard work and determination.

Aside from travel, lifestyle, food, and entertainment, content creation also taps into information dissemination with influencers who work in essential fields such as medicine and law. Dr. Willie Tan Ong, popularly known as Doc Willie Ong, is a cardiologist and internist who gives free health advice on Facebook and YouTube. He is a columnist for the Philippine Star and Pilipino Star Ngayon, and has appeared as a resident medical expert in the television show, *Salamat Dok (Doc Willie Ong, n.a.)*. In a keynote address delivered for the Healthcare Social Media Summit 2016, Ong shared his experiences in developing communication materials for healthcare and using social media to promote and disseminate health information. Expanding health topics, finding mentors, using ordinary language to overcome language barriers, and authenticity were some of his key points in communicating health to different sectors and ensuring that this information reaches those even at the grassroots level (*DOST, n.a.*). He had hopes of providing accessible healthcare to Filipinos and establishing cancer centers in the country. It was unfortunate, however, that Ong did not garner enough votes to win the Vice President position (*Barcelon,*

2021). Nonetheless, Ong continues to provide health information to the public through his social media pages which have 17 million followers on Facebook and 9.14 million subscribers on YouTube.

The Power of Pop Culture, Social Media, and the Fandoms

Pop culture in today's setting is throttled with the use of various communication platforms such as social media. Any beliefs, social norms, language, and morals in society are fueled by the wide distribution of pop culture especially in children and the youth whose cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development is greatly influenced by external factors such as social media (*Central Community College, n.d.*). At the height of the pandemic in the country, the population experienced a series of lockdown restrictions which prompted Filipinos to continue their daily activities within the confines of their homes. The disruption saw the characteristics of media consumption of Filipinos from 2021 onwards. In 2021, Filipinos use the internet for an average of 10 hours and 56 minutes daily, 3 hours and 30 minutes watching broadcast television or video streaming, 4 hours and 15 minutes on social media, and 2 hours and 15 minutes listening to music streaming platforms according to DataReportal (2021). Such numbers show that most Filipinos spend their time consumed by their devices because of media, with Facebook being the most used and favorite social media platform (*Meltwater, 2022*). The numbers measured in 2022 did not fall far behind the findings of 2021. There were 76.01 million Filipinos who were using social media as of 2022 (*Meltwater, 2022*). The proliferation of social media heavily influenced pop culture as more and more people spend their time in front of their devices.

In a much larger context, pop culture influences society too. The Children's Museum Indianapolis (*n.d.*) highlights that imbibing pop culture is a way of self-expression that shows the uniqueness of individuals in a community. Pop culture encourages conversation between people despite differences as it exposes society to new ideas, knowledge, experiences, and skills necessary for discovery and development. Pop culture can be defined as '*what the larger masses favor*'.

Hallyu Wave: Making a big splash in the Philippines

Korean entertainment has been in the Philippine airwaves since the early 2000s. One facet of pop culture that gained high traction, especially during the pandemic was Korean pop culture – entertainment, travel, language, food, fashion, and most notably, music (*Tangpos, 2018*). Popularly called the '*Hallyu Wave*', Korean culture heavily influenced the views, preferences, and perceptions of Filipinos who continuously consume their content and trends (*Dela Vega et. al., 2022*). Media is undeniably the powerful force that drives Filipinos to imbibe Korean pop culture in their everyday lives. Korean telenovelas, also called *Koreanovelas* or K-dramas, started airing in the country in the early 2000s. With the introduction of video streaming applications such as Netflix and Disney+, these K-dramas conveniently reached Filipinos even more (*Statista, 2023*). The relatable, romanticized, and often sensationalized plots of K-drama such as classics *Jewel in the Palace*, *Full House*, and *Boys Over Flowers*, to crowd favorites *Strong Girl Bong Soon*, *Descendants of the Sun*, *Crash Landing On You*, *True Beauty*, and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* led Filipinos to anticipate and watch these programs earnestly. It could be because of the prominent Korean artists who starred in these dramas like *Song Hye Kyo*, *Cha Eun Woo*, *Hyun Bin*, and *Son Ye Jin* who have their respective loyal fanbases (*ABS-CBN News, 2020*).

Subsequently, Korean mainstream music, more popularly known as '*K-pop*', found its way into the hearts of Filipino Hallyu fans. The Philippines is the third country with the most K-pop fans and the most active on Twitter according to Rappler's K-pop data in 2021. The staple upbeat and catchy tunes, complex choreography, and deliberate production of K-pop started making their way into radio and television airwaves. Social media further propelled K-pop through advertisements and marketing strategies. All these online and offline advertisements of K-pop artists directly targeted at Filipino fans have successfully urged them to watch, listen, and eventually purchase the branded merchandise of their favorite artists. More importantly, these strategies pushed fans to deepen their support and patronize their favorite artists or groups.

Music streaming applications such as Spotify and Apple Music have vast libraries of K-pop on their platforms making it convenient and accessible for K-pop fans to listen to their favorite songs any time of the day. At a time when Western music used to dominate world tours and pop charts, K-pop cemented its reputation globally by penetrating music markets left and right through sold-out worldwide stadium tours, social media penetration, branded products, exclusive distribution of documentaries, and performing and charting in international and local music awards and festivals (*Park, 2022*).

K-pop was the most talked-about topic on Twitter in 2021, rounding up around 7.8 billion K-pop-related tweets in the same year (*Rappler, 2022*). In the report released by the Korea Foundation in 2018, a 22 percent increase in the number of Hallyu fans globally was estimated at 89.19 million compared to 73.12 million fans in 2017, and the Philippines had the highest growth rate of Hallyu fans (*Interaksyon, 2019*). The increase was largely due to the rise of the popular South Korean boy group and

21st-century pop icon, *Bangtan Sonyeondan* more popularly known as *BTS* (Kwak, 2018).

The powerful force that is BTS

While BTS started gaining popularity in recent years, its roots can be traced back to the first generation of pop stars or *idols* in the 1990s (*Los Angeles Film School, n.d.*). Groups such as *H.O.T.* introduced bop tunes while second-generation idols such as *TVXQ*, *BIGBANG*, and *Super Junior* continued with the signature direction of pop music while incorporating creative takes on K-pop. The third-generation idols are the artists and groups who have begun dominating charts internationally aside from the local award – a first for the Korean music scene. They are the prominent figures of K-pop known today such as *Seventeen*, *Blackpink*, *Twice*, and *Astro*.

Fourth-generation idols such as *Tomorrow x Together*, *NewJeans*, *Le Sserafim*, and *Enhypen*, and the emergence of the newest addition of idols in the 5th generation, take the global stage thanks to their seniors or *sunbaenims* who have paved the way for them to enter the international stage. More and more idols and groups are being produced by entertainment companies to introduce fresh dances and the newest talents to make waves in the local and global K-pop scene, much to the enjoyment of K-pop enthusiasts (*Moya, 2021*).

The septet, BTS, started with humble beginnings back in 2013. Long before the group became famous and “paved the way” for other Korean acts, they began their journey in a small, unassuming entertainment company called BigHit Music (formerly known as Big Hit Entertainment). According to the K-pop group’s website (n.d.), the Grammy-nominated South Korean group began gaining popularity through their authentic and self-produced music, elaborate performances, and their genuine

connection with their fandom called ARMY. As their songs circle on self-love and acceptance, and talk about social issues, the group has become the voice, role model, and force for good for millions of children and youth around the world who are disadvantaged, discriminated against, and are going through difficult times each day. The group members themselves were subjected to derogatory comments, racial slurs, and discrimination from their peers and other people from different walks of life until today.

While breaking global records and receiving local accolades, the group promoted their campaign “*Love Myself*” with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to fight violence against children and the youth with the hope of making the world a better place through music (*Love Myself, n.d.*). In 2021, amid the pandemic, the group stood in front of world leaders at the 76th UN General Assembly and delivered a speech of hope, love, and encouragement while sharing the youth’s hope for a brighter future (*Basbas, 2021*). These significant contributions also transpired in the lives of each of the members. Individually, the members have their philanthropic activities done anonymously. The Global Citizen (2021) cited some of the activities done by the members such as when Park Jimin, the group’s main dancer and lead vocalist, made several donations including resources to his alma mater, Busan High School of Arts, to help struggling students in need of monetary assistance. Jung Hoseok, the main dancer, sub-rapper, and sub-vocal of the group, donated an estimated USD 85,000.00 worth of scholarships to low-income students of Jeonnam Girl’s Commercial High School. Another member and main rapper Min Yoongi, popularly known by his stage name SUGA, donated USD 88,000.00 to Keimyung University Dongsan Medical Center to help finance the unsettled hospital bills of children deprived of adequate medical care.

The perfect combination: BTS and ARMY

The success of BTS would not have been entirely possible without the support and devotion of their fandom, the *Adorable Representative M.C for Youth*, simply called ARMY. In a Time Magazine article written by Kat Moon entitled “*Inside the BTS ARMY, the Devoted Fandom with an Unrivaled Level of Organization*” (2020), the author underscored ARMY as “one of the most active online communities in existence”. As of date, the social media pages of BTS have the following number of subscribers: (1) the YouTube channel, Bangtan TV, has 76.4 million subscribers, (2) their official Facebook account has 21 million followers, (3) their official Instagram account has 73.9 million followers, and (4) their Twitter account has 48.5 million followers, not to mention the individual Instagram accounts of the members of BTS.

Moon further emphasized that social media serves as an avenue for ARMYs to interact with their fellow ARMYs and the BTS members themselves. Fans share information through these channels just like how some fans manage “Fan Translation” accounts. These accounts help deepen the connection of existing fans to the group and introduce BTS to new audiences. Moon noted that this “enables international ARMYs to learn Korean and take interest in Korean culture”.

Furthermore, “Data-Oriented” accounts are dedicated to calling on the fans for their votes in certain fan polls online and tracking the progress of the group’s position in local and international music charts. The use of hashtags on social media helps widen the reach of the polls that need voting or the distribution of knowledge to intended audiences. Lastly, social media helps in mobilizing abled fans to donate for every member’s birthday or raise scholarship funds for the charities they support.

Aditi Bhandari of Thomson Reuters wrote an extensive article that explains the power of ARMY in mobilizing the group's fandom. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement became the biggest phenomenon after the unjust killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis (*NPR, 2020*). In the same year, BTS and its record label, Big Hit Entertainment, donated USD 1,000,000.00 to the Black Lives Matter organization which was confirmed later. With this pivotal move from the K-pop group, ARMY organized an online campaign to match the amount donated with the hashtag, #MatchAMillion. Within 25 hours, the fandom was able to successfully match the amount donated by BTS. Another donation drive was organized by an ARMY on Twitter called, "One in an ARMY". The donation drive is a charity project for the UNICEF campaign, *Love Myself*, wherein 30 volunteer organizers and translators came together to conduct the drive in 22 charities around the world. Smaller campaigns also sprung from the main campaigns such as the "ARMY Share the Warmth" – a fundraising and donation drive for resources that were given to communities who are experiencing the harsh winter weather in their country.

Bhandari further noted that ARMY is sometimes "generalized as young and obsessive individuals". In truth, the fandom spans across ages and fans are proactive in raising awareness, are strategic in driving donations online and offline, and break social media records. This is attributed to the fact that ARMY is a semi-structured organization capable of moving and mobilizing as one unit swiftly. Bhandari asserted that older ARMYs have more discretionary funds to afford the band's merchandise and donations for charity. As cited in the article, ARMY is not just a group of people who enjoy BTS. The fans who take part in the fandom, ARMY, serve as the economic drive of the whole BTS network.

Moving forward together

In its general sense, being part of any fandom allows an individual to feel that he/she plays a significant role in the group. BTS has become a symbol of hope for many ARMYs, especially during the pandemic. Their presence gave comfort and serenity to many people, fans or non-fans alike, around the world with their words of encouragement and music. Truly, music touches the hearts of those who feel deeply. A 2020 article by Pankil Jhahria for The Assembly, a Malala Fund publication, showcases how BTS taught the author to love herself. In her article, the author explicitly noted that despite the song being sung in Korean, she understood the lyrics because of the conveyed feelings and messages. The author realized that the validation she needed should not come from other people but from herself. Readers from The Guardian shared their thoughts about BTS and their music, and how these help them find their self-worth (*Farah, 2021*). These readers came from diverse backgrounds, races, characteristics, and cultures, yet they all have collectively experienced the compelling power of BTS's music that eventually led them to accept and love themselves.

The Collective Psyche of the ARMY fandom or the K-pop Army, driven by the power of communication, compels fans to continue what BTS has started – to be champions of good. Modern technology and social media made it easier for fandom communities to mobilize and work in unison. Organizing charity work, donation drives, or food banks, to doing mass voting on social media to win coveted awards and disseminate important information pushed fans to collectively work and achieve the common good. The country can learn to maximize and harness the power of the Collective Psyche to develop its nation, elevate the standard of living, provide access to necessities up to the grassroots level, and improve economic stability for all. It

does not only serve those who idolize and fantasize about a certain K-pop group or artist, the collective thinking and action extend to the development of a nation by maximizing the reach and potential of fandoms who have been present in society. They are in the best position to inspire, encourage, and change the nation for the better, do what is morally good, and critically assess the nation. With the Fandom Phenomenon, developing the nation is not an impossible feat to do.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The book *“ASEAN Convergence - Towards an ASEAN Identity: Discourses on Communication and Culture”* (2019) authored by Flor and Flor defined the concept of *Collective Psyche* as an ordered grouping of individual minds. Known alternatively as the *Collective Mind*, the authors further defined the theory as when a group or a collective synergizes and functions as one. This is evident in social gatherings such as concerts, rallies, and movements, as it allows the participants to be part of a monumental event and imbibe the feeling of oneness. A prime example of the Collective Psyche was during the 2022 Presidential Election wherein fandoms in the country formed the group *“KPOP STANS 4 LENI”* advocating for the then-presidential candidate, Leni Robredo, during the election. These K-pop fandoms were bound by their shared passion for K-pop and good governance (Abad, 2022).

Throughout the pandemic in 2021, various K-pop fandoms in the country moved and initiated their community pantries in their respective places of residence. One ARMY initiated a BTS-inspired community pantry that shared free vegetables, rice, and other goods to their community (Abad, 2021). These examples show that collective actions resonate from the Collective Mind of the fandoms.

These movements were fueled by mass and social media. As fandoms began their work and called for support and volunteers through social media, news outfits began picking up these stories and disseminating them through their communication channels. Communication, therefore, is a pivotal variable at the center of the fandom phenomenon. BTS and other K-pop groups can communicate with their local and international audiences through mass media and social media, and communicating with these audiences means breaking down language and cultural barriers. More than just

supporting their favorite K-pop groups, the fans were able to positively contribute to society through their collective action and generosity

Assumptions

The following philosophical assumptions were derived and are to be addressed in the study:

1. Multiple reasons made me join the K-pop Army;
2. The ARMY Culture affects the way I move, think, and interact with my fellow fandom members; and
3. The ARMY Culture is manifested in the Collective Psyche of the group, K-pop Army, that I belong to as we move collectively as one unit.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research employed a qualitative research design with autoethnographic approach. Christian N. Poulos (2021) defined *autoethnography* as “an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects insights to self-identity, cultural rules, and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, and larger social, cultural, and political issues.” Poulos further explained the essence of autoethnography in research as a method that puts the researcher’s personal experience at the center of the research, thereby making it a vital source of information and an important step in the research process.

Relatively, Jayne Pitard (2017) described autoethnography as a way of “retrospectively and selectively writing about experiences that have their basis in or are made possible by being part of a culture and/or owning a specific cultural identity.

In this research, I dove deep into my personal and lived experience as a member of the ARMY fandom, how the ARMY culture shaped my involvement in the K-pop Army, and how our Collective Psyche pushed me like my fellow ARMYs to collectively move as one, united unit. These experiences, observations, and thoughts were collected and recorded through autoethnographic means particularly self-reflective data or journaling, documentation through photos, a chronological list of major events and experiences as an ARMY, and rich, thick description of lived experiences.

Locale of the Study

As the researcher and subject of the research, the study was conducted locally in the Philippines, specifically in the province of Rizal, where I reside, and in Metro Manila, where I work.

My Profile

I am a 30-year-old Filipina, single, residing in Cainta, Rizal and my place of work is in Tayuman, Manila City. I completed my undergraduate degree and am currently pursuing my Master's degree at the University of the Philippines Open University. I live with my parents, my sister, her husband, and their 4-year-old daughter.

As a big supporter of K-pop, I have been a member of the ARMY fandom since August 2020. Aside from BTS, I am also a fan of another boy group, Seventeen, and the girl group, Twice. In my free time, I am mostly connected online through my social media accounts, particularly Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, and YouTube. I consume digital media content through these social media platforms as information is readily available and easier to access. I learned about BTS through their social media content and since then, I watched their content through various digital platforms. I occasionally purchase branded merchandise to show support to my favorite K-pop group. In an article written by Aditi Bhandari for Reuters in 2020, she noted that older fans in my age group have disposable income which allows ARMYs like me to partake in K-pop activities and purchase various merchandise. However, it is also worth noting that women my age are susceptible to prejudice and cyberbullying because of our unique preference in K-pop.

Auto Sampling Scheme

Personal accounts, lived experiences, thoughts, and other observations were considered in the research. Borrowing the coined term from Brian A. Vasquez from his research, *Politico-economic influence and social outcome of English language among Filipinos: An Autoethnography* (2012), I utilized the “auto sampling” scheme into the study as I sample the experiences I went through in this fandom and thickened the discussion on the subject. Vasquez defined the auto sampling scheme as “purposive sampling personal experiences of the researcher himself that is substantial to the domain of inquiry.”

Research Instrument

The research instruments used in this study are a laptop, an iPad for my digital note-taking journal, and a mobile phone. These instruments provide the convenience to note my journey as an ARMY and make sense of the ARMY culture. This equipment also holds the photos I used as supporting visuals in explaining my experiences as a member of ARMY.

Data Gathering Procedures

My lived experiences are my data, therefore, I recounted my personal stories, encounters, thoughts, and feelings relevant to the ARMY culture and fandom. *Confessional* or *Self-critical* type of research to gather data. According to an article on Indeed (2022), Confessional or Self-critical research has a more personal approach in which the researcher thoroughly examines and is more explicit in his or her experiences and thoughts. Under this type of research, the main method of gathering data will be *Narrative Analysis*, a data-gathering method that will allow me

to deeply understand my experiences as a member of the ARMY culture and interpret these narratives into relevant insights. I freely recounted my experiences and wrote my thoughts, feelings, emotions, and ideas in a digital note-taking journal to ensure the accuracy of data and information.

In specific points, I used various autoethnographic data gathering methods as described in the report authored by Robin Cooper and Bruce V. Lilyea entitled "*I'm Interested in Autoethnography, But How Do I Do It?*" (2022), such as:

- Self-reflective data where I used a journal to record my reflections, thoughts, experiences, and emotions about my journey as an ARMY, relying heavily on memory and personal accounts;
- Gathering of relevant photographs to support the journal entries, the timeline of activities, and recount memories as an ARMY; and
- The chronology of events where I recounted major events, memories, and significant happenings relevant to my journey as an ARMY showed how my deep fascination with BTS, the ARMY, and its culture, progressed through the years.

Data Analysis

I adopted the *Structured Vignette Analysis* (SVA) framework developed by Pitard, as reflected in the *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences*, to make sense of the data gathered, examine and synthesize the thoughts and feelings presented in the study, and provide a rich description of my lived experiences by identifying the context, anecdote, emotional response, reflexivity, strategies developed, and conclusive comments on layers. Pitard expounded on these

processes further, explaining that dialogue and its **context** are important in shaping the data such that, through communication or conversations, people with diverse backgrounds can collectively understand their society.

The second step in the framework was explained by Pitard where I, as the researcher, must go back and remember my experiences before reflecting on these. It gives an unbiased and raw retelling of the central moment of my experience with concrete details to achieve the **anecdote**.

Pitard's third step in the framework, the **emotional response**, is the physiological and emotional responses (subjective experience, physiological response, and behavioral response) I have experienced that are involuntary and unconscious.

The fourth part of the framework was derived from Pitard's philosophy that **reflexivity** is a process. As the researcher and the subject of the study, my role in the research is vital as I am part of the research process. Embedded within the study, my lived experiences, values, beliefs, and preconceptions impact the process of deciphering the study and contributing to the body of knowledge.

Deriving from the process of reflexivity, Pitard explained that **strategies** would be **developed** and would be used for future interactions with peers and generate positive experiences.

Lastly, bringing together all the layers of analyzing each vignette creates the summary or **conclusive comments on layers** and a deeper understanding of the lived experience which will help researchers understand different cultures in the future.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical Considerations are essential in research as they set the parameters for upholding the rights of the respondents in the research, avoiding research misconduct, protecting scientific integrity, and promoting public participation (*Bachelor Print, n.d.*).

David Resnik, J.D., PhD (2020) identified some of the ethical principles that Ethical Considerations address such as honesty, objectivity, integrity, carefulness, openness, transparency, accountability, intellectual property, confidentiality, responsible publication, responsible mentoring, respect for colleagues, social responsibility, non-discrimination, competence, legality, animal care, and human subjects protection.

In this research, protecting one's privacy is of utmost importance. As the line between being the researcher and the respondent, I am aware of all potential risks and consequences that may arise in the duration of the conduct of the research. Disclosing sensitive information such as embarrassing experiences, intimate information, and stories that may have legal or professional repercussions must be considered before the conduct of the research, and in cases where I wish to reveal any sensitive information, I must implement safeguards to protect myself (*Toronto Metropolitan University, 2015*).

Chapter IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To make the discussion easier for the readers to digest, I adopted the Structural Vignette Analysis of Pitard to decipher each significant event relevant to my journey as an ARMY and getting used to its culture. Each vignette answers the research question.

The first vignette answered what it means to become an ARMY; what does it mean to become an ARMY? In hindsight, social media made me curious about K-pop. This vignette explores the first year I became an ARMY and when I was exploring the realms of K-pop.

The second vignette answered what it means to be part of the ARMY culture, to be a K-pop Army. What facets of the K-pop ARMY culture or values did I imbibe? This vignette explored the significant events I went through in the following years as a K-pop ARMY. In this facet, social media platforms were my ultimate source of information for anything K-pop – news, events, upcoming Army gatherings, and all other information that fed my K-pop curiosity. It was also through social media that I forged new friendships, made instant connections or interactions with fellow K-pop Army members, and allowed myself to get out of my comfort zone and be extroverted. This connectedness that started in the digital realm translated to the actual, physical world which contributed positively to my mental health.

The last vignette answered the latter years of my K-pop ARMY journey. This was the point in my life where I have seen numerous online content that I may have unconsciously imbibed the positive attributes and values of my idols. It was also at

this moment that I felt accepted in online and physical communities without prejudice because we share the same love, passion, and experiences. This was also the point in my fandom life that I gained lifelong friends and strengthened existing relationships. Of all the values, beliefs, and culturalization I imbibed in the past years, how did I apply the K-pop ARMY culture in my life? How did it translate to how other ARMYs contribute to the K-pop ARMY culture? How will culturalization shape the Filipino Collective Psyche?

Vignette I

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, K-pop was my escape

Context

The year 2020 was a turning point for me as I struggled with the pandemic. Nothing could ever compare to the fear of losing a life, a loved one, a source of income, or even losing mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual stability. The pandemic brought about uncertainties and being at home, without the liberty to go outside and live normally, was not much of a help, especially to those who have mental health issues. As a person who overthinks a lot, I was not in a happy place, mentally. I struggled anxiously and kept thinking of the things that could go wrong. I know I could lose my job anytime, or that one of my loved ones might not make it out of the pandemic era (which did happen), or I could lose my life. I felt the uneasiness in the household, too. My parents were both senior citizens at that time and they were vulnerable to the effects of the virus. My sister and her husband also feared for their daughter who was less than a year old when the pandemic spread. It felt like sitting on the edge of a cliff with nothing to hold onto. I was desperately looking for something to keep my

mind off things. I was not sure what I was looking for, however, I know that I was trying to find something that could help me adapt to the situation at the very least.

Anecdote

An excerpt from my entry for October 2020 – I remembered how I struggled with an important client during this time. At the height of the pandemic and when a hybrid work setup was implemented, my team and I conducted a hybrid event for Inga Angat. This was the task force created by the public and private sectors to curb the impact of COVID-19 and safely jumpstart the Philippine economy once again.

The sleepless nights and long days got the best of me. Aside from the daily routine and other projects to manage, I had to deal with the client's demands, overcome challenges, and face the risk of being exposed to asymptomatic team members. I missed my birthday to beat deadlines and prepare for the event.

While struggling with these problems, BTS was my constant companion. The long nights became bearable as I found comfort and relaxation in their songs. I remember how I felt heard and understood while I worked and listened to their songs in the background. I watched their first online concert during this time. The concert experience was very different, however, it was the closest thing my sister and I could do to see them live and connect with them and ARMY.

The concert was held for two days. My sister and I bought Korean food and iced coffee with their faces printed on the bottles to complete the concert experience. Millions of ARMYs watched the concert. There was a live count of viewers throughout. At about the same time as the concert, the group charted on the Billboard, much to the delight of the ARMYs. Two of their songs took the first and second places – a feat for an Asian group. Asian acts have never charted often. Dominating a Western music chart was a win for the group, the fandom, and the

Asian race. Asians were (and still are) being stereotyped by other races as if being Asian equates to being a minority. It was as if Asians did not have the right or the fighting chance to be recognized and be heard. Still, BTS powered through with the help of ARMYs who religiously listened to the group's songs in music streaming apps.

Despite the busy schedules, challenges, and all other things, BTS has been my constant companion 24/7. I watched their music videos, reality shows, and livestreams online and the English translations uploaded by other active members of the fandom or the subtitles automatically translated in the video were helpful for me in understanding their music or conversations better. These translations helped me connect with them deeper and allowed me to appreciate them more because I was able to make sense of the conversation from the Hangul or Korean language to English. In hindsight, I realized that playing BTS in the background while working or doing errands gave me the serotonin boost I needed to go through my to-do lists.

Emotional Response

My initial emotional response was fear. What I feared most at the time of COVID-19 was the unknown. I was not certain if I would still be able to make it through the dark times; I could not protect myself or my family fully; I may or may not have a job by tomorrow; I was not sure if my family would still be intact by the time the pandemic was over. I thought the pandemic would be gone after quite some time and that we would return to normal programming after a few days as if nothing happened. Only after three years did the country achieve herd immunization and was able to take control of the pandemic.

With the intent of taking my mind off the reality in front of me, I sought ways to overcome the overwhelming feeling of anxiety coupled with overthinking. I suddenly

found myself listening to K-pop, specifically to BTS, and they became an escape for me. On the days I listened to K-pop, I felt like I was in control and I had something certain to hold onto. One of the songs that kept me going was For You, a song about love, hope, and trust. A line that struck me was “Even if we are apart / Our hearts are connected to each other / Forever with you.” This particular line served as a strong message to me because I am constantly reminded that I am not alone. Even if there is a great distance between me and my Korean idols, I would always feel their presence which inspired me to keep moving forward.

Reflexivity

The whole pandemic experience was distressing. I constantly asked myself, “*What would I do?*”. What would I do if I got laid off like my other colleagues? What would I do if I lost one of my friends, family members, or relatives to COVID-19? What would I do if I did not have enough resources to keep me secure for months? These were the questions that kept on running through my mind and kept me awake for most nights.

With the introduction of K-pop, my habit of overthinking lessened because I felt that, even for a few moments, I was in control of myself and how I perceived the situations in front of me. The thoughts and questions that ran through my mind at this time were, “*I find K-pop interesting. What do I love most about it?*”, “*What should I know about K-pop?*”, “*How can K-pop help me during this time?*”, and “*Of all the genres that I could explore, why did I choose K-pop?*”. These questions urged me to dive deeper into the K-pop world and explore the realms of the musical genre.

Strategies Developed

I listened to K-pop more to help myself understand the hype around K-pop which meant exploring my favorite K-pop boy group, BTS. I started researching the group,

its members, what they sang about, how they rose to stardom, and all other information that could help me know more about them. I took the time to research the lyrics of each song, the English translation of these lyrics, and the context or meaning behind the songs.

I allowed myself to listen to the songs repeatedly, relate myself to the lyrics of the songs, and encourage myself to feel the emotions while listening to them. For example, one of my favorite songs, *00:00 (Zero o'clock)* was about starting again after going through difficulties in life. When the clock strikes midnight, there is renewed hope to begin again. The song reminded me of powering through despite the worries and overthinking because brighter days are ahead. I found solace in K-pop, particularly in BTS, because I felt understood and heard. My perception of the challenges in front of me shifted and I began seeing the positive side of every situation.

Conclusive Comments on Layers (My Main Takeaway)

Learning about K-pop urged me to take another step forward and experience the culture of K-pop firsthand. This step allowed me to enrich my understanding of the culture and the people in it. Language barriers are still evident considering BTS hails from South Korea and I come from the Philippines. Live translations have been very helpful for me to understand the context of the band's conversations during live streams. Subtitles were also important for me to interpret their lyrics and their interviews. These translators are also fans themselves and they always make it easier for other fans like me to join conversations and understand BTS more. In an interview with Kat Moon of Time Magazine in 2020, college student Claire Min translated various BTS content online and said that international fans take an

interest in Korean culture because translations bridge the language barrier and take the time to learn the Korean language.

Finding a source of happiness amid the uncertainties could help a person overcome difficult challenges or conditions. In my experience, appreciating and understanding K-pop helped ease my worries and anxiety over time. I shifted my focus to the things I was passionate about such as BTS and it kept me and my sanity at bay. I spent hours watching BTS by trying to remember their names, their facial features, their stance, and their humor. By studying them, I was able to differentiate one member from the other, making it easier for me to identify who's who. Social media provided many references and resources for me to understand and familiarize myself with K-pop and BTS such as watching online content or videos on Weverse, YouTube, and Tiktok. These have become so convenient to do because I could easily watch them through my mobile phone. Video content and edits done by fans gave me ideas on how other fans perceive K-pop and BTS.

I spent the time learning and understanding a different language and culture to connect with BTS. As a new fan of the boy group, I started watching their reality show, "Run BTS", where a series of activities, challenges, and secret missions were developed for the members to participate in. I would patiently wait every Tuesday night on video streaming sites like their YouTube channel, BANGTAN TV, or on Vlive. Each episode in Run BTS showcased how the BTS members interact and tease with each other like normal people. This provided me a sense of belonging because I felt that despite their global status, they can still act foolishly and live their best life.

One of the episodes that I kept on watching was when the members were arguing about a certain topic and they were shot repeatedly with water whenever they say or blurt a particular word, phrase, or action throughout the debate. The members had to

identify a certain word, phrase, or action of another member and when that member would accidentally say his identified word, phrase, or action, the production team would shoot them with water from their water gun. The members do not know their particular word, phrase, or action, which made the debate even more challenging and funny for the viewers. I enjoyed this particular episode because it was chaotic in a good way and I would always have a good laugh whenever I watch it. I learned that Korean idols were overly competitive especially with prizes at stake and they were effortlessly funny. These were the feelings that drew me to watch Run BTS episodes every chance I got.

Aside from their reality shows, I also spent time watching their concert documentaries. One of the band's shows that I watched was "Break the Silence: The Movie" where the group documented their Love Yourself world tour, spanning across the Americas, Europe, Middle East, and Asia. The documentary revealed unreleased footage of the concert series and each member's personal stories told candidly. Such documentaries proved that the BTS members are also people. They are individual beings with valid feelings and experiences and these make them human. These raw, untold stories showed me that each BTS member has gone through hardships just like everyone else but they have always put a brave face for their fans every time they step on stage.

Vignette II

Cross-Cultural Communication: Becoming a K-pop Army

Context

Cross cultural communication can well describe the experience of becoming an ARMY. Even if this is one-sided, the effects are felt worldwide making a dent in every country that they crossed around the globe. By cross-cultural it implies one-way communication and adaptation.

A year after the onset of the global pandemic, societies have learned to live with the idea of COVID-19 being present in asymptomatic and symptomatic individuals. The majority learned to keep their surroundings safe and sanitized frequently to keep infecting others at bay, however, others were still vulnerable to the negative effects of the pandemic physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and economically. There were a lot of factors that were considered and everyone had different avenues on how to adapt to the crisis. My way of coping with the pandemic and its effects were to immerse myself in a newfound passion, K-pop.

K-pop culture shines brightly as various artists and bands enter the music charts and the recognition they deserve as Asian artists. Up-and-coming artists and bands were also being introduced left and right. Each artist or group possesses a unique characteristic or persona that supposedly sets them apart from other groups. K-pop promises aspiring artists the chance to take the global center stage and showcase their talent in entertaining audiences globally.

I, on the other hand, remained a loyal fan of BTS. I began to explore their music videos, video content, live streams, news articles, social media posts, and any other content that could help me connect and know BTS more deeply. I began to acclimate myself to

the K-pop ARMY culture and tried to make sense of what it is like to be part of a community or culture that seems united and intact.

Anecdote

An excerpt from my entry for September 2021 – September was an incredibly tough month for me and the family. On September 16, 2021, just 2 days after my birthday, my cousin passed away due to COVID-19. His case was severe because of his comorbidities at that time. It was an untimely death because he was just 28 years old then.

He was 2 months younger than me. He had high hopes and dreams for his family but he had been taken sooner. Two years before my cousin passed away, our lolo passed on due to old age. He was 92 years old when he died. He would have been 98 years old today – just 2 years shy of 100. After a year, the father of the same cousin succumbed to the last stage of lung cancer. The years 2019 to 2021 were the hardest for the family after losing 3 members consecutively.

I distinctly remember how my cousin's sister cried while telling me her brother did not make it. It was one of the most devastating phone calls I had to answer, similar to how I took my mother's call when she asked me to go back home because my lolo just passed on to the other side.

We did not have a proper funeral for my cousin. My own family and I had been exposed to COVID-19 and had to go through self-quarantine. We were only able to view my cousin's body bag before the funeral home staff put him inside the crematorium.

My family and I turned to each other for comfort. No one saw this coming because it had been so sudden. I turned to BTS during the days I felt extra sad. I found comfort and assurance from their songs that our dark days will soon be over and that we will find peace eventually.

As a way to cope with the sadness and longing, I would always listen to songs that would bring me to tears and incredible pain. This has always been my way to go through the hardships until I no longer find myself being hurt or I have stopped crying after feeling too many emotions. I listened repeatedly to “Spring Day” at this time. The song has a knack of bringing me to tears every time and I figured that, by listening to this song, I would have cried all the tears left inside of me until I felt better or when the heavy weight had finally been lifted. Although the song was centered on longing for friendship, it was said to be a tribute to the victims of the Sewol Ferry as the music video had a direct semblance of what tragically transpired when the ship sank. Several bodies of young students who were on a field trip were retrieved, lifeless, and only a handful survived.

The lines, “How long do I have to wait / How many nights do I have to pass to see you? / To meet you?” and “Pass the end of winter’s cold / Until the spring day comes again, until the flowers bloom again / Please stay, please stay there a little longer” struck me as I recounted the moments where the bad news were broken, the emptiness enveloped me, and when realizations would hit me that I will no longer be able to hold my grandfather, uncle, and cousin any more. The song was a strong reminder that my family members went ahead but their memories would live on. I know that our family gatherings will never be the same but we try to live how we used to even after these challenges.

Emotional Response

My initial emotional response to this life event was shock. No one was prepared for the passing on of my cousin, especially since most of the family members were still grieving from the demise of two other family members. I cannot help but feel worried because the COVID-19 trend during this time was not improving. Cases were recorded extremely

high on some days. Other times, the numbers projected were below the average daily count. Aside from the worry, grief was also evident at this time as I was still coping with the loss of my uncle and the vivid image of the time the hospital staff waited for my mother and me to arrive at the hospital before putting my grandfather in a body bag and being transported to the morgue.

I turned to BTS and ARMY for emotional support when my worries or fears became too heavy for me to carry. I listened to various K-pop groups, explored different genres, and searched for other means to keep me preoccupied. In an article authored by Simon McCarthy-Jones (2021) in *Greater Good Magazine*, a science-based publication of the University of California-Berkeley, McCarthy Jones expounded that when a person experiences major life events such as the loss of a loved one, the body releases hormones such as prolactin and oxytocin to cope with the grief and pain by making the body feel relaxed, consoled, and supported. In a way, K-pop helped fans to adapt with their struggles and “heal” them through their music.

I can attest that BTS has healed my broken pieces because I, too, felt the sincerity in their songs and their eagerness to connect with their global community. Just a few months short of entering his mandatory military enlistment in 2022, eldest member, Jin, released a song called “The Astronaut” in collaboration with the famous English band, Coldplay. The song had Korean and English words that have successfully captured the hearts of Korean and international ARMYs. Perhaps the most catching lines in the lyrics for me was when Jin sang the lines, “When I’m with you, there is no one else / I get heaven to myself / When I’m with you, there is no one else / A life, a sparkle in your eyes / Heaven coming through and I love you”. In those lines, I felt the intensity of Jin’s love and adoration toward the fandom. I felt that I Jin touched my heart and lifted the heaviness I was feeling all throughout the pandemic. I also felt that the heart has a way

of recovering despite the torture it went and would go through and that even when times were hard, the heart would keep pumping, keeping a person alive. BTS was my lifeline whenever I felt that I could no longer move forward. The impact of BTS to its fans was and has always been astounding which helped them connect emotionally with the ARMY.

Another song that I deeply resonate with is their song “Magic Shop” inspired by the memoir written by Dr. James R. Doty entitled “Into the Magic Shop: A Neurosurgeon’s Quest to Discover the Mysteries of the Brain and the Secrets of the Heart”. One of the lines that stood out for me was “On the days I hate being myself / Days I want to disappear forever / Let’s make a door in your heart / Open the door and this place will await / It’s okay to believe / The Magic Shop will comfort you.” I remember downloading a copy of the memoir so I could understand the inspiration behind the song. I started reading it and found myself engrossed in the chapters, finally understanding that the song is about the author meeting a woman in a magic shop who taught him how to be in touch with his heart.

The band became my personal ‘magic shop’. On the days I felt empty, unloved, or unworthy, I turned to BTS and their music for support. Similar to how the music was written, BTS encourages everyone to come into the “magic shop” to leave their worries, sadness, and pain behind. That was precisely what I did; I listened to their songs, cried when I felt the need to cry, and kept in touch with my feelings. By listening to their music, feeling its intensity, understanding the meaning of its lyrics, and reading the literary pieces that served as inspiration, I was able to make sense of the songs they wrote and deeply feel the emotions BTS wanted their fans to feel.

Reflexivity

I noticed that listening to music allowed me to be in touch with my emotions and thoughts that I swept under the rug because I became vulnerable when I let these affect me. I realized I needed to feel these emotions and listen to my thoughts to help me through my problem.

One of the songs I resonated with was BTS', *Life Goes On*. Members Taehyung and Jungkook sang a verse, *"There's no end in sight / Is there a way out? / My feet refuse to move, oh / Close your eyes for a moment / Hold my hand / To that future, let's run away"*, and I understood that even amid a pandemic or an internal struggle, BTS is a pillar of strength for the ARMYs as they guide their fans towards enlightenment and peace. I reflected on the thought that if I were personally moved and comforted by their songs and presence, other ARMYs would have felt that fleeting feeling, too. It could also mean other fandoms would have felt the same way towards their idols. I particularly savored, the line, "Close your eyes for a moment / Hold my hand / To that future, let's run away", because I felt the sincerity and genuine love of the group to the ARMYs, to me. I felt at that exact moment that while we were all going through struggles especially the pandemic, the group is always willing to take the worries and pain away. Their comforting words and reassurance were enough for me to power through the darkness that I felt at this time. I thought of how BTS could magically take away the things that bothered me and with that, I was comforted. I felt calm, almost at peace, because I somehow knew that BTS will always walk with us, their fans.

It was comforting to know that I was not alone in this struggle and that even some of the BTS members experienced loss and grief. It was a matter of joining and forming a strong bond between BTS and the ARMY.

Strategies Developed

I joined various ARMY groups on social media to deepen my understanding of BTS and solidify my connection with them. There is a group called *Titas of BTS* whose demographics consisted of women aged 30 and above, considered in the Philippine culture as “aunties,” who shared the love for BTS. I also joined another group, *Borahae From Manila PH*, whose demographic profile consisted of ARMYs aged 20 and above. Both groups gave me a sense of what it feels like to be in a community with the same passion and liking. Community members would often post their BTS or ARMY experiences and share how these created a big impression in their lives. ARMYs would also talk about the BTS members’ mandatory military service, how they could not wait for the members to be complete by 2025, and how they long for their presence and compensate by rewatching old video content online. Other times, some ARMYs would also post BTS “memes,” or a photo or video typically humorous, to make fun of the members endearingly and generally have a good conversation with any ARMYs. This kind of rapport created a significantly solid fanbase or community that provides solace during difficult moments, support to each other, and a positive outlook in life. A journal article penned by Kimberly D. Hieftje, Ph.D. published in the Journal of Adolescent Health in 2022 entitled, “*How a Korean Boy Band Saved My Daughter*,” elaborated that her daughter, Ellie, struggled with mental health conditions during the pandemic and that music and BTS were her lifeline to help her adapt. ARMY served as her support group or network to help her heal. It also made a difference when she and her daughter had conversations about mental health, South Korean culture, music, and film.

Conclusive Comments on Layers (My Main Takeaway)

I realized that people have different ways of absorbing pain and grief because it takes a lot of willpower and dedication to pull one’s self out of misery. It takes a great amount of

acknowledgement and courage to accept what is beyond our control which does not happen overnight; it is a long and often daunting process.

However, with great support systems like family, friends, or communities like the ARMY, the pain and grief became bearable in the long run. It shows how people can be accepting and supportive despite having different backgrounds and cultures. It shows how even BTS go through the same predicaments proving they are also human beings and that they need the support of others to get through. The use of digital communication, especially social media, has been pervasive during the pandemic and it came at the right time when people were isolated from each other to prevent the spread of the virus. Although physical distance was evident that time, I was able to find my support system through the K-pop Army. The distance grew smaller when friends and I would talk about BTS and whenever we would exchange updates, members' recent posts, and other interesting news. Online communities became a virtual meeting place for fans to stay updated within the comfort of their homes. It was how "online bonding" surfaced and so group chats, watch parties, invites, and discussions about Army events came about.

Lastly, it shows how people can collectively do good and inspire others to do the same.

Vignette III

K-pop Army and the Filipino Collective Psyche

Context

Imbibing the cultures of various K-pop fandoms could be habitual, especially for a K-pop enthusiast like me. I could not help but look out for the latest trends, news, fashion inspirations, and entertainment. Social media propelled my love for Korean culture thanks to famous K-drama actors and actresses, K-pop, Korean food, travel, and other subcultures because information is readily available at my fingertips. This is why visiting Korea is one of the items I would like to check off my bucket list.

A few days ago, my ARMY friend said that BTS would have a pop-up store of their *Monochrome* line in one of the biggest malls in Metro Manila and she asked me if I would visit and what day I would drop by. Just a few months ago, we both secured our tickets to an interactive exhibit hosted by BTS called “*B Star Universe*,” in a nearby mall. These activations proved how BTS is still relevant despite its members currently serving in their respective military duties, and demonstrated how ARMYs would still support the members and their endeavors. Some ARMYs had already posted their experience in Monochrome and B Star Verse when the activations opened a few days before.

The impact of K-pop is so tremendous that even development organizations and foundations such as the United Nations and UNICEF leveraged the BTS’ popularity to encourage the youth to get vaccinated against COVID-19 and end the stigma on mental health conditions. Korean artists started to penetrate local brands as they slowly became brand ambassadors one brand after the other. Since Filipinos are among the most passionate and supportive fans of K-pop globally, artists and bands kept going back to the country to perform their latest songs or conduct the Asian leg of their world tour.

Anecdote

An excerpt from my entry for December 2023 – December was about reflecting on the past year and analyzing what went well, what can be improved, and the best practices I can still apply in the following year.

I realized that BTS and other K-pop artists played a major role in keeping my mental health in check. I realized that aside from the people and things that made me happy, K-pop helped me look at the positive side of things, be in touch with my thoughts and feelings, and give myself enough time to process my emotions.

One of the most genuine things BTS did for ARMY (which I also experienced personally) was their consistency in connecting and communicating with their fans.

They always put the ARMYs at the forefront. They would always celebrate ARMYs' big and small wins, for example, when younger fans finish their exams or they have completed their school year. They would also call out inappropriate behaviors of fans, such as when Jeon Jungkook's home address was leaked and a number of fans sent food to his house. Such an act invaded Jungkook's privacy and he called out these fans in one of his livestreams. He said that while he appreciates the kind gesture from fans, he will still not eat the food that they sent and they should not have sent it to his home in the first place, and be genuinely present for ARMYs. Another thing that I admire about BTS is their active participation in campaigns on mental health, youth, inclusivity, and health. The group recently launched a new campaign with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on mental health where children and young adults are encouraged to share their story about happiness, love, or any experience worth sharing. BTS also supported the Black Lives Matter Campaign where they donated a generous amount to the foundation. Similarly, the fandom donated the same amount to the foundation, doubling the donation. Another instance where the group supported campaigns on

social issues was when they advocated for inclusivity and anti-violence through the Love Myself campaign with UNICEF. As a Development Communication student and health communicator, I admired their stance on social issues and their efforts to mitigate the impact. I remember how they spoke in front of world leaders at the UN General Assembly to encourage the children and the youth to get vaccinated against COVID-19 as they have already received their doses. As a health communicator, they used their voice and reach to inspire and encourage the youth to do their part. At the same time, they debunked myths about COVID-19 vaccines and addressed misinformation and disinformation because they, themselves, received their doses. In their interview at Good Morning, America, Jung Hoseok, also known as j-hope, mentioned that they were eager to receive their COVID-19 vaccines because it was their ticket to seeing the fandom as soon as possible. They used the platform to encourage everyone, especially the youth, to get vaccinated.

More than their role of bringing ultimate joy and world-class entertainment to their fans globally, they serve as pillars of hope to those who cannot speak, are alone, are hopeless, and are afraid. More than being artists, they empathize with their fans as if they have known them for a long time. Fans would eagerly write to the group on Weverse, a mobile platform for fandoms, expressing how BTS saved them from their depression through music. Other fans would also comment on the group's livestream, saying that BTS got them through their dark moments. Much like the other fans, I also took the time to write a digital letter to Kim Namjoon (or RM) through the Weverse app after seeing him do a livestream looking tired. I told him that it is okay to feel lost or tired since we are all humans. I went on and shared how I was physically and mentally tired too. I ended my short letter with a message that we all deserve peace and happiness. I used the mobile application in the hopes that my letter would reach RM because they all

have access to Weverse too. I wanted him to know that he is not alone and that the ARMY would be forever thankful to them.

These are the reasons why I was drawn to BTS. They remained humble despite their popularity, did not forget their fans, and strived to be good examples to the younger generation.

Emotional Response

My initial emotional response to this realization was I was moved. Before learning about BTS, I was not keen on Korean culture, especially K-pop, and I did not join the hype.

The language was difficult to understand and I often wondered how fans understood the conversations or content of their idols. My preference revolved around Western culture, particularly music in the 90s. I also thought that Western entertainment is far superior to Asian acts in terms of storyline or plot, techniques, equipment, and standards. However, when I finally understood South Korean culture and the entertainment industry, I suddenly took an interest in learning more about the facets of their culture. I was swooned by K-pop's creativity, mastery, and world-class production.

Moreover, I was moved by how BTS and other K-pop groups have begun to take a stand for what they believe in and encouraged their fandoms to become more aware of social issues that remain rampant in society. K-pop set the standard in using music to express feelings, share experiences, and send vital messages to local and international audiences.

Reflexivity

Deriving my reflections on the second vignette of this study, K-pop is like a driving force for me; it came at a point in my life when I needed it the most. Idolizing K-pop and other facets of K-culture go beyond mere admiration of select artists and groups. K-pop

fandoms, just like any other fan group, create their own culture to satisfy their needs and interests and be a part of something bigger than themselves (*Sloat, 2015*).

Fandoms allow individuals to feel a semblance of belongingness, involvement, and identification because they can act or express themselves freely without being judged and will be accepted regardless of how they identify themselves. In January of 2024, I attended Seventeen's concert in Bocaue, Bulacan with a friend. I was not as involved in the Carat fandom as in the ARMY but I felt accepted and included because fellow Filipino Carat members were warm and hospitable to every individual they interacted with. They did not ask if I was new to the fandom or if I knew every information about Seventeen and its 13 members but they freely gave their warm smiles, small tokens, and even a friendly hello. Indeed, music connects fandoms and is the best way for individuals to connect and establish friendships.

Further reflecting on the fandom culture, Sloat asserts that fandom is an imagined collective. There is no need for fandom members to convene to feel the solid connection of the fandom. When I was in the early stage of my research, I messaged several ARMYs to ask permission for them to join as respondents in my research about the ARMY fandom. A majority said yes and were eager to participate in the study. Even if my research was still premature, ARMYs were very helpful in suggesting ways to improve my research. A fan even said we could conduct the interview whenever convenient because she resides outside the Philippines.

Sloat further discussed in her article that fandoms influence critical thinking and creativity because they often analyze and put themselves in situations that require insightful analysis and reasoning. This was especially true during political campaign periods because Filipino fandoms were more empowered and vocal about their political stance in the government. I remember how K-pop fans gathered together and created a

sub-group that advocates for good governance in the country. Fans would usually engage in banter to protect their idols, however, the national election proved that fans could unite and support their favored candidates for good governance. As mentioned previously, 'K-pop Stans for Leni' was one of the prime examples of how different fandoms gathered to support the former presidential bet, Atty. Leni Robredo. Fans took aside their differences and offered their support and reach to advocate for Robredo and her party. It was unusual for EXO-Ls, the K-pop group EXO's fanbase, to be seen next to an ARMY because the two fandoms were notoriously known as rivals in the K-pop scene. During the national election, these two groups, along with the other fandoms, worked together and pushed for good governance.

Strategies Developed

I continued being a fan of multiple K-pop groups, especially BTS, because the positive aspects of being in a fandom outweighed the emotional turmoil I go through every day such as pressure at work or school. When I took the role of the section head at work, it came with several roles and responsibilities that I had to accomplish which also meant wearing different hats to cater to various stakeholders and principals. Admittedly, I miss being an active member of the fandom but I know that I can always come back whenever I want to.

Conclusive Comments on Layers (My Main Takeaway)

The fleeting feeling of being accepted is one of the reasons why fandoms are very important to me. During the days I doubted myself, I found recognition and acknowledgment from people I do not know personally but share the same interests. Digital communication, especially with the presence of social media, fostered a stronger and deeper bond among fans as they shared common interests, passion, and adoration

for K-pop and BTS. Constant and instant communication among fans create a beautiful reality that brings the community together. With these communication practices done ritually, it creates one mind in the fandom.

The K-pop Army members are the most helpful and considerate people because their character stems from the influence of their idols and the communities they resonate with. Like a virus, it is like a contagion that spreads so quickly and pervasively enveloping one's identity. The strong phenomenon rapidly grew due to digital communication. The sheer unconscious replication of actions and reflections is a total display of the collective mind. It does not have to be measured or quantified but simply felt and lived.

In an article by Zhang Nan entitled "*Bane and Boon of Fandom Culture*" (2023), fandom culture, as a social subculture system, is founded by social interaction and identity recognition where fans build on emotional trust. The culture provides a familiar, safe, and stable environment for fans that serves as a sanctuary whenever difficult times occur. Similarly, Nan pointed out that fandom culture empowers society by forming a united and collective community. K-pop artists and groups serve as an example to their fans, especially the younger generation, which is why they always set good examples and standards to their audience and are seen with high regard because of this.

Filipino fandoms have their own culture where they cultivate the positive contributions of K-pop in the community. Not only do they support the endeavors of their idols, but they also mirror their idols who impart knowledge and goodness to their fanbases. Case in point, each BTS member has philanthropic activities for the causes they advocate for. Rapper Jung Hoseok, popularly known as j-hope, donated 100 million won to ChildFund Korea to support children in Tanzania exposed to violence (*The Borgen Project*, 2023).

Min Yoongi (or Suga) donated 100 million won to Save the Children for emergency relief of children affected by the Turkey and Syria earthquakes in 2023. These are examples of how K-pop idols give back to the community by donating and doing humanitarian work to support society, especially vulnerable children in underserved communities. It becomes a cycle and a norm for fandom members, and when collectively done, it creates a big impression and difference in society.

Drawing from the Vignettes Presented

Writing my first few entries about my K-pop journey was quite tasking but also eventful. I had to go back to the year 2020 and recall the first time I became engrossed in K-pop; I had to write every detail, thought, feeling, and memory I could remember to ensure that the data I was writing about were accurate. However, it also felt like walking down memory lane because as I look back, I realized I have somewhat progressed in my life, career, and journey both as a K-pop Army and a BTS ARMY. I thought my life became stagnant because of the pandemic but I realized that I have grown so much in many aspects of my life despite the numerous lockdowns and mental breakdowns. Thanks to K-pop and BTS, I was able to get by and cope with the pressure of life and career because they were my source of strength and inspiration. I saw how BTS rose from a band managed by a small entertainment company and worked their way to becoming one of the most successful and influential K-pop groups in the world. I also thought that in some way, I may have grown on my own too with the help of K-pop.

My adoration on BTS, or K-pop in general, was not an instant feeling that happened overnight. My adoration slowly grew and became prominent with every video I watched, every song I listened to, every interview I spent hours watching, every show I watched while laughing heartily, and every lyric I tried to memorize and understand despite the

foreign language. I mentioned in my vignettes that K-pop served as my lifeline as I went through challenges and accomplishments during the most trying years of my life. BTS became my constant companion and, even if these K-pop idols were miles away from me, I could still feel their authenticity and their eagerness to connect with me and the fans around the world. In one of my usual get-togethers with my K-pop Army and work best friend, Krizia, we were reminiscing about the days we started our love and adoration on BTS. Krizia mentioned that, like me, she was not a big fan of BTS or K-pop, for that matter. She knew them but she did not invest much time and resources into it then. She mentioned that she grew curious about BTS when I randomly shared a video of the group on Instagram Stories. The group was singing a few of their songs and Krizia said, “They looked interesting,” especially one particular member of the group, Taehyung. Since then, she began reading up on BTS online and explored K-pop during her free time by watching videos, interviews, and consuming content online. Her adoration for BTS deepened when she went through grief and loss and she turned to K-pop to cope. She felt that BTS became her support system while going through a major challenge in life because their songs deeply resonated with her.

Drawing from these examples, K-pop groups have that certain pull where members of the K-pop Army like me naturally gravitate to. It became habit forming. It created a unique bond that worked very well and hooked members of the K-pop Army alike. The sub-culture diffused slowly and before I knew it, I became part of the K-pop Army too. The rise of K-pop during the pandemic came at the most opportune time because social media catapulted the music genre’s popularity to greater heights. Everyone was connected online; all sources of information and entertainment were accessible through digital channels and staying connected with friends and family became easily available. K-pop used this avenue to reach out to potential audiences outside Korea and the

genre became an instant hit. The undeniable connection between the fans and K-pop groups goes beyond the elaborate production, deep lyrical meanings, and the humorous variety shows of K-pop; this connection served as an invisible thread that intertwined fans and K-pop groups together and it became an integral part of the fandom because K-pop groups connected with their fans in ways that touched the deepest, most vulnerable part of the fans' emotional and mental aspects. More than the physical attributes of K-pop idols, they embody the ideal persona of every K-pop Army: someone who deeply connected with and understands the fan members, someone who has values and wholesome character, and someone who fan members can always rely on. In one swift moment, K-pop idols have the capacity to mobilize its K-pop Army towards doing the common good to others and giving back to the community. A member of the K-pop Army follows suit once he or she sees that his or her K-pop idol is doing something beneficial and impactful. Such a snowball effect creates a united mind without the need to explicitly call the attention of others – it happens organically and systematically within the K-pop Army because their K-pop idols do it.

Apart from my lived experiences, it is no surprise that other members of the K-pop Army like me have been engrossed with K-pop groups. With the way K-pop “saved” us, it is no wonder that members of the K-pop Army continuously support K-pop and its culture. Our fandom consists of millions of men and women from different parts of the world and while we neither know each other nor communicate as regularly as we can, we always draw back to our K-pop idols and our fandom, the BTS ARMY. We naturally gravitate towards BTS and K-pop because at one point in our lives, we were “saved” by our idols. We were touched and we felt included in a community that shared the same stories, passion, and experiences collectively.

Suffice to say that each of these vignettes shaped how the Filipino psyche evolved into a subculture but across nations and around the world. The amazing spread of K-pop as a symbol of strength, unity, passion, and grit consciously or subconsciously seeped into one's mind without hesitation or embarrassment regardless of age, race, or gender. Everyone was hooked and knowingly followed the idols not because of who they were but what they did. The noble acts of altruism may have been a penchant for popularity though resonated as a uniting communication act that collectively created a subculture beyond fandom that made the ARMYs a conduit. It can be surmised that K-pop culture that pervaded the airwaves, the internet, and the world wide web became a beacon that led their followers to where they ought to be that spread like a virus leading to the development of a Filipino collective psyche.

Chapter V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

I became a fan of BTS at the exact time that I needed them. While their songs were written in Hangul or South Korean language, English-translated renditions, romanized lyrics, and subtitles have been very helpful in synthesizing the songs and meanings for me. Through these communication interventions, the language barriers blurred and I began to fully understand and resonate with the thoughts and emotions BTS wanted me to feel. In addition, knowing the stories behind their songs, the inspiration, struggles, and past experiences of the band were completely relatable for me as I have had my fair share of struggles currently and in the past. In one of their songs entitled “Mama,” J-Hope told his story as a young dancer from Gwangju, South Korea and his dream of becoming a dancer. The song was a love letter to his mother who supported him as he achieved his dream. Similar to J-Hope’s message, my mother has always been one of my biggest supporters and she has been my constant cheerleader in life.

The role of social media during the pandemic was the highlight of my lived experiences; digitalization was at its highest peak, providing easier, faster, and more accessible means of communication. Social media was like a communication channel for me at that time and, with its rapid growth, it became a solid foundation for the rise of online communities such as the K-pop Army. Live translations and real-time captioning broke language barriers and provided opportunities for fans like me to understand the context of the BTS members message or watch their videos easily. I finally understood what they were trying to say and I felt a deep connection

ever since. Instant and interactive conversations in the digital space was convenient for me as a fan. I had the opportunity to connect with fellow K-pop Army members and it allowed me to create meaningful friendships with fans and strengthen the existing relationships I have with my other friends.

The use of vignettes to highlight major experiences in my life allowed me to make sense of the genuine connection of their songs and what I went through or felt at a given time. If there is truly one song that could define my past, present, and future experiences, it would be “00:00 (Zero o'clock)” because this song always reminds me that tomorrow is another day and that whatever happens, the clock will restart at exactly twelve midnight, giving us another chance in life.

Apart from the meanings, underlying contexts and themes of their songs, BTS and other K-pop groups and artists have emerged to become champions of goodwill – advocating for their chosen advocacies, donating to charitable institutions or schools, and supporting social campaigns to raise awareness on pressing social issues.

Drawing from my lived experiences and with my interpretation throughout the study, I derived the Filipino Collective Psyche into thematic categories using the “BTS” acronym. The first vignette is thematically categorized as “Breaking Barriers”. Prior to joining the K-pop army and understanding the essence of the Collective Psyche, I learned about K-pop and BTS by constantly watching relevant video content on social media, I listened intently to their songs, and I researched about the band, their lyrics, and their inspiration. I broke multiple barriers in order for me to know BTS and K-pop culture better. Language barrier, for one, was broken down with the help of English subtitles and translations, thereby allowing me to connect with my idols. I consider prejudice as another form of barrier because, for me, K-pop is like an

acquired taste. It was not my first choice in terms of musical genre preference because their music videos were too flamboyant for my taste. Eventually, I learned to love every bit of K-pop culture and I have never looked back since.

After watching numerous videos, listening to the whole discography, and keeping tabs of the band members' social media updates, I have become one of the members of the community. The second vignette was thematically categorized as "Transformation of Self" because I began to interact with other K-pop army members by joining communities or groups on social media. I also suddenly realized that I am aware of each BTS members' antics, style, humor, and other observable traits. I began to mirror BTS in my life and it is evident in my choice of songs and even my coffee preference; I became an iced americano convert because of K-pop. I slowly found myself transformed as my adoration progressed.

Soon enough, I was able to acclimatize myself with the culture of K-pop and the nuances of the K-pop army. The third vignette perfectly captured my experience as I underwent "Socio-cultural Adaptation" which led to the creation of a subculture in the context of K-pop and being a K-pop army that is the Filipino Collective Psyche.

Conclusions

Social media is akin to a person's nervous system. With a vast network of neurons that send information throughout the body, social media similarly holds a lot of information that, when consumed, sends vital information throughout the fandom. Harnessing the extraordinary power of social media, it increased K-pop's presence which opened the door to world-wide success for Asians in the Western-dominated industry, inspiring other young dreamers to follow their dream and be who they want to be. The tremendous impact of K-pop in the entertainment scene gained a large

following from fans globally. The meticulous and elaborate composition of music and lyrics that touches on important social issues sends a clear message that fans and listeners are heard, included, validated, and understood. This communication channel unites fans young and old and it is capable of reaching fans even from afar. It is through this digital channel that K-pop artists such as BTS could connect to their fans in a meaningful way, albeit digital, only because it is the fastest, most convenient way to communicate with their fans in different parts of the world. It is the best way to inspire and be a beacon of hope to their fans, especially those who are struggling with mental health conditions and are looking for a strong pillar that they could hold onto, similar to how I went through with my K-pop Army journey. They are not afraid to talk about race, inclusivity, gender-sensitivity, and mental health. They raise awareness and inspire millions of fans through their songs, they engage and connect meaningfully with their fans, and they acknowledge the struggles they went through in the beginning. Their humble personalities and generosity earned the trust and loyalty of their K-pop army.

On the contrary, my lived experiences may not be even that unique. Perhaps some other fans may have experienced the same journey as I did but I do believe that my experiences are my life's blueprint. My adoration for K-pop or BTS may not be unique but my experiences paved my own K-pop Army journey. In essence, my lived experiences might even be a reflection of a typical K-pop Army but my lived experiences and another K-pop Army's experiences form part of an extensive system that, when put together, could awaken the fans' consciousness and drive social transformation thereby becoming the Collective Psyche of the K-pop Army.

Recommendations

I conducted the study by employing the autoethnographic type of research as I personally recounted my memories and lived experience as a member of the K-pop army. It is therefore recommended to:

1. Conduct a similar study with a different point of view to explore other theories or phenomena that could explain how the Filipino Collective Psyche and communication shaped the fandom;
2. Conduct a study on how to leverage K-pop as a developmental tool for communication for the progression of society;
3. Further the research on fandom, fandom cultures, development, and the Collective Psyche to unlock communication and development mechanisms that can contribute to the advancement of communities and societies, such as using prominent and respectable figures to serve as ambassadors of campaigns developed by national government agencies; and
4. Leverage on the reach and popularity of prominent figures who could lead by example and encourage the target audience to take part in behavioral change and social mobilization through communication.

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