

You Never Walk Alone: BTS As A Symbol of Light For Youth

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Abstract

This essay examines how the South Korean music group, BTS, has utilized their platform to bring awareness to mental health in youth. I specifically analyze the use of their personal stories and experiences as a means of communication or outreach to their fans, also known as the ARMY. Exploring the theory of identification, or a direct sense of connectedness between a speaker and an audience, I argue that through their music and personalized rhetoric speech patterns, BTS seeks to allow their fans to view their experiences as the same. This has created a dynamic encompassing a sense of friendship and understanding rather than a typical artist-to-fandom phenomenon. Finally, I consider the implications of how this work has impacted the youth overall and inspired a change in systematic pressure for future generations, despite the group's language distinction.

On June 13, 2013, the South Korean music group, BTS or Bangtan Sonyeondan, debuted with seven members: RM, Jin, SUGA, j-hope, Jimin, V, and Jung Kook, under the music label Big Hit Entertainment, which as of 2021, has been renamed HYBE Entertainment. The name comes from the phonetic sound of the English word “hive”, reflecting its newer vision as a multipurpose content company. Big Hit Entertainment was founded in 2005 and between the years of 2005 - 2010, the small company was perceived as producing groups and subunits that only created R&B and pop music. It was not until mid-late 2010 when current BTS member, RM, joined Big Hit as a rapper and songwriter at 16. Impressed by RM's style of rap and complex lyricism at such a young age, former CEO and current chairman of HYBE, Bang Si-hyuk better known as “Hitman Bang” decided to form BTS, previously known as BPB or Bullet Proof Boys, as a hip-hop crew that would center RM as the leader in 2011. However, as the lineup of the group had been finalized by the arrival of Jimin in May of 2012, Si-hyuk

considered the context in which groups had become successful in the Korean music industry and believed that “a K-pop model made more sense”.¹ This was due to the extensive growth and popularity of “Hallyu” or the wave of South Korean popular culture, which includes Korean pop music and its influence across both Asian and some western music markets, such as the world’s largest and most influential music market, the United States.

K-pop or Korean pop music is often described as being “designed to be enjoyed visually as much, if not more, than it is meant to be heard”,² which alludes to the fact that the popularity of the genre stems from the music videos that are produced on the YouTube platform. While these videos contain powerful visual styles and intense choreography, the lyrics that the artists are trained to perform are often empty and meaningless, relying on the instrumental to carry the “catchiness” of the tune, pushing for the idea of popularity through mainstream sound.

As a team, BTS has taken a different approach to this genre. During his interview with TIME Magazine in 2019, Bang Si-hyuk stated that he believes that the factor that has set BTS on its unique path was “their sincerity, consistency, and ability to embody the spirit of the times... They don’t shy away from speaking about the pain felt by today’s generation. They respect diversity and justice, the rights of youths and marginalized people.”³ Therefore, since their debut, BTS has focused on and built their platform around becoming a force that would capture the youth's voice within several sectors of their lives, which began in South Korea and

¹ Kang, Haeryun. 2020. “‘Hitman’ Bang Si-Hyuk, the Brand-New Billionaire behind BTS.” NPR.org. November 18, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/18/935848354/hitman-bang-si-hyuk-the-brand-new-billionaire-behind-bts>.

² Sherman, Maria. 2020. “Start Here: Your Guide to Getting into K-Pop.” NPR.org. July 13, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/13/888933244/start-here-your-guide-to-getting-into-k-pop>.

³ Bruner, Raisa. 2019. “The Mastermind behind BTS Opens up about Making a K-Pop Juggernaut.” Time. Time. October 8, 2019. <https://time.com/5681494/bts-bang-si-hyuk-interview/>.

has expanded across the globe. Their name, “Bangtan Sonyeondan”, translates to “Bulletproof Boy Scouts” in English, with a special meaning of being resistant to or blocking out stereotypes, criticisms, and expectations that aim at adolescents as bullets, while preserving the values and ideals of them as well.⁴ To truly capture the vulnerability and situational aspects of youth culture, specifically within the realm of mental health, BTS has incorporated their personal stories and experiences as a means of communication that would bridge the gap and close off the social stigma surrounding youth concerns. This essay will explore ways BTS has utilized their platform as musicians, through their songs and a public speech rhetoric in particular, to address and bring awareness to the mental health crisis that youth aged 16 to 29, have been facing since the early 2010s.

Literature Review

The current research and conversation surrounding the character and advocacy of BTS lies within two pivotal aspects of their career. The first echoes the widened curiosity of how their fandom, the ARMY, has become incredibly massive and widespread within the last 10 years. This is almost unheard of for a non-western and non-English speaking act. The second aspect confirms that BTS has been exercising its platform as a tool for bringing awareness to social issues and structures in South Korea. In her essay, “Mental Health, Community, Commitment, and the Growth of Individual Identity in the Participatory Fandom of the BTS ARMY”, Haulenbeek focuses on the size of the BTS ARMY and how basic elements within their physical lives, including financial and social habits, has been impacted depending on their level of commitment and participation in the digital fandom culture. She suggests that “ARMYs who

⁴ Trabasso, Giovanna. 2016. “BTS Is Tackling Problems That Are Taboo – Affinity Magazine.” Affinity Magazine. May 29, 2016. <https://affinitymagazine.us/2016/05/29/its-about-time-you-know-why-bts-is-trending/>.

spend more time involved in the fandom and fandom activities experience a higher positive impact on their habits, and are more involved in their physical communities”⁵ and that much of what separates ARMY from other large fandoms, resulting in the development of these positive endeavors for both themselves and the world around them, “has to do with the group, BTS, that they follow”.⁶ ARMY internalizes BTS as a form of strength that has been able to call attention to and impact so many lives outside of their own. Their mission as a fandom then, has become a force that both stands behind BTS and emulates their positive behaviors.

Being that BTS does act as a guide for how the ARMY carry themselves through their lives, the majority of the contributions that the ARMY has made to their social environment thus far, originate from causes that BTS has shown are important to them, which includes donations toward charitable organizations, such as UNICEF and their #ENDviolence campaign in 2017. Haulenbeek also mentions that “BTS’ albums encompass messages about mental health, youth, society, struggles, and more recently, in their “Love Yourself” series, self-love”⁷ and how those messages have been embraced by ARMY. However, she admits that there has been a gap within research regarding “the impact that being involved in the BTS ARMY has on the individual, particularly concerning committed participants’ mental health and their community outside the fandom”,⁸ meaning that there has been little done to analyze how BTS has been able to have an

⁵ Haulenbeek, Sydney. 2022. “Mental Health, Community, Commitment, and the Growth of Individual Identity in the Participatory Fandom of the BTS ARMY.” *Journal: ODU Undergraduate Research Journal OUR Journal: ODU Undergraduate Research Journal* Haulenbeek, Sydney K 9: 5. <https://doi.org/10.25778/rd1r-ep02>.

⁶ Haulenbeek, Sydney. 2022. “Mental Health, Community, Commitment, and the Growth of Individual Identity in the Participatory Fandom of the BTS ARMY.”

⁷ Haulenbeek, Sydney. 2022. “Mental Health, Community, Commitment, and the Growth of Individual Identity in the Participatory Fandom of the BTS ARMY.”

⁸ Haulenbeek, Sydney. 2022. “Mental Health, Community, Commitment, and the Growth of Individual Identity in the Participatory Fandom of the BTS ARMY.”

impact on ARMY's mental health and what implications that these types of methods could have on such a mass group of people, specifically the youth. This research will be able to add to the conversation of the voiceless young people who have found their comfort through the personal experiences of the BTS members and echo how the use of music and public speech advocacy can become a medium of aid.

Mental Health in South Korea: The Factors Within

In the late 1990s, South Korea began to develop a severe mental health crisis, which only worsened over the last 20 years. According to a report released by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2014, "South Korea ranked first in suicide rates among developed nations, with 29 in every 100,000 people committing suicide"⁹ and "of these suicides, around 60 percent are said to have resulted from depression and other mood disorders"¹⁰ due to the factors of economic pressure, occupational stress, social stigma, and lack of access to health services that involve mental strain. In comparison, the United Kingdom, which is similar in size, has a lower rate of suicidality at "10.7 deaths per 100,000 people"¹¹. The following three years were just as strenuous, as the Korean government reported that in 2017, 1 in 4 individuals suffered from a mental disorder, though only 1 in 10 pursued or received professional help and treatment, culminating in the country having the highest suicide rate of any

⁹ Toohey, Kylan. 2018. "South Korea's Mental Health Crisis." Korea Economic Institute of America. December 12, 2018. <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/south-koreas-mental-health-crisis/>.

¹⁰ Toohey, Kylan. 2018. "South Korea's Mental Health Crisis."

¹¹ Office for National Statistics. 2023. "Suicides in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics." [www.ons.gov.uk](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2022registrations). December 19, 2023. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2022registrations>.

OECD member nation,¹² which is sensible because within that same year, 95 percent of adults in South Korea reported being under stress of some kind, along with staggering rates of depression among the elderly.¹³ Despite mental health being such a huge issue nationwide, it is rarely discussed, often neglected, and labeled as “taboo”, which is deeply rooted in the public conscience, allowing the state-funded inpatient facilities to be both underfunded and underutilized.

Although suicide has been classified as the fourth leading cause of death in the South Korean general population, it has become the number one cause of death for youth aged 9 to 24. The issues that the youth have been facing in particular, lie within an “increasingly competitive and stressful culture”,¹⁴ that surrounds aspects of intense education systems, family pressure of idealistic living, and an unemployment rate that is three times higher than the national average, even before the strike of the pandemic.¹⁵ Furthermore, as conversations about mental health are perceived as taboo to the general population of Korean citizens, this idea has been conveyed even more among young individuals, as they often get blamed and victimized for their mental health problems or told that they do not have “nothing to be stressed about” from both immediate and extended family and often, friends as well. This position of thought has led to the youth feeling as if they are voiceless, misunderstood, and that the issues they face do not matter to anyone, burying the pain even from themselves.

¹² Nagar, Sarosh. 2022. “The Struggle of Mental Health Care Delivery in South Korea and Singapore.” *Harvard International Review*. March 11, 2022. <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-struggle-of-mental-health-care-delivery-in-south-korea-and-singapore/>

¹³ Nagar, Sarosh. 2022. “The Struggle of Mental Health Care Delivery in South Korea and Singapore.”

¹⁴ Nagar, Sarosh. 2022. “The Struggle of Mental Health Care Delivery in South Korea and Singapore.”

¹⁵ Nagar, Sarosh. 2022. “The Struggle of Mental Health Care Delivery in South Korea and Singapore.”

Mediums of Aid

This essay will attempt to understand how BTS has been able to use its platform as a tool that both spreads and brings awareness to the mental health of youth and the severity of this aspect within their lives. This piece of writing will analyze several songs within the discography of BTS and one public speech considered one of their most powerful. Therefore, when thinking about the approach that this research would take, the specific analysis of their use of their journeys as both their persona as individual musicians and their natural state appealed as a method of safe communication between them and their fans because there seems to be a clear emphasis on how “human” BTS is.

The songs that will be explored are as follows: N.O., Tomorrow, Louder than Bombs, Reflection, The Last, Promise, Epiphany, and Life Goes On. The speech that will be discussed is the speech that was given at the launch of the “Generation Unlimited” and “Youth 2030” campaigns at the United Nations General Assembly in 2018. This specific combination of artifacts has been chosen due to their ability to capture various aspects of mental health through the window of interpersonal communication and vulnerable life experiences to help others who may have encountered similar circumstances. The timeframe in which the artifacts have taken place is critical to the analysis of this research because although the mental health crisis for youth began in the late 1990s, the situation had become worse entering the 2010s and was severely impacted during the earlier stages of the COVID-19 pandemic within the on set of the 2020s.

Finding the Common Ground: BTS’ Resonation with ARMY

Kenneth Burke defined rhetoric as the use of words, symbols, or symbolic language by human agents to form attributes or ideas to induce actions in other human agents,¹⁶ in other

¹⁶ Burke, Kenneth. “A Rhetoric of Motives.” (1950), p. 41.

words, how humans use symbolic language as a form of persuasion. Burke also had various major perspectives and strategies in which rhetoric could be used as a tactic or guide that helps form connections between the audience and the speaker. One key perspective of Burkean theory that lies within building this connection is what he defined as “identification”. Identification surrounds the idea that “if our opinions match those of the speaker, we identify with the speaker’s rhetoric—therefore identifying with the speaker...Based on how much we identify with the speaker, we may be moved to accept the conclusions that the speaker comes to in an argument, as well as most of its implications”.¹⁷ Burke has established this element as being critical for influencing action amongst other human agents due to the nature of constant human interaction and conversation, simply, as we listen to others speak, we often are intrigued about how similar the ideals and opinions of the speaker is to our own. This can also therefore be described as the inverse of “ethos” or the act of persuading an audience through one’s credibility or authority toward a certain subject. To analyze how BTS has been able to utilize their platform as an instrument to both spread and bring awareness to the mental health crisis in youth culture, I will be applying the method of identification.

In September 2018, BTS was invited to the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles to indulge in an intimate conversation about their process as songwriters, their success, and how they have been able to connect with their fans. During the said conversation, BTS member SUGA detailed the founding principles and motives of the group and how before their debut, Big Hit Entertainment founder, Bang Si-hyuk, would emphasize that they should “sing about our own

¹⁷ Keith, William M.; Lundberg, Christian Oscar (2008). “The Essential Guide to Rhetoric.”

experiences, our own thoughts, our own feelings”¹⁸ and how that piece of advice became “the center of the music that we made”.¹⁹ However, the use of their personal stories, thoughts, and feelings was only half of the principle of their music and general platform, the other half though, lies within their age. In June of 2013, the ages of the BTS members ranged from 15 to 20, meaning that when it came time for them to be introduced to the music industry, they were also considered “youth”, which generally ranges from age 9 to 24. SUGA also commented on this factor stating, “When we first started out, some of us were still in our teens. I was in my early twenties. We talked about the issues that we faced, and that's made BTS what it is today.”²⁰ This aspect then, in combination with sharing vulnerable pieces of their lives, became a door or passageway for young people to feel as if they are being heard or understood by a peer with a voice that carries rather than seven young superstars.

Therefore, because identification resonates with how a connection between a speaker and an audience can move one in a certain direction of how they may navigate their lives, this method will serve as the appropriate approach to the analysis. BTS has made it clear through their lyrics and public speech rhetoric that they constantly live through a similar struggle with mental illness and know firsthand how living as a young person in the world is not an easy task, acknowledging that the journey of gaining a positive sense of mental health and loving oneself can be difficult, but that it is not impossible. This sense of age and experiential identification then, is used to encourage youth to reach out and seek help for their mental strain because there

¹⁸ Calixto, Joshua. 2018. “BTS on Why Their Music Speaks to Young People and Their Collaborative Creative Process.” MTV. September 12, 2018.

<https://www.mtv.com/news/2f24mt/bts-grammy-museum-conversation-recap-quotes>.

¹⁹ Calixto, Joshua. 2018. “BTS on Why Their Music Speaks to Young People and Their Collaborative Creative Process.”

²⁰ Calixto, Joshua. 2018. “BTS on Why Their Music Speaks to Young People and Their Collaborative Creative Process.”

is someone who understands them, is willing to listen, and can guide them through that pain to a more positive awareness of what their lives can become.

The Tuneful Bandage

Since the release of their first single album “2 Cool 4 Skool” on June 12, 2013, BTS has released a total of 16 albums, which include mini, compilation, and full-length versions. Each album has its own color and distinct message that is conveyed throughout, which can vary across several social issues that young people may be facing, such as the difficulty of finding love, economic disparities, and the severity of the educational system. However, because the focus will be on the awareness that they bring to the mental health of youth, the eight songs chosen represent the identifying factor and message that they want to convey not only to the youth but to the world as well. Those songs are as follows: N.O., Tomorrow, Louder than Bombs, Reflection, The Last, Promise, Epiphany, and Life Goes On. The specific lyrics have been chosen and organized to present the themes that will be discussed, including the strict educational system of South Korea, social disparity and uncertainty of one’s future, personal turmoil of losing oneself and finding a purpose, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and how to navigate those circumstances.

“N.O.” was released on September 11, 2013, as the title track of their 1st mini album, “O!RUL8,2?”. This song is not only an encouragement to youth, but also a comment on the education framework in South Korea as a whole as it discusses the unhealthy and harsh disadvantage of the educational system for Korean students, which spans from K-12 to college students. The framework and aggressiveness of this system are one of the prominent causes of the alarmingly high rates of suicide and mental illness in the youth of South Korea. This is

because education is considered “South Korea’s backbone”²¹ and “It is such that high levels of responsibility and stress drive parents not only to invest large amounts of financial resources in their child’s education but also to remind their kids that how they do in school affects the whole family.”²² This stems from the idea that many Korean parents often consider their children an extension of themselves, which both drives and makes the child’s academic success not only a high standard of individual achievement but also a form of family honor. As one would assume, this type of educational lifestyle can be emotionally draining and both anxiety and pressure-inducing for the children, which most of the parents are too naive and caught in an egotistical cycle to notice. It also places adolescents at a higher risk of mental strain as 46% of mental illness amongst students is caused by academic stress related to social expectations and success,²³ commonly leading to depressive behavior and high attempts of suicide, which as stated before, is the number cause of death amongst young children and adults in South Korea.

Although youth may often feel misunderstood or silenced by their parents about their feelings, through “N.O.,” BTS has channeled the voice of the students who live in the different forms of the education system each day and speak in frustration about how difficult and stressful that culture can be on a young life. This thereby encourages students to both reflect and stand up against social expectations due to the indication that they would be much happier and healthier if they pursue their dreams instead of following the social norm that their parents and other outside figures have placed upon them. Additionally, there are a few lyrics that convey these ideals, such

²¹ Henao Ruiz, Evelyn. 2021. “Post-Industrial Challenges In Modern South Korea: Educational Pressures And Their Impact On Young People”. *Online Journal Mundo Asia Pacifico* 10 (18):24-42. <https://doi.org/10.17230/map.v10.i18.02>.

²² Henao Ruiz, Evelyn. 2021. “Post-Industrial Challenges In Modern South Korea: Educational Pressures And Their Impact On Young People”.

²³ Henao Ruiz, Evelyn. 2021. “Post-Industrial Challenges In Modern South Korea: Educational Pressures And Their Impact On Young People”.

as “Dream is gone, no time to breathe/School, house and PC room is all we have/We live the same life/And have to become number one/For us it's like a double spy between dream and reality”²⁴ and “Who is the one who made us into study machines?/It's either number one or a failure/They trap us in borders, the adults/There's no choice but to consent/Even if we think simply, it's the survival of the fittest/Who do you think is the one who makes us step on even our close friends to climb up? What?”²⁵. The use of the words “we” and “us” here is very critical because through verse 1, they are displaying the sense of tiredness that the young people are feeling on an individual level, while also executing the idea that “we live the same life” or live under the same circumstances of being a student and constantly feeling suffocated by the pressure of “dream and reality” that needs to be balanced. However, verse 2 is meant to open the minds of the youth while using the word “us” multiple times to demonstrate that they should operate under a collective mindset instead of against one another and realize that they are not suffering alone when millions of other companions are facing the same fight and fear, including the members themselves. In other words, they should be upset with the South Korean school system rather than one another because there is strength in unity. Therefore, living as 16-20-year-old students in 2013, BTS has unraveled the depressive and harsh reality of schooling in South Korea and the thoughts that accompany the minds of young people. Using phrases that contain “we” or “us” allows students to associate themselves with a voice that, at the time, could be understood as more powerful than their own.

“Tomorrow” was released the following year on February 12, 2014, within their second mini album “Skool Luv Affair”. This song in particular tackles the theme of uncertainty and

²⁴ Genius. 2014. “BTS - N.O (English Translation).” Genius. 2014. <https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-bts-no-english-translation-lyrics>.

²⁵ Genius. 2014. “BTS - N.O (English Translation).”

navigation in the face of entering your 20s and speaks directly to young people who may believe that they are stuck in a repetitive cycle of questioning if the hard work that they have put in is worth it. However, BTS is also urging these people to understand that it is okay to pause and take a break from what has been weighing them down but to never stop pursuing what they believe in just because things may seem to be becoming too difficult because that is a part of personal growth. The lyrics both reflect the feelings of anxiety and frustration, but also the fact that there is a sense of hope within the constant sea of worry. Two examples of the lyrics are the following: “I have a long way to go but why am I running in place?/I scream out of frustration but the empty air echoes/I hope tomorrow will be different from today/I’m just wishing”²⁶ and “Tomorrow, keep walking, we’re too young to stop/Tomorrow, open the door, we see too much to shut the door/When the dark night passes, a bright morning will come/When tomorrow comes, the bright light will shine so don’t worry/This isn’t a stop but just a pause in your life for a break/Turn up your thumbs and press play so everyone can see”.²⁷ As examined in the first set of lyrics, there is the use of “I” statements, which is connected to the act of personal experience, however, just as within “N.O.”, BTS utilizes the “I” statements as a form of “we” or conveying that the voice of both them and the youth act as one. The inner thoughts displayed in the first set of lyrics then, are to mirror the minds of the listeners, displaying a sense of connectedness amongst other people who may have the same thought process when reaching this point in their lives. The second set of lyrics follows a similar pattern, however, “I” actually becomes “we” and brings the idea of encouragement into the fact that because “we” are so young, we should not

²⁶ Genius. 2014. “BTS - Tomorrow (English Translation).” Genius. 2014. <https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-bts-tomorrow-english-translation-lyrics>.

²⁷ Genius. 2014. “BTS - Tomorrow (English Translation).”

give up on ourselves and although today was difficult and disheartening, tomorrow may not be, so we have to keep going.

“Louder than Bombs” was released on February 21, 2020, as part of their 4th full-length album, “Map of the Soul: 7”. This track is considered one of the group’s saddest and most personal songs to date since the song was not only written to showcase the growth of the sadness and fear that the group has encountered since beginning their journey as musicians, but member RM also commented on the piece stating, “When I wrote the song, I thought about the letters...when I read posts on Weverse, fans share sad things they had. They didn’t do it to make us feel sad..talking about said things can lessen the burden...when I read fans’ postings about sad things in their lives, I thought about the feelings that we have, or the emotions”.²⁸ What RM is referring to is when fans use Weverse, HYBE’s social platform for artists and fans, they often share what they are going through as an outlet, but to also build connection with other ARMY because they all believe that although BTS may not reply to them, they are listening and they feel a sense of security in the fandom. Therefore, RM, in collaboration with the other members, wrote this song thinking of the countless circumstances that the ARMY must be going through and conveyed their sincerity by telling their story. Here are just a few lyrics from the song: “Now it has grown to be so clear/The unfamiliar shadow amidst those cheers/Perhaps I wouldn't be able to believe the words: “Let's see and hear only good things” no more/Your silent sadness, it shakes me/In my quiet sea, waves would sometimes rise”²⁹ and “You and I, we feel it together/Sadness and pain/It's not a coincidence/Yeah, we picked this game”³⁰ Within both parts

²⁸ Run BTS. 2020. “[ENGSUB] BTS Live Kim Namjoon {Namjun's 7 Behind} Full.” YouTube. March 10, 2020. <https://youtu.be/FxbUHj6SZgc?si=GrS8Gnwgk14LT6ju>

²⁹ Genius. 2020. “BTS - Louder than Bombs (English Translation).” Genius. 2020. <https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-bts-louder-than-bombs-english-translation-lyrics>.

³⁰ Genius. 2020. “BTS - Louder than Bombs (English Translation).”

from the song, there is a clear pattern that although the group may be feeling massive amounts of despair at times, they know from the continuous posts that they have come upon, that behind the screams and cheers that fans let out, there is also a massive amount of despair within their lives as well. However, when both parties meet as one, the environment becomes vulnerable, yet safe because those emotions affect the band in a similar light.

“Reflection” is a solo track by member RM, which was released alongside their second album “WINGS” on October 10, 2016. This song looks into the story of how the said member has reflected upon himself and realized that he is within a deep emotional spiral of trying to find self-love through the countless mistakes he has made and the hatred that has been received. Here are just a few of the lyrics: “But you know, sometimes/I really really hate myself/To be honest, quite often/I really hate myself”,³¹ “People look happier than the day/Everyone else knows where they’re supposed to be/But only I walk without purpose/But still, blending in with them is more comfortable,”³² “I wish I could love myself”.³³ As the lyrics convey, this song is drawing into RM’s battle with mental illness as Kim Nam-joon and how although self-reflection can be very heart-wrenching to deal with, it is important to do so when trying to find yourself. This song illustrates a tremendous amount of vulnerability and courage to speak up when you are unhappy with yourself, which most youth often have an issue with expressing. Therefore, this song acts as a passageway into showing that if RM can deliver his voice to the world as a young adult, the youth should be able to do so as well.

³¹ Genius. 2016. BTS - Reflection (English Translation).” Genius. 2016.

<https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-bts-reflection-english-translation-lyrics>.

³² Genius. 2016. BTS - Reflection (English Translation).”

³³ Genius. 2016. BTS - Reflection (English Translation).”

“The Last” was released within member SUGA’s first mixtape “Agust D” under his alter-ego “Agust D” on August 16, 2016. This track is considered to showcase one of the most vulnerable places that the rapper has gotten within his music because it expresses his anxieties, fears, mental illnesses, and details on a traumatic accident that he was involved in at just 20 years of age. The following lyrics convey his emotional and mental strain that can connect to the youth: “On the other side of the famous idol rapper/Stand my weak self, it’s a bit dangerous/Depression, OCD/They keep coming back again from time to time”,³⁴ “Around the age of 18, I developed social anxiety/Right, that was when my mind was gradually polluted”,³⁵ and “On the first visit to psychiatric ward/My parents came up with me/We listened to the consultation together/My parents said they don’t truly understand me”.³⁶ Just as bandmate RM, SUGA has taken a courageous approach to let ARMY in on very vulnerable parts of his life as Min Yoon-Gi instead of the idol superstar “SUGA” and has allowed them to perceive that he understands their mental pain severely, while also pushing that it is okay to voice your emotions because you may be able to help someone else who is struggling with a similar issue, just as they have done with ARMY.

“Promise” is a solo track by member Jimin, which was released on December 30, 2018, as a gift to fans. This song captures the emotions of Jimin having a conversation with himself and wondering when he began to become depressed, not realizing that the act that he speaks of is self-inflicted. However, he makes a promise to himself and encourages the fans to do so as well, in trying to take better care of themselves, seek out help if needed, and realize that self-love is an

³⁴ Genius. 2016. “Agust D - **마지막** (The Last) (English Translation).” Genius. August 16, 2016. <https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-agust-d-the-last-english-translation-lyrics>.

³⁵ Genius. 2016. “Agust D - **마지막** (The Last) (English Translation).”

³⁶ Genius. 2016. “Agust D - **마지막** (The Last) (English Translation).”

important piece when trying to evolve your character. These lyrics come to mind as the most prevalent to the message: “You're hurting me too cause you're mine/I just want to blow your mind/We're drifting apart again/“I don't even feel it” That's what I say/But to be honest that's not it”,³⁷ “I want you to be your light, baby/You should be your light/So that you won't be in pain/So you can smile/I want you to be your night, baby/You could be your night/I'll be honest with you tonight”,³⁸ and “Now promise me, oh, oh/Several times a day, oh, oh/Though you feel alone, oh, oh/Don't throw yourself away, oh, oh”.³⁹ These lyrics, in particular, use many “I” and “you” statements to once again solidify the unity of speaking to oneself, but also speaking to others. The “promise” then, is between himself and the ARMY to be careful to watch for self-inflicted pain amongst oneself, never beat themselves about feeling mentally drained, and that they can become their own light in the darkness through proper self-care and awareness.

“Epiphany” was released on August 24, 2018, as part of their 1st repackage album “Love Yourself: Answer”, which is the third and last album that is connected to their Love Yourself series. This track is often thought of as the one with the “perfect title” because it takes the listener through the journey of member Jin who realizes that he should not hide his broken self behind a mask anymore and that even though he is not perfect, he should still love himself as he is. These few lyrics convey those ideas: “I'm shaking and afraid but I keep going forward/I'm meeting the real you, hidden in the storm/Why did I want to hide my precious self like

³⁷ Genius. 2018. “Jimin – 약속 (Promise) (English Translation).” Genius. 2018.

<https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-jimin-promise-english-translation-lyrics>

³⁸ Genius. 2018. “Jimin – 약속 (Promise) (English Translation).”

³⁹ Genius. 2018. “Jimin – 약속 (Promise) (English Translation).”

this?/What was I so afraid of?/Why did I hide my true self?”⁴⁰ and “I’m the one I should love in this world/Shining me, precious soul of mine/I finally realized so I love me/Not so perfect but so beautiful/I’m the one I should love”.⁴¹ In this instance, Jin wants the youth to internalize the idea that living behind a mask filled with self-hatred is not healthy and very self-limiting and that they should love their true selves under all circumstances because no one is perfect, as Jin emphasizes for himself even though he lives as an idol.

“Life Goes On” was released on November 20, 2020, as the title track of their fifth full-length album, “BE”. I believe that this song was important to mention because it was released during the pandemic, which is when cases of mental illness, especially for young people, skyrocketed all over the world due to extreme worry and isolation. “BE” as an entire album was set to provide comfort to people all over the world during a time when they felt there was no hope left. “Life Goes On” serves as the best title track for the album because within the song, BTS opens up and expresses their mixed feelings about the situation of the pandemic and how it has impacted their lives as both normal people and musicians. However, they also offer an extra hand of support to ensure people that although the circumstances were extremely unexpected, there is still hope and if one believes, they will be able to overcome all of the pain and struggle that has come with it. The lyrics selected are as follows: “One day, the world stopped/Without any warning/Spring didn’t know to wait/Showed up not even a minute late/Streets erased of footprints/I lie here, fallen to the ground/Time goes by on its own/Without a single apology,

⁴⁰ Genius. 2018. “BTS - Epiphany (English Translation).” Genius. 2018. <https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-bts-epiphany-english-translation-lyrics>.

⁴¹ Genius. 2018. “BTS - Epiphany (English Translation).”

yeah”,⁴² “I’m in a world of pain/This cold the damn world gave to me (Woo)”,⁴³ and “Close your eyes for a moment/Hold my hand/To that future, let’s run away/Like an echo in the forest/The day will come back around/As if nothing happened/Yeah, life goes on”⁴⁴ With this, BTS wanted to communicate that though they are superstars, they too felt huge amounts of fear and anxiety about COVID-19, which had taken a toll on their mental health, but want to reassure that living in that mindset is not healthy and leads to pessimism. Therefore, they push the idea of becoming optimistic and living the best way possible because life can improve, but it is up to you to make it that way.

Speech As An Identifying Factor

BTS’s speech at the United Nations General Assembly occurred in New York City on September 24, 2018. The members were invited to speak as a part of the newly launched campaigns at the time, “Generation Unlimited” and “Youth 2030” due to the circumstances a year prior when they launched their “Love Myself” campaign in collaboration with UNICEF on November 1, 2017. The speech was given by the group’s leader, RM, who began by speaking about himself as a normal citizen, Kim Nam-joon, who just grew up as a curious young boy. He then moved into how even after joining BTS, he still had much learning to do about himself and how to navigate through self-hatred that had risen due to mistakes in the past. The final piece of his speech that stood out to most fans, including myself, is how he mentioned that after the release of their “Love Yourself” album series, he and the other bandmates began to see many stories about the impact of the messages within their music and how that has helped them

⁴² Genius. 2020. “BTS - Life Goes On (English Translation).” Genius. 2020.

<https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-bts-life-goes-on-english-translation-lyrics>.

⁴³ Genius. 2020. “BTS - Life Goes On (English Translation).”

⁴⁴ Genius. 2020. “BTS - Life Goes On (English Translation).”

overcome their hardships and begin loving themselves. The prominent takeaway of this speech though, is how many young ARMY identified with the content and messaging throughout.

There are multiple excerpts of the speech that I would like to highlight, which are the following:

“I was born in Ilsan, a city near Seoul, South Korea. It’s a beautiful place, with a lake, hills, and even an annual flower festival. I spent a happy childhood there, and I was just an ordinary boy...I would look up at the night sky in wonder and dream the dreams of a boy. I used to imagine that I was a superhero, saving the world.”⁴⁵

“I’m sure that I, and we, will keep stumbling and falling. We have become artists performing in huge stadiums and selling millions of albums...But I am still an ordinary, twenty-four-year-old guy...Maybe I made a mistake yesterday, but yesterday’s me is still me. I am who I am today, with all my faults. Tomorrow I might be a tiny bit wiser, and that’s me, too. These faults and mistakes are what I am, making up the brightest stars in the constellation of my life. I have come to love myself for who I was, who I am, and who I hope to become.”⁴⁶

“After releasing the “Love Yourself” albums and launching the “Love Myself” campaign, we started to hear remarkable stories from our fans all over the world, how our message helped them overcome their hardships in life and start loving themselves. These stories constantly remind us of our responsibility...I would like to ask all of you. What is your name? What excites you and makes your heart beat? Tell me your story. I want to hear your voice, and I want to hear your conviction. No matter who you are, where you’re from, your skin color, gender identity: speak

⁴⁵ Kim Nam-joon. 2018. “We Have Learned to Love Ourselves, so Now I Urge You to “Speak Yourself.”” UNICEF. September 24, 2018. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/we-have-learned-love-ourselves-so-now-i-urge-you-speak-yourself>.

⁴⁶ Kim Nam-joon. 2018. “We Have Learned to Love Ourselves, so Now I Urge You to “Speak Yourself.””

yourself...Find your name, find your voice by speaking yourself...I'm Kim Nam Jun, RM of BTS. I'm a hip-hop idol and an artist from a small town in Korea. Like most people, I made many mistakes in my life. I have many faults and I have many fears, but I am going to embrace myself as hard as I can, and I'm starting to love myself, little by little."⁴⁷

This speech not only conveyed how “normal” or “ordinary” the members carry themselves and their origin but also because of the sense of “ordinary”, they are not afraid to acknowledge that they have and will make mistakes as most humans do and their “idol” status does not define who they are as people or how they perceive others around them. RM’s specific piece stating, “But I am still an ordinary, twenty-four-year-old guy...Maybe I made a mistake yesterday, but yesterday’s me is still me. I am who I am today, with all my faults. Tomorrow I might be a tiny bit wiser, and that’s me, too.” stands out a tremendous amount because he felt that it is important to acknowledge his age as he too is a young person and is a representative of young people as well. This helps the youth to be able to both identify with BTS as a whole, but also with RM as a speaker because it defines how although they have made mistakes that have placed them in dark places in their lives, they are still young and human as the next person. This then encourages youth to acknowledge their mistakes as a part of themselves because accepting your faults and mistakes are some of the first steps to gaining a better mental consciousness, self-awareness, and acceptance for both themselves and others in their lives who care for them.

Our Platform, Your Voice

This analysis reveals that both music lyrics and public speech have become tools that BTS has utilized to reach and empower young people who are suffering from mental illness and

⁴⁷ Kim Nam-joon. 2018. “We Have Learned to Love Ourselves, so Now I Urge You to “Speak Yourself.””

those in power who may have an influence and ability to help change the outcome for future generations. Though their career begins with touching on internal issues in South Korea that have influenced the severity of mental illness, such as the educational system, BTS has expanded their message globally as they have understood that this problem has affected youth in several countries other than their own. The first language of the group is Korean, however, along with fans of Korean descent translating for ARMY in other places in the world, the development of websites that can process lyrics in multiple languages, and even international ARMY learning Korean themselves, BTS have been able to create a connection through stories of shared experience rather than letting their language dictate their relationship amongst global fans who also need their help.

Another aspect of this though, is associated with establishing partnerships that extend beyond the scale of their homeland. Their partnership with UNICEF, which began on November 1, 2017, has allowed them to get in touch with powerful global leaders who have the potential to make a difference within their respective living spaces. The campaign partnership titled “#LoveMyself”, has garnered around “five million tweets and more than 50 million engagements, such as likes, retweets, replies, and comments”⁴⁸ on the Twitter platform. This amount of exposure has ensured the organization of the group’s following and the power behind what they want to convey to young people: “unity” or standing together amid troubling times, ensuring that there is someone who walks alongside them and understands the difficulty of

⁴⁸ Wylie, Helen. 2021. “UNICEF and BTS Celebrate Success of ‘Groundbreaking’ LOVE MYSELF Campaign.” [www.unicef.org](https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-and-bts-celebrate-success-groundbreaking-love-myself-campaign). October 5, 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-and-bts-celebrate-success-groundbreaking-love-myself-campaign>.

seeking help and finding love for oneself. Therefore, when BTS was first summoned to attend the United Nations General Assembly, this allowed them to not only use their individual story to speak on behalf of the youth but also encouraged them to speak up for themselves and share their experiences. This began with a simple hashtag, which created the idea of a safe community that believes in the importance of mental stability, while also recognizing that mental illness has become a global pandemic in itself.

As previously mentioned, the exploration that has often been done involving BTS has primarily been focused on the curiosity of how their fanbase has been able to grow as massively as it has for a non-English speaking act or seeks to confirm that they have been using their platform to bring awareness to multiple social issues that take place on South Korean soil. However, there was an important addition that needed to be addressed regarding how BTS has been able to make an impact on ARMY's mental health and what influence these types of methods or methodological approaches could have on such a large group of people, specifically the youth. My research has been able to capture how the use of Kenneth Burke's theory of identification within the group's music and public speech, has been able to grasp the attention of young people and allow them to feel as if their voice matters in a world that has tried to silence them due to their age or economic circumstances. Taking into consideration the age of the members and personalization of their rhetoric patterns and work that they have produced, the youth have found seven unique individuals that symbolize a form of "home" or comfortability in helping them understand that they too have struggled or are struggling to understand themselves through mental strain. However, they have made it clear that growth in that area is possible and that one person's story or experience can be the next prevention of self-harm or the inspiration of someone wanting change for themselves.

Conclusion

Mental illness is one of the most undertreated and overlooked diseases in the world. It has caused young people, beginning at the age of 9, to perish in the arms of that darkness and watch it consume their peers one by one. Korean music group, BTS, has made it their mission to bring awareness to this problem and built their platform around supporting the youth population in their troubled circumstances because they too, have experienced what it is like to feel as if they are alone, lost, and misunderstood. Kenneth Burke's theory of identification offers an interesting perspective of how young people have connected with the BTS members through their stories of mental turmoil and signs of encouragement. In retrospect, these young people have been able to find a friend who recognizes the factors of their journeys and how to navigate themselves during those times. Therefore, BTS has established to both ARMY and the general youth population that they should not and will never have to walk alone again.