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Courtney Lazore

Culture of Care

Understanding Ethics of Care through BTS and ARMY

ABSTRACT

The Korean pop supergroup BTS is well-known for breaking records, winning awards, and garnering the dedication of a massive global fandom known as ARMY. Research on BTS and the fandom is emerging, articulating a need for a deeper understanding of how BTS influences ARMY. This paper draws on the concept of the ethics of care, delving into how BTS embodies care and how ARMY reflects those expressions of care. Through a detailed analysis of BTS's content and public actions, this paper shows how BTS use their lyrics, livestreams, social media, and behind-the-scenes video content to provide care to each other, ARMY, and the world. Similarly, ARMY's care is directed back to BTS via support for their music, as well as toward other members of ARMY by providing services to the fandom. ARMY extends its care to the world by participating in charity projects in response to BTS's own philanthropic actions. The ethics of care acts as a lens for better understanding both BTS's success and ARMY's practices, showing us how fandoms can be valuable spaces for nurturing caring relationships, helping fans improve their own community, and creating opportunities to contribute to the betterment of society.

KEYWORDS

BTS studies, ethics of care, fan studies, K-Pop

AUTHOR

Courtney Lazore (National Coalition of Independent Scholars) is an independent researcher interested in fan and media studies, pop culture, and game studies. She is a founding member of the Bangtan Scholars network and has contributed work on BTS to several volumes and conferences. Currently, she is pursuing a second master's degree and expanding her work into game studies.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2060-8641>

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Introduction

K-Pop sensation BTS's never-ending list of firsts, multitude of accolades, and worldwide fandom are testaments to the group's impact on the global pop culture landscape. Although the scale of BTS's success has led to numerous discussions surrounding the BTS 'phenomenon' and expansive ARMY fandom, there is a need for deeper considerations of BTS's impact on ARMY.

The relationship between musical artists and their fandoms has garnered significant scholarly interest, specifically when examining how celebrities and fans may transcend traditional relationship dynamics. In the same vein, this paper attempts to answer the question of how BTS influences fans. Here, I offer a nuanced examination of how BTS and ARMY redefine the celebrity-fan relationship through the ethics of care. I argue that the BTS members embody care in their messages and actions towards each other, ARMY, and the world. In response, the ARMY fandom mirrors this care back toward BTS, toward other ARMY, and toward society at large. This exploration illuminates the powerful potential of popular culture to foster meaningful connections and care practices across diverse populations.

The ethics of care, a feminist moral theory, champions the interconnectedness of human life. Care ethics is concerned with how we can build, maintain, and repair relationships with each other, ourselves, and our world. In practice, caring actions can be found everywhere, from medical professionals tending to their patients to the lyrics of pop songs. For BTS and ARMY, expressions of care ultimately deepen the connection between artists and fans.

BTS and ARMY

BTS (Korean: 방탄소년단, Bangtan Sonyeondan) is a seven-member boy band ensemble from South Korea. Formed through an audition process at a small K-Pop agency known as Big Hit Entertainment, the group debuted in June 2013. Now, in their 12th year, the success of BTS has grown exponentially from their humble roots to one of the biggest bands in the world, according to album sales data released by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (cf. IFPI 2022). Their management company similarly skyrocketed, becoming the conglomerate HYBE in 2021. The members include Kim Namjoon (stage name: RM), Kim Seokjin (stage name: Jin), Min Yoongi (stage name: Suga), Jung Hoseok (stage name: J-Hope), Park Jimin, Kim Taehyung (stage name: V), and Jeon Jungkook. Throughout this paper, the members are referenced by their given names.

BTS's dedicated fanbase, ARMY, numbers in the millions. The ARMY fandom, known for its organization and zealous support, is very active on social media platforms. Though it is impossible to know the true size of ARMY, a look at BTS's social media followings can give us a clue. As of February 2025, BTS has 48.5 million followers on X (formerly Twitter), 79.8 million subscribers on the BANGTANTV YouTube

channel, and 75.6 million followers on the official Instagram. A census conducted by fans in 2022 that garnered over 560,000 responses shows a glimpse of the diverse fandom. Of the respondents, nearly 70% were adults over the age of 18, with each category from under 18 to over 60 represented. About 96% of the respondents were female and over 100 countries were represented (cf. BTS ARMY Census 2022).

The growing field of research on BTS and ARMY has produced a wide range of work. BTS's influence on ARMY has been shown in several studies (cf. Lee/Bhattacharya/Antony/Santero/Le 2021; Park/Santero/Kaneshiro/Lee 2021; Chang/Park 2019). How ARMY and BTS interact through play to form a community has been examined (cf. Ringland/Wolf 2022; Ringland/Bhattacharya/Weatherwax/Eagle/Wolf 2022), as well as advocacy by ARMY for improved mental health (cf. Hermanto/Salindeho 2021; Haulenbeek 2022; Blady 2021). ARMY is known for consistent, active engagement on social media, both in response to BTS and to fellow fans. While traditional understandings of parasocial relationships see celebrity-fan interactions as largely one-sided (cf. Horton/Wohl 1956), more recent scholarship explores how digital media complicate these dynamics, fostering new forms of perceived intimacy and reciprocity (cf. Marwick/boyd 2010; Click/Lee/Holladay 2013; Bond 2016). While this paper centers on care ethics rather than parasociality, recognizing this shift in mediated relationships helps contextualize the BTS-ARMY dynamic.

Care Ethics

The ethics of care (or care ethics) is a moral theory that, unlike deontological or utilitarian schools of thought, emphasizes relationships and human interconnection. Instead of focusing on universalizable moral ideals, care ethics makes room for context, personal relationships, and emotions. The heart of the concept of care is meeting needs in our interrelated existences, whether these are the needs of others, ourselves, or the world.

Care ethics is often attributed to psychologist and ethicist Carol Gilligan, who challenged Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development. Kohlberg argued that moral maturity "progressively moves toward more universalized and principled thinking" (Sander-Staudt n.d.) and found that girls scored lower in his framework. Gilligan (1977), however, argued for a revised model that legitimized women's tendency to value relationships when making moral decisions.

While early discourse framed care ethics as gendered, theorists including Gilligan (1982) and Joan Tronto argue that care is a fundamental aspect of humanity. Tronto and Berenice Fisher offer a widely accepted definition that caring can "be viewed as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Tronto/Fisher 1991, p.40). Care theorists debate its scope, such as limiting care to meeting basic needs (cf. Engster 2007) or excluding self-care (cf. Bubeck 1995). However, Held (2005) argues that care is both a practice and a moral motivation that encompasses labor and ethics.

Previous scholarship has situated care ethics in a vast range of applications, including political theory (cf. Tronto 1993), medicine (cf. Groenhout 2018), business (cf. Hamington 2019), open-access librarianship (cf. Bradley 2021), and popular culture (cf. McClinton-Temple/Myers 2012; Cassidy 2012). Little research explores care ethics in fandom, but Adrienne Raw (2020) looked at how fans practice self-care and community care in their online spaces. Additionally, my previous work examined how one ARMY group, Bangtan Scholars, demonstrates care in its practices (cf. Lazore 2024).



Recent studies also investigate digital ethics of care, such as examining how adolescents exhibit care in online relationships (cf. O'Reilly/Levine/Law 2021; McLean/Southerton/Lupton 2024). Schaffer (2019) expands the concept with 'communities of care,' which extend beyond families and institutions to wider, more fluid networks including neighbors and friends.

Understanding care as a value, labor, that is sometimes digitally mediated, and as an act around which communities can be built can help us more thoroughly understand how care functions in the artist-fan relationship of BTS and ARMY.

Methods

This paper examines care ethics, which emphasizes relationships within a fandom space. As such, I chose the qualitative methods of autoethnography and participant observation, allowing me to leverage my lived experience as a member of the BTS ARMY to provide detailed, 'thick' descriptions (cf. Geertz 1973) and a more nuanced analysis as a community insider (cf. Hills 2002; Ringland/Bhattacharya/Weatherwax/Eagle/Wolf 2022). Autoethnography is well-suited for the current study because it allows for a critical reflection on how care is enacted in a digitally mediated fan space while keeping the analysis embedded in lived experiences.

I employed an iterative and emergent approach, rather than relying on strict sampling of BTS's content and ARMY's online exchanges. A fixed sample would likely exclude significant content or interactions that arise naturally, preventing a more comprehensive understanding. My own field notes, covering my reflections on BTS's content and ARMY interactions, were a major data source. The field notes also supported my participant observations, where I collected notes and screenshots of ARMY's online activities for my own documentation. This included observations of how fans express care for BTS (e.g., charity projects, streaming goals, support messages) and how BTS expressed their own care through messages or interactions. Rather than focus on a specific content type, I reviewed content across BTS's variety shows, livestreams, concert speeches, lyrics, and social media to establish larger patterns.

While my position as a participant-researcher requires careful attention to critical distance, my deep knowledge allows me to identify content that widely resonates with ARMY, as well as common fandom activities, more easily. To ensure accuracy, I revisited BTS content and fan responses to verify my own notes and re-examined the content through the care ethics lens. A purely quantitative or outsider study would not fully capture the nuances that this analysis provides. Given the relational nature of care ethics, a qualitative approach from the perspective of an insider that relies in part on lived experiences within the fandom's culture is useful for understanding BTS-ARMY care practices.

For the few quotes from ARMY that appear in this paper, I've followed the example set by Ringland, Bhattacharya, Weatherwax, Eagle, and Wolf (2022), where quotes are paraphrased and anonymized to protect the poster's privacy.

BTS and Care

The BTS members show care in a multitude of ways, including care towards each other, ARMY, and society. Caring actions can be identified throughout BTS's pre-filmed video content, as well as livestreams, social media posts, lyrics, and other public actions. In the sections below, I use examples from these different content types to explore how BTS manifests care.

How BTS Care for BTS

BTS frequently demonstrate care toward each other, adjusting communication styles and interactions to suit individual members. Fans often recognize their strong bond and name their brotherhood as a common reason for becoming a fan. Despite the challenges of working (and previously living) as a group of seven, BTS publicly value their relationships with each other and as a team, often emphasizing the significance of their group in interviews. As Namjoon stated in *Break the Silence* (2020), “The seven of us are on a boat, looking in different directions but going the same way” (E1).

One way in which BTS members demonstrate care is by anticipating and responding to each other’s emotional states. A particularly noteworthy example occurs in a video for the *BTS Winter Package 2020*, where each member writes a letter to ARMY. When Jungkook becomes emotional reading his letter, Jimin immediately points out his reddened ears as a sign that he is being really open. As the members playfully tease him, Jungkook tears up, prompting three members to hug him and reassure him. Moments of BTS members getting emotional and receiving comfort are not uncommon in BTS’s concerts or in pre-filmed video content.

Similarly, an often-repeated exchange among fans comes from BTS’s travel show *In the Soop* (2020). When Taehyung asks to flip a *pajeon* (a Korean savory pancake) in a skillet, a couple of members lightly protest, believing he will drop it (cf. S1E3). When Jungkook asks, “What if he flings it?,” Seokjin brushes the idea off: “Then he flings it.” Referencing the possibility of ruining the food, he follows up in a light tone: “You can’t even let that happen for Taehyung?” In context, the intent is clear: It is no big deal if he ruins it, but he should at least get to try. Many instances of ARMY using the phrase “Then he flings it” can be observed since then, used as a subtle but important message of encouragement and reassurance. Even though it was a small gesture, seemingly said in passing, it was indicative of Seokjin’s attitude toward the other members, showing care to both their relationship and Taehyung’s feelings.

BTS’s conflict resolution also undoubtedly demonstrates their care towards each other and the group’s well-being. *Burn the Stage* (2018) captures an argument over choreography between Seokjin and Taehyung (cf. E4). Tensions rise between the two just minutes before they are due on stage and both artists are clearly unsettled. Other members check in on them throughout the concert and they gather as a group in the hotel once the show is over. After a group discussion, Seokjin and Taehyung are left alone to apologize, agreeing to change their behavior. Taehyung later notes that the issue was resolved that night; several members reiterate through various episodes and other interviews that they always gather to resolve disagreements as a group, spending ample effort to learn to get along. This dedication to mending their relationships before they have a chance to grow resentment and sow division has certainly contributed to their group’s longevity. While we cannot know the intricacies of their private disagreements, observation of their public behavior tells us a lot.

On the other end of the spectrum, BTS positively reinforce their bonds through play, often seen in livestreams, social media posts, performances, and behind-the-scenes content. Ringland and Wolf observed how BTS and ARMY use “playful reciprocity” to “build and maintain their relationship with each other” (Ringland/Wolf 2021, p.68). In a separate study, Ringland, Bhattacharya, Weatherwax, Eagle, and Wolf (2022) contend that play reinforces the BTS-ARMY relationship and improves ARMY’s wellbeing. While play may not be a conscious strategy, it nevertheless fosters care and connection. And to be sure, the capitalistic incentives for BTS to cater to fandom are also part of the dynamic, as discussed in the next section.



Additionally, BTS's lyrics also demonstrate care by expressing the members' emotional ties. Jungkook's solo song "Begin" encapsulates his relationship with the members. He addresses them as 'brothers' and struggles to see them in pain: "I can't stand when you're crying [...] When my brother hurts, it hurts me more than my own pain." Similarly, Yoongi's lyrics for his solo song "Outro: Tear" are written as if they address a breakup, but they refer to the band potentially disbanding (*Break the Silence*, cf. E6). The outpouring of emotion in "Outro: Tear" is clear: "We walked toward the same place, but this place becomes our last. We talked about forever, but we ruthlessly tear each other down."

Through reassurance, encouragement, play, and lyrical affirmations, BTS consistently center their relationships with each other and the band, using numerous caring strategies to deepen those connections.

How BTS Care for ARMY

BTS place a lot of focus on their group bond; however, at the heart of much of what they do is their connection to ARMY. BTS's relationship with the fandom has strong roots, forged from years of operating as a lesser-known group from a small company. Their early struggles and ARMY's organic efforts to support and promote them laid the foundation for a fan-artist relationship centered on care and emotional investment. From the start, BTS and creator Bang Sihyuk emphasized authenticity and sincerity (cf. BangtanSubs 2018)—principles that extend beyond their music to their overall persona and interactions with fans.

When considering BTS's expressions of care towards ARMY, understanding how their messages are shaped both by content (BTS's words and actions) and formal aspects (how the messages are mediated) is useful. Most of BTS's messages are conveyed to ARMY through digital media, including their social media profiles. Scholars of digital media have noted how social media can structure celebrity-fan interactions in ways that cultivate intimacy while maintaining performance boundaries (cf. Marwick/boyd 2010). Similarly, BTS's expressions of care may be influenced by South Korean cultural norms that emphasize politeness and collectivism. At the same time, these norms intersect with the K-Pop industry's reliance on fan bases for financial support. Some may interpret BTS's actions toward ARMY as strategic or calculated, given the capitalistic incentives of maintaining a deeply devoted fanbase. As artists whose job it is to make and sell music, BTS will always benefit from actions that appeal to fans. Messages mediated through social media complicate this dynamic further, as anyone posting online is in some way partaking in a performance (cf. Thomas 2014). Celebrities stand to gain more from their online performance than the average user, whether through direct monetary incentives or encouraging intimacy with fans. However, the performative nature of social media may not necessitate that the actions or statements are inauthentic (cf. Marwick/boyd 2010; Thomas 2014; Goffman 1959). BTS's expressions of care may be shaped by industry expectations, but their consistency across platforms over time can also be read as an intentional ethos rather than purely strategic. Regardless of the authenticity debate, ARMY "can be aware of the capitalist foundation that the group has built its success upon and still believe the kindness and love that BTS promotes is an authentic representation of themselves" (Wise 2022). More importantly, ARMY's perception of BTS as authentic (cf. McLaren/Jin 2020; King-O'Riain 2020) increases the impact of BTS's caring actions and reinforces a reciprocal relationship.

By evaluating the content of BTS's messages to ARMY, using examples from various media types, it becomes possible to show how their words and actions are most relevant to understanding a rela-

tional care ethics. While BTS's care may serve multiple purposes—such as motivating, protecting, or reassuring fans—these functions are deeply interconnected. Thus, this paper takes a holistic approach, examining the overarching ways BTS fosters care ethics with ARMY, rather than isolating specific modes or goals.

As musical artists, BTS infuse their sincere thoughts and emotions into songs. The significance of fan songs to the BTS-ARMY relationship is key as they function as confessions of appreciation and love (cf. Lazore 2023). For example, the 2016 track “Two! Three!” describes the hardships that BTS faced early in their career and thanks ARMY for sticking with them. Lyrics like “It’s okay. When I say ‘one, two, three,’ forget it. Erase all the sad memories, hold my hand, and smile” and “So thanks for believing in someone like me [...] for becoming my light, for becoming that flower in the most beautiful moment in life” illustrate their gratitude for ARMY’s loyalty and support.

Many other BTS songs support their connection to fans. “We Are Bulletproof: The Eternal” expresses a desire to “interact and become one with the audience,” according to the Spotify storyline text, while “For Youth” has BTS reminiscing on their time so far and thanking the fans. “Thanks to you, I became wholly me. The countless words you gave to comfort me, they made me,” BTS sing, before the group took a break to focus on solo activities and required military service. These songs, among others, reinforce BTS’s relationship to ARMY by building connections.

The impact of BTS’s lyrics on ARMY has been shown in several prior studies. Lee, Bhattacharya, Antony, Santero, and Le (2021) report that members of ARMY feel comforted by BTS’s music, suggesting music as a refuge. However, Woongjo Chang and Shin-Eui Park (2019) go further, arguing that BTS’s music offers more than passive support; it encourages fans to actively take control and develop resilience. My own work, involving a fan survey, also concluded that the majority of fans sampled felt BTS’s work helped them heal or deal with challenges. This distinction is crucial because it suggests that BTS’s music goes beyond immediate or short-term emotional relief and helps ARMY play a more active role in their own care. BTS’s commitment to impactful lyrics and ARMY’s continued response to those lyrics reflect the idea that care is also about building long-term emotional resilience (cf. Held 2005). As will be discussed in a later section, ARMY does not passively receive care; they actively extend it back to BTS and the larger fandom by engaging in fan-led initiatives to boost BTS’s success and ARMY’s collective well-being. This exchange reinforces the idea that BTS-ARMY care is not a one-way interaction but an ongoing reciprocal process that sustains the community.

BTS’s music and lyrics have been paramount to maintaining such a strong relationship with ARMY, but BTS also makes considerable efforts to convey their appreciation and desire to comfort and connect with fans through award speeches, social media posts, livestreams, interviews, and other content. Two of Namjoon’s quotes have been shared widely online among ARMY:

You guys taught me, through your eyes, through your tweets, through your letters, through your everything. You guys taught me and inspired me how to love myself. [...] It’s never intended but it feels like I’m using you guys to love myself. So I’m going to say one thing: Please, please use me, please use BTS to love yourself. Because you taught me how to love myself. (*Love Yourself*, Citifield concert)

If we, BTS, our music, our performances, our videos, even if it’s not by a lot, if we could take your pain from 100 to 99, 98, or 97, then our existence has meaning. (*WINGS Tour Final*, Seoul concert)



Each of the above serves the purpose of championing his and BTS's relationship with ARMY, helping fans feel appreciated and cared for. Similar expressions of care can be found in other members' words, including Jimin's statement from a YouTube video, which also circulates often in ARMY social spaces: "I hope you remember there is a person here in Korea, in the city of Seoul, who understands you" (BANGTANTV 2020). In an online posting, Seokjin wrote: "Didn't you know? If you share your sadness with me, it will be divided in half, and if you share your happiness with me, it will be doubled" (@tanniefairie 2024). Hoseok responded to an interview question with, "I feel like [ARMY has] become an icon themselves. I'm so proud of them. [...] I think we give each other good energy and helped each other to make something good" (Kang 2021a). Time and again, BTS honor their relationship with ARMY by keeping them at the center.

There is also the undeniable theme of reciprocity running through BTS's care toward ARMY. For example, prior to his military enlistment, Jungkook regularly took to Weverse to host livestreams for hours at a time. The streams were casual with Jungkook doing everything from cooking and singing karaoke to exercising and simply responding to comments. More than once, he fell asleep during the stream as fans watched. Several fans commented that Jungkook's streams feel more like having a video call with a friend. Jungkook also seems to get something out of the experience. In one stream, he sits in the dark with music playing in the background, chatting to the camera:

What's really interesting is that I can't see you, right? Besides your comments. But it's sort of...it's an environment where we can share, so I gain a lot of comfort from that. Even if I don't read the comments, it's so...Should I say it's a sense of safety? When I feel happy, I can search for you. But if there's a lot on my mind, if I feel unstable, I come searching for you then as well. So I'm going to continue to do that. (BTS 2023)

Later in the stream, he says he feels "at peace because we're connected like this right now. [...] Whether there is one person, or 10, or 100, or 1000 people, you're the only ones I can share these emotions with" (BTS 2023).

Similarly, Taehyung also comes to Weverse to receive something from ARMY. During *In the Soop*, he admitted he started going to Weverse more often during the COVID-19 pandemic because he needed "the feeling of assurance that I am someone who is loved" (E6). Since live performances were not possible at the time, he lost some of that confidence. But ARMY was contributing greatly to something he needed; Taehyung reinforced the reciprocal nature of his relationship to fans in an interview: "[ARMY are] friends I would hate to lose. Friends who seriously give me strength whenever they're around" and "Somehow I feel better when I hear their stories. [...] I want to be ARMY's partner, their best friend, the friend who's always by their side when we're not on stage" (Kang 2021b). Separately, he even asked fans to upload more vlogs to YouTube, so he'd have something to watch.

These examples—actions, words, lyrics—all center ARMY with healing, comfort, and support, suggesting a richness and depth to the care with which BTS treats fans. And it works. As one fan wrote on social media, "Loving BTS never feels one sided." More confirmed this sentiment: "They really make me feel valued," and "They make us a priority and are my biggest source of comfort." The sentiment is also echoed by BTS, as Yoongi stated, "Hearing our fans saying that we changed their lives changes our lives in turn. We got to know about the weight that our words and music carry, and we're truly thankful for

that” (Chakraborty 2020). BTS’s words and actions could be interpreted as having many goals: showing appreciation, signaling protection, or offering motivation and support. But the overarching thread, from my perspective within fandom, is an emphasis on some form of comfort. In this way, BTS’s interactions with ARMY demonstrate a lived practice of relational care ethics, where mutual support and reciprocity sustain the artist-fan relationship.

How BTS Care for Society

BTS extend their care beyond ARMY by using their platform to address social issues and support global causes. Several of BTS’s early songs are critical of societal pressures on young people, specifically the stressful education system and parental expectations (addressed in “No More Dream” and “N.O”). The track “Baepsae” criticizes South Korea’s socioeconomic issues by juxtaposing the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots,’ where BTS align themselves with the underdogs. Additional examples include “Go Go” and “Spine Breaker” (critiques of consumerism), “21st Century Girl” (female empowerment), and “Answer: Love Myself” (advocating for self-love).

BTS’s socially conscious lyrics can “serve as a form of comfort, power, and validation for those whose experiences are reflected” (Lazore 2023), demanding a better world for everyone. Similarly, the members of BTS were appointed as “special presidential envoys for future generations and culture” (Westfall 2021) by South Korean President Moon Jae-in, an honor which granted them diplomatic passports and saw them make their third speech at the UN General Assembly. The speech touched on environmental issues and spoke to young people worldwide, whom some had termed the ‘lost generation’ during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though many ARMY tuned in to watch, BTS’s speech was for a much broader audience and an example of how they can extend their care, and their platform, to society at large.

BTS’s philanthropic efforts further demonstrate their commitment to care. The group’s most notable initiative is the anti-violence Love Myself campaign in partnership with UNICEF (<https://www.love-myself.org/eng/home>). At launch in 2017, BTS and their label, Big Hit, donated 500 million Korean won (approx. USD 360,000) as well as an ongoing portion of sales of the Love Yourself album trilogy. BTS renewed their work with UNICEF in 2021, donating another USD 1,000,000. As of April 2024, the campaign has raised nearly USD 6.5 million (cf. UNICEF 2024). The members have also personally donated to other causes, including children’s hospitals, disaster relief, and local schools. Notably, the band donated USD 1,000,000 to Black Lives Matter, an amount that ARMY collectively matched in less than 24 hours (cf. Kwak 2020).

Through socially conscious lyrics, diplomatic engagement, and charity initiatives, BTS extend care toward our interconnected world and aim for positive social impact.

ARMY and Care

As both a researcher and a member of the ARMY community, I have spent nearly ten years participating in and observing our fandom’s activities, both on- and offline. My own experiences range from volunteering for the Bangtan Subs subtitling team, schlepping through the New York subways with a large box of fan club banners for a concert, creating Korean language learning materials based on BTS content, and co-running Bangtan Scholars, a group dedicated to research in the fandom. By reflecting on my own involvement, as well as activities I have observed from fellow fan groups, a common core emerged: that ARMY endeavor to help BTS or each other in some way. Watching BTS enact care



inspires the same in ARMY, and those behaviors manifest across similar categories, including care toward BTS, toward ARMY, and toward the world.

How ARMY Care for BTS

ARMY's support for BTS often takes the form of labor. Like many fandoms, ARMY functions as a participatory culture (cf. Jenkins 1992) that actively co-creates, distributes, and sustains BTS's works and messages across a global context. Some of ARMY's labor, such as translating BTS's videos and social media posts, positions fans as "new cultural intermediaries" (Lee 2012, p.131)—fans who volunteer to take on labor traditionally performed by paid professionals, reshaping how cultural products are distributed and accessed globally. This relocation of labor not only expands BTS's reach but also disrupts traditional media hierarchies. Although fan labor is at the risk of exploitation by corporate structures (cf. Stanfill 2019), ARMY's labor remains largely decentralized and reciprocal, reinforcing a relational ethic of care. And while some argue BTS's image and ARMY's engagement are merely extensions of market-driven neoliberal consumerism (cf. Kim 2021), this perspective overlooks the ways that ARMY's labor fosters community building and mutual aid. ARMY members actively support, sustain, and advocate for BTS in ways that align more with collaborative care than capitalist exploitation.

Beyond translation and content distribution, some of the most prominent labor ARMY engages in involves streaming and buying BTS's music. Designed to push BTS to the top of the charts, ARMY streaming is highly organized and targeted. While some social media users criticize these projects as hyperconsumption or somehow manipulative, ARMY operates within the existing rules of chart-keepers. These practices are also embedded in ARMY's collective identity as a fandom. Rather than engaging in strictly consumer behavior, ARMY's efforts reflect a collective identity based on solidarity with other fans, a feeling that is reinforced by the emotions they experience together within fandom (cf. Cook/Joseph 2023; Puglin 2020). ARMY's efforts are also indicative of both affirmational fandom (supporting BTS's success within the existing industry norms) and transformational fandom (reshaping fan behaviors into advocacy for BTS and community building) (cf. Jenkins 2006). In this way, ARMY's streaming projects are not simply about metrics and breaking records but about expressing their care and love through collective action, contributing to the reciprocal fan-artist relationship.

In addition to the labor of streaming and buying, many ARMY rely on fan-run social media accounts dedicated to different streaming platforms and voting projects that analyze industry regulations, share tips and strategies, and report results. The labor behind these initiatives is time-intensive, yet it is voluntary and driven by ARMY's desire to support BTS, rather than external pressures.

In addition to these large-scale initiatives, ARMY also engage in everyday acts of care, such as posting well wishes on social media when the BTS members are sick or hurt, sending physical and digital fan letters, and trending hashtags in honor of BTS's achievements or birthdays. Fans also frequently tune in to BTS's livestreams on Weverse, participating in playful behaviors that strengthen the artist-fan bond. Ringland, Bhattacharya, Weatherwax, Eagle, and Wolf (2022) have observed that these acts contribute to a shared community-building process, where participation itself is a form of care. The BTS members have expressed a need to connect with ARMY, and these interactions reaffirm that connection, demonstrating that ARMY's engagement is not just for themselves, but also for BTS's benefit. Ultimately, ARMY's diverse forms of labor are not solely fan activities but expressions of an enduring ethic of care. ARMY understand BTS's gratitude and, in return, work to consistently nurture the fan-artist relationship.

How ARMY Care for ARMY

Much of the work described above also functions as care for the ARMY community. Providing translations to fans in their native languages and teaching them how to effectively support BTS's music empowers fans to both understand BTS better and to be more involved in contributing to their success. However, fans go even further to provide care for fellow ARMY. In my other work, I have detailed how Bangtan Scholars, a group I co-run for ARMY researchers, enacts care in its own practices (cf. Lazore 2024). But we also see care via the multitude of accounts and websites that are not focused on the social learning around BTS's lore or success.

For example, navigating the ARMY fandom as a new fan can be challenging. BTS has a long and prolific history and the content catch-up can be overwhelming. Some fan accounts are dedicated to creating resources to help guide new fans, including explanation videos and PDFs that help new fans learn more about BTS's lyrics, performances, and music video storylines. Others create magazines or post daily news to keep ARMY updated and engaged. One daily news account (@dalbitbangtan) boasts over 200,000 followers on social media and several popular YouTube guides have garnered over 500,000 views, with one posted on Taylor Mari's channel hitting 2.7 million views (<https://www.youtube.com/@Taylormari>).

Perhaps most interestingly, there are accounts dedicated to many non-fandom topics. There are ARMY-run accounts that teach Korean, offer support to ARMY researchers, and provide subject tutoring for fans who are in secondary school or college. Other groups focus on ARMY's mental health by offering a space for fans to reach out to talk or regularly posting meaningful quotes from BTS.

ARMY have also created accounts to support disabled fans; others are dedicated to bringing fans together in interest groups for art, film, cooking, and books; other accounts support ARMY in professions such as teachers, lawyers, and medical fields. Essentially, ARMY has created its own village to fulfill various perceived needs, many of which lie outside the direct support of BTS. However, BTS ties all these efforts and projects together because ARMY often desire to do good in honor of BTS or to bolster the ARMY community because they are also ARMY, even though they will never meet most of these fans offline. As a member of translation and video subtitling team BTS_Trans (1.5 million followers) put it: “[We] started as a way to help fans know more about BTS and we are thrilled to have been active for so long and to still be able to help spread the word” (Kelley 2017). Similarly, ARMY Help Centre (66,000 followers) expressed how their mission “was inspired by BTS's messages of self-love and radical kindness” and their project to provide a listening ear to ARMY in need “began as a platform for the fandom to lean on and has grown into a community of helpers pioneering to bring mental health everywhere” (McNamara 2020). These fan-led accounts demonstrate how ARMY's care ethics are deeply embedded in their cultural practices, creating networks of mutual support beyond ‘traditional’ fandom activities (e.g., fan fiction writing, distribution of fanzines).

How ARMY Care for Society

BTS inspired ARMY to care for the world, a manifestation seen in the many charity projects initiated throughout the global fandom. From small actions like handing out trash bags at concerts to avoid leaving behind a mess to large-scale projects like #MatchAMillion, ARMY has championed social causes for years.

Fanbase accounts on social media tend to donate to charities in the name of different BTS members, usually for their birthdays. For example, ARMY from the Philippines hosted a book donation



drive and adopted seedlings to be planted in Philippine rainforests (cf. Mercado 2022). Another ARMY group, One In An ARMY, has been organizing charity projects since 2018. Inspired by BTS's work with UNICEF, the group hosted campaigns for ocean cleanup, disability support, COVID-19 relief, support for unwed mothers, safe drinking water, and donations for Palestinians in Gaza.

Of particular note, when BTS announced their donation to the Black Lives Matter movement, ARMY mobilized quickly to match their USD 1,000,000 in less than 24 hours. By using One In An ARMY's donation links, fans quickly spread the campaign on X with the hashtag #MatchAMillion. Fans reached out to their networks to help gain awareness and the campaign was a major success. It was the largest campaign ARMY ever collectively participated in. Similarly, many ARMY joined the K-Pop fans who disrupted anti-Black hashtags on X by posting photos and videos of BTS or sent RSVPs to Donald Trump's campaign rallies, with no intention of showing up (cf. Hollingsworth 2020). Using social media to take over hashtags or negatively impact undesirable political candidates may be small acts of resistance, but they contribute to messages of acceptance and hope for a better world.

Smaller charity projects are hosted by other fan-run accounts, typically as one-off campaigns. Occasionally, accounts may be created to support a specific cause, such as ARMY4Palestine, which focuses on educating others on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and raising funds to support relief efforts in Gaza. ARMY4Palestine campaigns alone have raised around USD 100,000.

Of course, not all ARMY participate in social action or charity campaigns. Controversies can arise in fandom, sometimes over a specific method associated with activism. Regardless, the donation trackers of One In An ARMY show that ARMY is a potent community with the power to make big impacts.

Connecting through Care

This paper has demonstrated how BTS exemplify care ethics through their public words and actions and how ARMY reflect that care in their practices. The BTS members support each other through emotional care and play, offer comfort to fans, and extend care globally through philanthropy and socially conscious messages. In return, ARMY care for BTS by supporting the group's projects, fostering a caring community, and hosting their own charity initiatives. BTS meet emotional and social needs for ARMY in ways that go beyond typical celebrity–fan relationships. Many fandoms value authenticity, but what sets BTS apart is the consistency, breadth, and intentionality of their care-focused expressions. Their vulnerability and emotional openness are reinforced across lyrics, livestreams, and other content, and their use of digital platforms allows for sustained, personal-feeling connection. ARMY emerged within a global, digitally networked context, where fans both receive care and reflect it by organizing charity efforts, translating and creating resources, and supporting fellow fans with tools that often extend beyond BTS. The reciprocal dynamic of the BTS-ARMY relationship is uniquely rooted in care, enabled by digital culture and amplified by fans around the world.

Practicing an ethic of care can create real change and influence others to participate, improving the community and fostering ethics of care in general. Understanding BTS and ARMY through this framework highlights how valuable fandom spaces can be for cultivating caring relationships. While BTS's exact moral philosophies may remain unknown, their public actions demonstrate how they center care at the core of their approach to the world as BTS.

Although ARMY is largely a community of care, disagreements inevitably arise, leading some fans to toxic behaviors, including harassment and racism. For example, BuzzFeed News reported on racism

within ARMY fandom, where Black fans were told to “keep quiet so they don’t make BTS look bad” (Dahir 2018). *Teen Vogue* later ran an article about supportive hashtags (#BlackARMYequality and #BlackARMYsMatter)—an example of the fandom’s attempt to internally regulate (cf. Dodson 2018). As Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen (2012) note, fandoms must constantly negotiate their values and boundaries, which adds to internal tensions over what is considered acceptable. This is reflected in how most ARMY engage respectfully, but toxic fans resort to harassment or abuse, despite BTS’s repeated messages of kindness. But this challenge to negotiate norms exists in any large, decentralized community, where there is not one way to enforce etiquette and the poor actions of some do not negate the positive behaviors of others.

Future research on this topic could benefit from additional examples of BTS’s care, more deeply analyzed to continue to rethink how BTS impact each other and the fandom. For example, BTS’s care toward ARMY and ARMY’s care toward each other could be analyzed through goals (comfort, support, call to action, etc.) or more closely examined for how the messages are mediated, both from BTS and from ARMY. Studies employing fan surveys could examine how fans feel that they, as individuals, receive or give care within the fandom and continue to consider how ARMY builds community. A specific focus on the labor involved in ARMY’s care would be particularly significant.

Until 2021, BTS music videos opened with Big Hit’s slogan: “Music and artist for healing.” Even though the slogan was removed after the HYBE rebrand, it still rings true. BTS’s care ethics, infused into nearly every aspect of the group, did a lot to maintain, repair, and even heal relationships. Now, the fandom they created stands as an ongoing testament to the power of their care.

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