

BTS Pilgrimage: A Spiritual Journey of Indonesia BTS-ARMY to South Korea

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ABSTRACT: In 2018, the Hyundai Research Institute released a report stating that one in thirteen tourists who visited Korea in 2017 were motivated by the K-pop idol group, BTS. The research aimed to find the reason why visiting BTS-related object matters to the fandom of BTS named ARMY from Indonesia? Using a mixed methodology of quantitative online survey and qualitative analysis by interviewing ARMY, who visited Korea more than once, the research found that the journey is not just a tourism matter but a pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is the journey to sacred places and objects that bring personal and spiritual benefits, a transformative meaning of life and spiritual healing. The journey to the BTS-related object not only celebrates the success of BTS. It also reflects ARMY's personal and collective experiences. The BTS Pilgrimage reflected the impact of BTS, which taught ARMY how to love themselves and save them from mental disorders.

Keyword: BTS Pilgrimage, BTS, ARMY, Fandom Culture, Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

In July 2019, the Korea Tourism Organization announced ten tourism spots related to the K-pop idol of BTS to attract their fandom, BTS-ARMY. Previously, Hyundai Research Institute in 2018 released those one of 13 tourists who came to South Korea in 2017 was motivated and inspired by BTS, and in 2018, 7% of foreign tourists or around 800.000 came because of BTS (Business Insider, 2022). BTS tour packages are growing very rapidly by local tourism agencies in South Korea. One of the BTS Tours, Trazy, targeted international fans with a cost starting from USD 26 (the Korean Times, 2019), while I am your guide.com offered BTS Tour starting from USD 50. In Indonesia, TXT Benhil travel offered the Seokj Igvn Birthday Trip starts from USD 860 for six days and five nights via Instagram.

Although it is part of the tourism industry that brings profit to South Korea, visiting BTS-related spots holds a different meaning for BTS-ARMY. ARMY motives might not only enjoy the view and South Korean culinary, since in previous research from Chang and Park (2020) named the community of BTS ARMY a Digital Tribe and a tribe they shared values. The research discusses whether these shared values and the impact that BTS brought that make ARMY make more than seven hours flight journey to BTS-related spots.

Peter Jan Margy (2008) said that the difference between tourism and pilgrimage is on the motives and the goal. The pilgrimage goals are to visit sacred, religious, and cultus objects, although they have secondary motives to enjoy the beauty of the scenery, tourist aspect, and sociability of the collective journey.

This research focuses on BTS ARMY in Indonesia, who have visited BTS-related spots in South Korea at least once, aiming to understand how the pilgrimage means to them and how it matters in their lives.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology. Mixed methods are a strategy to conduct research using quantitative and qualitative methods with the principles of Creswell and Clark, as quoted from Kim Yeunchul (2019): collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data in response to research questions and hypotheses; integrating the two forms of data and the result; organizing these procedures into specific research

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designs that provide the logic and procedures for conducting the study; and framing these procedures within theory and philosophy.

Participants: BTS ARMY Indonesia

Data Collection:

Quantitative: first step, data collected through online survey via BTS-ARMY fanbase network account on social media such as Bintang Ungu, Madnae Jin, Jinbase and Kpop4Planet, as well as international fanbase @Bangtan Scholar. The survey was conducted from 13-17 December 2022 with 46 respondents.

Qualitative: Second, from the quantitative data, I interviewed six informants age–20-47 years old via WhatsApp and Zoom from October to November 2023. These six informants are BTS-ARMY who had experiences more than one-time visiting BTS related spots and representing the experience of the journey of ARMY in South Korea

Data Analysis:

I analyzed the data quantitatively, finding respondents who had spiritual experiences during the visit and those who had personal experiences in becoming BTS-ARMY, even though they had not yet visited BTS-related spots. Then, I conducted dept-interviews with respondents who had more than one experience to gain a better understanding of their journey.

Research questions: Why do visiting BTS-related places and objects matter to BTS ARMY and how it matters?

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hall (2003) said that identity concerns questions about using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we come from,’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented, and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. However, in the postmodern life, Baumann (2003) said that ‘problem of identity’ is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open.

BTS ARMY is the identity of a person who becomes a fandom of BTS and embeds the values inside the fandom group, as Chang and Park (2020) called the Digital Tribe, and Yong Jin (2021) named this fandom Transnational Cyber-Nationalism. Nevertheless, the process of self-construction and identity-building is a pilgrimage that Baumann (2003) described as a kind of world in which footprints are engraved for good, so that the trace and the record of past travels are kept and preserved.

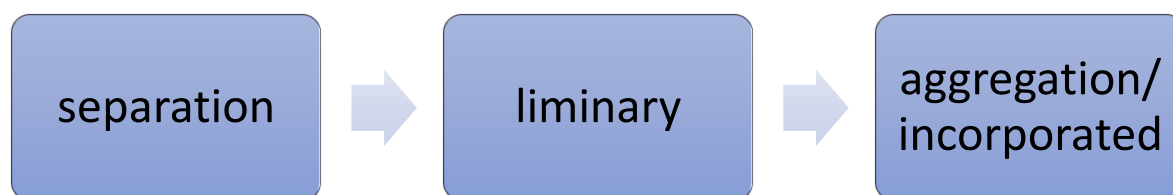
To understand the spiritual journey of BTS-ARMY as an identity to construct, build, and then express it as a pilgrimage, I use the rite de passage theory from Arnold van Gennep, since it has clear stages of the journey.

Arnold van Gennep believed that both individual and group experience a transition from one situation to another, which is marked by time, place, social status, and spiritual worlds. Van Gennep divided these transitions into three stages that he called as “rites de passage,” where in each stage, human being developed different cultures to satisfy their curiosity toward natures and themselves, as well as assuage their worries and fears. Van Gennep discerned the sequence of human transition on three stages – the rites de separation, rites de merge, and rites de’ agregation and he looked at them from a psychological, or spiritual point of view, and thus considered the rites of separation to be the rites of preliminary; rites of margine (merge) to be right of liminary; and rites of aggregation to be the rites of postliminary (Zhang, 2012)

The separation stage is the separation from the old group; the liminal stage is the stage during the passage, when the individual no longer belongs to the old group, but is not yet versed in the practices of the new group; and rites of aggregation or incorporation stage when the individual becomes a fully-fledged member of the new group. These stages are characterized by cognitive and affective crises. Moreover, this crisis is necessary for the passage to occur, and without it, the individual will not fully join the new group (Di Martino, 2022; Zhang, 2012).

In van Gennep words as quoted on Zhang (2012)

“Whoever passes from one to the other (zone of the sacred and zone of the secular) find himself physically and magico – religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time; he wavers between two worlds. It is situation which I have designed a transition (the term margin), and one of the purposes of this book is to demonstrate that this symbolic, and spatial area of transition (imaginary and physical margin (may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico religious position to another.”

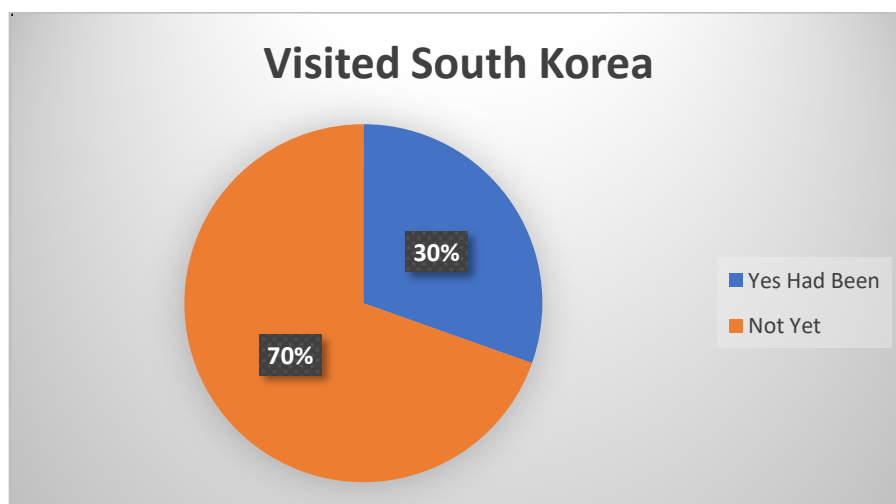


Zhang (2012) said that in the modern societies, an individual and a group may experience the process in new social and spatial environments without its former group, and the sense of social cultural and ethnic majority or minority, which may be mixed with the sense of social center or mainstream versus the margin, strike out distinctively. The rites of passage are the means by which the participants constantly construct new identities, whether as the majority or minority, or the local or foreign. Such identities are the awareness and result of cross-cultural interactions. Therefore, it should be emphasized that each culture develops at its own pace on the basis of its own cosmology and values, and thus, the interpretation of each rite should be contextualized with perspectives on the distinction of an individual or a group.

The pilgrimage acts as a rite of passage to visit the meaningful object to an individual or group, as a symbolic affirmation of faith or identity. However, Peter Jan Margry (2008) identified pilgrimage as a journey that people undertake based on religious inspiration to places that are regarded as more sacred or salutary than the environment of everyday life. A pilgrim seeks an encounter with a specific cult object to acquire spiritual, emotional, or physical healing or benefit. On his book of *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred*, Jan Margry concluded that the new pilgrimage (to secular objects, places) is where individual may find assistance with and support for their existential life questions and problem, where the visitor can cope with the traumatic loss of a venerated person – an icon, idol, role model, hero, or ‘saint.’ The value and significance of the places are then raised from the profane/secular level to a more transcendent level so that the visit acquires a religious or sacred dimension and can then be regarded as a pilgrimage.

IV. FINDING AND ANALYSIS

Of the 46 respondents, 14 (30%) visited BTS’s places. Nevertheless, respondents who had never visited South Korea also expressed their wishes to go there if they had a chance. “If I was there, I would be so proud, happy and yet, moved,” said Nana.



Most of the respondents said that they listened to BTS music for the first time during the pandemic when they had to spend time alone at home and felt depressed, just like Nana. Since then, the respondents said that the BTS has changed their perspectives in life.

“I was depressed, hopeless and I have no hope to live any longer. Then I listened to BTS, and at least I had reason to enjoy life day by day. Their lyric is so powerful, so does their struggle,” said Nana

The feeling of being influenced by BTS in respondents' lives, wanting to celebrate the journey of finding themselves, and understanding the BTS are among the reasons that motivated BTS ARMY Indonesia to fly to South Korea.

Dian visited South Korea three times (Seoul in 2020 and Busan twice in 2019) to find the answer to her question on how BTS influenced her life. Dian wrote that in Seoul, she pilgrimages to BTS's training spots, while in Busan, watched the concert and visited BTS – Jimin and JK hometown. "Yes, they make me appreciate myself," and to find out, "Does BTS influence my life? why and how?"

Another respondent, Aditya, visited South Korea and expressed her feelings of being nostalgic during the journey. "To feel the nostalgic feelings of Bangtan, to sense their presence at those places. You cannot describe how you felt. It is beyond happy, but also heartwarming at the same time."

After meeting BTS and experiencing her journey as BTS ARMY, Aditya feels a significant change in her life. "Indeed. They, especially Jin, showed me how to enjoy my life to the fullest, and how I should love myself first before loving others. Oh, also they are very entertaining, so I do not need anything to make me feel happy aside from them. I feel content every time I am with them."

Aditya said that the journey she made was to feel nostalgic with Bangtan (BTS) and to sense their presence at those places. She said, "You just could not describe how you feel. It's beyond happy, but also heartwarming at the same time."

The places that the respondents visit, among them are: Hybe Insight, Nonhyeong-ro, Gangnam (old dorms, old Bighit, Hakdong Park, Yoojung Sikdang), Jamsil Olympic Stadium, Haeundae Beach, and Magnate Café. These places represent the BTS's journey from the trainee period, when they were struggling to survive in the industry, and to the success of their career as global artists.

The journey for BTS ARMY is not just a tourism visit, but it is the expression of their transition or journey, of what Jan Margy said as an individual devotee with a larger system of meaning that is shared as BTS – ARMY. Becoming a BTS-ARMY is also a journey, a transition that can be explain based on van Gennep's "Rite de Passage," that divided the journey, the transition into three stages where in each stage, human being developed different cultures to satisfy their curiosity toward natures and themselves, as well as assuage their worries and fears.

The Separation Stage

In this stage, the ARMY feeling separates from the old group, as shown in the survey, during the COVID-19 outbreak. ARMY was forced away from their communities and felt lonely and hopeless because of the uncertain situation. They discovered BTS through social media and friends' recommendations. First, they love music and songs that bring happiness.

Alin (39 years old) who once work as a music journalist said that the BTS' lyrics can perfectly describe her life. "It is insane! Their lyrics are so powerful that although they are commercial songs and productions, their song is insane! Totally insane! Very well-structured." While Vita (41 years old) said "their lyrics are emotionally connected to me. Everything they said on the songs are relatable to my condition."

During the pandemic, Hera pushed herself to exercise to keep her healthy, and her daughter introduced her to BTS's songs to energize her during exercise. Since then, she began to like BTS but not until 2021, and she began to meditate using BTS's song, Magic Shop.

"The Magic Shop is like a meditation itself. The lyric said to close our eyes, our heart, there is only you and I, let us be happy... then I start to learn about them and how they handle problems as a BTS. Previously, I read spiritual books, now I switch on BTS because they have the same value."

Nevertheless, COVID-19 is not the only cause of separation. Respondents also had different separation stages; for example, feeling different from society's expectations of women. Hera told her story how she lost her confidence in herself because she did not have a fair skin and beautiful face, which refers to global beauty standards. She always feels like an ugly duck in her family.

"My mom always called me the black-sweet, but as I got older, mom said I lost the sweetness in me, and left only the black skin. BTS lyrics of Love Myself that made me realize to love myself and accept who I am. I am more confidence and happy since then," said Hera

Nevertheless, being separate from the world while also having cancer made Tria feel depressed. Tria was told that she could not have a baby because of the cancer and that not having a baby is something that society hardly accepts for a woman. However, something magical happened, and Tria became pregnant.

Tria said, "BTS has become my company in 2021 and gave me happiness, made me able to embraced my condition. Once I feel relieve, a miracle happened, I had a baby and we called Kim Seok Jin (BTS Member) as the second father because I like him and BTS lyrics taught me not to give up live."

On this stage, respondent and informant are already doing the pilgrimage referring to Jan Margy (2008) as the consciously “extricate” himself of herself from everyday life in order to set off for the sacred place, or Turner calls “separation” that going beyond physical and mental boundaries. Pilgrimage is a liminal activity, and crossing boundaries is a constant element of pilgrimages. In this sense, I would argue that BTS to them has become a virtual sacred place with songs and lyrics visited by respondents and informants crossing their daily life boundaries of the pandemic and social expectations. The respondents found refuge in BTS songs and the lyrics that connected them emotionally.

The Liminal Stage

This is the stage when the individual no longer belongs to the old group but is not yet in practice of the new group (Di Martino, 2022). It takes some time for an individual to accept a new identity as a BTS ARMY. In this stage, the crisis of identity and new thoughts as alternatives to the common sense indeed experienced by informants, where Di Martino (2022) and Zhang (2012) argued that these crises are necessary for the passage to happen, and without it, the individual will not fully join the new group.

Each respondent has their own struggle to accept a new identity as BTS ARMY, as they must fight with the majority, such as social expectations or stereotyping against K-pop fandom, who is viewed as a non-serious group and hedonistic.

Nining (27 years old) mentioned, *“I have seen ARMY being excluded from the group conversation, even from Kpop friends because they said BTS is not a representative of K-pop. In global music, BTS is excluded as Kpop. And if I said I am an ARMY, they do not take me seriously. People sometimes are just being judgmental toward ARMY.”*

At this stage, Hera must hide herself from her friends and colleagues because she enjoys BTS. She is the top manager in her company. Hera worried that people around her might laugh at her for liking BTS and underestimate her performance at work.

The liminary stage, I argue is more like a ‘heterotopia’ a place and spaces, described by Michael Foucault in the text ‘of other spaces’ as ‘non-hegemonic’... a place where alternatives are considered, ‘common sense’ is questioned and business as usual stop for a moment (Land et al, 2014)

In this liminary stage, an individual starts to transform a journey of their daily life into more engagement with the new group. Since Hera started meditating with BTS’s song and intensively learned everything about BTS, she started questioning the ‘common sense’ and the hegemonic value. For example, she said, *“religion taught us good things, Muhammad gave us the example. However, it was a long time ago, but BTS is a real person appearing on this present time and they give us an example of how to live humbly and be kind to others. I turn to BTS because of their value and real action while religion and spiritual books give us text.”*

Start from listening to BTS songs to learning the lyrics, embracing the value are the informants’ baby steps to become ARMY. During this stage they found an alternatives space within BTS that are different from their ‘common sense’ where Hera things BTS is more spiritual because they show real action to be kind. Nining starts to feel that RM, the leader of BTS, has taught her that it is okay to be an independent girl who has ambition, while at the same time, Suga taught her that there is always another dream to achieve if she fails. Nevertheless, Nadhira (27 years old) said *“after being trapped in the corporate world, and I finally actualized my dream to pursue a higher study. I think it is because I absorb BTS values.”*

In a patriarchal culture, girls are told to be submissive and expected to get married and take care of their family at an early age. Nining and Nadhira, both 27 years of age, shared common experiences of being pushed by their family to start thinking about marriage; however, today, they have an alternative space provided by BTS to achieve their dreams.

In this stage, back to the Jan Margry statement, the pilgrims characterized the journey that encountered special objects to acquire spiritual, emotional, or physical healing or benefits, and this is well described through respondents’ stories. The respondents are trying to get to know BTS better by reading books about them; for example, Alin and Hera read books that inspired BTS, such as Carl Jung’s book ‘Map of the Soul’ (BBC, 2019). Meanwhile, Vita, Nining, Nadhira, and Sarah collected albums and BTS merchandises. These objects are part of the emotional and spiritual connection to BTS that brings motivation and inspiration to an individual’s life. The crisis identity expressed by Hera and Nining is also part of the process at this stage.

The Aggregation Stage

The stage when the individual becomes a fully-fledged member of the new group and incorporates the values of the new group. In this context, it is when an individual fully embracing their new identity as BTS ARMY and becomes a member of BTS ARMY. Dal Yong Jin (2021) argued that BTS ARMY has become the trans-national community and build their own cyber-nationalism and within this fandom sub-culture, ARMY shared

identity and values. Eureka Shiqi Wang (2022) on her study on BTS – ARMY in China found that the identity moved the individual and group to make a real action such as attended BTS concerts everywhere in the world while also spending money on charity under the name of BTS.

The value that BTS shares through their music and acts such as love yourself, embracing differences and equality, as well as BTS, act on paying attention to mental health, especially to youth, and their kindness is being embraced and shared between ARMY.

Mutia had mental health issues and tried to kill herself many times. Although she had visited a professional psychiatrist, it did not help her until she found BTS.

“Just when I am on the edge of my life, I found them. Surprisingly, they made me laugh, their lyrics, the music had made me believe that there are 7 people out there who want me to keep on living,” she said

Meanwhile, Feby wrote that BTS inspired her to be brave in taking control of her own life. *“..they give positive influence on how I look at my life it is like I have friends who understand my life when I have trouble in expressing it to other friends.”*

The deep individual impact that respondents received from BTS is the reason they embrace their new identity as BTS-ARMY. Hera no longer felt the need to cover her identity as ARMY, and she celebrates and transforms her new identity together with the community of Bintang Ungu, where Vita joined, established a free pre-school for unfortunate children in Jakarta and Depok.

“Previously, I was trapped in the persona as a leader in the company and a wife as well as a mom in the house. Now, I can say that I am an ARMY, and this is the whole me. It is okay to have a different side of self, but it is still me, and you are you,” said Hera.

Bintang Ungu has become their new group where they can express themselves and applied the value of BTS.

For Alin, it took about three years from the first time she listened to BTS’ song from 2017 to 2020 before embracing her identity as ARMY because she needs to convince herself that BTS is worth being idolized and followed. To date, Alin has used her verified status on X (Twitter) and Instagram to share BTS values.

“At first, friends are being judgmental to me. One friend asked why I changed and why they shared the BTS at all times. From Alin who loves metal music to Kpop. But then, why not! This is my account and I observed the dynamic response of how one identity can change the way people judge you,” said Alin

Once the new identity and values are embraced, informants are moved to have journeys to BTS’s sites. The pilgrimage paid with their own money and spent time, particularly on BTS’ sites where they could celebrate the success of BTS, remembering the struggle and fighting, seeking meaning, support, comfort, and healing, both individually and collectively. The places where they can share spiritual, emotional, or shared suffering with BTS and ARMY.

The first dorm of the BTS in Hanggang was the first place to visit informants and respondents. This place brings an emotional and spiritual journey in which they imagine how hard the struggle of BTS is at the beginning of their career. They also learned to stay humble like BTS, even when you were at the top of the success.

“I have been there two or three times to South Korea, and the first dorm always hits me differently. I can imagine how hard it is to struggle in a very narrow place, one room with seven people living together,” said Vita:

“I was crying in their dorm. It is a small, dumped, ugly, and hilly road. It was a very tough fight for them, and I went to their studio, rotten, dump, and frosted glass. And to see them now, I am amazed how can stay humble when they are so success.” Hera

Feby wrote that she visited historical places of BTS as a true pilgrimage for ARMY *“I feel joy, moved and still could not believe that I was finally there... when I went to a museum that RM once visited, it feels like I am connected to RM *laughing”*

In 2018, Nining went to an abandoned swimming pool at Seoul National University, where BTS was released on stage: prologue, one of the music videos that formed the foundation of The Most Beautiful Moment in Life era in 2015. She said, *“While other people took photos in the gate of SNU, I went there. I do not know how to describe the feeling, but it feels like I am in the same universe as them. BTS is too personal for me. It is like we grow up together.”*

The journey is the pilgrimage, according to Jan Margry, about crossing the geographical or mental border; it is the first place transitional, a rite of passage in order to approach, enter, and experience the sacred. Then, I can conclude that the journey to BTS-related places is the pilgrimage and ARMY entering the magico, emotional, and spiritual transition while doing it, and these places have become sacred from ARMY.

The journey is not necessarily a physical place; the rite of passage is the pilgrimage itself. The journey to finally embrace the identity and shared value changed the ARMY as an individual. The respondents learned to love

themselves, save their lives from mental illness, have the feeling of having best friends to grow with, stay humble, and not give up hope, which are the real impacts of BTS on ARMY's life.

V. CONCLUSION

In modern society, the rite of passage is not only related to the life cycle– birth, marriage, and death. It is also about changing life in a new culture, including being a fandom of BTS, named ARMY. The research found that the journey of becoming a BTS-ARMY follows the rite of passage by Van Gennep. Respondents followed the stages of separation where they felt an outcast of society or family when they found BTS. The next stage is the liminary stage, where they learn to identify themselves as ARMY, the crisis of identity within themselves. The post-liminary is the aggregation stage when an individual embraces and celebrates its new identity as BTS ARMY and no longer worries how society will see them as a fandom.

At each stage, individuals experience the pilgrimage as a journey of spiritualism and magico experience, while not necessarily visiting physically sacred places. The journey of ARMY is a transition that includes the feeling of spiritual and magico experience from despair to hope and from sadness to happiness, and BTS has become a virtual sacred place where they can find comfort and support in life.

Having a physical journey to South Korea for ARMY is a special one that I can argue is a pilgrimage beyond tourism activity. The pilgrim is the ARMY that seeks places related to BTS to acquire spiritual, emotional, and physical healing. Tears and happiness, as well as feelings of pride in BTS, appear during the pilgrimage. The pilgrimage matters to them as the act of celebration and commemorates the struggle of BTS that they can reflect on the struggle of their own life.

These findings have practical implications beyond the research publication, especially for the tourism industry in South Korea and travel agents in Indonesia, on how they can create special packages for BTS Pilgrimage. The findings can also strengthen the relationship between members of BTS ARMY Indonesia to bring impactful movement as the realization of BTS values.

Moreover, this research contributes to the field of pilgrimage studies because it brings a new perspective of pilgrimages from the fandom culture instead of the religious one. Meanwhile, the discussion is also important in bringing about a new understanding of the journey of the identity process of BTS-ARMY and how this identity drives a social movement in real life. Most importantly, the journey of group identity and the movement are all running through digitalization, which is also relevant to the present and future life of society. Hence, the results can contribute to further research on fan studies from passive to participatory and active audiences. Henry Jenkins in his books *Afterword: The Future of Fandom*, argues that fandom is almost entirely embedded in mainstream culture. Hence, it requires an interdisciplinary study and dialogue about business and the intersection of fandom and economics, the transformation of politics by new media and practices, changes in social life, relations, and identities, and the impact on the nature and role of culture. Thus, Jenkins concludes that "fandom is the future" (Gray et al, 2008)

VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank Prof. Dr. Bambang Wibawarta, M.A. and Dr. Ibnu Wahyudi, S.S., M.A as my writing supervisor from Faculty of Humanity, University of Indonesia, and BTS – ARMY in Indonesia.

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