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Pop Spiritualism: The Experience of Superfandom

By Sam Goldberg

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Anthropology Thesis for Pomona & Claremont McKenna Colleges

Readers: Alexandra Lippman, Joanne Randa Nucho

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INTRODUCTION

“Fun fact...I got hit by a car,” Roy, one of my informants, casually told me. The accident had occurred after I had met him at Lady Gaga’s Chromatica Ball last September. Concerned, I asked if he was alright. Roy brushed off my question, that wasn’t the point: he’d injured his left ankle, the same one he was planning to have her lyrics tattooed onto. At the time the car struck him he was holding a Lady Gaga shirt he had bought at the show. He saw the accident as a sign to definitely go ahead with the tattoo. He even told this story with excitement: he’s planning to share it with Lady Gaga when they become friends. Needless to say, Roy is a Lady Gaga superfan.

What creates this behavior and mindset? How does an adult come to view a car accident as a sign he will meet his idol? This ethnography will examine superfans of musical artists, specifically Lady Gaga and BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan or “Beyond the Scene”), to explore the nature of superfandom and the evolution of the parasocial relationship. To unpack this, I explore the research questions: For superfans of musical artists, what meaning do they find in their fandom? What kinds of experiences and behaviors does it stimulate?

What exactly is a ‘superfan’? This paper determines superfandom to be self-proclaimed, but the title generally applies to fans who invest heavily (in time or financially) in a particular artist or group, engage with that artist in a routine way, and have strong positive feelings toward the artist and their music. Both Lady Gaga fans and BTS fans have their own monikers: Little Monsters and BTS ARMY, respectively. The name “Little Monsters” was given to devoted fans by Lady Gaga herself. During a 2010 interview with Larry King “the singer explained the origins of the term. Talking about how she saw her fans behaving at her shows, she said that it appeared to her they were ‘salivating at the mouth,’ that ‘they were rabid,’ and ‘they just behaved like

monsters” (Deflem 127). She began referring to her fans as “little monsters” in an endearing way. In “Lady Gaga Pioneered Online Fandom Culture As We Know It”, Jake Hall says:

“she began calling out to the crowd during her live shows. Giving a whole fandom a nickname of sorts was already commonplace in K-pop, but Gaga was the first to do it on such a grand scale in a western context – using it to describe the way fans would writhe, scream and dance in the pits of her high-octane performances... it created an "us" and "them" narrative. You were either a true Gaga fan, or you weren't.” (Hall “Lady Gaga Pioneered”)

It is interesting Lady Gaga flips the word ‘monster’ to become a label that empowers and unites her community. As the first in western pop to do this she anointed the Little Monsters as true fans, one of her people. While Lady Gaga brought her fans into the fold with a special name, BTS fans took the mission upon themselves.

BTS ARMY stands for “Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth” and is a global network of BTS fans. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on US BTS ARMY exclusively. The US BTS Army is the American chapter of the official fanbase of BTS. While it was not established or regulated by BTS, it is acknowledged by the group as an official fanbase. The name ARMY is fitting as it feels like a regime, a bold statement this paper will unpack later but it is safe to say the ARMY is comprised of dedicated BTS soldiers.

In order to study superfandom, it’s crucial to understand the ever-present ‘parasocial relationships’ between the artists and their fans. The concept of parasocial relationships was first brought into the public sphere in 1956 when psychologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl coined the term “parasocial interaction”. They detailed it as the following:

“Parasocial interaction (PSI) is a phenomenon in which media viewers find themselves involved in an imaginary, one-sided interpersonal interaction with media personalities or performers... They argued viewers act as if they are involved in an actual interpersonal interaction... Although the interaction is one-sided, without mutual development, audience members often feel they are part of the social interaction with the personae and that they know the personae almost as friends” (Adhikari *The SAGE International Encyclopedia*).

When Roy spoke about the friendship he believed he would one day have with Lady Gaga, he was exhibiting a parasocial relationship. These relationships between fans and musical artists are particularly heightened. As Eric C. Wiemer notes, the music industry is “an environment observed to be associated with some of the richest parasocial experiences”, although parasocial relationships can be the result of many media outlets (Wiemer 301).

To understand these parasocial relationships and explore the experience of superfans, this paper explores questions such as: What factors lead someone to superfandom? How do they practice it? Does superfandom include rituals or other aspects of religiosity? What is the nature of a parasocial relationship within superfandom? To dig deeper I examined the spaces in which superfandom is practiced and how superfans engage there. I attended concerts and fan events, conducted interviews with self-proclaimed superfans, and researched activity and behavior within online fan portals and message boards. Additionally I use a number of sources to engage with theory, including but not limited to: Dharma Adhikari’s “The SAGE International Encyclopedia”, Claudio Benzecry’s “The Opera Fanatic”, and Mathieu Deflem’s “Lady Gaga and the Sociology of Fame”.

I argue that superfandom begins as a parasocial relationship between fan and artist, but through a combination of trauma experienced by the fan, music rituals practiced, and the internalization of artist messages, a spiritual subculture of superfandom is built. The driven superfan community then transcends the parasocial and develops an interactive and reciprocal relationship with the artist more closely resembling a ‘real’ relationship. This is significant as it demonstrates how this transformation of the parasocial relationship of fandom enables a culture of ‘giving back’ to the artist and their causes. The result is tangible action reaching far beyond

what the artist could achieve alone. Post-pandemic, it gives insight into why superfandom is on the rise and what both the artist and the superfan stand to gain from the relationship.

METHODS

I attended two live music events to conduct field observations and informal interviews. The first was the Lady Gaga concert on September 10, 2022 at Dodgers Stadium. The concert lasted roughly three hours and was attended by 52,000 people. I conducted observations from around 9 P.M. to 12 A.M. A microphone attached to my jacket recorded the entire time while I occasionally took photos and videos. Concertgoers ranged broadly: parents chaperoning their children, women in their twenties attending with friends, trans and homosexual men attending with partners.

I conducted several informal interviews with attendees during the duration of the event. For informal interviews I had an old “zoom handy” recording device to ensure audio quality. Informal interviews included a gay white couple in their late twenties, a white mother in her early forties who accompanied her young son, two separate Latinx gay males in their twenties, and a group of Latinx women in their early twenties attending together as a friend group. They were all Lady Gaga fans, but not necessarily superfans. By the end of the concert I had obtained the contact information of two self-proclaimed superfans I would later formally interview.

The second event I attended was the Oh!Ddaeng! It’s A Dance Party, a BTS event, on November 3, 2022 at The Federal Bar in Los Angeles. At the time of my research members of the music group BTS began to enlist in the South Korean military, so there were no BTS concerts to attend. Fortunately, through the US BTS ARMY website, I discovered this event. I arrived at around 10 P.M. I attended for roughly two hours and about 100 people were present. The majority of partygoers were women. At the event I conducted an informal interview with a group

of Latinx women in their early twenties, and one formal interview that lasted thirty minutes with a group of three API women, all mothers in their late thirties to early forties.

Outside of these events, to meet superfans I utilized the ‘Snowball Sampling Method’ in which individuals I met at the live music events made introductions to superfans they knew. Two interview participants were also obtained from my own personal network (one is a friend of my mother, the other a friend of my cousin). In total I conducted five formal interviews with a total of seven superfans: three Lady Gaga superfans were interviewed individually over zoom, one BTS superfan was interviewed over zoom, and three BTS superfans were jointly interviewed in person at the Oh!Ddaeng! event. Interviews lasted thirty to sixty minutes each. All formal interviewees were made fully aware of the nature of this research and were required to sign consent forms on behalf of Claremont McKenna’s IRB. Informants’ identities were to remain completely confidential unless an individual explicitly approved the use of their name, which some of my formal interviewees did.

In addition, I conducted online field observations of Lady Gaga and BTS fan sites as well as the artists’ social media pages in which fans are able to post comments. BTS fan sites included the US BTS ARMY website, Weverse (BTS), as well as fan-operated Twitter and Instagram pages. Lady Gaga fan sites included (but were not limited to) Ladygaga.com, the official Little Monsters website, Discord and Instagram pages. Observations were conducted over various times and multiple days. I chose these sites to observe how the fans behave online, the social rules, and interactions both amongst fans themselves and with the artist.

To expose any potential biases, I’d like to disclose a few tentative presuppositions I had going into this ethnography: (1) superfans are obsessed and therefore, to some extent, mentally ill, and (2) superfans become superfans because they are outsiders and are looking for meaning

and community. I made sure to conduct my ethnographic work without framing through these biases, however, it is important to note my initial hypotheses. I'd also like to note that I do wish my sample size was larger to encapsulate more perspectives. At the Lady Gaga concert I mostly interviewed visually transgender or homosexual men, and at the Oh!Ddaeng! BTS event all males I approached claimed they were "there for the girls" so I only had in-depth interviews with females. With so many superfans out there with differing opinions and experiences, the reader should be aware that this paper's conclusions are dependent on localized research and observations. So what 'is' a superfan in a modern context? In order to learn about the superfan experience, and how they are created, I asked the superfans themselves.

MEET MY INFORMANTS - THE SUPERFANS

Sandy (pseudonym) is an old family friend who makes it known that she loves Lady Gaga and considers herself a superfan. Sandy is a white Italian-American woman in her mid-fifties who lives in New Jersey. Like Lady Gaga (who is also Italian-American) she grew up in New York City and was raised Catholic; she and Lady Gaga even attended the same high school (though different graduating classes). Sandy is extremely proud to be Italian and from the tri-state area. She is an executive assistant and estate manager, and was formerly a sales assistant. Throughout a long and messy divorce with her husband she has had to bounce between jobs to stay financially stable for her three children who are now grown. Sandy is an extremely compassionate person who describes herself as a "leader" who always "did her own thing." She listens to Lady Gaga daily, when she works out and is driving. She goes to concerts occasionally. She says of her progression from fan to superfan: "I would say it was more of a gradual development because you know, life is busy. And I was in my forties and I had three little kids

that I was raising by myself. So my life was a little crazy, but I definitely got excited and I used to buy all her music... My poor kids grew up on it in the car rides [laughs]”. Ultimately for Sandy, becoming a superfan had to do with battling depression and overall feelings of loneliness.

“In my early forties, I was starting to go through a bad divorce and my family and marriage was falling apart... I struggled with depression and I tried really hard not to be depressed for my children. But you know, that's a battle sometimes that we lose in life and it's like a little bit of out of our control, right? And I didn't have the resources that I needed to get help. And I remember her biggest single in, I believe it was in 2008, was “Just Dance.” And whenever I felt just lonely and depressed and I would literally put on that song, and I would just dance by myself in my living room when my kids were upstairs, probably sleeping already. So that song means a lot to me”.

She admired the fact that Lady Gaga preaches about not feeling alone as a part of a marginalized community. She commented that part of her joy of being a Lady Gaga superfan came from learning more about the LGBTQ+ community that she had previously felt disconnected from, and being able to empathize with their struggles in a new way. Sandy was the only person I interviewed who was a superfan prior to the 2020 pandemic (she's been a fan since 2007). Though Sandy clearly loves Lady Gaga, she did not demonstrate or state any fantasy of being in a personal relationship with her.

Ely is a gay black man in his late twenties from New York, currently living in Los Angeles. I met Ely at the Lady Gaga concert. He is a professional dancer and claims he knows dancers in Lady Gaga's network. As a superfan, he aspires to be one of her dancers one day. He is assertive that he will be friends with Lady Gaga in the future. Ely claimed that Lady Gaga helped him get through a miserable high school experience:

“[Lady Gaga's] music has gotten me through a lot of rough times. If I'm being blatantly honest, I tried to commit suicide back like in 2012. And her music just lifted me up. And I'm a dancer, so I would learn all of her choreography, all of the dance moves. I'd be in my room for hours learning it... I remember being in high school and just, like, having horrible days, but coming home and just blasting “Telephone” and by the end of that

three minutes, I would feel so much better and, like, so relieved... I would tell her how much she saved my life”.

Ely said he went from fan to superfan when he had too much spare time during the pandemic and used it to memorize the dance moves from her latest album “Chromatica”. He listens to Lady Gaga at home, mostly in the shower. He has a special playlist that is mostly Lady Gaga songs. He resonates with her support of the gay community, positive messaging, and her ambition and talent.

Roy (pseudonym) is a gay white male in his early twenties whom I met at the Lady Gaga concert. He is from Queens, New York but currently attends college in Los Angeles as a musical theater major and considers himself a musician and actor. He is a superfan of Lady Gaga and listens to her music at the gym and on most nights. Roy has known about Lady Gaga since he was seven years old, but the pandemic gave him time to become a superfan. Prior to COVID-19, he was estranged from both his parents for a variety of reasons, including his homosexuality. Lady Gaga’s music helped him to connect to his feelings at that time.

“Most people [chuckles], they’re like ‘my life was great before COVID and COVID messed it up’. For me, it was the opposite. My life wasn't the best before COVID. I wasn't living it up. I had a strained relationship with my mom and my dad. And that song [“1000 Doves”] I really connected with that because that reminded me of that time period and what I was feeling and what I was going through and now things are a lot better between my parents and I. Our relationship with each other has healed, we've made it out on the other side of that tunnel and actually I did a cover of that song in one of my classes.”

Roy likes that Lady Gaga is a supporter of the gay community. He resonates with her positive messaging to love oneself no matter their flaws and that she is “sassy” like him. He identifies with the fact that she is from New York, and a musician and actor like he is. Roy was very enthusiastic when he spoke but was self-critical, often correcting himself and asking if things

were “weird” to say. Roy firmly believes that he will be personal friends with Lady Gaga one day.

Jane is an Asian-American woman in her early thirties who I was introduced to by my cousin and is a BTS superfan. She works in technology at a large multinational financial services firm. Her family is from China, England and the United States, but Jane was raised in Wisconsin and Florida and now resides in New York City. She claimed that being from a few different continents made her question where her home was and it ended up being a question she had to answer by herself. She said that she had to make a home wherever she was, leaving her feeling displaced and lacking a community to ground her identity. A lot of her friendships became long-distance (communicating virtually) and it was difficult to have consistent community support around her as she was changing locations so often. Interestingly, when asked how she would describe her relationship to BTS, she likened them to her younger brothers abroad, a distant friend, or a pen pal. Jane made it very clear that she, in no way, confused it for a ‘real’ relationship. Jane was raised in a traditional Asian-American household where she claimed unrealistic expectations of perfection were forced upon her and contributed to her low self-esteem. She said, “my parents were just so focused on perfect grades, perfect clothing, perfect everything. And then, you can't be fat or whatever, like every single little thing has to be perfect. But then sometimes that doesn't let the child really get to who they truly are”. Jane stated that she actually prefers American and British music, but “there’s something about it [BTS] that’s just so positive.” She listens to BTS daily, weekly when she is very busy, and engages in weekly BTS listening parties with her friends either in person or on zoom.

Jane became a superfan in 2021 when she was struggling with the isolation and desperation of the pandemic. She said her progression from fan to superfan was “gradual, but quick”:

“I was just sick with my COVID vaccine one day and I was watching YouTube videos. And I was like, wow, these people were really, really good at dancing. I couldn't even tell them apart for months. But then when I started collecting all the albums, and really going to events with my friends and talking more deeply about the message that they're carrying and how much it has changed my life, that's when I realized that it was really something that was really important”.

Jane liked BTS' positive messages. Jane said she became a superfan because it was her coping mechanism when feeling alone during the lockdown. The pandemic “definitely strengthened” her relationship to the group:

“I don't know if there was still a quarantine exactly but it's definitely at the tail end of things where there wasn't as much going on outside of just being in my house. And so I had more time to get into it. And also I don't think I was lonely where I couldn't be with people, but it was just a weird place in my life where I was living alone, and spending a lot of time alone. And because of that I needed like, friendship, and it was almost like a substitute for real life friends in my life who were sitting in my room at the time, and that was because of COVID”.

Jane mentioned BTS' message of supporting an individual through self-acceptance. BTS generally convey that one should not feel alone or bad, that their fans have the inner power and love to get through whatever hardship they are facing. (The US BTS ARMY fan page is flooded with posts and comments reflecting the group's positivity, encouraging fans to spread this message. More on this in the online field research observations.) She also resonates with BTS because they are a positive Asian influence, especially at a time of increased API hate crimes prevalent during the pandemic. Although she was certainly passionate about them, like Sandy she did not fantasize about knowing them personally. Jane had a positive view of fandom for herself but was more pessimistic about fandom for others, stating that she found superfandom to be an unhealthy practice for some.

Julie, Rebecca, and Alice (pseudonyms) are all Asian-American (API) women and consider themselves extreme BTS superfans. I encountered them on a night out together at the Oh!Ddaeng! event. All three women live in Los Angeles and were introduced to BTS through their kids. When I interviewed them jointly, the group claimed they had been friends before BTS but that BTS dramatically strengthened their bond.

Julie was the newest BTS superfan, starting in the summer of 2021. Like the others, she first began listening to BTS through her kids and then was drawn in by the songs and the meaning she found from them:

“My kids let me listen to “Life Goes On” from the BE album. That was last summer and a really great, great song. But then right after that, I just kind of dove deep into really listening and translating into English all of their songs. And it's so poetic. It's very poetic, very deep, very relatable. And then my friends and I did the livestream of the Korea BE concert. So we stayed up until 2 A.M., went until 4 or 5 A.M. watching it. And that was it. After that I'm like, I gotta go to a live concert. That was it”.

Julie says BTS “literally is my medicine.” Listening to BTS music seemed to be a mainstay in her life currently: “There's not been a single day [without listening to BTS]. So it's been over 365 days now where I have listened to BTS. So every day, maybe all day in my ear, in the car, in the shower. I mean, it's kind of an addiction. It's kind of an obsession.”

Alice has been a superfan since late 2020 or early 2021. She talked about her superfandom as a means of personal identity: “For me it's actually finding myself because when you get married, when you have kids, to be your best you assume the best solution is to throw yourself into it. And you kinda forget who you are as a person. So when I started listening to BTS, I was like shit, I got stuff I can separate from my husband and my kids. So I'm just finding myself again, that's my main thing”. Despite their fervent superfandom, in the BTS community Alice and Julie would be referred to as “baby ARMY” as they have been fans for less than two years (a commonly accepted credential within the community).

Of the three, Rebecca has been a superfan for the longest time and the closest to what the BTS community would call “veteran ARMY”. In the interview she shared the most ARMY expertise, spoke the most about the hierarchy of fans within the ARMY and taught me ARMY vernacular. She was surprised to run into Julie and Alice at the event: “We know each other, but we happen to just see each other here...And that's the beauty of it. Where it's like, you know, especially post-pandemic, this is a... real life opportunity”. All three women were incredibly enthusiastic when talking about BTS, making bold claims like “the BTS fanbase tripled during the pandemic”. Everything they had to say about BTS and its community was exceedingly positive.

SPACES OF SUPERFANDOM

To analyze the experience of superfandom, I turned to the various spaces within which fandom operates. In Claudio Benzecry’s book “The Opera Fanatic : Ethnography of an Obsession” he describes

“three diverse settings in which people learn about opera. One type is informal. It involves the surrounding, nonmusical moments of the performance: ticket and door lines, intermissions, bus trips to other opera houses. A second kind is more formal, including as it does classes, lectures, and conferences. A third kind takes place at the opera house as novices follow the lead of older fans who either clap, sit silently, or boo, indicating the etiquette and the appropriate moments for each action” (Benzecry 67).

This is interesting to me because of how locations lend themselves to the ritual of opera; it made me think about how spaces played a role with superfans of Lady Gaga and BTS and, like Benzecry, I break these spaces down into formal and informal categories, public and private, each serving different functions of fandom. The public spaces I analyze are the Lady Gaga concert (formal) and the Oh!Ddaeng! BTS dance party (informal). Private spaces include those experienced individually (like the shower or the car) and communally (online fan forums).



The Lady Gaga concert at Dodger Stadium was bursting with energy. It felt chaotic, buzzing, and grandiose at such a large venue that was practically sold-out. It was extremely crowded and hot. My general impressions were that the vibe of the concert was extremely welcoming and liberating. Reactions of the crowd in my immediate vicinity were mixed, varying from constant dancing and shouting of lyrics to sitting down and enjoying the show. There was a group of four girls behind me that were dancing non-stop and screaming every single lyric. Attendees of the concert portrayed a wider spectrum of demographics than I initially expected. The racial composition of the crowd was broken down in this order from most represented to least: Latinx, Caucasian, Asian, Black. (It is important to note that there were 52,000 people at this concert and I obviously could not see everyone present; this ratio is an educated guess based on my observations.) There were people of all ages, from young children to adults in their late fifties, but most appeared to range from teens to thirties. The gender ratio seemed even. Most men I observed appeared to be trans, gay, or accompanying a family member.

Just as there was a large variety in demographics of attendees, there was a large variety of apparel worn. While some fans were in a casual shirt and jeans, a couple of stylistic themes

dominated: Lady Gaga merchandise and extravagant outfits. It was apparent these fans dressed for the event; their outfits screamed ‘hey, look at me’ and were not normal street attire. Outfits included flashy/glossy items, BDSM gear, a lot of pink, one female in a bright and feathery pink outfit, men in tank-tops and netted clothing (including fishnet tights). One young Latinx man had dyed purple hair. Another Latinx man wore a pink top exposing his stomach, its bottom half made of fishnet lacing; he also wore black pants with a silver chain attached and bright pink boots to match the top. Some attendees had ‘Phantom of the Opera’ type masks to match one that Lady Gaga had worn in the past. In this space, ‘extra’ outfits didn’t feel so strange.



Glowing wristbands were distributed to concertgoers. The wristbands were in sync with each other and lit up in different colors to match the music (I’m pretty certain they were distributed at a booth by concert organizers). Synchronization of the lights in the dark had a large unifying presence at the concert, making the audience a part of the visual entertainment. This connected the audience to each other, to the artist, and to the event; something they were a part of, not just watching.

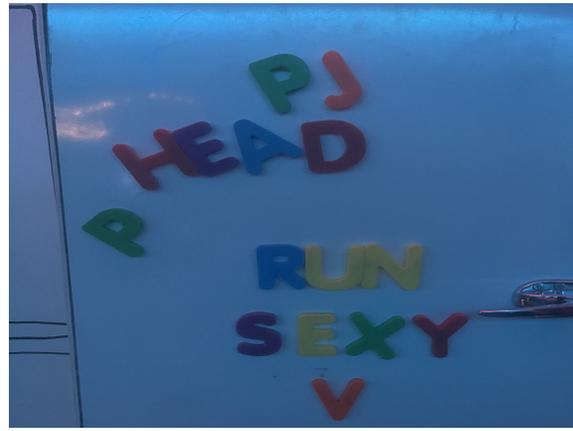
The concert atmosphere was ceremonial and celebratory. The stage lit up in every color but when the stage lights and crowd lights went white, it reminded me of candles. The concert ended with fireworks (yellow, white, red, and green). The wide spectrum of colors reminded me

of the gay pride rainbow, using them together in a way that created joy, connectedness, and had a grandiose and ceremonial feel. In my opinion, the atmosphere of the concert was overwhelmingly positive, inclusive, and felt special.



Lady Gaga's visual style was bold and seemed intended to intimidate. Multiple costumes included large and colorful shoulder-pads, adding size to her frame. Big dance moves also exaggerated her size. Every outfit Lady Gaga wore had a large component of black in it. One costume was a black leather 'bondage' cop uniform; another was a skintight lacy black outfit with leather around the neck. Her hair was platinum blonde, she wore black eyeliner and lipstick. At one point Lady Gaga wore long claws and did her iconic "Paws up" hand gesture (explained later); fans reached back at her.

Lady Gaga's performance included messaging to connect with the crowd. Messages alternated between personally empowering and politically mobilizing. She spoke harshly on overturning Roe v Wade. She constantly spoke to the crowd, whether it was a speech or screaming to hype up the audience. At one point during her "Poker Face" performance she ordered the crowd, "Now scream!" and let out a hype-inducing passionate moan.



The next formal setting I observed was the **Oh!Ddaeng! BTS dance party**, held in a bar venue that consisted of a big square walkaround on the interior with the bar in the center. There was an exterior area that felt indoors but had no ceiling. It was a relieving space as the air was cooler compared to the densely packed dance floor. Flashing lights, alternating many colors, splashed the room in colorful hues. BTS music was playing loudly. The event required attendees to be twenty-one years old to enter but my underage sister was able to sneak in, so it is likely that this was the case for any other underage attendees. Racial composition from most to least was Asian, White, and Latinx people. There were very few Black people. The gender ratio skewed female, approximately forty:sixty or thirty:seventy (M:F). While the space had a youthful tone to it, the age range seemed to be late teens to late forties.

Attire was split into two themes: costumes and clubbing attire. Many individuals, including one whom I interviewed (Julie), wore an outfit of their favorite BTS member. Others were dressed in what I describe as anime style clothing such as Pokémon or Hatsune Miku styled clothing. The majority of people were dressed relatively casually but looked well put together. It looked like they were going out to a nice nightclub, which this venue essentially was.



I felt the space was energetic, approachable, and had an atmosphere of acceptance. People were mostly in groups of six but almost no one was alone. The dance room was crowded with lots of people dancing, while in the exterior area, small groups were decompressing. Most people seemed to know the lyrics of the songs and sang along. I was particularly aware of people singing along as, prior to the event, I had been doing online research and found a section of the US BTS ARMY website called ‘fanchants’ (I will further unpack fanchants later).

Next I turned to where most fans meet up in today’s culture: online. I began with **Lady Gaga online fansites**. I engaged with a variety of different fan pages and forums including websites specifically made for Lady Gaga by Lady Gaga, and smaller communities on Twitter, Discord, and Instagram. Most sites and posts seemed to have little recent engagement, with few comments or likes. A lot of sites were inactive or had no posts in over a year, leading me to believe that the once-strong online community (according to researcher Matthieu Deflem who

wrote that the Little Monsters participate “actively in online forums and on social networking sites, setting up specialized fan websites”) has fizzled out.



Demetria Stephanie @Demetrialegs

10 months ago

@mars_palacio Oh my!!!! 😊😊 That's so gorgeous artwork!!!! 🎨🖌️

♥️ 3 • Reply

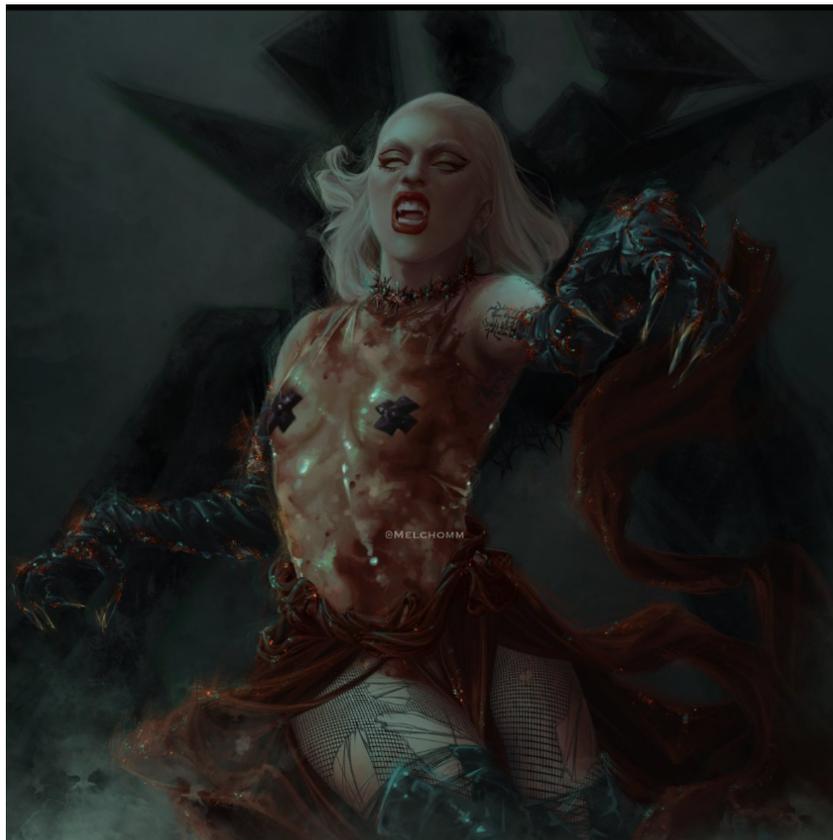


Marciano Palácio @mars_palacio

9 months ago

@Demetrialegs thank you so much! 💜

♥️ 1 • Reply



The activity I did observe across the sites, however, included mostly posts of fan art and merchandise for sale from unofficial sites (often targeted towards gay men with items like hot pink jock-straps). Some fans posted personal thoughts, expressing their feelings and using the community for solace. As interview participants had reported they engaged in fandom through their personal social media, with little activity in the fan sites I moved to Twitter. Examining Twitter engagement around the topic of Lady Gaga, it was somewhat impossible to differentiate long-time fans from new fans or non-fans in the comments. This makes it hard for fans to know who they are talking to, and was in stark contrast to BTS fans where there was a clear sense of fan hierarchy (more on this to follow).

I then visited Ladygaga.com, the official website to promote her music, content, videos, and merchandise. Quickly reviewing it I observed there was no space for fan engagement. There's a reason for this: Lady Gaga was one of the first artists to create her own online social platform for fans, littlemonsters.com, and so fan communications live there. Again, naming her fans achieved unity, this time online:

“it grouped them all together in a way that made sense online. For a generation of kids who existed on the internet, being a Little Monster meant more than going to a few gigs. It meant having a support network of like-minded people from around the world that you could interact with, like an extended family. Finally, there was a name for all the people who spent their waking hours immersed in the online world of Lady Gaga” (Hall “Lady Gaga Pioneered”).

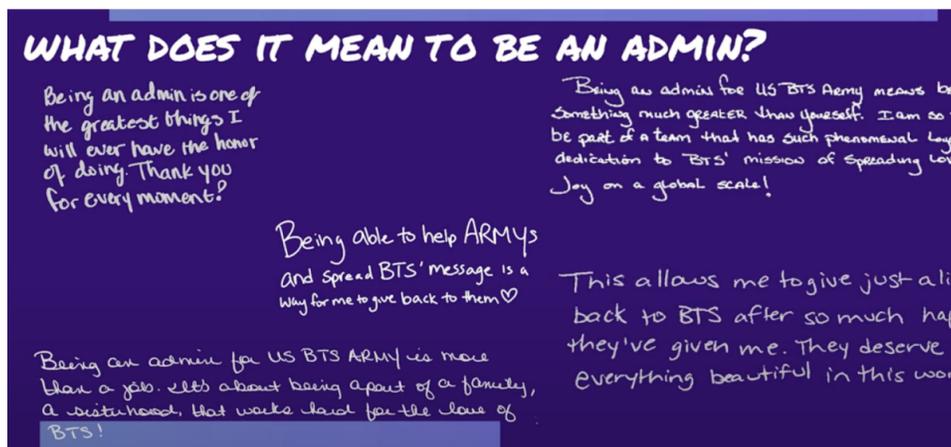
It wasn't enough to listen to Lady Gaga and attend a few events to be a 'true' Lady Gaga fan; to be a true Little Monster now required online dedication to her, through her own site, as well. At the time of Hall's writing, this official online fan network was successful: “The site [littlemonsters.com] has been used by Lady Gaga to reach out to her fans... By April 2016, littlemonsters.com had almost 1 million registered users” (Deflem 111). It was noted that Lady Gaga herself would engage with fans there, most likely driving fan usership for the opportunity

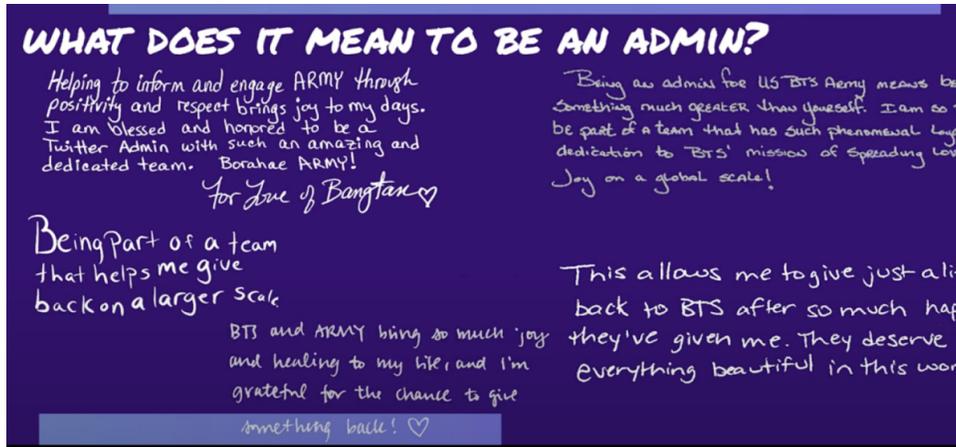
to potentially talk online with their idol. While this may have been the case in the 2010's, my research contrasted the strength of the community spoken about in academia at the time. I observed that littlemonsters.com was active with some users, but there was very little interaction; dialogue in posts felt non-conversational. The site does not seem up to date, not surprising given that all of my Lady Gaga informants had either never heard of the website or used it. This either suggests that her fans have evolved in how they connect online, or her popularity has waned as she's transitioned from a focus on music to acting and selling makeup.

Searching for a central fan hub currently in use, I went to Ladygaganow.net. Included on the website was a link to an associated Discord forum. On the Discord page, the general chat had few active people; all seemed to have some familiarity with each other. This page felt like a space to speak your mind, speak about Lady Gaga, and share interesting Lady Gaga content. While most discourse was about Lady Gaga, there were specific tabs devoted to other topics such as "movie/tv" and "gaming". These tabs included no mention of Lady Gaga whatsoever but still existed on a Lady Gaga fandom Discord. This highlights the nature of the community in that it connects people through Lady Gaga but not necessarily for Lady Gaga. This demonstrates diminishing online frenzy for her, at least at the moment and especially in comparison to what I witnessed elsewhere on fan pages for other artists. Even the "music" tab had little information about Lady Gaga and was more of a space to share music with others in the community.

I focused my **BTS online fansite** research on the US BTS ARMY site and the virtual chat cafe Weverse. For both of these sites, I was solely an observer and did not participate in the chats. The US BTS ARMY is a non-profit organization, so its website's comprehensiveness and almost corporate-like nature was surprising. Immediately once on the site it looks incredibly intricate with countless different tabs, links, and information. I began with the "About Us" page.

The first thing that appeared was a “Happy 7th Anniversary to US BTS ARMY” video. The video narrator says that both BTS and ARMY have “had to face discrimination, being mocked and ridiculed. We have gone through a lot together. Despite the rocky road, we wouldn’t change it for anything in the world”. Onscreen appeared the words “not enough English”, “xenophobia”, and “toxic masculinity”. These comments seem to be something that would be directed towards the band BTS themselves, however the video makes it seem as if these comments are a personal attack on the fans. Perhaps this portrays the fans’ extreme sense of identification with the band. Also included in the video are testimonials on the impact being an admin has on these volunteers. Admins run the website and, according to the posted requirements, take on a time-consuming role that is unpaid (“Rules and Expectations” stated admins are required to be online at least two to six hours per day without any compensation). All comments on being an admin were overwhelmingly positive. Many said it gave them a sense of purpose and that interacting with the community had been life-changing. The following quote demonstrates the tone of many of the admin responses: “Being an admin is one of the greatest things I will ever have the honor of doing. Thank you for every moment!” This highlights the importance that BTS and being an admin has on this user. It feels like this admin believes they are engaging in a noble cause.





After concluding the video, the “About Us” page listed some biographical information. The US ARMY was founded on April 28, 2014 (BTS has been around since 2013 but did not have a large presence in the US at that time). The page listed their mission statement as “to inspire, celebrate and spread BTS’ message of love and acceptance to ARMY and any other who cross our path”. This language reminded me of a religious missionary statement. There was a tab titled “Violation of Fan Club Rules” which listed pages full of ways one could violate their ethics as well as the repercussions for doing so. It was clear the administrators of the website had strict expectations for particular etiquette. There was even an entire tab called “ARMY Etiquette”. This section gives viewers access to really detailed information and clearly a lot of thought had gone into it. Guideline statements such as “do not engage in other improper and inappropriate actions unbecoming of a fan or that which may be seen in a negative light by the fandom” did not feel like standard cut-and-copied forum regulations, but like they had been devised particularly for the BTS community. Though ‘etiquette’ sounds like behavioral standards, some of the guidelines listed were actual laws: “do not stalk anyone and do not hurt BTS mentally or physically.”

The “ARMY Dictionary” portion was essentially an expansive compilation of quotes from BTS that were then coined as terms by the community. These quotes were likely off-hand

comments not intended for beyond the scope of the conversation they were said in. An example of a popular phrase is “I Purple You”, which is meant to mean ‘I love you’ as purple is the last color of the rainbow and to the BTS community symbolizes love (I heard this phrase used in a formal interview). This tab immortalizes BTS’ words, making it as though their words are sacred, something to be remembered. By using ARMY terminology it also gives the fan a sense that there is a great mobilization they are a part of.

The tab “Latest Updates” mostly included promotion for new songs, events, and videos (music videos and their reality TV show). One post commented on the oldest BTS member, Jin, enlisting in the South Korean military. I was surprised by this, as much of the website did not address the subject even though it was really big news at the time. Also under the “BTS Updates” was a tab called “Merch Information”. It included DVDs/Blue-rays, a cookbook, keychains, postcards, posters and stickers, magazines, photo-folios, and special editions of singles and projects on vinyl, CD or cassette tapes. These were only the recent merchandise items, there were more in earlier years. Under a different tab titled “Music”, there is a subsection called “Stream and Purchase Guide” where they literally instruct viewers on how to stream a song. It is as if they don’t want to miss out on any fans, including the non tech-savvy. I’m not sure who this is helpful for but it is, in my opinion, unusual to have something as rudimentary as this on the website.

Under “The Army Hub” there was a tab called “Concert Survival Checklist” that details all the things one could possibly need when attending a BTS concert. This includes water, a “cute/cool/chill outfit”, ticket & ID, and snacks. I had two reactions to this checklist: on the one hand, it once again felt like they were holding the fans’ hands through a simple process and, on the other, it felt like a checklist for going off to some sort of bootcamp.

a printable survival checklist for ARMY

feel free to cut it out

we hope this helps!

download the BTS official lightstick APP

on concert day, sync your lightstick with the APP via "concert mode" and enjoy the light show during the concert

only compatible with the ver. 3 & MOTS SE lightsticks

approved stadium bag size

12" x 6" x 12" Clear Bag (plastic, vinyl or PVC)

1 Gallon Plastic Freezer Bag

Small Clutch Bags (may not be larger than 4" X 6")

please see venue's website for more info

FOR ARMY concert survival checklist

necessities

- ticket & ID
very important! if you have multiple days, make sure the date corresponds to the right concert day, you will need ID to prove the ticket is yours
- face mask
due to COVID-19, face masks are required for venue entry
for more info visit the official ticketing & venue's website
- cute/cool/chill outfit
make sure to check the weather & be comfy! (bring extras if needed)
- ARMY bomb light stick
don't forget extra AAA batteries just in case! when passing TSA, please use the term "light stick"
- credit/debit card
gotta get that merch & just in case you get hungry and need food! please note cash might not be accepted at the venue
- water
*although venues don't allow you to bring in water, if you're going to be there for the day, **make sure to stay hydrated!***
- power bank
gotta keep that phone charged; especially in case of emergencies
- bag / clear bag
to carry your necessities please note that stadiums such as soft, rose bowl, soldier field, and metlife have implemented a clear bag policy; please see venue's website for more info
- *proof of vaccination OR negative COVID test result
IF REQUIRED BY VENUE, fans may need to provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours prior to entering the venue, OR be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 (at least two weeks after final dose) and provide documentation showing proof of immunisation
for more info visit the official ticketing & venue's website

notes

optional

- portable battery charger
out all day? bring this so you can charge your phone throughout the day!
- sunscreen
protect yourself from getting sunburnt, especially when you're out all day!
- hand sanitizer
defend from germs
- medication (tylenol, etc)
in case of emergencies; if you're getting headaches/not feeling well
- snacks
this is very important especially if you'll be at the venue all day; don't starve yourself! please note snacks may not be allowed inside the venue
- cheering slogan/sign
make sure they're not too big so that it won't block any fans' views
- fanchants
study your fanchants! bring a physical copy of your fav fanchants, or better yet, a digital copy with you to practice!*

Within “The ARMY Hub” there was also a tab called “Fanchants”. This section gives the lyrics to most of BTS’ songs and highlights in yellow the lyrics where fans are supposed to sing along. Most fanchants were created by US BTS ARMY but there were also some made by individual fans. Fanchants, observed in tandem with the large number of people at the Oh!Ddaeng! event that knew song lyrics, shone light on the engagement of the BTS community. Similar to the checklist and instructions on how to stream a song, it felt to me like the ARMY put themselves in a role of authority to educate and engage the fans.

The US BTS ARMY website felt overwhelmingly positive with little to no room for negativity. One section was inarguably positive: the “Love Myself Campaign”. This campaign is one of BTS’ forms of philanthropy, which donates to UNICEF to end violence and ensure children safe lives. The BTS community has been involved for several years and released “Kakaotalk Stickers” as part of the promotion.



Weverse is a website made for fans to interact with primarily artists but additionally other fans, acting as a sort of virtual chat cafe. The website was relatively plain with a clean simple design. There were four tabs to click on at the top of the BTS chatroom page: (1) Feed, (2) Artist, (3) Media, and (4) LIVE. Under the “Feed” tab, there were a flurry of languages amongst the different posts. The most common language was Korean, some were in English, and some were even in Spanish. Fortunately, most posts had a button next to them to translate the language. The colorful fan posts of BTS added flair to the plain website with cool photos and videos of the band. Amongst the fan posts in the Feed section, I identified four categories, or types, of posts: (1) diary-esque self-expression - some of them are related to the band and others are completely personal, (2) fan-girling over the ‘cuteness’ of BTS, (3) promotion for BTS and voting for them for various music awards, and (4) talking about BTS members entering the South Korean Army. The page was extremely active; every minute I refreshed the page there would be several new posts. In fact, Weverse reports that there are 18 million members of the BTS Weverse page. While fans claimed that this was a space to interact with the artist, it felt like more of a social forum to post anonymously and get interaction from other fans.

purplemuhly
10. 23. 12:26

just pure sadness and anxiety...

< 3 replies

trisha
10. 23. 12:27

same. what makes you feel like this?

🔍 3

purplemuhly

10. 23. 12:33

thank you.

but I guess you got a greater problem since you are battling with yourself. I am hoping you'll win over sadness.

🔍

trisha

10. 23. 12:31

talk back the same insensitive way or try to focus on something else to feel less bad just me, myself and my life in general.

🔍

purplemuhly

10. 23. 12:28

an insensitive human being is causing me this. and you?

박지미나
10. 23. 12:27

Darling Jiminie ♡~🥰

I think you're sleeping right now I want to be with you so that I can see you sleeping I want to hug you and sleep all night

I have school tomorrow and I haven't slept yet. I really need you

I miss you at this hour. I miss you every time in my life



NellieL
10. 23. 12:26

Where are all the ARMYs who watched the online concert on October 15th? Where are these 40 million people? Why don't you vote for our guys? We are already 300,000 votes behind! Please ARMY vote! It does not take a lot of time. BTS has been making us happy for so many years. And we just need to give them -10 minutes once a day! Create new accounts, ask your loved ones! If the gap is not closed in the next 3-4 days, BTS will lose!!! Voting on idolplus.com

[Link]

아이돌플러스

<http://idolplus.com> 🧑🏻💜🧑🏻💜

anayongi
10. 23. 12:25

i am feeling alone

I asked my family to go and take rest but now I'm feeling alone here

I'm given most special room in whole hospital but still its not good because I am scared

I texted my sister but she has a test so she can't talk I have watched all the videos of bts and every

I'll sleep soon because no one is here to talk I am missing two people soo much (can't mention their

they both cannot be with me actually

its really hurting like crazy

I have to say many things but I can't





Ceparates
10. 23. 12:27

[#yettocome_on_weverse_live](#) replay

I wanted to tell BTS and Weverse thank you for the replay. Although it still had some issues, it filled the void that layed in my heart from the original failed stream. It gave me some closure as I had taken the hit and knew that it was an event that I did not want to miss. Even the loss of sleep and irritating my husband was well worth it!

BTS no matter what the future brings I hope that each of you are happy, that is really what matters to me. As I have grown to love each of you. You have so much more life to live and YOUR BEST IS YET TO COME especially in your personal lives. Stay strong, take care!

💜BTS💜🇺🇸ALWAYS PROUD OF YOU!💜

Weverse you have renewed my faith in your service a bit and I will stay aboard your app. and active...



ARMY!

Did you all see the amazing concept photo of Jin uploaded just now? I'm about to faint from the unexpected beauty attack 🤩

↳Do everything you can to get back up and see Seokjin's solo album

Where can I see such a handsome astronaut?! 🤩

Where in the universe can I meet the worldwide handsome superstar?! 🤩

The first concept photo of Jin's solo single!

Let's go see it again! 🤩

These posts share both positive and negative emotions. On the one hand, fans demonstrated a supportive and interactive community, and showed love for each other and BTS. On the other, it is clear that many individuals in the community are in a dark place, a theme that arose in my interviews. For instance, user “purplemuhly” stated in a post “just pure sadness and anxiety”. Another user, “trisha 🤘💜”, responded they were feeling the same and offered support (see screenshot). A school girl with the Korean username mentions “Darling Jiminie ♡~🥺 I think you’re sleeping right now I want to be with you so that I can see you sleeping I want to hug you and sleep all night”. This post shows an individual’s fantasized intimacy with BTS member Jimin and raises the question of whether this poster intended for Jimin to see this (respondents stated they go to Weverse to directly interact with BTS) or if it served as more of a

“dear diary” entry. Whether positive or negative in nature, there was a common theme that posts were emotive and intense.

Out of my informants, Julie, Rebecca and Alice stated they engaged in Weverse. Interestingly Julie noted, “we do use Weverse. Instagram is probably the main connection for all of us... the biggest thing with Weverse, we don't really go on there to chat with each other more. So it's to chat with the idols”. It is interesting that she reports using Weverse for what it is intended for (chatting with idols) when my observation of the site made it appear as if it operated for fans to communicate with each other anonymously. It seemed as though most of their online interactions were not on Weverse, however. Julie summarized her online engagement by stating “we have millions of chats. I literally have like eight different chats with different groups of BTS ARMY friends.” The three BTS superfans explained how being a BTS superfan online is “all-encompassing”, due to algorithms on Instagram and TikTok (an unprecedented technology).

Alice: “You don't even know you're going down a rabbit hole until a month later.”

Julie: “There's no turning back. I always tell people once you're just a little bit in and you start to understand, there's no turning back. For life, that's what I always say, for life.”

Alice: “Your YouTube algorithm has changed forever.”

Rebecca: “Our Instagram algorithm has changed. It's very all encompassing. It engulfs your life. And we were home, right? 2020, 2021... Nothing but time. They [BTS] worked so hard over the pandemic. They were just pumping out content, connecting. And so I think it was very pivotal for ARMY like us to connect with them at this particular time.”

Usually when someone says that something engulfs their life, it has a negative connotation. But Rebecca and her friends were very enthusiastic about being automatically bombarded by content as a result of the algorithms. Social media establishes further connection to idols and their communities and plays a significant role in strengthening and reinforcing superfandom.

Finally, I turned to **private listening spaces (such as the home, car, or shower)**. I asked all of my informants where they listened to their favorite artist and, while there are some exceptions, responses overwhelmingly reported private spaces. These included the shower, the

car, or even the ‘private’ space of headphones with noise cancellation (at the gym). Sandy listens to Lady Gaga music when she works out and in the car. “I listen to her probably four times a week, let's say, okay, so daily”. When I asked Julie if she listens to BTS at any specific time and how frequently, she responded by saying that the better question would be “Is there ever a moment that she isn’t listening to them?”. She mentioned that she listens to BTS in the shower, but clarified that her listening is not bound to a specific place or time, but rather that it is an all throughout the day experience, everyday. All of these spaces are special locations where the individual is in control of the space and free to act differently than they normally would, singing or playing songs as loud as they want and expressing their love for the artist as passionately as they want. Ely beautifully described this phenomena by saying:

“I think the shower is like an intimate time and also I've learned to really love having time with myself. And the shower is perfect because no one's in the bathroom with you. It's a private place and the acoustics are pretty, usually pretty good in the bathroom, so you can sing pretty well, and it's just speaker full blast and just like, do it. I always pictured as a kid, anytime I was in the shower, that I was on the stage”.

Practicing fandom in these types of private spaces is interesting in comparison to engaging in social networking sites; while being a fan online means engaging with others and both sharing and consuming content, listening to music in a private space seemed to be all about consumption (of the music) and internalization.

WHAT SUPERFANS SEE REFLECTED IN THEIR IDOLS

So what is it about the artists that regularly draw superfans into these spaces? All three Lady Gaga superfans identified with personal attributes of the artist. All were originally from New York, but Sandy showed a particular pride that she associated with her hometown and roots. Sandy loved the fact that, like herself, Lady Gaga was Italian-American and grew up in the same

area. Sandy stated that identifying with Lady Gaga's background, as well Lady Gaga's positive messaging, were huge factors in her becoming a superfan:

“I love the fact that she's Italian because I'm Italian, and I love being Italian. And I think it's important to support your kind of people. You know, I don't know... I'm a big believer in that. And I also think that her background is very similar to my background. She grew up in Brooklyn. I grew up in Lower East Side. She went to Catholic school, she was raised a Catholic and her parents are, I believe, first generation in New York. Her dad owns a restaurant, it's just like my kind of upbringing. So there's a lot of things about her that I connect with. And I think that was the beginning part of why I was even attracted to her”.

Like Sandy, Roy also mentioned Lady Gaga being from New York although the attributes he responded to most differed from there. Both Roy and Ely resonated strongly with Lady Gaga because they saw themselves in Lady Gaga's personality, artistry and dance skills. Roy mentioned Lady Gaga being “sassy” like him, he felt an alliance with her in that way as well as the fact that they are both performers. Similarly, Ely referenced a kinship in being a dancer like Lady Gaga is. He even attended a dance workshop with Lady Gaga's choreographer who was teaching her dance moves: “My dream was to dance for Lady Gaga... I danced my whole life. I was like, that's what I want to do.” As mentioned earlier, Roy and Ely both felt so strongly about their compatibility with Lady Gaga that each believed they would one day have a personal relationship with her.

Lady Gaga superfans also mentioned that her liberated, unapologetic authenticity encourages them to be their authentic selves. When asked why Lady Gaga resonated with him, Ely mentioned her authenticity and freedom to be herself: “Gaga was weird... She was wearing all these crazy things but she was different and she was herself and that's what it is. And the thing I love about her music is that her music is always kind of for her. She's a very authentic artist... The thing about Gaga is that she helped me be able to be me... there's times where I didn't want to act feminine or those times where I didn't want to be weird, but I'm like, if Gaga was doing it,

why the fuck can't I do it?" **Pedro** (pseudonym), who traveled from his home in Mexico to attend the Lady Gaga concert in Los Angeles where I informally interviewed him, also considers himself a superfan because of the effect she has on his identity: "She inspires me to be myself and define who I am in this life". He dressed as Lady Gaga and danced onstage for his birthday and at a Super Bowl party, which he described as a way that he can express himself through her image. Lady Gaga superfans feel empowered by her as individuals, amplifying their own traits through her example.

BTS superfans interviewed care less about being like their idols and instead admire and feel comforted by what they represent. Julie, Rebecca, and Alice spoke about how every BTS fan has a favorite member (or "bias"), but their favorites rotate regularly, some BTS fans even claim themselves to be "OT7" ("one true seven") which means the collective is their favorite. This indicates that they aren't identifying with personal characteristics shared with individual members; instead Julie, Alice, and Rebecca spoke about their favorites with the tone of a schoolgirl crush. Lady Gaga superfans displayed care for Lady Gaga and her community's messaging, but seemed to care more about Lady Gaga on an individual level.

My interviews and observations revealed that BTS members care less to imitate their favorite artist, however, I read of one extreme example of a BTS fan whose self-proclaimed identity issues led him to attempt to transform himself into a particular BTS member through thirty-two plastic surgery operations. He stated in the media that he "identified as 'Korean' and [BTS member] 'Jimin'". This extreme superfan, Oli London, stated, "That has been a big factor in me having surgery, me being unhappy, me also funneling my love into Jimin...I really tried to model myself on that person, because I thought that would make me happy" (Lenthang "Oli London"). While this is the case of a superfan who, it seems, identified with a particular group

member to an extreme degree, this attitude was not one reflected in my research. London's motivations however, of attempting to resolve identity issues through BTS fandom, is something I observed. As stated earlier, Alice mentioned that being a BTS superfan was a pastime that formed an identity apart from her husband and children. Mothering being a full-time job, Alice claimed that she had no time or space to think for herself. Giving herself a hobby that she enjoyed allowed her to do something for herself and something that exists outside of her everyday life.

When asked what about BTS resonates with Jane, she mentioned the themes of their songs resonated with things in her life at the time:

“A lot of their songs aren't actually about romantic love, which...you see that a lot in pop music, but a lot of their songs were just about working really hard and struggling to make it and succeed and the anxieties and depression that they were facing throughout their lives as they went on the path to success as music artists. So that resonated a lot with my anxieties about work”.

Once again, it is what BTS represents for Jane, as opposed to shared identity traits, that captivates and motivates her. Not only do their actions inspire her, they become applicable to her own life and how she felt about it. Identifying the qualities superfans see reflected in their favorite artist helps us understand how the superfans build a bond with the artist. However, these shared personal values are not the only contributing factor; external and societal influences are instrumental in the creation of these superfans today.

THE ROLE OF THE PANDEMIC AND TRAUMA IN CREATING A SUPERFAN

There's a reason why messaging and a need for identity affirmation were instrumental among the creation of these superfans. All seven participants interviewed mentioned that the music helped them get through some form of trauma; for many, that traumatic experience was

the COVID-19 pandemic. Julie needed a support system of encouragement to get through this traumatic time that she found in BTS:

“They were really the cure to a hole, a deep hole, that I was feeling after the pandemic because I was a nurse in the ER, so I was frontline. And it was hard to really get out of that. And it was really only until I started listening to BTS music just last summer, so summer 2021, after the entire pandemic year, that I started to heal... So BTS for me is very personal, because that's what they did for me. And so they can continue to be that cure and that medicine for me. Anytime I feel down, I just listen to them and I feel better. I know that it will get better and that this is just another day, another bump in the road and we can move forward”.

Here the artist acts as a friend to encourage Julie through each day and gives her enough positivity and energy to push forward. While Julie sought encouragement to get through the eye of the storm in the ER, interviewees mentioned how fandom fulfilled other emotional needs unique to this particular time. Jane became a BTS fan as a result of extreme loneliness during the pandemic, and the group's image of friendship provided solace:

“I was single pretty much the entire time that I got to know BTS. I was just very free and had a lot of time. But I was also dealing with a lot of loneliness coming out of COVID. And because of their message... a lot of times, it's just like being with seven of your friends...They have flaws....They have variety shows and all these different genres that you can consume. It felt like this was a little community that I could reach out to almost. Not that they were actually my friends, but it felt like I had friends”.

This is a classic example of a true parasocial relationship. As Adhikari describes it: “Over time, viewers may, through repeated use of media, cultivate an ongoing bond of intimacy with the media personality, developing a one-way parasocial relationship (PSR)” (Adhikari *The SAGE International Encyclopedia*). Jane's use of multiple outlets of media strengthened her “bond of intimacy” with BTS during this period of isolation. By stating “they have flaws”, the members of BTS become humanized in a way Jane clearly finds relatable and accessible at a time in-person contact was restricted. Jane's experience of entering a parasocial relationship at this time is not surprising. The article “Parasocial Relationships: The Nature of Celebrity Fascinations” makes

the claim that “increased internet dependency may lead to increased parasocial interactions”. The pandemic directly caused increased internet dependency on a scale we had never experienced before.

Aspects of identity affirmation also revealed themselves in these superfans coping with pandemic trauma. During the pandemic, Asian Americans faced a new onslaught of discrimination, compounding the difficulty of this period. The Asian-American BTS superfans interviewed appreciated and felt empowered by BTS’ positive contribution to the reputation and strength of the Asian community. Rebecca stated,

“With all the API violence that happened in 2020, I don't think it's a coincidence that, especially for us being API women, we're all moms too...there was maybe something subconscious that had me gravitate to: alright we are targets. But how can we flip it, find something else positive? And then they came into our lives as that positive light”.

This “positive light” necessary during the pandemic was echoed by Jane as a general means of identity affirmation she had missed. Discovering the group during the pandemic, Jane stated:

“[BTS] reminded me to really be proud to be Asian, because in the places I grew up in England, and in Wisconsin and Florida, people aren't proud to be Asian in those places, because it's weird and different. But then when I saw these seven guys work so hard, and they're so talented, and doing their best to succeed, it made me hopeful that there are other Asian people out there who can also be proud of their heritage and their culture”.

The external hardship brought on by the pandemic imposed personal struggles that these superfans experienced as individuals but that we, as a society, also experienced as a whole.

While this paper discussed earlier the power of BTS messages in creating superfans, it is clear that because of the pandemic these superfans were poised to be extra receptive. It explains why BTS’ popularity rose at this time.

Lady Gaga superfans Ely and Roy both also mentioned that the pandemic enriched their relationship with Lady Gaga, though born of different reasons. Both were able to become

superfans because of the ample time they had during lockdown, but Ely seemed to use Lady Gaga, specifically her choreography, as a way to escape during the pandemic:

“Everybody went through something in 2020. And I think that Chromatica came out at a time where people needed it. You know, people needed to get up and dance. People needed to hear these lyrics, like “Alice” is about mental health. You know, it's about getting out of your head and trying to escape those thoughts. I was listening to the song, I may have been dancing, and I was crying too. It was getting me through”.

Ely mentions both song lyrics he found relevant to the time as well as the need to dance through Lady Gaga’s music as being important to him then. (The element of dance as a therapeutic ritual is something this paper later unpacks.) Six of the seven participants interviewed reported that while they may have been fans of these artists before the pandemic, it was during that time that they became superfans. Clearly, the time, place, and music were operating in sync together.

Kyoko Miyake’s 2017 documentary “Tokyo Idols” explores how particular pop phenomena (in the context of the film, Japanese idol culture) gain steam as a result of crises experienced at that time by society. These influences often intersect with personal identity and self-worth. In the film, economic and industrial analyst Masayoshi Sakai and cultural commentator Akio Nakamori said “The Japanese generally have a very low sense of self-worth. It’s tied up with the economy. In the 1990s the economy boomed and then plummeted. The drop had a huge impact...The economy was stagnated and the cultural scene was dead. People were looking for something new. London invented the Sex Pistols. The Japanese answer was idol culture” (Miyake “Tokyo Idols”). The film makes the claim that Japanese men were looking for an outlet for stress, which gave rise to Japan’s cheerful “idol” J-pop music culture. Finding this community led men to feel connected and accepted, empowered, and subsequently ‘normal’ (or at least mainstream). Similar to what we observed with the pandemic, global pop phenomena offers the public something to take their minds off of the troubles of the world as well as offer an

outlet in which to feel accepted and empowered. (In the film, community and self-purpose were also main objectives for those consuming idol culture; these themes relate to our superfans as well, later in this paper.)

The film also shows trauma influencing pop culture tastes may also be of a personal nature: protagonist Koji stated that he got into idols after the love of his life left him for another man and as a result he spent all of his planned wedding savings on idols. This is similar to what I found in the interviews, when participants referenced specific personal issues that led them to resonate with their artist: Roy was plagued by an estranged relationship with his parents who did not accept his sexuality; Ely was suicidal while struggling with his identity; Sandy went through a nasty divorce and subsequent financial troubles; Jane felt isolated due to constant moving as well as faced familial pressure to be “perfect”. All of these examples illustrate how the superfan utilized the artists and their music to strengthen themselves and may explain why their foundations for superfandom are so sturdy. Trauma on both a global scale and a personal level seem to leave individuals looking for new outlets, ways of coping, and new spaces to find themselves in to come back to the world a stronger individual.

DOES RITUAL EXIST IN SPACES OF SUPERFANDOM?

I’ve established that superfandom for those interviewed strengthened during traumatic times, and the spaces in which this superfandom is practiced. But what does that look like, and do themes emerge? In “The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media”, Lisa A. Lewis takes what I refer to as the notion of a superfandom ‘spaces’ and describes a ‘habitus’ in the context of fan culture:

“The habitus includes the notion of a habitat, the habitants and the processes of inhabiting it, and the habituated ways of thinking that go with it. It encompasses our position within

the social space, the ways of living that go with it and what Bourdieu calls the associated ‘dispositions’ of mind, cultural tastes and ways of thinking and feeling. The habitus refuses the traditional distinction between the social and the individual, and it reformulates the relationship between domination and subjectivity” (Lewis 32).”

With this idea of habitus, and its accompanying ways of being within these ‘social spaces’, I became curious about the presence of ritual in the spaces I had observed, and if there was one. At the onset of this ethnography, I was originally interested in comparing superfandom with cult behavior to see where the distinction is made between the two. This kept the idea of ritual in my mind’s eye. Collins Dictionary defines ritual as “a way of behaving or a series of actions that people regularly carry out in a particular situation, because it is their custom to do so”. Rituals include aspects of ceremony to holidays, a routine break from everyday life function. In “From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play”, Victor Turner touches on facets of rituals (in tribal and agrarian societies that, interestingly enough, relate here), stating “There is a play of symbol-vehicles, leading to the construction of bizarre masks and costumes from elements of mundane life now conjoined in fantastic ways. There is a play of meanings, involving the reversal of hierarchical orderings of values and social statuses. There is a play with words resulting in the generation of secret initiatory languages, as well as joyful or serious punning” (Turner 85). While not imposing it upon my research, I was keenly aware to look out for aspects of ritual in superfandom. Within the spaces where superfandom is practiced, or habituses, I found rituals emerged in each. In line with Turner’s research, I found examples of symbolic hand-gestures, initiatory language, dressing for events (costumes), and ‘play of meanings’ through hierarchical role reversal, among other ritualistic practices.

Dancing as Ritual

The most prevalent example of ritual I observed and heard about it in interviews was dance. Superfans mentioned they were drawn in by beats, rhythm, and dance moves first; messaging of the songs was absorbed later and favorably. In Mark Duffett's "Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices" he claims:

"When watching physical movement, the activation of certain motor regions of the brain suggests that by anticipating and imagining, observers already participate in the action of dance. Their urge to join the dancers is not just a desire to be part of what Barbara Ehrenreich has called... 'collective excitement,' but also to perform the same physical actions as those being observed. The practice of dance can therefore be seen as a form of imitation" (Duffett 47).

An example of this previously noted is Ely's ambition to one day dance with Lady Gaga. Memorizing her dance moves online, he is able to impersonate her and build that "collective excitement" from his own living room. In Kathryn Lofton's "Consuming Religion", she argues that impersonation and identification with an artist "become[s] a form of ritual practice, moral commentary, and identity development [that] in ways correlate to religious behavior" (Lofton 361). In this way, we can deduce that dance among fans, and these superfans, is a form of ritualistic practice. At the Lady Gaga Concert and BTS dance event, dancing ranged from casual swaying to full-blown movement and sweating. Amongst the more expressive dancers, you could literally see the energy they were exerting for the artist, giving it their all for the occasion (and possibly for the artist). Many of the fans I have interviewed spoke about how dance strengthened their connection to their artist. Julie stated:

"[My daughters] were into music and dance and choreography. And BTS was one of the top searches that came up, and they just started really getting into it. And then the messages outside of the music came after because you listen to the rhythms and the beats and the music, like rhythmic beats of it, and everyone can relate without even knowing the words. Then when you understand and you look up translations of the words, then you're like, Wow, this is really deep. These are really good words and it means a lot to a lot of people. I think it really transcends and relates to a lot of people".

Julie was introduced to BTS through their dance and then began to imitate their moves. It is interesting to note that our interview was conducted at an event specifically bringing people together to dance to BTS music.

Fan Costumes and Masks

As mentioned earlier in this paper, I observed the way people dressed differently at the live events. Fans who attended communal events dressed up (even in costume) for the occasion, such as the masks and provocative outfits attendees wore at the Lady Gaga concert and the costumes or club clothes I witnessed being worn at the Oh!Ddaeng! Dance party. Sandy mentioned that she rarely spends money on clothing but that for Lady Gaga concerts she always wears her nicest dress. It's as if fans were dressing for ceremony, an occasion special to them. Both spaces, especially the Lady Gaga concert, were places of inclusion and their vibe made the extravagant feel readily accepted.

As noted earlier, several BTS fans dressed as their favorite BTS member. Many Lady Gaga fans, including men I interviewed, had dressed as Lady Gaga at some point in their lives. This use of clothing highlights role reversal between fan and artist, a practice Lady Gaga herself has engaged in and even promoted: Mathieu Deflem notes this in Lady Gaga's "Manifesto of Little Monsters", a text included in The Fame Monster album, she describes her fans as "the kings" and "the queens" while she herself is only "something of a devoted jester" (Gagapedia "Manifesto of Little Monsters"). Victor Turner's "The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure" speaks upon the use of masks and costumes in role reversal as a form of ritualistic activity. Turner explores how this role reversal exists at specific moments and unique spaces in communities, and the effects this ritual has:

“By making the low high and the high low, they reaffirm the hierarchical principle. By making the low mimic (often to the point of caricature) the behavior of the high, and by restraining the initiatives of the proud, they underline the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictable behavior between the various estates of society. On this account, it is appropriate that rituals of status reversal are often located either at fixed points in the annual cycle or in relation to movable feasts that vary within a limited period of time, for structural regularity is here reflected in temporal order.” (Turner 176-177).

As the events where these costumes and masks were observed are occasions that occur periodically, they serve as an example of this role reversal and ritual in progress.

Singing and Listening in Groups

Singing along was obviously a major component of both the Lady Gaga concert and the BTS dance event. At both events, fans sang with their groups of friends as they danced along. At the Lady Gaga concert specifically, there were moments where Lady Gaga’s vocals would be cut out so that the fans could fill in the lines. In a crowd of thousands, the effect of so many strangers singing together was powerful and demonstrated the fans’ passion. I observed one fan sitting quietly alone with his hands together and his eyes closed; it seemed to me he was praying with the music.

The BTS fanchants (found online for concert prep) serve a similar purpose: to bring the community together in song and make the fans feel like they are a part of something bigger. While BTS fanchants detail which parts are supposed to be sung along, Lady Gaga cues the fans to sing in the moment and replace her vocals. By supplying fanchants in advance, US BTS ARMY orchestrates a more cohesive and organized way of singing along. This speaks to something I observed about the nature of BTS versus Lady Gaga fans: the BTS community seems to be more cohesive and organized, while the Lady Gaga fandom seems to act as individuals.

Regardless of the level of cohesion and organization, this singing together in groups achieves a common effect: “From empirical investigations we know, for instance, that choral singing enhances the notion of social support and reduces feelings of isolation” (Schäfer, et al. “Social benefits of music-making”). People who go to these events don’t even need to engage in singing to achieve the benefit of social support. Just being in attendance has its purpose: “Listening to music with other people, for instance, induces feelings of togetherness...and enhances group cohesion” (Schäfer, et al. “Music listening and social needs”). Within the context of the pandemic isolation interviewees experienced when they became superfans, this is particularly resonant. The concert and dance event are further highlighted as special periodical spaces of ritual where individuals feel a part of something bigger than themselves. These feelings of “togetherness” and “enhanced group cohesion” at the group events reinforce the fan as part of the community through place and occasion devoted to engaging with the music and, therefore, much like attending a church service, could be considered a ritual.

The Ritual of Solitary Listening

Of my participants, superfans reported listening to their favorite artist largely in private spaces at recurring times of the day. When I asked Jane how often she listens to BTS she stated “I would say daily still? Not like not very much. But I think still daily. Either I think of them or I listen to a song by them or something like that. And if I got really busy in life, then maybe weekly”. When I asked Sandy about her rate of engagement with Lady Gaga’s music, she responded “let’s say monthly.” I then clarified that I meant any sort of participation whatsoever, including simply listening to Lady Gaga, and her answer changed: “I listen to her probably four times a week, let’s say, okay, so daily”. Listening regularly as a break from everyday routine could be considered ritual. During these times alone fans deliberately play this music to induce

certain feelings or relaxation. In “How Listening to Music and Engagement with Other Media Provide a Sense of Belonging: An Exploratory Study of Social Surrogacy”, Katharina Schäfer and Eerola Tuomas found “solitary music listening is used to temporarily satisfy social needs” (Schäfer, et al. “Conclusions and future studies”). As many of my respondents said, their listening increased during the pandemic and their level of superfandom rose at this time of listening alone. We can assume the importance of this ritual during that time.

It’s also interesting to note that both of these participants back-track their statements, first reporting very casual engagement and then revising it to listening daily. This is particularly interesting in light of Claudio Benzecry’s “The Opera Fanatic : Ethnography of an Obsession”, in which he writes about how opera fanatics downplay how often they attend the opera, pointing to other people as more regular attendees. Later, when one fanatic states that they have been attending for decades, they further elaborate with: “just twenty-five years.” With the similarities to the answers given by Jane and Sandy, I had to wonder to what extent my informants are worried that they will be seen as obsessive and are deliberately setting themselves apart from others in their community.

Ritualistic Hand Gestures

When I saw Lady Gaga do her “Paws up” gesture at the concert, there was a lot more meaning behind it than I initially realized. “Paws up” (also referred to as the “Monster Claw”) is a shout out to Lady Gaga’s Little Monsters and serves to underscore the “‘us’ and ‘them’ narrative” between Lady Gaga and her fans versus everyone else:

“It was a gesture as simple as curling her fingers and raising them in the air, but she did it so frequently online and on-stage that it swiftly caught on. Fans would put their "paws up" at concerts and she eventually got the claw tattooed on her back, which she shared on Instagram like a gift back to the fandom.” (Hall “Lady Gaga Pioneered”).

A “gift to the fandom” could be considered another instance of role reversal, in which the idol in power gifts the fans for their allegiance. This aside, it could be confusing to think of a hand gesture as a form of ritual. It becomes easier to contextualize if one considers the hand gesture as a ‘secret handshake’ exchanged between Lady Gaga and fans in the crowd. ‘Secret handshakes’ are a recurring practice and indication of participation, demonstrating that one belongs to a group or even subculture. Just like a secret handshake, Lady Gaga’s “Paws Up” unites the community under this symbolic action.

Ritualistic Online Fan Engagement and its Hierarchy

From what I observed within the fan forums, fans posted, commented on, or shared their favorite artist’s content regularly, often daily; this was particularly so within the BTS forums. The simple act of participating in fan forums regularly is a form of ritual. It serves as a way for individuals to habitually engage in a special space and break from everyday functions. Amongst my interviewees, Jane stated that she “used to post photos, like, every single day because there’s seven days a week so every day of the week is a certain member’s day, like unofficially”. She not only practiced the ritual of posting every day, but within that ritual each day had a different BTS member as the subject of devotion.

By regularly signing into the fan sites under a created username (or handle), fans are able to mask their real identity in a habitual way. Interacting with others under a username allows fans to detach themselves from their IRL identity and express themselves in ways they may not typically do. The article “Parasocial Relationships: The Nature of Celebrity Fascinations” states “parasocial relationships expand the social network in a way that negates the chance of rejection and empowers individuals to model and identify with individuals of their choosing who naturally

elicit an empathic response”. Posts in which users express feelings of depression (noted above) to others they have met through the fan community are an example of this sense of intimacy, and additionally show a break from regular function and, by extension, persona. It is much easier to express oneself in an uninhibited way behind a keyboard than in person, and particularly to those you feel a communal online bond with through shared love of the artist.

This notion of ‘power’ within the ritual practice of regular online engagement was primarily observed on the US BTS ARMY site. Within the site, admins are elevated to positions of power or gatekeeping that they may not experience in their ordinary lives. Fans, for their part, are categorized, so to speak, by the length of time they have been a member of ARMY, creating a hierarchy. In Abd-Rahim Atiqah’s “Online Fandom: Social Identity and Social Hierarchy of Hallyu Fans”, he wrote

“The possibility of possessing certain knowledge and skills to get recognition from others has led fans to struggle for dominance in online spaces. This can be illustrated by Bordieu’s (1984, 1986) concepts of social and cultural capital, in which fans must possess a minimum of knowledge, effort and skill to verify the construction of their identities within fan communities. By identifying the identity, fans accrue various forms of capital to acquire an advantageous placement and dominance within a fandom” (Atiqah 77).

In my field research I found social and cultural capital to exist through length of fandom and insider knowledge, particularly through the use of certain phrases and vocabulary in the “ARMY dictionary”. When I asked in my interview at the Oh!Ddaeng! event about whether a BTS ARMY hierarchy exists, Julie did not express a strong opinion. Rebecca, however, emphatically stated "There is [a hierarchy]! Let’s not pretend that there isn't. However, I will say that, for the most part, if you say to somebody who's veteran ARMY, ‘yo I’m baby ARMY, I'm a pandemic fan’, they welcome you with open arms. I think that's just part of entering any community. So no, plus or minus to the community. But that's just what it is”. Rebecca’s nonchalant attitude towards and acceptance of this hierarchical structure demonstrates how dynamics and power structures

are willingly accepted and normalized within this fandom. Julie, Alice, and specifically Rebecca taught me several BTS terms such as “OT7” and “I Purple You”; by doing this, as superfans in possession of cultural capital they were exerting influence over me, the novice.

While this exhibited and practiced fan hierarchy may also exist within the Lady Gaga online community, I did not observe explicit mentions of it in my online fieldwork nor was it discussed by any of my respondents. However, on Lady Gaga fan pages I did note several users who regularly posted fan art of Lady Gaga. According to Atiqah, this can be considered an ‘exercise of power’ within a fandom: “Investing in cultural capital by obtaining the knowledge and skills to reproduce these cultural works can develop a fan’s reputation within fan communities... This is a basic practice in the existence of the members of any fandom to represent their group, to speak and act in its name, and to exercise power within the fandom” (Atiqah 67). This organization of fans within their online communities, regardless of their IRL social standings, constitutes a “reversal of hierarchical orderings of values and social statuses”, which Turner referenced as present in ritual.

Ceremony and Ceremonial Objects

The Lady Gaga concert itself had the air of ceremony: all eyes on Lady Gaga centerstage, the events followed a processional order, and the atmosphere was amplified to powerful effect. As noted earlier, the glowing wristbands, candles, and fireworks all contributed to this ceremonial atmosphere and made the whole experience feel more special and grandiose. Wristbands distributed acted like objects and costumes of ceremony; the fact that they were synced throughout the crowd created a feeling of being a part of something bigger than yourself (the crowd and concert space, even Lady Gaga) without any effort on the behalf of those wearing

it. Fireworks had a similar impact, contributing to this grandiose and powerful feeling, literally shaking the crowd. White lights that looked like candles lined the stage leading a path to Lady Gaga, the idol of the event. These lights also ran through the audience, connecting the crowd even further to Lady Gaga in the space and reminding me of a church.

All of these objects of ceremony were provided by the Lady Gaga concert and aimed to facilitate and empower the ritual happening within the space. Everything worked together to make the Lady Gaga concert feel significant, her message and cause feel significant, the practices and rituals themselves feel significant, and being in attendance of this event feel significant. Merchandise and the wristbands serve as objects one could bring home with them and act as a remnant of that importance and connectedness. The concert space and its elements were reminiscent of a church, though instead of being connected to religion the attendees were connecting to Lady Gaga, her music, and each other through her music. This space and these objects instill belief in the cause and the practices to honor it.

Band merchandise acts as a way to practice ritual and was a major component of BTS superfandom that I observed. Again, attaining physical objects of fandom can be considered collecting ritualistic objects. They hold power for those that attain them. Jane explained the lengths fans go through to collect these objects of ceremony and devotion. For example, she stated that some fans buy huge billboards to promote the band of their own volition. She also noted how some merchandise had to be sought after to obtain, only being available in certain locations to those in the know. She shared that in celebration of the members' birthdays, one could visit select coffee shops in New York City to obtain coffee mug sleeves with a photo of a BTS member on it if they purchased a drink. This creates a further 'insider's club' for those who had the knowledge of how and where to obtain these objects and follows annual tradition (for

their birthdays). This creates excitement for special events in which fan merch can be collected. Much like the way fans attain status through regular posting and sharing fan art online, fans can also elevate status by collecting cool merchandise that few others have. This is not merchandise widely bought and sold, but distributed at special times and events, underscoring the break from the norm and a special event taking place. This is best highlighted in what BTS calls “Season’s Greetings”. Jane described that “The idols have created rituals too... For the holidays they have a box that you can buy that's called Season's Greetings. They have a once a year memories package with DVDs and photos.” “Season’s Greetings” is not the only annual event. Jane elaborated that there are BTS-created ‘holidays’ throughout the year, from celebrating band members’ birthdays to acknowledging the fans and the band’s longevity and success:

“They have a once a year fan event. It's surrounding celebrating the fans. Then sometimes they have an annual thing where they're celebrating the new year that they're still performing. So they'll have concerts for those. So there are a lot of holidays, you can say. Pretty much every day is like a holiday in this BTS world... You can say it's kind of like a religion”.

It’s as if every day is an occasion to celebrate, complete with presents. These “holidays” make each day in the BTS world feel more special and important than the mundane ‘normal’ world.

As demonstrated in the various habituses observed, rituals are a major component to engaging in superfandom. In total, each worked to unify the fanbase through feelings of importance and reverence - from the special outfits worn to the idol objects collected. In my research, however, I found evidence that ritual is just one aspect of a larger landscape centered not only around the artist, but around the messaging they conveyed, spread to and through their fandom.

WHY SUPERFANS INTERNALIZE ARTIST IDEOLOGIES

As demonstrated by the combination of superfandom elements, we can observe that the music and artists attract fans, personal identification with the artist and trauma experienced by the fan strengthens their bond to these idols, and rituals bring superfans deeper into the fold. We will now see how this combination of factors make superfans particularly susceptible to internalizing the artists' messages; in the case of Lady Gaga and BTS, their messaging centers on identity affirmation, as well as social or political causes close to their hearts. Kathryn Lofton's "Consuming Religion" addresses the celebrity as a pantheon "that exists to dramatize social concerns, endorse certain forms of normative behavior, and fulfill narrative fantasies of an inchoate, disconnected, and ostensibly secular public" (Lofton 359). By saying the celebrity "exists to dramatize social concerns" it establishes the celebrity's main function as a social mouthpiece and authority; in my research I've observed the success of this with both Lady Gaga and BTS. Resonance with the artists' messages of love, inclusion and equality were mentioned by both Lady Gaga and BTS fans I interviewed. These fans also spoke freely about how receiving these messages, internalizing them, helped them to inform their personal identities during difficult personal times. In turn, their identities then began to include the terms 'Little Monster' or 'BTS ARMY'.

At the Lady Gaga concert, her interaction with the crowd was clearly more than commercial entertainment. She passionately addressed the crowd about political topics she had moral issues with, speaking in a tone that was deliberate, empowering to young women and queer folk, and mobilizing. One specific talking point was against the new Roe v Wade decision, the crowd cheering her on. In fact, she dedicated her Chromatica Tour to abortion rights and stated to the crowd at a performance in Washington D.C. "I pray that this country will speak up

and we will stick together and that we will not stop until it's right" (Nolfi "Lady Gaga Rallied 'Chromatica' "). This statement sounds like it came out of the mouth of a politician, mobilizing masses by tying in religion (praying) and giving a sentiment of right and wrong. Words like 'stick together' create an 'us vs them' narrative, reminding me of political fights between Republicans and Democrats. She not only tells her fans what she believes is right and wrong in this instance but tells them to do something about it in a relentless fashion ("we will not stop until it's right"). She speaks the words of a politician but they impact her audience like a sermon, conveying what is morally just and getting the message across as opposed to simply saying it. Her fans showed up to a concert for Lady Gaga and her music, but left with a political message.

Her political messaging to fans is not limited to concerts. Her online activity is often politically charged and intends to spread a message in support of loving yourself, women, and the LGBTQ+ community. From Lady Gaga, this is particularly impactful: her messages are delivered with a personal tone, but the reality is she is spreading political messaging to online followers which number in the millions.

Though this paper focuses on Lady Gaga's messages in concert, online, and lyrics mentioned by respondents, it's also important to note that she established the "Born This Way" foundation, aimed at supporting the mental health of youth. The organization serves to influence normative behavior towards inclusion and equality, particularly for the LGBTQ+ community. Through this charitable work, Lady Gaga is also delivering a powerful message to fans who may feel disenfranchised, underscored through her songs.

While my informants became fans through dance and admiration of Lady Gaga's qualities, it was her message that mobilized them into becoming superfans. Sandy remarked that she related to the message of the songs "Born This Way" and "Edge of Glory", as well as Lady

Gaga's message to not feel alone as someone who is marginalized. Part of Sandy's joy in her superfandom of Lady Gaga is learning more about the LGBTQ+ community and identifying with them in a new way she had previously felt disconnected from. Roy likes that Lady Gaga is a supporter of the gay community (he has recently come out as gay to his parents and needs this support) and that she spreads that message of loving yourself no matter your flaws. Sandy and Ely both heavily commented on appreciating her authenticity and her promotion of the message of being yourself. Ely, as a gay man, also appreciates her messaging to support the gay community and promoting it as a part of one's identity. Lady Gaga's messaging gave my informants the support they needed to incorporate new aspects to their identities proudly.

Messages conveyed by BTS also reach their superfans on a personal level. All of the BTS superfans interviewed mentioned the group to be a positive Asian influence, particularly at a time of API hate crimes during the pandemic. While at times this seemed to be an implicit message conveyed by the presence and success of Asian superstars, it is also a political message out of the mouths of BTS themselves. In 2022 BTS made an address about API discrimination during a briefing at the White House and met with President Biden on the topic. "It's not wrong to be different," one of the group's members, Suga, said during the event. "I think equality begins when we open up and embrace all of our differences" (Espada "BTS Discusses Anti-Asian Hate"). In March 2021 the group tweeted: "We recall moments when we faced discrimination as Asians. We have endured expletives without reason and were mocked for the way we look. We were even asked why Asians spoke in English" (Espada "BTS Discusses Anti-Asian Hate"). Just like the case with Lady Gaga, this Twitter messaging is significant. The message gave personal anecdotes of discrimination faced by the members of the group, as if they spoke eye-to-eye with their Asian fans, the reach of which was over 40 million followers.

BTS' messaging is hardly limited to support for the API community. In her interview, Jane mentioned that she appreciates BTS' message of "supporting the individual through self-acceptance." This message is spread through the group's lyrics but is particularly underscored in the "Love Myself Campaign" with UNICEF to highlight mental health for young people. This campaign has the "ambition of love and togetherness, particularly at this time of social isolation" ("BTS and Big Hit renew commitment"). BTS' campaign differs from Lady Gaga's in that there is no clear political agenda; it more closely resembles the nature of religious charity, acting to uplift the community from a social angle the way religion does. This uplifting message has been internalized by the fans. In fact, both participants Julie and Jane expressed that BTS encouraged them to believe in themselves through messages of self-acceptance; that no matter how alone or negative they felt, they have the inner power and love to get through any hardship. They admired BTS' hard work during the pandemic to continue to push out content and fight through trifling times, encouraging them to stay hard workers themselves. The following quote of a US BTS ARMY admin is evidence of the same truth of how superfans internalize these messages in my online field research: "Being an admin for US BTS ARMY means being something much greater than yourself. I am so proud to be a part of a team that has such phenomenal loyal dedication to BTS' mission of spreading love and joy on a global scale!" The user's language sounds humbled to the greater mission and proud to receive the message as well as spread it. By receiving these artist messages in a ritualistic way, whether in special spaces like a concert or online forum, or with the regularity of ritual online activity, the messages carry extra weight. The fans have clearly internalized their idols' messages, which serve to strengthen the artist, but also reveal a much wider impact on the fandom itself.

SPIRITUAL CONNECTION TRANSCENDS PARASOCIAL

We can see why these messages of the artists are so meaningful for the superfans at times of personal and societal trauma, why they were primed to receive the messages, and why they then went on to regularly engage in the rituals of superfandom. But what does this mean? This combination of personal trauma, receiving of messages, and ritual practice reveals the existence of something larger than simple ‘fandom’ would imply. Most of my participants reported that on an individual level, their engagement with the artist felt spiritual in some sense. When asked if superfandom created a sense of spiritualism, Julie said:

“Absolutely. I think that BTS has hit people definitely on a spiritual level, on many levels. But yes, I would say spiritual is one of them. It doesn't even matter what religion they are. I think it's when you could speak and actually listen to some other music and it really hits us hard because we're spiritually connected in some way personally, emotionally. And you can equate those to being spiritual, right? Because you feel it on a different level than you would with other music.”

Julie claims the reason she connects to BTS is because their music moves her on a spiritual level, and that this is true for others as well. The community becomes “spiritually connected”. Based on my research, I can make the assumption that this “spiritual connection” is what drives their level of engagement and internalization of the artists’ messages. When Ely shares his experience as a Lady Gaga superfan, he states that he already considered himself a spiritual person but being at the concert amplified this:

“The last concert was a lot better experience. You know it didn't matter what she was really singing. It didn't really. It was just... you could say, spiritual. I'm a very spiritual person too. So I feel a different energy there. It really does feel like... I don't want to say a religion, but it's something that is almost kind of like that in a sense of like, she is the big energy...it's more about Gaga. I grew up kind of experiencing it by myself. I always kind of hold that for myself.”

Ely draws connection between being at a live concert and a spiritual experience, underscoring that this ritual practice has particular meaning for him. He explicitly states that the spirituality is

strictly between himself and Lady Gaga as opposed to the community. Lady Gaga, as he points out, is the center of his devotion, “the big energy”, live on stage. (It should be noted that while fans are called Little Monsters, Lady Gaga herself is referred to as ‘Mother Monster’). When considering that superfans accept their idols as a moral authority and source of strength, combined with the superfans’ sense of spiritualism, the ritualistic practices and objects of superfandom, as well as the sacred spaces in which music is listened to, I can conclude that superfandom transcends the parasocial relationship between fan and artist into a spiritual relationship centered through the idol.

My initial assumption that superfans become superfans because they are outsiders looking for meaning and community has some basis to it, however a more accurate statement would be: superfans are often born in trauma and are looking for meaning and, or, comfort that may be found in the spiritual subculture of superfandom. This subculture provides support not just from the artist, but through fan interaction, ritual, and the consistency of the community with the message of the artist at its center. This could explain why both the Lady Gaga concert and the BTS dance party felt so welcoming and inclusive. While my informants seemed to find emotional benefit from this spiritual subculture, Jane offered an alternate perspective within the BTS fandom. She stated that there’s a sense of godlessness within the New York BTS fan community and many use BTS as an escape mechanism for unaddressed trauma. She feels a darkness and hopelessness within the community, and claims that some fans fill this hole with an immediate ‘quick fix’ of happiness through BTS.

“Instead of really going at the root of your trauma and dealing with it directly, if you have these rituals or patterns of behavior, such as listening to a song in the morning, or coping by buying albums or merch, or doing crazy things, it can kind of be a bandaid to your problems by grounding you in reality in some other ways... Trauma is very real, but then in this superfandom case, we could be cycling through some of the superfan rituals,

instead of really going in at the core problem and dealing with weeding out the root problems that are associated with trauma.”

Jane directly mentions several practices of rituals we observed but she sees the functions of the rituals in a different light. She gave an example of a fellow superfan who sleeps with a cardboard cut-out of one of the BTS members. In this example, the object of ritual and adulation (the cut-out) could be used in an isolating way, replacing sources of ‘real’ intimacy with objects. This is similar to what I observed in the Weverse chats, when users directed feelings of hopelessness and depression to specific members of the band. The fact is, the fan must be engaging in this ritual because they find a source of comfort and connection from the (even one-dimensional) presence of BTS. Regardless of whether these rituals and their objects are ‘healthy’ or not, my observations show they strengthen one’s connection to the spiritual subculture and strengthen the spiritual subculture itself.

The spiritual subculture created does not only impact the fans, as a parasocial relationship would suggest; instead it transcends the parasocial as the fans and artists give to each other and exchange acts of charity. While superfans have been actively engaged in participating in this spiritualism with the artist, their idols were busy altering the nature of the artist-fan relationship. While the internet impacted superfandom by enabling the growth of fan connectivity, the artists themselves used the internet to broaden the parasocial artist-fan relationship into a more reciprocal one. Both BTS and Lady Gaga utilized fan sites to communicate with fans directly. As Hall noted of Lady Gaga’s personal fan platform littlemonsters.com, “Gaga herself was known to scroll through the forum: it was here that she sought out die-hard fan... Emma, who suffers from scoliosis, and paid for her hip surgery.” (Hall “Lady Gaga Pioneered”). The fact that one fan could reach out to Lady Gaga online, be heard, and personally taken care of by Lady Gaga serves as a story of inspiration and hope for others who use the platform that the same could happen to

them. It demonstrates to fans that Lady Gaga cares enough about them to go out of her way and do something for them, making the relationship feel more ‘real’ and rooted in intimacy rather than fantasy. Spiritualism is strengthened by prayers being answered. In return, the power Lady Gaga’s fans provide her platform is very real and tangible; this influence enabled her “Born This Way” foundation to raise almost \$250,000 as of June 2022 (Lunt “Lady Gaga's Foundation Donates”). Lady Gaga gives, and spiritual subculture gives back for a cause they both believe in.

BTS fans are particularly adept at returning the charity on behalf of their idols.

Researcher Tvine Donabedian argues that when BTS interacts with fans on platforms like Weverse, they utilize a sense of intimacy to mobilize the fans to action, stating:

“In this sense, BTS not only maintain the pre-existing intimacy, they reinforce it, they validate it. They make their fans feel seen by reconfiguring the unidirectionality of the parasocial relationship and instead building a reciprocal relationship that is as authentic as possible. Most importantly, they make fans want to return it... Thus, we situate ourselves within this exchange of intimacy, with a narrowed focus on fan responses to artists’ relational labour” (Donabedian 10).

When the artists communicate directly with the fans on social networking sites, the fans feel more personally connected to them and belief in the spiritual subculture is strengthened. The subculture is inspired to give back to this person they care about. As Donabedian states, “they want to return it” and it was in this vein that I observed the strength of the US BTS ARMY as a collective; a spiritual organization spreading the word.

The US BTS ARMY states their mission is “to inspire, celebrate and spread BTS’ message of love and acceptance to ARMY and any other who cross our path”. As noted earlier, this language reminds me of a missionary statement, trying to convince as many people as possible to convert to the religion of BTS. Admins especially, whose dedication can qualify them as superfans, spearhead the efforts. As one admin wrote, “Being an admin for US BTS ARMY is more than a job. It’s about being a part of a family, a sisterhood, that works hard for the love of

BTS!” This quote recruits new onlookers, letting them know the BTS community offers acceptance, love for BTS and each other, and fills the role of family. Using the term “sisterhood” is particularly intriguing as it once again reminds me of creed: religion or missionaries. The strength of the ARMY community’s actions to give back to BTS was on display when BTS won “Favorite Social Artist Award” at the 2018 American Music Awards, a category decided entirely by online votes from fans. In my own research I came across fans on Weverse advocating other fans to vote for similar awards (see in Spaces of Fandom). BTS itself was not the driving force for its own success here, it was mobilized and achieved by the ARMY subculture itself. They utilized messages, ritualistic use of fan sites and devotion to idols to achieve greater status for the artists than they could have achieved alone. The same could be said of the previously mentioned Unicef “Love Myself” campaign. While BTS did establish this charity, they would not have been able to reach the level of fundraising success they did without the help of the BTS ARMY: “as of August 2021, BTS’ Love Myself partnership with UNICEF has raised over \$3.4 million, while #BTSLoveMyself hashtag has been used more than 15 million times across social media” (Bowenbank “BTS Celebrates 5th Anniversary”). Trauma, ritual, and the internalization of artist messaging all come together, acting as ingredients for a spiritual subculture with the artist at its epicenter. The artist conveys a message, spread through music and ritual, that is then absorbed by the superfans who in turn spread that message themselves.

CONCLUSION

This ethnography began as an exploration into the meaning superfans of musical artists find in their fandom. The answer ended up being more complex than I anticipated. Multiple factors came together to explain the initiation and perpetuation of superfandom. Personal identification with the artists and being affirmed through them, the desire to heal from trauma,

ritual, and the internalization of artist ideologies all contributed to an all-encompassing lifestyle hitting on a spiritual level. Forms of ritual, practiced individually and in communion with each other, reinforced the subculture and its benefits. This strong spiritual connection to others in the respective community, as well as to Lady Gaga and BTS themselves, make the experience of superfandom, traditionally thought to be parasocial, clearly reciprocal and resemble more closely that of a 'real' relationship. In the context of today's society, massively affected on an emotional level by both the pandemic and politics, the spiritual subculture of superfandom fulfills a social need for support and connectivity in service of spiritual healing.

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