

Abstract

This thesis investigates the reliability and ethics of parasocial interaction theory (PSI) for public relations (PR) practitioners to rely on when creating content or campaigns for fans. Drawing on literature from fan studies and public relations theories, this research proposes situational theory of publics as an alternative theory when researching the motivations and passions of fandom communities. The researcher employs a qualitative multimethod design that integrates individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) with PR practitioners in fan engagement specialist roles and autoethnographic essays written by BTS' ARMY—a fandom that supports popular K-pop group Bangtan Soyeondan (BTS). The interviews and essays are coded to identify whether the mindset of the fan engagement specialist and fan can be categorized as identifying with PSI or situational theory of publics as part of a qualitative thematic analysis.

Findings from both fan engagement specialists and ARMY reveal that they view fans as active publics since fandoms represent community, meaning situational theory of publics best serves as a PR theoretical framework in studying today's fandom culture. The fan engagement specialists and ARMY share similar views as both parties identify as fans, thus, demonstrating an understanding of fandom from an insider perspective that revealed the positive participatory culture experience. By viewing fans as an active public, the research recommends that PR practitioners use research methods to study the nuances of fan activity to make an authentic connection as a reflection of their audience research, and engage in co-creating practices.

Keywords: fan studies, public relations, situational theory of publics, BTS, BTS ARMY, parasocial interaction theory, participatory culture

CRITICISM OF PARASOCIAL INTERACTION THEORY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

RESEARCH: A FAN STUDIES APPLICATION THROUGH BTS ARMY

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIES AND SITUATIONAL THEORY OF PUBLICS

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Literature Review	5
Defining Fan Studies.....	5
Defining Public Relations.....	7
The Intersection of Fan Studies and Public Relations.....	8
BTS and BTS ARMY: Significance to PR.....	11
Parasocial Interaction Theory in PR vs. Fan Studies.....	14
Situational Theory of Publics.....	16
Ethics in Public Relations Messaging	17
Methodology	19
Thematic Qualitative Analysis on Autoethnographies.....	19
Recruitment Process.....	20
Reflexivity.....	21
In-depth Interviews.....	22
Data Analysis.....	23
Results	25
IDI Results.....	27
BTS ARMY Autoethnography Results	32
Summary of Results.....	41
Discussion	45
Implications of Findings.....	45
Recommendations.....	52
Limitations.....	54
Future Research.....	55
Conclusion	58
Appendices	59
Appendix A.....	59
Appendix B.....	61
Appendix C.....	62
References	63
Vita	70

Chapter 1: Introduction

The introduction of social media has forever changed the way public relations practitioners conduct research on key publics because of the two-way communication capabilities and social listening analytics. Through social media, there are notable conversations by users who identify as being part of a fandom who can instantaneously communicate with one another and stay updated on their fandom. Over the last 10 years, BTS – a K-pop boy group from South Korea – has become a global artist with millions of fans that were given the fandom name “BTS ARMY” (Moon, 2020). During this timeframe, there have been over two billion mentions of BTS across social media with an average of 547,945 mentions a day (Newton, 2023). There have also been over 36.96 million unique authors on Twitter talking about BTS since the group’s debut in 2013 (Newton, 2023). Fandoms are becoming a more desired audience to understand from a public relations standpoint because of how harnessing the power of fandom can give a brand greater recognition (Park, 2023). In this research, topics in public relations and fan studies will offer insight into how to understand where the two fields, as academic disciplines, intersect.

There are strong reasons for PR practitioners to study fandom, including how fandom is universal, the key to technological growth, and a way to free a brand from algorithms (Park, 2023). This interest in wanting to gain more knowledge for communications and marketing industries is evident in this researcher’s observations as both a fan and a PR practitioner. In preparing for this research, the researcher found that all public relations theses on Syracuse University Institutional Repository website called SURFACE that cover fandom communities have used parasocial interaction theory as the primary theoretical framework in explaining fandom behavior. Parasocial interaction theory is described as a “media user’s reaction to a media performer such that the media user perceives the performer as an intimate conversational

partner” (Dibble, et al., 2015). Such responses are described as unhealthy because they are not a real exchange, rather mass media gives the illusion of a face-to-face relationship (Duffett, 2013). With the rise of social media, there is research that believes parasocial relationships are enhanced due to the availability of knowledge on social media personas, as this knowledge can ultimately impact a user’s behavior and cognition (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Another study also shares that social media can enable brands to foster brand personalities that adopt PSI as a means for implementing successful social media strategies (Labrecque, 2014). However, in fan studies, PSI has a negative connotation because the theory illustrates fans as individualistic and bordering on pathological behaviors (Duffett, 2013). These interpretations on PSI lead to the first research question:

RQ1: What are the ethical considerations that public relations practitioners need to consider when targeting fan audiences with their messages?

Public relations is a dynamic field that aims to influence, engage, and build relationships with key stakeholders (PRSA, n.d.). Commonly used terms in public relations to describe the consumers, or receivers of the messages, include “stakeholders,” “publics,” and “audiences” (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). PR practices have evolved because of social media, which has caused these terms, and more such as “stakeholders,” “markets/consumers,” and even “voices,” to be used interchangeably despite having different meanings to attribute to a general public (Shin & Heath, 2021). The way “audiences” and “publics” are different is that audiences are seen as a more passive audience as they receive messages, whereas publics are active since messages spur them to take action (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). This same study that explains the differences between audiences and publics illustrates this difference by stating fans are an audience because they must receive messages to become a fan, while publics convene because of

an issue (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). The role of the PR practitioners is to distinguish the engagement level of the message receiver. Deciding which theoretical framework functions best between parasocial interaction theory and situational theory of publics for assigning a label to fans leads to the second research question:

RQ2a: To what extent does parasocial interaction theory accurately reflect the dynamics of fan-celebrity relationships in public relations campaigns?

RQ2b: What alternative theories could be used to better understand these dynamics?

This thesis uses BTS ARMY as the primary fandom example to show that fans as a key public require further study beyond parasocial interaction theory defining the fans' motivations. The reasoning behind this decision is because of the researcher's past studies on BTS ARMY, identity as a BTS ARMY, and the availability of autoethnographies published and written by fans. Autoethnographies give a firsthand account from community members on their experience as an active community member (Custer, 2014). When autoethnographies are written by a researcher, these methods tend to reveal their vulnerabilities, foster empathy, and provide therapeutic benefits as the researcher uncovers a spectrum of feelings (Custer, 2014). To better understand fan identity for PR purposes, the third and final research question asks:

RQ3a: What predominant themes emerge from autoethnographic narratives shared by members of BTS ARMY?

RQ3b: How do these themes shed light on aspects of fan identity that require ethical consideration from PR practitioners?

The next chapter will cover the core literature in defining fan studies and defining public relations for the purpose of sharing where the intersections between fan studies and public relations exist. The existing scholarly literature that discusses the intersection of fan studies and

public relations includes two editions co-edited by Amber Hutchins, Ph.D. and Natalie Tindall, Ph.D., both communications and public relations researchers. These works offer insights into the reframing “publics” when conducting research on fans, which supports the need to investigate the best PR theories to apply when integrating fan studies. The sections to follow offer context on parasocial interaction theory, situational theory of publics, and ethics in PR to provide a foundational understanding in answering the research questions. Then Chapter 3 offers further explanations of the qualitative multimethod design of conducting IDIs and thematic coding of autoethnographic essays, with Chapter 4 revealing the results. Chapter 5 covers the significance of the results, while also including potential routes for future research. The concluding chapter demonstrates the recommendations that PR practitioners, as well as adjacent roles in marketing and advertising, can adopt from this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter includes the essential pieces in comprehending all of the elements used in this study. Before describing the intersection of fan studies and public relations, each field is defined separately because the literature that covers this intersection, while significant in itself, is covered by two editions of scholarly research published in 2016 and 2021. Some literature on sports fans is also included because they are a highly studied group by PR researchers. To follow is insight on BTS and their fandom BTS ARMY. Research on BTS and BTS ARMY is interdisciplinary, but how information can be interconnected with fan studies and public relations is based on news articles and fan-run research collections. Since past PR research at Newhouse has focused on using parasocial interaction theory as a strategy for understanding fans, and general research on PSI being applied to engagement strategies, the next section addresses how PSI is viewed in a PR context compared to fan studies. As an alternative theory, the context and definitions of situational theory of publics are explained. To round out the literature, the last section expounds on the complicated nature of ethics in PR to demonstrate the reasons PSI has been studied by PR researchers, but is argued by fan studies to not be suitable for studying fandoms.

Defining Fan Studies

Fan studies is a relatively new area of academic research focused on media fans and fan cultures as the field became more established in the early 1990s. Fan culture describes a shared fan identity amongst people with a similar appreciation for the specific media content (Jenkins, 2012). The idea of fan studies and reasons fans should be studied in tandem with communications practices is an idea noted Jenkins (2012). There are five distinct dimensions of fan culture that mass media influences, which are (1) its relationship to modes of reception (2)

role in encouraging viewer activism (3) its function as an interpretative community (4) its particular traditions of cultural production and (5) its status as an alternative community (Jenkins, 1992).

The central aim of fan studies is “to recognize and represent fans in ways that are advantageous to their position in society” (Duffett, 2013). An example of this is fans questioning representations in media, celebrating fan creativity, and being critical of online campaigns (Duffett, 2013). The historic uses of fan and fandom were born out of sports fandom in the early 20th century and later characterized the interests of media content as literary genres like science-fiction gained attention (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). From the beginning, fandom recognizes a community of people with common interests, motivations, and passions that constitutes “fannish behavior” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Fannish behavior has become mainstream as technologies have made engaging in fandom more accessible by interacting with artists, connecting with other fans, and generating fan content (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

The latest research in fan studies covers a vast area of media fandoms and recognizes fans as the most active audience (Hills, 2022). Defining “fan” is complex in academic studies because of the various ways fan identity can be cultivated (Hills, 2022). Theories from fan studies that explain fan identity construction are inspired by Henry Jenkins’s (2012) ideas in *Textual Poachers*, which creates a binary of non-psychological and psychological components with the latter explaining the manifestation of fan stereotypes (Hills, 2022). Fan studies does acknowledge the slippery slope of pathological connections with fans wherein obsession can be viewed as a “social impairment” (Duffett, 2013). However, delving too far into the “slippery slope” can invite the creation of a fallacy that only acknowledges a small number of cases within cultivated fan culture (Duffett, 2013). The breadth of work accomplished within fan studies uses

a wide range of methodologies to actualize the fan community and the existence of fan cultures, which sheds light on fans from both the fan insider and researcher perspective (Booth & Williams, 2021).

Defining Public Relations

Public relations is defined by the Public Relations Society of America as, “a strategic communications process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, n.d.). While the history of PR is extensive and the field has undergone various definitions, the current definition is mindful of technological innovations that have caused the role of PR practitioners to evolve (PRSA, n.d.). Public relations is centered on influencing, engaging, and building a relationship with key stakeholders through multimedia channels to frame the public perception of an organization (PRSA, n.d.). One of the many roles that every PR practitioner must fulfill is to research on a continuing basis to maintain an informed public (PRSA, n.d.).

“Public” is at the center of public relations; however, how “publics” is defined and understood has evolved, especially in terms of social and psychological factors (Shin & Heath, 2021). From the 1960s through the 1980s, publics was acknowledged by most public relations scholars as identifying organizations and the commercial functionality of influencing consumer behavior (Shin & Heath, 2021). In today’s conception of publics, there are more usages of public relations theories for enhanced stakeholder mapping (Vieira, 2019). Also, technological developments allow a further understanding on whether or not an audience is receptive to PR messages, which means that audiences are no longer siloed as passive and can respond, thereby gaining opportunities to take action (Vieira, 2019). The social media era gives publics a voice and further characterizations that are required to understand the differences between “audiences”

and “publics” (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). “Audiences” represent a passive group, yet that does not mean a community has to be completely passive to be categorized as such. Wakefield and Knighton use fans as an example, citing well-known fan scholar Henry Jenkins to make the point of fans being an “audience” because to embody a fan identity means to be a receiver of messages, whereas publics will take action without being persuaded (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). This study acknowledges that fans could possibly be a passive audience based on this interpretation, though argues that is not definite.

The Intersection of Fan Studies and Public Relations

The literature that specifies the relationship between fan studies and public relations exists in two published collections co-edited by Hutchins and Tindall (2016). The first edition states that PR practitioners are primarily focused on the relationship between organizations and their stakeholders, but through Web 2.0, the relationship is dominated by public participation (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). Social media enables a means for two-way communication that has created a participatory culture wherein co-creation can occur (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). Fan studies has become a more recognized area of research because of Web 2.0 two-way communications capabilities, allowing fans significant power in message creation, and fan studies scholars such as Henry Jenkins have built fan theories based on two-way communication (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). While there is definite reasoning to explain the intersection between fan studies and public relations, current PR theories fail to recognize the motivations of fan communities and fan studies do not explicitly include PR ideas (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). The co-editors offer situational theory of publics as an extension of understanding fandom audiences through a PR lens (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016).

The chapters in the first edition are divided into four parts. The first part gives an overview on the foundations of why fandom is a “public” through the inherent participatory actions that are supported by the digital era. The wide array of digital content has led to the development of transmedia storytelling, which invites fan participation and fan criticism, with the possibility of the latter forcing media industries to prepare strategies to circumvent if necessary (Chin, 2016). Hills (2012) warns that for those interested in the intersection of fan studies and public relations to not view fandom as homogeneous because social media and the relationship between a fan and celebrity/producer can have a different symbolic nature on the basis of activity, cultural practices, and beliefs (Chin, 2016). The second part explains the theoretical approaches to public relations, engagement, and fandom. A quantitative study in this part supports that fan publics can be cultivated through public relations tools including bridging strategy and perceived authenticity in order to generate positive word-of-mouth behavior (Krishna & Kim, 2016), which this researcher can connect to BTS ARMY in the next section. Though not as prevalent to this thesis that is mainly focused on entertainment fandom, the third part covers brand perspectives and applying public relations theories and fandom in corporate, government, and nonprofit spaces. The final part advances routes for stakeholder engagement and communication in traditional fan spaces. An example is health-related storylines in character narratives giving health campaign planners unique opportunities in spreading information to better inform fan conversations (Edwards, 2016).

In the 2021 continuation of Hutchins and Tindall’s co-edited publication, the focus elevates to how online engagement reflected in participatory culture changed due to COVID-19, as COVID-19 heightened social media usage and altered social media practices (Hutchins & Tindall, 2021). This edition expands on the previous ideas with a stronger focus on the influences

of social media in an activist capacity, enabling users to become “participatory publics” themselves (Hutchins & Tindall, 2021, p. 35). The core idea is that there needs to be a continuation from both fan studies researchers and PR practitioners in the overlapping ideas and theories as social media evolves and impacts fan culture (Hutchins & Tindall, 2021).

Unlike the 2016 edition, the 2021 edition is not divided into parts, rather the chapters all share a consistent commonality by focusing on the online activity of fans. Major events happened during COVID-19 that generated an activist culture, and the included chapters use Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ Pride Month, and health messages as examples wherein various fandoms became involved in donations and taking politicized actions (Edrington, 2021; Venter, 2021; Torres, 2021). Significant ideas from the 2021 edition include co-creation, fan identity intertwining with intersectional identity, and authenticity. For co-creation, a brand that knows what their fans care about can create a mutually beneficial opportunity, which is what Rihanna’s Fenty brand demonstrated during the Black Lives Matter movement by using social media as a site for activism and spreading awareness (Edrington, 2021). Another case study shares how fans of the television show “Wyonna Earp” who were women and LGBTIA+ created a “save our show” hashtag campaign because the show represented a safe space (Bourda, 2021). Then there are instances when fans are compelled by authenticity to support a cause, meaning that fans become a public since they are motivated to take action (Strauss & Stansberry, 2021).

While the intersecting academic literature on fan studies and public relations is growing, so are online PR news publications, clearly recognizing the PR need to better understand fandom. At a South by Southwest panel presented by the Plus Company called “The New Fandom Economy” invited panelists to discuss the way relationships between brands and consumers have evolved in a Web 2.0 context (White-Sax, 2022). CEO of Plus Company, Brett

Marchand, said, “A product truly only has meaning if others [fans] talk about how good it is” and renowned designer Yves Béhar added “You know the saying ‘Advertising is the price you pay for being unoriginal?’ When a product doesn't have meaning in people's lives, people are not advertising it on their own. Today everybody's a fan and that's the best PR” (White-Sax, 2022). This panel made it evident that harnessing fan power is a critical marketing strategy because fans can determine the virality and authenticity behind a product (White-Sax, 2022). They predict that the future of fandom and PR is seeing a world where the fans become stakeholders that have an investor or creative input role with the organizations due to the intensity of their fandom passions (White-Sax, 2022).

BTS and ARMY: Significance to PR

BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan) is a prominent K-pop group from South Korea that has grown exponentially in popularity since their debut on June 13, 2013. They are made up of seven members including RM, Jin, SUGA, j-hope, Jimin, V, and JungKook (listed by commonly known stage names) (Moon, 2020). BTS' fandom name is ARMY, which stands for Adorable Representative MC for Youth, has a double meaning of fitting into BTS' Bulletproof with ARMY being like their military and BTS the armor, and with the acronym signifying the fandom's everlasting support (Pham, 2023). The trusting relationship between BTS and ARMY is also further signified by their logos. BTS' rebranded logo from 2017 of two simple trapezoids placed like wings represents open doors (Ahmed, 2017). ARMY's first-ever logo (as part of BTS' 2017 rebrand) are the same two trapezoids like BTS' logo, but placed inward to represent ARMY meeting BTS at the door (Ahmed, 2017). When BTS' logo and ARMY's logo are placed together they form a shield because it fits with the English translation of Bangtan Sonyeondan as Bulletproof Boy Scouts and is reminiscent of BTS' past logo of a bulletproof vest (Ahmed,

2017). When the rebrand was publicized, BTS stated on Twitter that where the logos meet is “us and ARMY becoming one together” (Ahmed, 2017; Figure 1).



Figure 1: BTS logo (open doors) and ARMY logo (meeting BTS at the doors) when put together creates a shield that fits into the English translation of Bulletproof Boy Scouts (Ahmed, 2017).

As noted in previous sections, the purpose of public relations is to create mutually beneficial relationships, and after a conversation with Tindall, the researcher became aware of other PR theories that explain the relationship building process, one being stewardship. BTS’ mirroring logo with ARMY signifies a relationship that does not necessarily have to be defined by PSI/PSR, as stewardship incorporates means of giving thanks and gratitude known as reciprocity (Kelly, 2012). BTS has acknowledged and given thanks to ARMY on multiple occasions, and when ideas of stewardship are applied, even though stewardship, in a theoretical lens, is usually applied to the PR practices of nonprofit organizations (Kelly, 2012). The prevalence of BTS and ARMY to public relations has yet to be seen in PR scholarship; however there is no shortage of academic research on BTS. A growing research archive is available on the fan-run Bangtan Scholars website that offers insights on BTS’ soft power in diplomacy and the fan labor (Bangtan Scholars, 2023). While this idea of stewardship can be explored in a future study, in this research, it will later provide an idea as to why fans may exhibit instances of

situational theory of publics (taking action) rather than PSI/PSR (passive acceptance) (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019).

The way BTS demonstrates stewardship and authenticity is what creates a significant draw of people to become fans, and thereby become part of ARMY. ARMY is regarded as an influential and active fandom because of the millions of active digital users talking about BTS and mobilizing on a variety of donation projects (Haulenbeek, 2022; Newton, 2023). The in-person presence is also significant, as evident by how BTS sold out 4 concerts at So-Fi Stadium in 2021, breaking Billboard Boxscore records (Farley, 2022). ARMY also exemplifies a diverse fandom, as the demographics of ARMY vary in age, race, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and more (Yoon & Moon, 2022). The general public often stereotypes ARMY as teen girls with poor taste in generic pop music; an example of a ‘foot-in-mouth-moment’ being when late-night host James Corden referred to ARMY as ‘15-year-old-girls’ (Yoon & Moon, 2022). There are a great number of ARMY subcommunities, such as fan accounts based on geographic location like ‘ARMY MÉXICO’ and ‘Bangtan Egypt’, ones based on age ‘Bangtan Moms & Noonas’, and even some that are profession-based ‘BTS ARMY Medical Union’ and ‘BTS ARMY Bar Association’ (Yoon & Moon, 2022). An ARMY, Hannah Yoon - a professional photographer - set out on an independent project to capture the faces of ARMY and has traversed continents to catalog the diversity of ARMY, showing that the ARMY identity cannot be associated with one face (Yoon & Moon, 2022).

The autoethnography collection used in this research, *I Am ARMY: It's Time to Begin*, was published in 2020 co-edited by Wallea Eaglehawk and Courtney Lazore as a first edition to an anticipated series of autoethnographies, is a sample of the ARMY fandom. The ARMY who were selected for the published essay collection were tasked with sharing how they became part

of the ARMY and how their ARMY identity is situated in their personal lives. By writing this collection, the authors demonstrated that because of how BTS' messages, in music, speeches and significant donations, has had a positive impact on them so much so that they take part in stewardship by taking on “responsibility” of bringing goodwill to others (Eaglehawk & Lazore, 2020; Kelly, 2012). This is evident in the introduction chapter of the collection describing being part of the world of BTS as, “Where every fan is cherished and valued in partnership with the biggest, most influential group on Earth, where everyone is invited to participate in changing the world first by changing themselves: by loving themselves (Eaglehawk & Lazore, 2020, p. 1). ARMY trusts BTS, and trust in public relations is important in managing positive relationships (Kelly, 2012).

Parasocial Interaction Theory in PR versus Fan Studies

Parasocial interaction theory (PSI) was developed by psychologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956 that introduced how media users develop a one-sided interpersonal interaction with a media performer or personality (Adhikari & Merskin, 2020). With the significant ways media access has evolved, ideas of parasocial interaction theory have elevated because of the highly interactive nature of technology (Adhikari & Merskin, 2020). Researchers tend to conflate parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship (Dibble et al., 2015), but both are discussed in fan studies as the discussion focuses on some kind of mediated relationship with a media performer (Duffet, 2013). Parasocial interaction is “characterized by a felt reciprocity with a TV performer that comprises a sense of mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment” (Dibble et al., 2015).

While parasocial interaction theory is applied to communications studies and is acknowledged by fan studies, there are instances when the theory is not in favor with fan studies

because it describes fannish behavior as pathological (Groszman, 2020). While PSI is focused on illusions interpreted as reciprocal encounters, PSR involves forming an emotional connection with a media performer, or in other terms, it means that “PSI are temporary illusions, while PSR are long-term attachments” (Groszman, 2020). PSR develops when PSI is repeated continuously over time, and people in a PSR can be aware that they are one-sided (Groszman, 2020). Being able to distinguish PSI and PSR from one another is essential, however, both theories are off-putting in fan studies as it often illustrates negative depictions of fan behavior that are not entirely representative of a fandom population (Groszman, 2020). This can be considered unethical when PSI and PSR are utilized for PR or marketing purposes because it’s presumptuous to believe that fans are deluded into imaginary relationships as a reason to buy into a product or idea.

Even though parasocial interaction theory is not highly regarded in fan studies, it is in public relations studies because PSI and PSR are indicators of a strong organization-to-consumer relationship, which illuminates the penultimate goal of building mutually beneficial relationships for PR practitioners (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). This thesis is centered on PSI, but the term still signifies a form of a relationship. “Relationship” in PR has growing importance because of the greater reliance on bolstering social media, such as materials using the phrase “join the conversation” (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). The focus on relationships in PR research was designed to “improve PR practice” by understanding how interpersonal and shared identities translate to PR (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). This does demonstrate a complication in combining public relations and fan studies, which is why alternative theories are considered in this body of research.

Situational Theory of Publics

The aforementioned co-edited work from Hutchins and Tindall (2016; 2021) suggests that situational theory of publics is a theoretical framework that can best serve the interests of fan studies and PR research. PR theorist J.E. Grunig developed situational theory of publics to put meaning to the term “publics” as it is a key term in “public relations” (Heath, 2013). Unlike PSI, situational theory of publics emphasizes the public before the relationship, which signifies the necessity of understanding publics before defining the plan to build a stakeholder relationship (Heath, 2013). Situational theory of publics can identify types of stakeholders and pinpoint ideal times to share information with certain stakeholders (Heath, 2013).

The theory has a long-standing reputation as a well-tested theory that has been applied in a wide range of industries that require PR communications, which is virtually every industry (Toth et al., 2011). The theory has been well-tested in quantitative terms, noting three independent variables including level of involvement, problem recognition, and constraint recognition (Toth et al., 2011). The level of involvement measures how relevant a problem is for an individual, then problem recognition is the extent to which individuals recognize the problems facing them, and constraint recognition is how individuals perceive factors that could inhibit their ability to enact change or alter behavior (Toth et al., 2011). These variables validate the nuances of a key public's motivations and explain individuals' information-processing and information-seeking tactics when it comes to engaging with an organization (Toth,et al., 2011).

Essentially, Grunig's theory distinguishes publics as active or passive, and if active it helps PR practitioners realize how to keep active publics captivated (Illia et al., 2013). Social media has helped an active public maintain a high level of involvement by giving a platform to the consumer's voice (Watkins & Smith, 2021). This applies to fandom audiences who are

typically active online communities whether or not a media performer is active (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). Moreover, situational theory of publics details how a public communicates as a community with similar ideals, meaning the communication style and opinions dictate the level of activity that the public performs to sustain the community identity (Illia et al., 2013).

Ethics in PR Messaging

When researching a tight-knit fandom community and learning the internal communication practices, there is a question of ethics in PR and fan studies. A major challenge for PR practitioners is how to implement ethical reasoning because, as a strategic communications process, PR builds mutually beneficial relationships through truth (Holtzhausen et al., 2021). Ethics is a system of morals that are personal for an individual, and how the individual enacts those morals is entirely up to the individual, which applies to everyone, including how a PR practitioner decides to fulfill the job responsibilities (Holtzhausen et al., 2021). Therefore, the challenge is how PR practitioners uphold their ethics, but generally, it is crucial for a PR practitioner to have sound ethics to enact professionalism (Holtzhausen et al., 2021).

The same idea can apply to researchers in fan studies. Researchers in fan studies usually identify as “acafans” to indicate that their research position is both as a fan and researcher (Booth & Williams, 2021). Fan studies also uphold ethical standards in relationship-building with fans, knowing as fans how difficult it is to be an object or site of research rather than being seen as passionate people (Willard & Scott, 2021). In the methods of fan studies, the aim is to avoid exploitation or collaborative interactions, and instead use a unique methodology that makes deliberate ethical considerations that supports fandom communities (Willard & Scott, 2021).

Fandom is riddled with fan identity stereotypes, which is why it is pertinent for fan studies to prioritize ethics (Willard & Scott, 2021).

Unlike fan studies, PR may not always prioritize ethics because building a mutually beneficial relationship does not always require ethics, though it does not mean the relationship is successful (Shin & Heath, 2021). Also, there are several ethical challenges in PR because not every client is a “saint” and to do good PR work that makes a client happy means the PR practitioner has a choice between adopting that client’s ethics for professionalism or rejecting to maintain individual ethics (Shin & Heath, 2021). In this instance, a key stakeholder that is not explicitly considered is the key public and how the ethical foundation with a client can impact their investment (Shin & Heath, 2021). This means if the relationship-building between a client and PR practitioner holds greater focus than the audience that is impacted by both entities, that means certain needs and wants from a key public can slip through the cracks (Shin & Heath, 2021). For fandoms, this means if a PR practitioner’s idea of a fan is through how an organization views the audience, and it’s all very surface level, then the messages produced may not make full ethical considerations, but that process may be a pitfall of PR ethics rather than purposeful disregard.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methods for this thesis are qualitative to showcase the perspectives from PR practitioners on fandoms and how fans describe their fan identity. The order of employing the methods occurred sequentially with the coding of the autoethnographies being complete before the interviews were scheduled. This enabled the researcher to become more knowledgeable on fans before asking fan engagement specialists questions on their attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors towards fans. The semi-structured in-depth interviews that followed were conducted with seven participants who identified their role as being in fan engagement with varying years of experience. Both methods underwent a qualitative thematic analysis that categorized quotes from fans and PR practitioners as either seeing fans as a passive public (parasocial interaction theory) or active public (situational theory of publics).

Thematic Qualitative Analysis on Autoethnographies

An autoethnography is a form of self-ethnography that allows the researcher or participant to place the self within a societal and cultural context (Reed-Danahay, 2019). Studying autoethnographies are beneficial to the researcher because of how autoethnographies raise questions “about the insider/outsider dichotomy and the construction of the objective observer” (Reed-Danahay, 2019). In this thesis, the insiders are BTS ARMY and the outsiders are PR practitioners. The autoethnography collection that will be the focus of this study is *I Am ARMY: It's Time to Begin* co-edited by Wallea Eaglehawk and Courtney Lazore and published in August 2020. The autoethnography focuses on how BTS has had a positive impact on the lives of fans and how that is seen in their daily lives, and serves as a sample of the everyday ARMY identity in socio-political contexts (Eaglehawk & Lazore, 2020). For this thesis, the objective

observer is embodied by the PR practitioner since public relations work incurs studying an audience or publics as key stakeholders in certain projects.

In the context of fan studies, autoethnography offers personal insights into how one can study and theorize their own fan practices (Hills, 2021). Autoethnography should not be confused with ideas of an autobiography because an autoethnography is an analysis of one's own life experiences and an autobiography, like an ethnography, is conducted by an outsider (Hills, 2021). The researcher chose to use autoethnographies because the material will further the qualitative purposes of the study, rather than surveying fans for short responses. The perspectives of fans can demonstrate to PR practitioners how to think of fans from an advantageous position that acknowledges the insider practices of fandom instead of potentially relying on numbers that may not illustrate the full scope of fandom motivations.

Recruitment Process

For the IDIs, sampling occurred through LinkedIn because the social media platform is job-oriented and has a search engine that can give results on people working in public relations with a fan engagement focus. The researcher made a recruitment post on LinkedIn (Appendix B) as a mode of convenience sampling – the primary sampling type for the study. Social media outreach would be considered convenience sampling (Galloway, 2005) because LinkedIn served as a convenient platform for potential participants to reach out to me if they fit the description of the post.

The recruitment process also involved purposeful sampling, also known as purposive and selective sampling, because the interviewees needed to have knowledge and experience in fan engagement and public relations. Purposeful sampling is essential in qualitative research methods because interviews with select participants yields results that account for the evolving

nature in a setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), which in this research means how PR knowledge on fandoms is evolving is accounted for in the results. The message used to recruit these possible specific participants acknowledged how their career experiences aligned with this study and how their experience would serve as valuable information to a greater PR community (Appendix C).

Convenience sampling and purposeful sampling functioned similarly as both sampling types enabled outreach with the intended participants. Both types of sampling have the disadvantage of being highly bias as both are categorized as non-probability sampling (Galloway, 2005), however, to answer RQ1, RQ2a, and RQ2b it is necessary to be highly selective since participants with experience in PR and studying fans will have the expertise the researcher can draw from for reliable recommendations.

Purposeful sampling yielded 2 participants out of the 21 LinkedIn users the researcher messaged. Convenient sampling yielded 5 participants who expressed interest in participating based on the researcher's LinkedIn Post, which had a reach of over 2,771 impressions as of August 2, 2023.

Reflexivity

My role in this research is multifaceted. I combine my identities as a BTS ARMY, a BTS ARMY fandom researcher, and an up-and-coming PR practitioner to situate myself as an objective researcher. While my identity as a BTS ARMY may seem like a disadvantage in terms of bias, the advantages outweigh potential bias because my insider knowledge paired with my current studies in public relations and past studies on BTS ARMY bode well for the research design. I also have a BA in English that has prepared me for the nuances of thematic coding analysis that has been conducted in two parts: the IDIs and the fan-written autoethnographies.

Moreover, my unique skillset and identities as a fan and academic researcher contributes to a comprehensive and insightful exploration of dynamics between public relations and fan studies.

In-depth Interviews

By holding interviews after the completed thematic coding of the autoethnographies, the researcher will have a groundwork for how to approach PR practitioners from an enhanced fan studies lens. One-on-one interviews offer an in-depth analysis and offer insight into an array of experiences (Strofer, 2021). These types of research interviews can also ask interviewees about their attitudes, values, and opinions about a specific topic (Hassan, 2023). The length of an IDI can vary from 15 to 20 minutes to around 2 hours, which all depends on the technique of the moderator (Greenbaum, 2012). The researcher intended to use 30 minutes to an hour to discuss each PR practitioner's views on fandom audiences, their experiences with fandom audiences, and if they have insight as to why instances may occur that can cause fans to have a negative perception of PR messages (Appendix A).

Without using the word "ethics" in the interview questions, some questions are designed to engage in the topic of PR messaging ethics to evaluate if ethics is naturally integrated into the participants' job role and thought process in engaging fans (Appendix A). These more ethics-based questions prompt the interviewee to recall past instances in creating content for fans that yielded negative results and positive results. Additionally, with informed consent, the researcher utilized the advantages of IDIs. In this research, the main advantage of using IDIs is that the format allows the researcher to probe more in-depth using laddering to discuss the views of the individual (Greenbaum, 2012). The researcher also chose to use IDIs over other qualitative research tools like focus groups because the IDI may enable participants' willingness to share more personal information since it is one-on-one (Greenbaum, 2012).

Data Analysis

The coding for this research was derived from theoretical implications found in fan studies literature in connection with PR practices. A thematic analysis, which was used for codifying both the IDIs and autoethnographies, is a process of identifying themes and patterns within the collected qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Using both methods of IDIs and thematic analysis of the autoethnographies enables both inductive and deductive thinking for the researcher. For a qualitative research design, researchers typically work inductively to build categories and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The inductive process exhibits a need of going back and forth between the data and the database to establish a comprehensive set of themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In this research, a back-and-forth will occur for the IDIs and autoethnographies separately, meaning that the autoethnographies went through two rounds of coding before the IDIs were coded in two rounds as these are separate datasets. Deductive reasoning occurred after the researcher did a thorough round of inductive analysis, which incurs if more evidence can support each theme (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). With the opening for alternative theories as a way of proving ideas outside of parasocial interaction theory, having a thematic analysis that incorporates both inductive and deductive thinking is necessary.

The thematic coding schema manifested through the language of the research questions. In using thematic analyses, there is a possibility of two themes: semantic and latent (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Semantic themes look at the surface level of what participants said or wrote without looking beyond the denotation, whereas latent meaning identifies the underlying ideas and conceptualizations that can sharpen the semantic content of the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). For this research, a strong foundation with semantic themes will be necessary since the research questions point to latent themes. For instance, the primary coding process for both the

IDs and autoethnographies will be to distinguish the underlying theoretical frameworks and whether the ideas lean into ideas of parasocial interaction theory or situational theory of publics.

The semantic theme processing uses quotes from the IDI participants and quotes from the published autoethnography collection by BTS ARMY.

Chapter 4: Results

Since the study investigated the thoughts of PR practitioners and the fan identity through two separate, yet intentionally collaborative qualitative methods, the results for each have distinguished sections, and are then compared for answer RQs 1:3b. Due to the research being conducted through exploratory qualitative methods, the results are based on the coding schema, which focuses on quotations rather than assigning numeric value for the purposes of offering thoughtful recommendations in the discussion and conclusion of this thesis. The quotations from the interviews and autoethnographies reveal overlapping themes in authentic outreach, participatory culture, mental health, modes of accessibility, and a common goal in enhancing the overall fan experience.

Semantic and latent meanings of various quotes put into perspective whether or not fannish behavior can be best acknowledged through parasocial interaction theory (passive audience) or situational theory of publics (active publics). The researcher created a theory comparison chart as part of the overall coding schema for the IDI and autoethnography quotations. This chart demonstrates the notable differences between PSI and situational theory of publics based on the cited literature, while also incorporating how the theories are viewed within public relations and fan studies literature. These differences highlight the importance in understanding the possible theoretical applications to modern, social media savvy fandom audiences.

Table 1. Theoretical Framework Comparison Chart

PR lexicon	Parasocial Interaction Theory	Situational Theory of Publics
Stakeholders	Audience - passive in receiving messages	Public - takes action
Response	A psychological	Response is to become engaged and

	response/connection	involved in the issue/situation
POV	An individual perspective	A group perspective; considers response at group level
Focus	Focuses on media figures, celebrities, and characters	Focuses on issues/events that have organizational relevance
Motivation	Attachment, identification, and perceived intimacy with media figures	Effectively engage and influence different publics based on their levels of involvement and problem recognition
Purpose	Examines the effects of parasocial interaction on individuals	Provides insights into communication strategies and tactics that communicators can employ
Application	Applied in the field of media and entertainment studies	Applied in the field of public relations and strategic communication
Value in PR	Understand the relationships individuals form with media figures	Analyze audience behavior and design campaigns targeted at specific publics

There are also some similarities between PSI and situational theory of publics to showcase that these theories are not binaristic, as both have prevalence to the respective fields of public relations and fan studies.

Table 2. Terms describing the similarities between PSI and situational theory of publics

Audience Engagement	Both concepts involve the study of audience engagement and response to media or communication stimuli. Parasocial interaction focuses on the one-sided connections that individuals form with media figures , while the <i>Situational Theory of Publics examines how different publics engage with specific issues or events based on their levels of involvement and problem recognition.</i>
Relevance and Importance	Both concepts acknowledge the role of perceived relevance and importance in audience engagement. In parasocial interaction, individuals develop a sense of connection with media figures they perceive as relevant and meaningful to their lives. According to <i>situational theory of publics, publics' levels of engagement are influenced by their perception of the issue's relevance and importance to them.</i>

Psychological Responses	Parasocial interaction theory explores the psychological processes behind the formation of one-sided connections with media figures , focusing on factors like attachment, intimacy, and familiarity . While the <i>Situational Theory of Publics</i> does not explicitly delve into psychological processes, it considers factors like problem recognition and involvement, which can be influenced by individual perceptions and psychological factors.
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Table 1 and Table 2 demonstrate that discovering the semantic and latent meanings of the quotations can be nuanced rather than have stark contrasts; however, noting both the nuances and contrasts of the results answers RQs 1:3b.

IDI Results

The majority of participants in the in-depth interviews chose to remain anonymous, which means for consistency in relaying the results that all participants will be referred to in the order in which they were interviewed (i.e. Participant 1-7). All of the participants were comfortable in talking about their present and past roles, but wanted to refrain from naming the companies they are currently employed by. The industries the participants worked in varied, which is demonstrated in Table 3. Such varying industries supported the commonalities in today's fan behavior, which will be further elaborated in the "Answers to RQs" section of this thesis.

Table 3. The array of industries the interviewees serve

Interviewee	Industry	Years of experience
Participant 1 (P1)	Music/ Non-profit	2
Participant 2 (P2)	Sports PR/ Streaming	15
Participant 3 (P3)	Music/ UI/UX Design	2
Participant 4 (P4)	Sports PR/ Consulting	21
Participant 5 (P5)	PR Agency - Tech/Lifestyle	2

Participant 6 (P6)	PR Agency - Retail	4
Participant 7 (P7)	Television network (on streaming)	4

All participants were asked the same questions (Appendix A) unless a participant provided some insights for a question before it could be asked, which the researcher adjusted as per the nature of semi-structured interviews. Any minor adjustments reframed some questions as follow-up questions to ensure participants had the opportunity to answer the questions to the fullest extent.

The first two questions confirmed how long the interviewee had worked in the industry and the main responsibilities associated with their roles, which all highlighted the work they do for or with fans, as well as generalizable PR work. The years of experience varied with P1 and P3 having worked major internship or self-starter projects while in their early 20s with the upper part of the range with P2 having 15 years of experience and P4 having over 20 years of experience in Sports PR.

The next two questions centered on their research process for fans, then followed by assessing whether or not the participants themselves identified as fans and if personally identifying as a fan motivates their work. The research process for most of the participants typically involved mixed methods of understanding fans, but with an emphasis on using accessible data from social media or media coverage. Most of the methods for researching fans the participants mentioned included social media analytics, surveys, media coverage, focus groups, and psychographics. The participants explained the research routes as the following:

P1 - “We [the team] starts out broad in the research, and then go from being general to more specific. For example, we might go through a list of accounts on a social media platform to find commonalities [of what fans are saying].”

P2 - “It depends on what you have access to. In my current company, we go by viewership and create fandom levels...With the streaming world being so big now, you can get a lot more access to what viewers are actually watching, how long they're watching, what types of sports they're watching. More **casual fans**, they're gonna come in for the really major events, like a Superbowl or something. The ones that are **diehard**, they're gonna watch our shows, our films, live events, all these different things. The ones who are **storytellers**, they're more the ones that it's like they want a good story. In past roles I primarily did survey research.”

P3 - “I would say the best research [method] is definitely just immersing yourself in that fandom. In my job, doing that meant using social media to communicate with certain [music] fandoms to ask what they would like to see on the app we were developing.”

P4 - “I use various tools to understand different things. A lot of the work I do is quantitative, like write surveys, setting out the populations and analyze the data. Using those tools means phrasing good questions. I [also] do a lot of focus groups. There I can go really deep with people and spend time with people and really get more intimate to kind of level up where it's just a group of people.”

P5 - “We [the agency] look at past media coverage to analyze the sentiment. I am primarily involved with handling earned media, and work on story pitches for journalists. My best mode of research [for what I do] is seeing what content the audience has liked and who are the current influencers in lifestyle or tech.”

P6 - “We do a lot of the research that goes into planning and communication, like media audits, audience profiling, and campaign monitoring to see what consumers are saying online. We also subscribe to tech platforms that allow us to sift through data, and then we get all kinds of information about their online behaviors, what brands they follow, what influencers they follow, purchase data, and some psychographics.”

P7 - “A big part of my role is creating fan sentiment reports. I take online feedback around a show or big launch and compile it into a report.”

The rest of the questions were more job-oriented, but were open-ended to give the participants the option of also incorporating their personal fan experiences. These questions focused on the overall job experience of researching and creating content for fans, and the likes and possible dislikes they might have for the job. The answers to these questions revealed the possible negative and positive experiences with fans. None of the negative experiences were overly negative, rather PR practitioners talked about instances wherein a campaign or content did not receive significant attention, likely due to a misunderstanding of the audience research (P2,

P4, P5, P6). Then the positive experiences primarily concentrated on the successes with fans or fan experiences that occurred while working as a PR practitioner that brought personal satisfaction (P1, P2, P3, and P4). The included positive experiences demonstrate an explanation of fan responses to the PR campaigns/messages:

P1 - “I’ve had an outpouring of support for my nonprofit organization that works to make [band name redacted] concerts accessible to disabled fans. What keeps me passionate is the impact fandom has had on me. Another part of what motivates me to become part of the music industry is I want to give back to people, and as a fan, I know what fans want. If I was detached it would be a completely different story.”

P2 - “I do think fans know when you say you invest in a cause versus when you're just doing it for PR purposes. I think the best experience I had was building a campaign around having the [team name redacted] participate in local volunteer events. Fans really responded to that to say thank you for getting involved in the community.”

P3 - “We had to engage a bunch of fans at Madison Square Garden to use the product [an app]. I talked to probably 200-300 people. For the project, when a certain song came on the app to create this venue wide light effect, which is very common in this fandom. I remember being so blown away by the fact that it not only worked, which I had been worried about, but also the fact that everyone around me was just so invested in doing it.”

P4 - “In my book, I have a lot of great examples of sports as a social connection for fans. A lot of these stories I share are about how this social connection between fans can overcome certain polarizing issues like race and politics, or even connect people who are geographically distant. For instance, I open the book with a story about a dad and a son I took to a Mets game. We’re hanging out and talking about life. I’m a Yankees fan, and as I was leaving the father said, “Now I have a reason to root for the Yankees” and for me it was a lovely thing to say.”

P5 - “I was part of a team that put together a demo gaming event that would be co-hosted by [redacted Twitch streamer name]. We were worried if fans would enjoy the lineup of games or not, but were relieved that audiences were happy to join. I just think of this scale as like, I’m one person and I’ve never done anything in my life that has commanded a thousand people to do something. So then to see something that really draws in a lot of people, they engage with it and they talk about it and they tweet about it and they attend the event – it’s just like a really happy feeling.”

P6 - “I have more positive experiences. My favorite client example is when [redacted cleaning company name] came out with a line of professional cleaning products for schools and hospitals, and developed the first nationally certified training program for cleaners at schools and hospitals. This might not be an expected fan example, but this

really bolstered the consumer-brand relationship because of great thought-leadership that occurred for a client that was losing out a significant market share to its competitors.”

P7 - “Personally, I really value the voices of the fans and try to get them the content they ask for. I love the passion fans bring to franchises. They’re really vocal and I love seeing their reactions in real time. If there are themes or characters fans resonate with I try to incorporate them more into our assets.”

The final question asked participants how they think the future of PR and fan engagement could look based on their industry knowledge. The purpose of asking this question was to gather insight for possible recommendations. These answers varied in detail, as well as whether or not the answers leaned more into PR standards or fandom culture. For the PR influence, these answers all emphasized the importance of PR practitioners doing their due diligence in researching a target audience as thoroughly as possible and listening to create a more authentic connection (P2, P5, P6, and P7). Other answers acknowledged that fandom influence will likely increase, especially with the influence of social media (P1, P3, and P4).

P1 - “I definitely think we should kind of take in the social impact side of things and social issues because I think especially throughout the past couple of years where a lot of social issues are gaining more attention. PR should definitely take a more socially informed position.”

P2 - “People can see the future of PR a lot easier now. There’s so much publicity out there, good and bad. You have to start your PR career with this information, knowing you’re going to be working across marketing, advertising, communications, social media and digital, making the PR identity collective. Now there’s so much research in figuring out what fans want, what fans are doing, and what fans are attending. There’s a lot more catering to the fan in PR now. You’re responsible for listening and acting based on lots of data to sift through.”

P3 - “I see potential problems where fandoms are becoming powerhouses of doing labor out of love that isn’t as acknowledged by labels or management teams as it could be. My hope is that more companies will do more in-depth research on what fans are doing.”

P4 - “My hope is that we can focus more on the social connection benefits of fandom, rather than the PR role being so product-centric for sports fandom.”

P5 - “I think moving forward in PR we are going to have to navigate and connect with the transgenerational fandoms and new fandoms that are built. Each fandom exercises

power differently based on media they have access to and with access to media means a growth in media literacy to continually voice their opinions and criticism, or generally share their thoughts. That’s why I think fandom will continue to be a force in PR.”

P6 - “For the future of PR, I think it could be really valuable to look at all consumers as fans because it gives them a sense of agency, which I think we lack when we talk about them. The digital world allows accessing information to be a more interactive experience between brands and consumers, which can benefit both parties.”

P7 - “I hope the industry continues to listen to fandoms and create more content featuring the franchises they love.”

BTS ARMY Autoethnography Results

I Am Army: It’s Time to Begin was co-edited by Wallea Eaglehawk and Courtney Lazore and published in 2020 through Eaglehawk’s self-made publishing imprint called Bulletproof. The anthology’s ten chapters, including the introduction and conclusion chapters, are autoethnographic essays with some references and quotes from scholars, journalists, fellow fans, or from BTS and BTS’ music to reinforce significant points in their journeys as fans. Table 4 lists the chapter titles, authors, and snippets of the authors’ biographies to contextualize their positions in regular day-to-day work and fandom roles, like being editors for fanbase magazines or running local/online fanbase activities. The notable demographics of the authors include being women in their early 20s to early 40s, being from different parts of the United States, Asia, Africa, and Australia, as well as being of varying races and ethnicities. While the sample of ARMY included in the collection is less than a fraction of the overall fandom, the identities of the authors demonstrate an inclusive representation in a global context.

Table 4. Authors and Chapters from *I Am Army: It’s Time to Begin*

Chapter Title	Author(s)	Information from Bios
Enter the magic shop: Introducing I am ARMY	Wallea Eaglehawk	Social theorist, EIC of Revolutionaries and imprint of Bulletproof

Emerging Victorious: Thirtysomething fangirls finding purpose with BTS	Naazneen and Tagseen Samsodien	NS: Human resource professional, TS: a working professional, and both: BTS fanbase administrators
The day that didn't break me	Anna Shaffer	Journalist and writer/manager with Borasaek Vision
From fake love to self-love	Manilyn Gumapas	Professor in Sociology
How BTS contributes towards an awareness of myself	Lily Low	contributor/ digital writer for <i>RELATE Malaysia</i> , <i>Young Minds UK</i> , and <i>Thrive Global</i>
I am ARMY, I am revolutionary	Wallea Eaglehawk	Social theorist, director and EIC of Revolutionaries and imprint of Bulletproof
Finding BTS gave me back myself	Courtney Lazore	EIC of The Kraze Magazine and founder of TheBTSEffect.com
Speaking myself	Sharon Chen	PhD student studying cognitive neuroscience
ARMY as a feminist identity	Keryn Ibrahim	University lecturer and academic writer
Exit the magic shop, enter the revolution	Wallea Eaglehawk	Social theorist, EIC of Revolutionaries and imprint of Bulletproof

The main themes to note from the book include: togetherness, self-reflection, self-love, fan identity, mental health awareness, feminism, and authenticity. While these terms might not have direct indications of being associated with PSI or situational theory of publics, the latent meanings that can be discerned from fully contextualized quotes. There are instances where both semantic and latent meanings can be surmised from the quotes that have implications in fan studies more so than public relations.

The introduction explains the general experience in becoming a fan of BTS, formally known as being an ARMY. A main commonality for a lot of ARMY is, "...we find BTS when we

need them the most” (Eaglehawk & Lazore, 2020, p. 1). Eaglehawk compares the experience to *The Matrix* wherein taking the red pill signifies entering BTS’ world, and being part of that world means it’s “Where every fan is cherished and valued in partnership with the biggest most influential group in the world” and “Where everyone is invited to participate in changing the world, first by changing themselves, by loving themselves” (Eaglehawk, 2020, p. 1). Some key ideas from these quotes involve fans being valued as partners in BTS’ success, having an invitation to participate, and learning how to self-improve before taking on certain challenges in the world.

Emerging Victorious: Thirtysomething fangirls finding purpose with BTS

The first essay is co-written by twin sisters Naazneen and Tagseen Samsodien. They relay their overall journey as fangirls, starting most notably as tweens with a passion for television fandom, and now being thirty-somethings who continue to express passion for the media they enjoy—namely BTS. They had always been passionate fans, with an early example of their fandom experience writing emails alongside the thousands of other fans pleading to have *Firefly* renewed, which did eventually result in the network rewarding the fans with a feature film (p. 23). Their joint-experience in becoming BTS fans started with viewing the MV for *Blood, Sweat & Tears* – a song off of the group’s 2016 album *WINGS* (p. 25). The initial experience of watching the MV gave Tagseen a visceral, individualized experience, stating, “My body felt charged and weighty, almost vibrating when I got that first up-close shot of Jimin, his arm reaching towards me. I felt something undefinable then – later I would recognize it as a sort of welcome” (p. 25).

For Naazneen and Tagseen, the majority of their essay offers insights into their experience as older women being judged for liking BTS that outsiders expect young, tween girls

as the typical image of a boy band fangirl (p. 27). But being older fans offers a unique experience, one wherein the sisters explain how BTS has helped them elevate their professional goals (p. 40) and aspirations, as well as strive to help younger fans by providing access to merchandise and digital content through giveaways (p. 29). These giveaways are able to happen because both sisters help run the local BTS ARMY fanbase in South Africa; by being admins they both also help coordinate local events and fundraisers in the name of BTS. Based on these personal anecdotes, the main ideas of Samsodien sisters consist of age and feminism (p. 26-27) and challenging the status quo through being inspired by BTS (p. 33 and p. 37). Mark Duffett and Henry Jenkins, prominent fan studies scholars, are referenced at least three times in the essay to support how fandom is an active, participatory experience (pg. 38), which Naazneen explains in the following passage:

“Tag and I purposefully engaged media outlets and went on radio to talk about BTS and why, as ARMY, uplifting others is a tenet of the fandom. In Korea, for example, amid the outbreak of COVID-19, BTS were forced to postpone their scheduled world tour. Korean ARMY donated their ticket refunds to help with pandemic-related relief efforts in their country. Similarly, when fires raged through Australia earlier this year, the fandom rallied and donated more than \$20,000. Are we promoting BTS? Undoubtedly. However, as women, it feels incredible to make a global difference in the name of fandom that misogynistic media still paints as vapid tweens” (p. 39).

The day that didn't break me

This theme of outsider misogyny having a negative impact on a fan's view of themselves is present in Anna Shaffer's essay "The day that didn't break me." Shaffer writes about how a BTS song that played in her mind reminded her to not quit (p. 53). This point in her life occurred

when certain aspects of her life, like writing, her job, and maintaining a romantic relationship, became challenging due to her mental health. The aforementioned partner harshly criticized BTS, as Shaffer mentions, “I tried to explain how BTS inspired me, and he mocked me, saying that I was a ‘bandwagoner’ and making fun of the group for ‘looking like girls’” (p. 50). BTS provided her a sense of sanctuary from external and internalized sources of judgment (p. 51).

Shaffer’s story is different from the rest of the essays in that she shares how she struggled to enjoy listening to BTS’ music for a period of time, as it served as an ever-present reminder of having to be saved from suicide ideation, especially when JungKook’s *Euphoria* confirmed the theory of suicide as part of the Bangtan Universe storyline (p. 58). Even though there was a time when she did not feel comfortable listening to BTS’ music other fans/ friends told her that doesn’t make her any less of a fan (p. 61) because there are other ways to support BTS (p. 63). Shaffer’s identity as an ARMY is one that ultimately helped her with mental health struggles since BTS’ message led to her realization in seeking therapy (p. 62). The passage, “Even when I doubted, [BTS] were still there, their messaging guiding my hand. With their help, I have found friends who understand and accept me; with their help, I am discovering my purpose in this world” (p. 66) demonstrates that mental health relief, fandom as a supportive network, and striving for self-improvement.

From fake love to self-love

Similarly to Shaffer’s minor mention of an unsupportive ex-partner, Manilyn Gumapas story centered on the *Love Yourself* album era, which served as a framework for understanding her past relationship. Gumapas gives context into what inspired BTS’ Love Yourself series, sharing how the album trilogy was inspired by psychoanalyst and social philosopher Erich Fromm's 1956 *The Art of Loving*, “It tells a beautiful cohesive story of young, innocent romantic

love (*Love Yourself: Her*) which eventually turns toxic (*Love Yourself: Tear*), and then culminates in a realization of self-love and acceptance (*Love Yourself: Answer*)” (p. 68). Gumapas experience in meeting someone who expressed immense love through romantic affirmations and actions turning into emotional abuse (p. 71-74). She became an ARMY as this relationship was blossoming (p. 72), but when she got to experience her first concert in 2018, she shared that the joy was lost to the relationship when her now ex-partner alluded to cheating on her in texts he sent while she was at the concert (p. 75). Gumapas’s story also themes itself on cultivating one’s self-worth and seeking additional resources, as her intersecting experiences as a fan and her work in sociology led her to making positive personal changes.

How BTS contributes towards an awareness of myself

In her essay, Lily Low uses the *Map of the Soul* albums to better understand the functions of her mental health while she was in higher education, studying to become a lawyer. The *Map of the Soul* (MOTS) album series occurred after *Love Yourself* (2017-2018) from 2019 to 2020. In a similar vein of *Love Yourself*, the MOTS concept was cultivated through philosophical ideas, this time being more-so centered on the ‘self’ through psychiatrist Carl Jung’s archetypes: persona, shadow, and ego (p. 92). By using this framework, Low uses the understandings of “Intro: Persona” by RM and “Interlude Shadow” by SUGA to explore how she cultivated a happy persona (p. 95-97) that contradicted her shadow–meaning traits she wanted to ignore like how she was struggling in school (p. 97-100). Low shared, “BTS’ sincerity inspires me to try to make the active choice to address all of who I am, rather than just the positive parts” (p. 104). Keywords here include “sincerity” and “active”, noting that the artist’s message through their music caused an active response. Such implications will be further explored in the discussion as

Low's story exemplifies a fan identity that is comforted by the artist so that she "...can express [her]self without fear" (p. 106).

I am ARMY, I am revolutionary

Co-editor Wallea Eaglehawk's personal essay details her experience writing her book *Idol Limerence*. This essay presented the most semantic quotes about PSI/PSR, but upgraded the ideas through the term limerence, which is a sociology-based term that "refers to a psychological experience of intense feelings of loving adoration and attachment to another person" (p. 119). Eaglehawk does not shy away from explaining the romanticized implications through PSI/PSR of enjoying BTS' music and the world they have created through photo concepts, the Bangtan Universe, and other digital contents. She explains that as a fan, she knows that the parasocial is an obvious marketing tactic to foster fan-celebrity relationships, and with existing commonalities between PSI and limerence, it's all a "capitalist ploy" (p. 119-120). However, the theorist shared, "My mind said capitalism; my heart said it's more complicated than that" (p. 122).

Eaglehawk decided to "commit a radical act of self-love" by furthering her limerent energy. She discovered BTS through their title track "Idol" on the final installment of the Love Yourself trilogy *Love Yourself: Answer* in 2019 (p. 122-123). By learning more about BTS and their underdog story in the K-pop industry, she realized that, "Limerence grows through adversity and you cannot get more adverse than experiencing a parasocial relationship with the most influential and complex idols on earth" (p. 123). Unlike parasocial relationships, limerence is not necessarily one-sided, but rather, flows freely between idol and fan (p. 131). Through writing *Idol Limerence*, a novel about a character that represented the manifestation of ARMY interacting with RM, Eaglehawk discovered, "...it wasn't just BTS whom I loved, it was the reflection of myself that I saw in them" (p. 126) and "The unsettling familiarity I felt with RM,

though perhaps induced by a parasocial engagement, was also because we were one and the same...we shared the same identity: love” (p. 126). These concepts offer different ideas from PSI/PSR that could connect to PR strategies in authenticity and storytelling.

Finding BTS gave me back myself

The next co-editor, Courtney Lazore, shared how she came to know BTS through her existing interests in Korean entertainment that started in 2007 while in high school. She was aware of BTS’ debut in 2013 and was a ‘casual observer’, but did not become a fan until 2015 when “I Need U” released off of *HwaYangYeonHwa - Part 1* (known in English translations as *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life*) (p. 141-143). The HYYH series kicked off the Bangtan Universe (BU), which Lazore has studied in current and past research to demonstrate how storytelling is what has set BTS apart from other Korean acts (p. 146). She described how listening to “I Need U” spurred on a desire to deconstruct a song lyrically and through MV visuals to connect it back to the unfolding BU; Lazore stated, “As I listened to more and more of BTS’ work, I could see how both the music itself and their lyrics helped me feel again” (p. 147). This process made her realize, “...it really shouldn’t have surprised me at first that storytelling, especially when combined with music and relatable lyrics, had such an effect on me” (p. 150). This ‘effect’ for Lazore meant learning how to gain a more positive mindset and seek mental health resources, which she saw other fans also experienced (p. 152-154).

Speaking myself

An important concept born from the *Love Yourself* album era was “Speak Yourself”, which was used as BTS’ tour name in 2019. In her essay, Sharon Chen explains how ‘speak yourself’ has been a crucial theme in her life. In elementary school, after moving to the US from China, she developed a condition called selective mutism (p. 159) because of anxiety that

stemmed from fear of initial language barriers and a general anxiety for speaking up. Later, in 7th grade, a new student came to her school and was really into K-pop, which made Chen feel happy, even though she primarily consumed Chinese-language music, because people were listening to non-English music. While in college, she came across BTS because of their appearance on the American Music Awards in 2017 (p. 163). She said, “I felt that a part of my identity was now slowly gaining acceptance in popular culture” (p. 164). The way BTS was able to become so successful in America inspired Chen to learn why, and finding that their music and lyrics made her feel so emboldened, stating, “Their lyrics are powerful because they are backed by a sense of sincerity...” (p. 167-168). Before BTS, Chen struggled to balance her Eastern and Western roots, but “BTS empowered me to finally accept the non-Western half of myself and fully love who I am” (p. 170) This coincides with how she also learned to speak up for herself, and feeling that action become enhanced by being an ARMY (p. 171).

ARMY as a feminist identity

The final essay explains how BTS ARMY can be a feminist identity despite the ingrained societal notion that liking a boy band is to be looked down upon by patriarchy. Keryn Ibrahim tells her story on how she became a feminist ARMY, and trying to understand how she was able to become a boyband fan while being a feminist. She explained “Being an ARMY is all-consuming, as it should be, but as a feminist, I feel the guilt in directing most of my attention to seven men” (p. 184). BTS has appealed to a lot of fans through being open about their hardships, but as a feminist, Ibrahim explained that they have not suffered the hardships of being women (p. 185). However, Ibrahim launched her academic feminist self through BTS research, that the ARMY experience has a lot in common with being feminist because of how ARMY checks off what it means to live in a feminist world (p. 195). This list consists of:

“(1) asking ethical questions about how to live in an unjust and unequal world, (2) creating relationships with others that are more equal, (3) finding ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems and (4) repeatedly coming up against histories that have become concrete, histories that have become solid as walls” (Ibrahim references Sara Ahmed’s *Living a Feminist Life*; p. 195).

With the researcher also being an ARMY, it is to the knowledge of all insiders how being an ARMY has represented activist work.

In Eaglehawk’s concluding chapter, each essay is summarized and connected to the overarching idea that to be an ARMY is to be a participating revolutionary (p. 207). As Ibrahim’s essay mentioned, ARMY has conducted activist work. Examples include how ARMY matched BTS’ \$1 million donation towards Black Lives Matter, put together fundraisers on member’s birthdays, aided in COVID relief funds, clogged the #WhiteLivesMatter hashtag by posting fancams, and even bought out a Trump rally in Texas (p. 220). To be an ARMY is to be revolutionary as BTS has taught the fandom how to love themselves, self-reflect, and “to address issues within the fandom and rise together...” (p. 221). The overall idea of *I Am ARMY: It’s Time to Begin* is that being a fan, specifically an ARMY, allows for a symbiotic relationship because of how BTS’ growth has inspired the personal growth of their ARMY (p. 222).

Summary of Results

Though some research questions can be more strongly answered by one prong of the methodology compared to the other, the answers to the research questions can be fully answered by integrating the results of both the IDIs and autoethnographies since the RQs are centered around the dynamics of the fan-practitioner relationship. The answer to the first question is primarily answered by the PR practitioners who participated:

RQ1: What are the ethical considerations that public relations practitioners need to take into account when targeting fan audiences with their messages?

There are no strict parameters for ethical considerations as the PR field lacks ethical clarity outside of aiming to build trust, however, the considerations PR practitioners spoke of in the research process combined knowledge on expected PR trust-building practices and research ethics in their audience research. These expected practices include using surveys, social media analytics, interviews, building audience personas, and if resources are available, focus groups. For loyal customers/ fans, these expected methods are applied with a fan understanding for 6 out of the 7 participants. This means by having personal experience as a fan, these practitioners apply how they want to be approached as a fan to the content they create for fans. Therefore, the main ethical considerations that were realized in the data comes from research ethics and the PR practitioners leveraging their personal fan identity in applying ethics to their roles. The next step for how certain PR strategies and tactics can be implemented is framed in the second research question as follows:

RQ2a: To what extent does parasocial interaction theory accurately reflect the dynamics of fan-celebrity relationships in public relations campaigns?

RQ2b: What alternative theories could be used to better understand these dynamics?

Situational theory of publics can be used to explain fan-practitioner relationships when noting how interviewees responded and direct quotes from the ARMY autoethnography anthology. The scope of responses from the PR practitioners indicates that they view fans as having the potential to be active as a response. This idea of a ‘response’ can either formulate from loyal consumers/ fans participating in the PR practitioner’s research and/or the reaction at the end of a campaign. Additionally, elements such as, but not limited to, demographics, psychographics,

intersectionality, and accessibility could influence the consumer/fans' response, which can be components of the research data that is considered when creating content. Ideas of engaging fans that could have PSI associations were not touched on as all participants discussed fandom as a participatory community.

While aspects of PSI exist as a mechanism that has engaged ARMY and enhances the connection with BTS, it cannot solely serve as a theoretical framework for influencing fan relations. PSI describes a one-sided relationship, but ARMY draws on quotes from BTS members that reassure fans that they value ARMY for the fandom's unwavering support and how the fans have responded to their music and activities with positive action, making ARMY 'active' in their responses rather than 'passive.' Essentially, BTS recognizes that ARMY and BTS are one in the same based on the prevalent themes in their music: self-love, self-reflection, and pacing one's healing journey. With these themes, the last research question furthers how these themes can connect back to the PR professional perspective.

RQ3a: What predominant themes emerge from autoethnographic narratives shared by members of BTS ARMY?

RQ3b: How do these themes shed light on aspects of fan identity that require ethical consideration from PR practitioners?

These acts of self-improvement that serve as a gateway for fans to participate in activist activities is the main theme presented in *I Am ARMY: It's Time to Begin*. A person decides to become an ARMY because of the sincerity BTS perpetuates in their music and activities. Once the ARMY identity is adopted, it means willingly participating in not only supporting BTS, but becoming part of a larger global community that aims to spread love and positivity. ARMY serves as a great example in this research because ARMY illustrates to PR practitioners that fans can have

significant influence because of their participation that shows distinctive action rather than passive behavior. Engaging fans in this manner means learning to respect the power of fandom, and rather than harnessing that power, it matters more to work alongside fans by using tools that can create an authentic connection. From both the IDIs and autoethnographies, there's ethical consideration for the fan identity for those who identify as a fan, seeing that the fan has the self-awareness and worldly-awareness to make decisions that are not based in the illusions of a one-sided relationship as parasocial interaction theory often suggests.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The quotes and ideas shared in the results section did offer semantic and latent meanings that the researcher could code as leaning into a PSI framework or situational theory of publics (Table 1), with the possibility for overlapping concepts (Table 2). This chapter covers the implications of the findings, recommendations based on the overall results and implications, limitations of the study and possible routes for future research. The implications are supported by references from the literature review, tying in all the pieces from public relations, fan studies, PSI and situational theory of publics, and how ethics can be applied overall. The recommendations are also supported by the existing literature, and are directed at PR practitioners since the purpose of this study is to enhance the PR understanding of fandoms. With the basis of the recommendations being from qualitative research, the limitations are addressed. The limitations grant ideas for future research that are expounded upon before the study's conclusion.

Implications of Findings

The findings shared in the results are organized in this section based on the differences between PSI and situational theory of publics in Table 1 and the comparisons in Table 2. With the primary terms used to distinguish the differences between PSI and situational theory of publics being from public relations lexicon, the studies referenced in the literature review underwrites the results through a PR lens. Fan studies does also underscore the implications as a way to put a check on the ethical considerations needed to be applied to the PR functions from a fandom perspective. Moreover, to clarify all of these integrated ideas and concepts, the PR terms from Table 1 serve as subsections that can allow the implications of the findings to be addressed from both the theoretical frameworks and scholarships from PR and fan studies.

Stakeholders

A study from Wakefield and Knighton (2019) references Henry Jenkins' work as a way to describe an audience as passive, with fans representing a passive audience because they must receive messages to be a fan. For a public to be assigned 'public' instead of 'audience', the group takes action without being persuaded (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). While it is true that for a fan to become a fan, they start as a receiver of messages, however, to perform fan identity implies being active in some capacity (Duffett, 2013).

All PR practitioners interviewed for this study demonstrated an understanding of fans and loyal customers being known as a target audience, but acknowledged the necessity of understanding the functionality of two-way communication. This means that passive terminology was used most commonly in the interviews; however, the details of how target audiences were described revealed the importance of understanding their activity, such as what fans do and say on social media. Then the autoethnographic essays by ARMY did proclaim love for BTS, but that the love for BTS is determinedly not one-sided because of the group's persistent communication with ARMY that is viewed as sincere. ARMY serves as both an individual and group identity, but the group identity is prioritized because actions from ARMY are typically collective and collaborative.

Response

In *I Am ARMY: It's Time to Begin* there are examples mentioned up until 2020 when the collection was published that included examples of times when ARMY formulated group responses to major world issues. The most noteworthy examples during 2020 were when ARMY matched BTS' \$1 million donation to Black Lives Matter and used ticket refunds to go towards COVID-19 relief funds (Eaglehawk, 2020). These issues encouraged a group response that also

just so happened to come from a collective psychological connection of being an ARMY. For PR practitioners, this can make interpreting these stakeholder responses complex. Ethical considerations in PR, though also complex in levels of transparency to opaqueness (Shin & Heath, 2021), an application of fan studies ethics in avoiding fan stereotypes (Willard & Scott, 2021) could enable content creation that better acknowledges the fans' level of involvement with a situational theory of publics approach.

P1 and P3 knew of possible fan stereotypes, as music fans of boy bands are viewed as “fangirls” which can serve to perpetuate negative associations with “obsession” and “screaming” rather than being actualized as actions of enjoyment. Yet despite knowing these stereotypes, both shared how important it is to understand the actions fans undertake to support their favorite artists, making the experience between music professionals and fans more collaborative. In sports, P2 and P4 described the reasons and level of fandom involvement, with P2 specifically specifying the system of recognizing casual fans, diehard fans, storytellers, and bucket-listers. It is clear these levels of fan responses are categorized by level of involvement and action based on the content they prefer.

When fans are recognized by their actions, this means the PR practitioner can create opportunities for fans to get what they want out of a fan-based experience. As the only current PR agency participants, P5 and P6 have select experiences with fandom audiences, but the responses of fans is similar to the embodiment of a loyal customer, and in these instances, the PR agency perspective showcased aims to get a positive response from the loyal consumers by not just buying a product or engaging with a campaign, but expressing positive sentiments. P7's work also focuses on sentimental value from fans, and such responses guide her work in fan engagement at a television channel.

Perspective (POV)

The difference in perspective of PSI and situational theory of publics when pertaining to fandom has a more direct tie-in with PSI because of how PSI is used commonly in entertainment studies (Dibble et al., 2015), whereas situational theory of publics has more to do with timing of group responses and situations or issues that may or may not be tied to a figure (Heath, 2013). However, the editions on PR and fandom from Hutchins and Tindall in 2016 and 2021 argue that situational theory of publics can apply to fandom because of how situations and issues can have relevance to a fandom. In the case of ARMY, the participatory culture is deemed to be that of a “participatory revolutionary” in the concluding essay from Eaglehawk. All participants expressed having personal fan experiences that give them perspective on content creation that makes them consider the fans. PR practitioners having that personal understanding is a means to potentially implement ethics from fan studies, and thereby, use situational theory of publics to better understand the motivations, purpose, and behaviors (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016) that coalesce into a specific fan perspective.

Focus

Evidently, the fan focus is on the media figure, but if that figure is part of or acknowledging certain situations and issues, then those situations can become part of the fans’ focus. An example from ARMY is when BTS made a donation of \$1 million to Black Lives Matter, the fandom decided to try to match that donation. An additional example is when ARMY hosts donations for charities on members’ birthdays, which is an instance where timing influences the action of fans. For both PSI and situational theory of publics, how fans act is a matter of what is relevant to the fan identity. This means that PR practitioners can use a mix of

quantitative and qualitative methods to understand the full scope of what fans focus on by further categories beyond just the media figure, team, brand, character, etc.

Motivation

The motivations described in both PSI and situational theory of publics are combined under the ARMY fan identity. Eaglehawk used limerence, an elevated version of PSI, to explain that the connection between BTS and ARMY is not one-sided, rather, BTS and ARMY are the same because both took part in the *Love Yourself* and *Map of the Soul* album eras that prompted thoughtful processes of self-love and self-reflection. PSI sees fan motivation as attachment and perceived intimacy that is furthered today by social media (Adhikari and Merskin, 2020), which can apply to information that is shared in the ARMY autoethnographies in the essence of having access to an incomprehensible amount of digitized content about BTS. A level of attachment is nurtured by BTS' lyrics because of the topical prevalence of self-love and self-reflection. Yet attachment for ARMY dictates the level of involvement in the fandom. Shaffer's story was unique in that she had to limit her involvement with BTS for mental health reasons, but was still considered to be involved because she did not stop supporting BTS. Such nuances in fan involvement means a fan's identity is not the same as another fan, even if they are part of the same fandom. ARMY is a fandom that has made it known that the qualification to be an ARMY is to support BTS. Ways of supporting BTS is then up to the ARMY.

These ideas of how fans are motivated were mentioned in the various industry contexts from the interviewed participants. P4's studies of sports fans found that fans find social connection through having a baseline qualification of enjoying sports, meaning you do not have to be a fan of the same team to connect with other fans. For the music industry participants (P1 and P3) attachment to a musical artist happens because of a fan's connection or enjoyment of the

music. Again, the means in which a fan demonstrates attachment then impacts their levels of involvement, which P1 and P3 shared similar answers in how the presence of fans on social media helps understand fan motivations further, which can then be better reflected in the work they create.

For P5 and P6 working in PR agencies, the use of audience personas helps configure possible goals and motivations that a product can fulfill. P5 used speakers as an example, saying if the speakers are promoted during back-to-school season, then the timing brings awareness to that product because the possible goal or motivation can be playing music to study. Even P6 described the audience persona process for a client – a cleaning products company – who was losing some market share. While the nature of a ‘fan’ for a cleaning product is not exactly like that of a fan for a sports team or musical artist, it does mean having a sense of loyalty or preference for a product. The obvious goal in making an audience persona for a cleaning company is a consumer wanting a clean house, but these days, consumers value corporate activism and social responsibility, so this cleaning company created a professional line of products for philanthropic work, which P6 expressed was a positive example of better understanding the motivations of a target audience. Moreover, motivations through a PSI and situational theory of publics can be combined to enhance overall audience engagement.

Purpose

Through purpose, PR practitioners can identify the possible strategies that stem from theories like PSI and situational theory of publics. The purpose of PSI is to examine the effects on individuals (Groszman, 2020), and PR practitioners rarely study ‘individuals’, but rather use stakeholders to identify certain groups (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). However, if PSI is used to manifest a shared identity, then it could filter into PR research since PR research investigates

group responses (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). Since situational theory of publics is a PR theory, the theoretical purpose is to provide insights on what communications strategies can be employed based on group reactions (Illia et al., 2013). Moreover, the purpose of PR practitioners using either theoretical approach in tailoring messages means in-depth audience research can produce categories of groups within the overall fandom to prevent one theoretical approach from possibly misunderstanding fan motivations and behaviors.

Applications

Once strategies are applied to a key public or target audience based on these theoretical frameworks, it's necessary to understand how such applications function in the PR field. The chapters in Hutchins and Tindall's co-edited *Public relations and participatory culture: Fandom, social media and community engagement* (2016) and *Public relations and online engagement: Audiences, fandom and Influencers* (2021) names a number of examples of fan studies applications to PR work. These examples of having fan knowledge ranged from entertainment and sports to retail branding and hospitality/tourism, and the participatory culture that exists for all of these industries. The results from the IDIs and ARMY autoethnographies are indicative of an understanding for two-way communication and fandom relationships. Combining these understandings from the results and existing literature indicates that the key to applying PSI or situational theory of publics is prioritizing research into participatory culture that is cultivated through two-way communications.

Value in PR

After knowing the possible applications these theories can employ through strategies and tactics, then it can be assessed whether these applications add significant value to PR. PSI can have applications beyond entertainment, as a study written by Labrecque (2014) discussed using

PSI for fostering brand relationships in social media environments. While PSI can have negative psychological connotations when used to discuss fans (Groszman, 2020), PSI is not a wholly determinantal understanding of fans since the idea of ‘attachments’ is a goal for establishing a connection with key stakeholders. However, the value of a situational theory of publics approach tries to understand how to foster a connection by analyzing audience behavior and motivations (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). With the main value of PSI as understanding the relationships fans form with media figures and that of situational theory of publics being analyzing the audience behavior, then drawing on both theories, and possibly other theories, can lend a more holistic approach in connecting with fandoms.

Recommendations

The intended recommendations from this thesis are geared towards the PR field and adjacent roles in communications. Implications of the findings outline how the study’s results and literature review supports expanding theoretical approaches applied to fans beyond PSI, which is the primary recommendation for three reasons: (1) utilizing more qualitative methods for fan research (2) employ collaborative strategies with fans as part of the PR process, and (3) enhance ethical considerations by cultivating authenticity.

In this study, the qualitative methods revealed detailed views from both the PR practitioner and fans. PR practitioners spoke of mostly using quantitative methods like surveys and social media analytics, but spoke of how more in-depth qualitative research can offer a greater number of specifics into the fan mindset and motivations, such as reading through social media posts, making a sentiment analysis report, or holding focus groups. The autoethnographies from ARMY consisted of such high-quality writing that outsiders wanting to better understand the ARMY fan identity would be remiss if they did not read stories from ARMY. In only using

quantitative research methods, the possible interpretations of the data can lead to assumptions that are based in PSI, as PSI is often a face-value assumption of the relationship between fans and media figures. This means that when qualitative research is included in the overall PR research on a group, that a shift from a PSI understanding to situational theory of publics can occur because the qualitative results will provide an explanation into what motivates fans to take action. Moreover, utilizing some form of qualitative research can help a PR practitioner discover particular nuances to use as part of overall content creation in PR campaigns.

Engaging with a fandom audience does not start and end with the research and must be seen through beyond a campaign timeline. The motivations and behaviors of a fan are constantly evolving for a variety of reasons, which is usually based on the internal and external factors that can affect a fandom. With ARMY as an example, an internal factor can be instigated by a BTS comeback and analyzing the new music for prevalent themes that they find personal connection with. The events of 2020 represent external factors that caused fans to pivot from anticipating a world tour to becoming activists. In the context of other fandoms, like in sports and retail, this can have a similar application to that of ARMY being a music fandom. With BTS exemplifying how to build trust, those in sports and retail can do so by implementing corporate social responsibility (CSR) that is of value to consumers, such as Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+, COVID-19 relief, sustainability, and more. Furthermore, these internal and external factors that impact fan identity are comparable for a lot of fandoms, and for a PR practitioner, this means learning more about these factors through two-way communication processes that are activated primarily by the digital realm.

To maintain consistent engagement, ethical consideration must be applied to ensure that engaging with fans goes beyond the purpose of meeting profit margins. Such considerations can

look like being mindful of possible cultural differences within the target audience/key publics. ARMY is an example of a diverse fandom, with subgroups like K-ARMY (Korean fans), J-ARMY (Japanese fans) and I-ARMY (international fans) being identifiers for the fan experience. Cultural differences for a PR practitioner mean configuring inclusivity into a campaign by researching components of these differences to be aware of in the content creation process. An understanding of trends and current events can also be integrated into an ethical consideration of creating PR messages for fans. For ARMY, cultivating self-love in the face of increasing social injustices happened through a co-creation process with BTS, thereby, empowering both the artist and fan. This can translate to PR practitioners as learning how to empower audiences through collaboration that can cover the necessary insights for ethical considerations tied to the fan identity. The possible guidelines for ethics in PR can vary from industry to industry, as this study demonstrates the nuances of fandom culture requires thoughtful collaboration.

Limitations

There are well-known weaknesses to conducting purely qualitative research such as difficulty in generalizing the data and replicating the methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In this study, seven participants' answers from the IDIs could be generalized to an extent, but is not generalizable to the whole population of PR practitioners. The particular population of PR practitioners selected for the study was narrowed to personnel that held responsibilities related to fandom engagement or audience-oriented PR research, meaning that the recommendations from this study may not be of interest to all PR professionals if not in the realm of fandom or B2C work.

The notable limitations with the additional prong of this study's methodology is that the autoethnographic accounts are also not generalizable for BTS ARMY. Only one edition of two available editions of autoethnography anthologies from Bulletproof [Publications] was used, and no readily available online-only autoethnographic essays were used due to time constraints. Arguably, the researcher is well-informed from past research on the ARMY fan identity, but is avoiding potential bias by acknowledging the potential limitation of coding ten essays. Also, ARMY as a fandom is not the same as all fandoms; therefore, certain components that are integral to the BTS fandom may not be applicable to other fandoms, such as learning how to self-love.

The IDIs and autoethnographies are the sites of data collection that serve the scope of the study – coding the data into two distinct theoretical categories of PSI and situational theory of publics. In this case, the limitation that is likely to occur is whether the data can strictly stay within the confines of these categories. As mentioned, there are overlapping ideas between PSI and situational theory of publics, which could ground new theory, however, this study did not seek to establish new theories or ideas, but rather make the argument in needing to explore the evolution of currently available theories.

Future Research

Since the research coalesced into a number of themes being drawn from public relations and fan studies, future studies can offer narrowed case studies or serve as the researcher's stepping stone for a larger dissertation for future Ph.D. candidacy. For instance, this study touched on feminism in the fandom space, but generally focused on the argument that fandom is more active rather than passive. Future research can incorporate a stronger sociological approach to particular fandoms and how that impacts the ways PR practitioners can best connect with

those fandoms while acknowledging intersectionality. As P5 specified, accessibility and intersectionality are inextricably linked, and in fandom this can affect how fans can engage with content. Also, perceived and experienced misogyny can specifically influence the comfortability fans have in certain fan spaces, such as sports being viewed as a masculine space and boy bands as a feminine space when the fan experience of today is more diverse than the anticipated stereotypes. Understanding how these gendered associations in fandom shapes the communities, both in-person and online, could give PR practitioners the opportunity to reshape spaces as more open and welcoming since fandom is a social experience.

As a social connector, future studies can also further tap into how fans become fans and what aspects or elements of fandom sustains the experience. This study did find that for BTS ARMY, they became an ARMY because of BTS' authenticity that is noticeable in their lyricism, performances, variety shows, social media interactions, and interview appearances. Authenticity has become an increasingly central component to today's PR, advertising, and marketing industries, and tends to intersect with storytelling strategies. While this study offers a comprehensive understanding of BTS' authenticity through BTS ARMY's autoethnographies, there is a wider scope of K-pop fandoms and fandoms in general that could be studied further by either configuring if authenticity is measurable or investigating qualitative findings on how authenticity is perceived by fans. Authenticity can also be influenced by the media, as media can be generally biased in how information is relayed. When it comes to how fans and celebrities are talked about in the media, there are possibilities for misinformation, disinformation, and overly negative perceptions, especially in recent news with "fans" throwing things on stage when it can be argued that such actions are not reflective of what consists of the fan identity.

More information on the fan/practitioner dynamics could be explored through quantitative research. Even though this thesis is qualitative, and thereby, difficult to replicate, there are questions that can be tailored to a quantitative study in a survey to PR and marketing professionals. A survey can include ranking and Likert scale questions that could investigate the common research methods used on fans and rating how successful those methods prove to be based on end-of-campaign results. More questions can determine how knowledgeable a PR or marketing professional is on the fandom in which they cater to and see if there is a correlation of personal fandom knowledge that positively or negatively affects the content/campaigns. An additional survey for fans can provide further insights on how fans react to targeted campaigns and promotions, as most fans acknowledge the inherent nature of being a fan has monetary costs, but it would be a matter if they feel spending money for fandom adds some sort of value to their fan experience. Moreover, the possibilities for future research can enhance the current study's understanding of PSI and situational theory of publics applied to fans through additional research on authenticity/storytelling, intersectionality, and media influence.

Conclusion

The findings of this thesis demonstrate the need to consider alternative theories that are better tailored to the current state of fandom activity and goals of fan studies, alongside evolving PR theories. The IDIs support that further fan research is necessary in developing a more authentic connection that showcases PR practitioners understanding the nuances of fandom culture. Autoethnographies written by BTS ARMY confirm that a fan-artist relationship is not one-sided, but rather a partnership that makes the two entities a mirror of one another. Moving beyond PSI also aligns with the goal of fan studies to showcase fandom in a positive light due to the media's tendency for negative portrayals. Fans' willingness to participate in some PR-related capacity means the strongest recommendation for PR practitioners is to create an authentic partnership with fans for possible co-creation of campaigns and messages. To make an authentic connection means recognizing how the fan identity involves a meaning-making process that must be treated respectfully in order to have a positive outcome for the PR team, fans, and clientele.

Appendices

Appendix A

Questions for the IDIs

- How long have you worked in the PR industry?
- What does your role as a PR practitioner primarily involve?
- When in the research phase of creating a PR campaign, what steps are involved in understanding the target audience?
- When recognizing members of the target audience who are loyal fans to the client, what applications or understandings are applied to that particular audience?
- When you think of fandoms, what is the first fandom to come to mind? What ideas or thoughts do you have about that fandom?
- Do you think fans have a greater impact through social media or through in-person events? Possibly both?
- As a PR practitioner, what are your thoughts on fans and fandom culture?
- What appeals do you consider and think of when creating campaigns and writing messages that are targeted at a loyal “fan” audience?
- Have you ever had a negative experience or faced a negative outcome with fandom audiences in your work? If yes, would you mind sharing what that was like and if there were any thoughts on solutions?
- On the other hand, was there a significant positive experience and great outcome when engaging with fandom audiences? If yes, can you recall that experience and share helpful details for fellow PR practitioners?


- What do you think the future of PR could be when thinking of fan or fandom influence?

Do you think fandoms have influence or that the PR practitioner could have more influence?

- Any final thoughts you'd like to share?

Appendix B

Convenience Sampling LinkedIn Post

 **Emma Hudson** (She/Her) · You
PR Masters Student at Syracuse University
3w · Edited · 🌐

👉 Looking to Recruit Interviewees for Public Relations / Fandom Thesis Research 👉

Hi! I'm hoping this post gets good reach and will introduce myself. My name is Emma Hudson and I'm currently finishing up my Masters degree in Public Relations at [S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University](#). My final task is working on my thesis.

- Research description:
For my thesis, I'm investigating the intersection of public relations theory and fan studies theory.

- Methodology:
I plan to conduct semi-structured 1-on-1 interviews via Zoom that will likely last around 30 minutes, but definitely no more than an hour.

- Looking to recruit:
If you are currently or were in a role that required studying fans/ fandom audiences, like fan engagement, fan relations, or social media roles, you'd be the ideal participant. The industry of work is flexible as arguably there are fans for retail, sports, entertainment, food, tech, etc., because a fan is like a loyal customer.
*Note: identities and places of work will remain anonymous.

- How to participate:
DM or email me at echudson@syr.edu with the subject line "PR Fandom Interview Interest." I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have about my study and can send a consent form for more details. I'm looking to schedule these interviews anywhere from now until July 28. I have a flexible schedule and can work with yours easily.

- If interested in helping me recruit:
Any and all reposts are greatly appreciated ❤️

[#publicrelations](#) [#research](#) [#thesiswriting](#) [#fandom](#) [#fanstudies](#)



S
Newhouse School of
Public Communications

thesis INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT

LOOKING TO SCHEDULE ANYWHERE FROM
JUNE 28 - JULY 28

Can participate if:

- ✔️ Role is in public relations and/or has PR functions
- ✔️ Study fans for PR purposes (i.e. creating campaigns, configuring product launches, etc)

How to reach me:

- LinkedIn DM
- echudson@syr.edu

Emma Hudson - Public Relations Graduate Student

Appendix C

Purposeful Sampling Email

Dear **Name**,

My name is Emma Hudson and I am a public relations graduate student at Syracuse University. I'd like to invite you to participate in a research study that is required for completion of my thesis. I am contacting you because you are employed as **executive director, president, CEO, director (or equivalent) of public relations/communications/marketing**, employed by **NAME OF ORGANIZATION** and at least 18 years of age.

I am interested in learning more about the ways in which public relations practitioners view and research fandom audiences. I believe your input would be extremely beneficial.

I would like to schedule an interview at a time of your choosing that will take approximately one hour. You will be asked to respond to questions regarding how you and/or your company views and researches fans for public relations purposes. This research will be used to better understand how fan studies and public relations theories can enhance general knowledge on how members of fan cultures prefer to receive public relations messaging. This study can offer recommendations for improvements in public relations messaging based on holistic knowledge of varying fan identities.

Please do not hesitate to respond via email or telephone with confirmation or additional questions.

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Emma Hudson

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Public Relations Master's Program

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Syracuse University

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Vita

Emma Carroll Hudson is from Williamsburg, VA. She is an aspiring public relations professional with the desire to pursue a Ph.D. in communications. Her honor society background consists of being a member of Sigma Tau Delta, Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, Phi Eta Sigma, and National Student Leadership Success. She was also the former president of the Sigma Tau Delta - Alpha Epsilon Chi chapter, president of Creative Writing Club at UTK, and Editor-in-Chief of Honey Magazine (now Ablaze) from 2020-2021.

Hudson's distinctions include Professional Promise, Outstanding Executive Board Member, Student Media Support of the Year, and two-time Mangam Merit Scholar from the University of Tennessee. She has varied professional writing experience having interned with Sundress Publications and Lyft. She has also gained professional education experience as a substitute teacher in Williamsburg James City County and as a Graduate Assistant for the Office of Research and Creative Activity at the Newhouse School.

She earned a M.S. in public relations from S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University in the summer of 2023. She has a B.A. in English and a minor degree in retail consumer science from the University of Tennessee that she received in the spring of 2021. Her thesis is her 10th academic project on BTS and ARMY.