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# BTS from “N.O” to “ON” and BEyond: Innovation in Effective Mental Health Messaging and Modelling\*

Sharon Blady\*\*

Over seven years, BTS have organically embedded consistent mental health messaging and modelling of various mental health modalities, representing innovation within mental health discourse, within and outside the pop and K-pop culture and fandom. Their personal and artistic journeys have resulted in songs, imagery, and relationship dynamics within the group and within and between their fans ARMY, that organically model behaviours associated with mental health therapeutic modalities and normalize the discussion of mental health and well-being. This practice is vitally important in the effort to end stigma and encourage mental health well-being and recovery. BTS’s authenticity establishes empathy with their audience ARMY and increases their ability to deliver these messages effectively. This includes fostering the creation of a peer support community within the group that extends to their fanbase ARMY, and from which fan-created mental health programs have emerged. BTS’s innovation will be explored by examining content creation throughout their career, illustrating their consistent and organic messaging, culminating in overt and conscious mental health content in their latest album *BE*, which was released three weeks after the initial paper was presented, and provides proof of concept.

Keywords: mental health, recovery, positive parasocial relationships, peer support, therapeutic modalities, lived experience, psychology

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BTS have innovated a major paradigm shift in mental health discourse, embodying Big Hit Entertainment's tagline "Music and Artist for Healing" through consistent positive mental health messaging and organic modelling of mental health tools, including sharing their lived experience of mental health challenges. BTS's rise to fame and their contributions to the global expansion of K-pop, including their becoming subjects of academic study, are seen in recent works by Herman (2020) and Lee (2019). However, a comprehensive study of their mental health contributions has not fully been explored, as it relates to their messaging and modeling of mental health tools. We are more familiar with how BTS innovate on numerous technological, social media, and marketing platforms, yet most do not recognize that these become mechanisms BTS use to communicate their messages and modeling, creative content, personal growth journeys, insight, and lived experience. What will be demonstrated here, is that in doing so, BTS shares and normalizes healthy and destigmatizing perspectives on mental health and well-being effectively. At a time where mental health issues are becoming more openly discussed and the growth of mental health disclosure and programming is evident, BTS are on the vanguard in pop culture and K-pop mental health content. While this research began before the release of *BE*, the process, content, and press interviews associated with the album provide proof-of-concept.

BTS's inclusion of mental health messages are consistent and well-integrated throughout their body of work. I do not suggest that there was a conscious choice by BTS to position themselves as a mental health-based group with a specific agenda. I acknowledge this work is conducted from the perspective of multiple mental health and neurodiversity diagnoses, and years working in the field of peer support, leading to the belief that the "Music and Artist for Healing" concept has facilitated this organic growth in mental health content within their body of work: as a reflection of a positive, supportive, and mentally healthy creative space (Kim, 2019) and in keeping with Lee's (2019) assertion of their building rhizomatic and collaborative work.

BTS's message and content is neither preachy nor abstract, rather creatively exploring vulnerability, self-compassion, lived experience, peer support and the recovery journey from the perspectives of the members: originating in their personal and artistic growth journey and emerging organically from it. The relationship BTS has built with their fanbase ARMY results in increased innovation as they extend their peer support community from seven people to a galaxy of fans, crossing language and culture barriers and inspiring fan-created mental health projects and dialogue, as they connect with fans who may experience mental health issues and seek solace in music that shares their perspectives and pain, while providing a

concurrent message of hope and resilience.

Recognizing that parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships are central to the dynamic between BTS and ARMY, and the complexity of these relationships, I focus on findings summarized within Liebers and Schramm's (2019, p. 15) extensive literature review which indicated:

*that parasocial confrontations and bonding with media entities have potentially positive effects. In particular, media users' identification with media characters shows connections to higher self-confidence (Greenwood, 2008), a higher self-efficacy expectation (Phua, 2016), a stronger perception problem-focused coping strategies (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012), and a stronger sense of belonging (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009).*

As media entities, BTS's fan engagement, while within the typical parameters of K-pop idols, demonstrates these positive impacts with the authenticity and candor of their mental health related content.

BTS demonstrates this organic innovation, not through radical departures from norms of idol creative and parasocial activities, but through subtle and uniquely personal transformations these seven men make in them, performing as organic, authentic, and consistent mental health advocates. BTS are not the first, or only, artists to refer to mental health and well-being in curated or lyrical contexts, however, how they have chosen to do so is unique. Their

particular bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1962, Derrida, & Bass, 1978) results in a unique, innovative, and comprehensive dynamic, strengthening positive parasocial bonds with ARMY, resulting in organic and authentic innovation in exploring individual mental health and wellbeing. BTS has created a safe space for their own personal growth journey and for ARMY, and have done so in public and curated spaces, normalizing vulnerability, and supportive mental health discourse. BTS's positive parasocial relationships with ARMY is examined through mental health related content created by BTS leading to the creation of mental health discourse and projects by ARMY.

## I. Playlist for Healing

BTS's innovation in mental health messaging is evident throughout their career and explored across several constructs. Beginning with a brief overview of select mental health terms and concepts, BTS's organic innovation is discussed across musical eras, demonstrating evolution in form, content, and messaging. Psychological and literary sources in their exploration of identity and wellbeing are considered and how their interpersonal and intertextual response results in BTS's informal organic modeling and embedding of positive mental health messages and therapeutic tools. This includes

the transformation of idol activities and parasocial relationships into forums for mental health engagement and fan-created mental health projects.

### 1.1 Mental Health Modalities: Key Terms & Concepts

Woven throughout BTS's work is the influence of Carl Jung, founder of Jungian psychology: a method to access, experience, and integrate unconscious material into awareness, in the search for the meaning of behaviours, feelings and events (Jung, 1966). Jungian therapy recognizes the potential in everyone to develop themselves fully through processes such as individuation (Jung, 1966) and exists within the broader category of psychotherapy: relational therapy where we learn about our mental health condition, moods, feelings, thoughts and behaviors, learning to respond to challenging situations with healthy coping skills, with numerous variations and approaches (Lebow, 2012).

Three therapeutic approaches are seen in BTS's work: cognitive behavioral therapy, positive psychology, and peer support. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is another form of psychotherapy, where we gain awareness of inaccurate negative thinking to view challenging situations more clearly and respond more effectively by reframing and re-appraisal of our anxious thoughts and perspectives on situations. (Greenberger & Padesky, 2016). Positive psychology focuses on

character strengths, optimism, life satisfaction, happiness, well-being, gratitude, compassion, self-compassion, self-esteem, self-confidence, and hope (Achor, 2010). Peer support is provided by someone with lived experience of mental health diagnosis and focuses on holistic wellness, and health and recovery rather than illness and disability, assisting people in finding their own path to recovery (Dennis 2003). Peer support workers provide complimentary care with other mental health professionals. Peer support can also occur informally within supportive mentally healthy contexts where dynamics for support, encouragement, acceptance, and non-judgment are central themes and practices (Dennis, 2003). The intragroup dynamics of BTS and their relationship with ARMY will be demonstrated as modeling informal peer support.

## II. Eras & Evolutions

### 2.1 Skool Trilogy + Dark & Wild

Shortly after their debut in 2013, The Bulletproof Boy Scouts explained their name during a radio interview, identifying themselves as a voice for and shield to protect youth, indicating that they will make social commentary within their music (BTS, 2013). It was an emblematic statement that would be represented in their logos, lyrics, and explorations within

the context of alter-egos, beginning with the *We On* webtoon and foundation for the *Bangtan Universe (BU)*. Within this era, six songs represent both their desire to speak truth to power as representatives of their generation, while exploring concepts related to self-growth and mental health.

Rebellion and individuation, while speaking to and for their peers, are evident in “No More Dream,” “N.O.,” and “We On,” while “Path,” “Tomorrow,” and “Rain” are early explorations of anxiety, introspection and self-awareness. Both sets of songs lay groundwork for later more complex mental health content and modeling.

“No More Dream” speaks of the frustration of expectations regarding education and employment, and the subsuming of dreams to attend afterschool academies all towards bleak aspirations of civil service positions, sarcastically calling them “No. 1 dream jobs.” BTS urge youth to “rebel against this hell-like society, give your dream a special pardon” and “be the subject of your own life that has been only suppressed” (Pdogg et al. 2013a). For a debut single, these are bold statements that can set any artist up for not living up to such strong messages in subsequent work. Later that year “N.O” continues BTS’s rage against the society that turns youth “into studying machines” living as “double agents between dreams and reality” while imploring “don’t live your life by being trapped in someone else’s dream” (Pdogg et al. 2013b).

“We On” is a slow grooving fight song, where

the rap line takes on haters who question their authenticity, taunting them with “proving you wrong is my hobby” and “You must be jealous, right?” The vocal line reminds haters “you don’t know me” and “I’ll show you, I promise ya, we on” (Pdogg et al. 2013c). BTS acknowledge the challenges of being with a fledgling company, and for RM and Suga the stigma of leaving the underground (and supposedly more legitimate) rap scene to become idols. They defend their choices, creativity, and identity, important in their growth as individuals and artists. The song is also the titular inspiration for their first webtoon, where their alter-egos are students saving the world from both alien invaders and the horrors of teen life: bullies, classism, and the school administration (Lee & Park, 2015). BTS establish strength in their identity, affinity with their peer demographic, and primary audience, while creating space for more vulnerable explorations of growth.

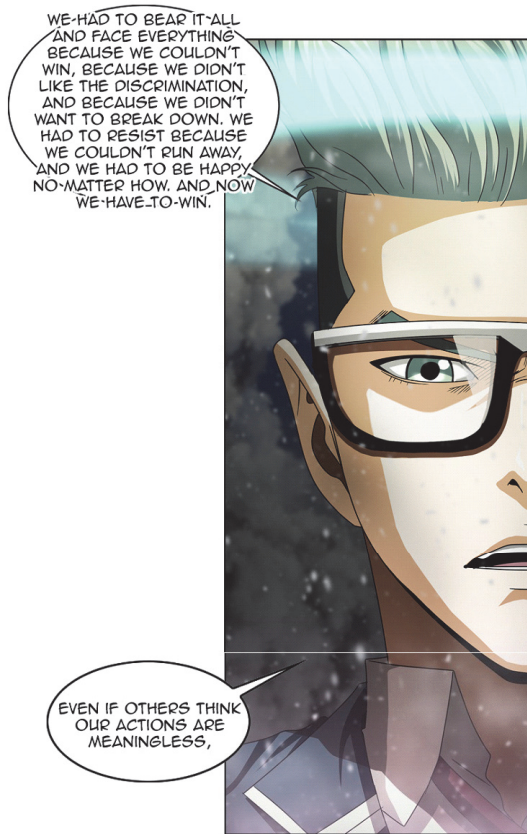
“Path,” “Tomorrow,” and “Rain” provide reflection and introspection on their journey and choices: the insecurity behind the demonstrated bravery and strength of the first trilogy of songs. This second trilogy are early examples of their exploration of the duality of human experience while confronting anxiety, rumination, and sadness that lingers near and within depression.

“Path” describes their trainee journey: emulating predecessors, creating their own style, finding their identity as individuals and group: “I walked through the tunnels without any lights, alone.

<Figure 1> Lee & Park. (2015).

"Chapter 23: Meaningless Resistance." (150211).

*We On: Be The Shield.*



I thought I was alone, but then I learned that it was seven. Rather than being barefoot, I wear the shoes that are called 'Bangtan'" (RM et al, 2013a). "Overcoming many pains and scars that occurred in between, I prepared myself. Making use of my notion to bend rather than to break," BTS describe adaptation to, rather than being overcome by challenges (RM et al, 2013). The chorus repeatedly asks, "Would I have been different if I had chosen a different

path if I had paused and looked back?" (RM et al, 2013).

"Tomorrow" continues this questioning and self-doubt about the efforts and outcomes "I wanted to be happy, I wanted to be perseverant, but why do I keep becoming weaker. Where am I going?" (Suga et al, 2014). Frustration and despair resonate with "Why am I remaining in the same place when there's a long way to go. Even if I scream out of frustration, it only gets echoed in the empty sky. That tomorrow will be somewhat different from today, I can only beg" (Suga et al, 2014). BTS comes through doubt to reassurance and positivity by reframing and moving from rumination to self-compassion, self-acceptance, and self-confidence: "Because the dawn right before the sunrise is the darkest, you, in the future, never forget yourself of now. Wherever you're standing right now, you're just taking a short break. Don't give up, you know it. Don't get too far away tomorrow" (Suga et al, 2014). While reflecting on life as trainees and idols, these are lyrics that resonate with anyone facing challenges or questioning their direction and future. BTS taps into a universality - the Jungian collective consciousness - creating empathetic parasocial bonds with listeners, while creating mutually safe spaces for the exploration and recovery from self-doubt to self-confidence. They remind us, that it's okay, to not be okay, to ride the wave, knowing that safer shores may come tomorrow.

"Rain" reflects on sadness and a sense of



being lost, tired, and unproductive, with references to incomplete songs, and haunting feelings of procrastination, excuses, and how “Everything in this world is slow” (Slow Rabbit et al., 2014). The internal dialogue is familiar to the depressive mind that seeks a way out - faking it, until you make it: “I put on a brief smile at the best background music. I hum like a crazy guy” (Slow Rabbit et al., 2014). BTS engage in personal exploration of their individual and collective identity, resonating beyond peer demographics, creating content that is effective in messaging authentic and positive mental health content, by building empathetic bonds with their listeners through vulnerability.

BTS faced criticism for other early songs and chose to model self-awareness, empathy, and compassion through emotionally intelligent and mature responses. “If I Ruled the World,” plays with the flex and diss traits common to hip-hop, admitting it is a “naïve song” in a self-mocking tone (Pdogg, et al., 2103d). Despite its calls that racism would completely disappear in this world of their ruling,

“RM expressed regret in a interview with Korean outlet *Hiphopplaya* in 2015 over using the term ‘Westside till I die,’ acknowledging that he does not share the history and relationship with hip-hop of many of the people that inspired him... understanding its roots, and your own is important, and RM’s recognition of this is laudable” (Herman, 2020, p. 124).

Here cultural appropriation is rejected and the criticism from “War of Hormone,” “Miss Right,” “Converse High,” and RM’s “Joke” as offensive in objectifying women, would see BTS further step up to admit shortcomings, expressing the desire to learn and grow (cited in Son, 2016). In doing so, BTS reject toxic masculinity, discrimination, and misogyny, choosing to model healthier behaviours: key elements of peer support and CBT, a pattern that grows throughout their career, strengthening their parasocial relationships. Even with fumbles, seeds are sown, and signs of early growth are evident. This era establishes, “that BTS is here to serve up earnest music based on their own lives and emotions, and the world they see around them” (Herman 2020, p.121).

## 2.2 The Most Beautiful Moment In Life

BTS’s introspection on the trials of maturing continue, utilizing alter-egos in the *Bangtan Universe* videos for “I Need U,” “Run,” and “Young Forever” introducing themes and images that will become iconic and revisited in the *BU*: identity, friendship, and mental health, including hospitalization, suicide, self-harm, trauma and abuse. While often shocking, they create safe spaces to discuss mental health, as they also provide images associated with healing, recovery, and support. The universality of these images creates cross-cultural connection that transcends language and the ability to



<Figure 2> Image of Friendship in BTS. (2015b). "Run" Official MV.



reach audiences and markets regardless of native language or culture.

While these images and stories explore themes that will come to be associated with their fictional alter-egos in the *Bangtan Universe*, BTS do not shy away from equally intense and personal reflection when drawing from their real-life experience. BTS share their growth and trials of group cohesion in "Moving On," speaking of their fears, tears, and the first dorm they shared. BTS acknowledge growth as individuals and as a group, the pressures they faced while looking forward to greater things (Pdogg et al., 2015b). Consistent both with personal growth and exploration of the previous era, it also speaks about the reality of fighting with each other yet always coming back together - consistent with images in *Bangtan Universe* videos of the era, blurring the lines between members and their relationships

and those of their *BU* alter-egos, engaging intertextually with their past songs, *BU* webtoons, and videos.

"Baepsae" reprises their role as generational voice and shield, expressing frustration and exhaustion with obstacles facing youth, inequities suffered by those not born into privilege, and the lack of support or empathy from older and more privileged generations (Pdogg et al., 2015c). While written in the context of Korean socio-economic conditions, the parallels to the experiences of North American millennial culture cross geographic and linguistic barriers, demonstrating the mental health toll associated with socio-economic struggle. This ability to connect with audiences emotionally across language and geography on socio-economic issues, especially while they are struggling, demonstrates the effectiveness and reach of their message.

“Whalien 52” takes the perspective of the 52-hertz whale, the loneliest creature in the world: “The world never knows how sad I am. My pain is unmixable, water and oil” (Pdogg, et al., 2015a). BTS’s loneliness is associated with their rising celebrity, where attention is only paid to them when on stage, or engaged in idol activities, “The attention on me is only there when I breathe above the water surface. A lonely kid under the ocean. I, too, want to let the world know my value every day. I get motion sickness from my worries” (Pdogg, et al., 2015a). After expressing the pain of loneliness, faith in oneself is found, “I go towards my future, I believe in the blue sea and my hertz” (Pdogg, et al., 2015a). Acceptance of circumstance and emotions is a mature mental health perspective - rather than rumination - knowing attempts will continue to reach others through their call until it “reaches tomorrow” and “even the other side of the earth” (Pdogg, et al., 2015a). The universality of the message (and its prophetic quality of BTS reaching a global audience) resonates with those familiar with loneliness. Rather than dwell in the negative emotion, BTS provides hope and perseverance, modeling positivity and resilience. The song’s effectiveness lies in its authenticity, vulnerability, and consistency. It is not a didactic mental health public service announcement; it is nuanced and profound in its relatability through shared emotional and mental health experience. BTS’s authenticity is a key element of their

mental health message, especially in its consistent presence and content.

“Save Me” reads on multiple layers: most overtly, the desperate cry of the lovelorn to be saved by the lover, whom they see as central to their identity and well-being. The lyrics express gratitude for happiness from “waking me up who lived in my dreams only. Because the sky clears up when I think of you. I gave my sadness away. Thank you for becoming ‘us.’ Please reach your hand to me, save me save me. I need your love before I fall, fall” (Pdogg, et al., 2016). These same lines resonate as calls for help within the experience of depression, especially where the loss of self leads to internalized stigmatization and the external search for validation and recovery (Drapalski, et al, 2013). The mental health message within the song is best evidenced in counterpoint to “I’m Fine” discussed shortly.

“Butterfly” explores similar vulnerability and anxiety associated with love: fearing the object of affection will be elusive as a butterfly. Significant here is how it begins BTS’s rich literary engagement: “I don’t know if it’s a dream or the reality. My *Kafka on the Shore*, please don’t go to the forest over there. My heart still breaks into pieces over you” (Bang, et al, 2015). Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore* reference goes beyond lyrical content informing BTS’s use of parallel stories, intertextuality, and the psychological inquiry into the nature of the world and our relationship to it. It

reinforces Murakami's notion of the power and beauty of music as a communicative form, the medium BTS uses to enrich their relationship with ARMY. (Murakami & Gabriel, 2006). In this era, BTS's maturing perspective creates expanding psychological safe spaces for more complex intertextual relationship with themselves, *BU* alter-egos, literary works, and ARMY to explore identity and its relationship to mental health and wellbeing. BTS leads their audience to authors and texts they may not otherwise consider, sharing literary and psychological works that influenced their journey and which may be beneficial to their listeners, effectively sharing mental health content and resources.

### 2.3 Wings

The *Wings* era continues BTS's exploration of the self and intertextuality, through personal growth journeys, increasing complexity of the *BU*, and the influence of literary and psychological perspectives. This is fertile ground for the mental health lexicon they are organically embedding in creative production. Influenced by Hermann Hesse's *Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth* (1958), *Wings* begins BTS's Jungian journey. Parallels to the psychological growth of Emil Sinclair, including confronting good and evil, and its presence within the self, and the outside world, are found in BTS's lyrical and video content.

BTS's *Songs in the Wings Short Film Series*

contains solo works "Begin," "Lie," "Stigma," "First Love," "Reflection," "MAMA," and "Awake" building on imagery and ideas established in the *BU*, while further embracing duality. Cinematically, each is a piece of a larger work paralleling Eric Sinclair's Jungian psychological evolution, with *BU* alter-egos exploring concepts in tandem with the Hesse's semi-autobiographical path for his protagonist (Hesse, 1958). Lyrically, they are individual explorations of the self and psychological growth.

"Begin" is a poignant piece from youngest member Jungkook, and while he does not have a writing credit for the song, the story behind why reflects the power of his relationship with his bandmates, and lyrics he requested RM craft on his behalf. Jungkook struggled as each member was writing about their hardships: he felt compared to them, and because of them, his life had been easy, and it made him cry when they suffered (RM, 2016). The song encapsulates the beginning of a growth journey, and parallels the early journey of Emil (BTS, 2016c): dependent on others and seeking to create his own identity yet feeling fraudulent in the process. With Emil, it is the lie about stealing apples, (Hesse, 1958 pp. 13-15) for Jungkook, it is the feeling he lacked experience and a sense of self, "Love you my brother, thanks to my brothers, I became to have emotions, I became me. So, I'm me. Now I'm me. You make me begin" (RM, et al, 2016). His devotion, support, empathy, and compassion

are clear: “I feel like dying when my brother is sad. When my brother is in pain, it hurts more than when I’m in pain. Brother let’s cry, cry, let’s just cry it off. I don’t know much about sadness, but I’ll just cry” (RM, et al, 2016). The collaborative, personal, and creative relationship this song embodies is one of genuine peer support, including empathy in displaying emotions, like crying, as safe, acceptable, and shared acts of authentic relationship.

Jimin’s “Lie” is a wonderful example of the power of the inner critic (internalized stigma) to undermine one’s sense of self-worth and fuel imposter syndrome (Jimin in BTS, 2016b & RM, 2016). Sounding like the confession of one who has deceived another, it is the lament of someone caught in a duplicitous relationship with the inner critic “smooth as a snake” causing him to lie to himself, doubt himself, and suffer torment and punishment (DOCSKIM, et al, 2016). A brilliant encapsulation of internal dialogues of those struggling with mental health issues, it resonates with pain and vulnerability, and the video replicates earlier images in the *BU* including hospitalization, drowning, suicide, and medication (BTS, 2016b), creating connection to listeners who maybe struggling with their own inner critic, and even suicidality. It parallels Sinclair’s struggle with good and evil and his lie about the apples, and our internalizing such events and our beliefs about ourselves. (Hesse, 1958, pp. 13-15).

V’s “Stigma” builds on this battle with the

inner critic and duality, especially the guilt and shame associated with the protagonist’s belief he was unable to protect another, and his pleas for both punishment and forgiveness (Philtre, et al., 2016). “That light, that light shines on my sins. The irreversible red blood flows down. Deeper, every day, I feel like dying.” (Philtre, et al., 2016) along with the video images, harken back to domestic violence and suicide in the story line of V’s *BU* alter-ego (Figure 7, in BTS, 2016e) amplifying the intertextual aspect of the song, while also speaking to the thought processes, guilt, and shame associated with post-traumatic stress (Drapalski, et al., 2013). The prospect that this song is an intertextual continuation of that narrative is reinforced by RM’s speculation on this point (RM, 2016).

Suga’s “First Love” is a testament to the growth process during individuation, as we move away from childhood associations, to later reflection in maturity, of their value to our formation (Jung, 1966). It is a love song to an unappreciated first love, returned to with remorse and apology (Suga & Miss Kay, 2016.). Images of fire and destruction, familiar to Suga’s *BU* alter-ego’s story line reappear destroying his first love. Regret, remorse, and reflection on one’s path parallel similar thoughts and processes expressed on Emil’s journey, especially as the video opens with lines from Hesse on the nature of God’s role in our loneliness and leading us back to ourselves (BTS, 2016f; Hesse,

1958, p. 84). Depression is often fueled by a continuous stream of regret and is a condition experienced by both Hesse and Suga (Agust D, et al, 2016, Freedman, 1978).

RM's "Reflection" video introduces the image of the god Abraxas from *Demian* as both a picture and tattoo: the duality of impermanent and permanent (BTS, 2016g), as his lyrics dwell on the transience of life, where he feels others are merely passersby in his life. From his perspective he sees the connections in their lives and hopes that maybe fate might also connect them to him (RM & Slow Rabbit, 2016). Self-loathing and despair linger throughout the song, ending with "I wish I could love myself" (RM & Slow Rabbit, 2016) foreshadowing a line that will be reframed to become iconic in BTS's next era, and central to the effectiveness of their mental health message.

"MAMA" is J-Hope's love song to his mother, filled with respect, passion, and the maturity to look back on the gifts and strength she provided, which he may not have fully appreciated in childhood. The video juxtaposes images from his *BU* alter-ego's storyline: medication and hospitalization (Figures 3 & 4), cured here with healing found in the image of mother and child (BTS, 2016h), echoing the significance of relationships with women in the Jungian interpretations contained in *Demian* (Hesse, 1958; Jung, 1966). From a mental health perspective, relationships to parents are fundamental aspects of psychotherapeutic practice and attachment

theory, such personal and symbolic exploration create safe spaces for reflection, growth, and healing relationships, vital to recovery and well-being (Lebow, 2012).

Jin's "Awake" provides a culmination to the video series, repeating motifs associated with his *BU* alter-ego (BTS, 2016i), and the inability of his character to change the outcomes of other characters' fates. It can also be seen as a personal reflection on his relationship to his bandmembers, represented by six flower petals: "Maybe I, I can never fly, Like those flower petals over there, as if I have wings, I can't do so. Maybe I, I can't touch the sky. But I still want to reach my hand" (Slow Rabbit, et al, 2016). Intertextuality is amplified with representations of Abraxas and photographs that reference directly and symbolically the other *BU* alter-egos. His sense of inadequacy is finally overcome with resilience and determination. According to RM, this song represents Jin's personality (RM, 2016). As the final video in the series, and with images like the photographs, it parallels *Demian's* final message to Sinclair: that he only need look inward to reach him, as he has internalized his mentorship and support, providing Emil the reassurance that you never walk alone (Hesse, 1958, pp. 183-184).

*You Never Walk Alone* moves from literary and academically psychological influence, to the practical, producing BTS's first distinctly mental health songs, marking their transformation from exploration to modeling, and from theory



<Figure 3> Image of Overdose/Self-harm/Suicide in BTS. (2015a). *"I NEED U" Official MV.*



<Figure 4> Image of Hospitalization in BTS. (2016a). *"Epilogue: Young Forever" Official MV.*



to praxis. "Spring Day" expresses the complex interplay of the stages of grief and healing, what it means to miss someone unsure if reconciliation and reunion are possible, and associated struggles to resolve these emotions without closure (Pdogg, et al., 2017b). Iconic within the BTS catalogue for many ARMY, it captures conflicting and overwhelming emotions,

with vulnerability and authenticity. Laden with film and literary references, it extends BTS's intertextual growth, reinforcing safe spaces for painful emotional and relationship growth. Video images portray loss and longing and model peer support, friendship, empathy, and dedication among BTS (BTS, 2017).

"Not Today" builds on their legacy of inspiring

generational peers, now presented as an anthem for peer support, suicide prevention, resilience, and recovery. In a vein consistent with “No More Dream,” “N.O,” and “Baepsae,” it is a call to action for the “underdogs of the world” that repeatedly states “It is too good of a day to die. No, no not today” and “never die today” (Pdogg, et al., 2017a). While these lines may be read as not giving up on any challenge in life, within a mental health context, it is very much like the dialogues used in peer support when working with someone experiencing suicidality (PeerZone, nd). BTS emulates the closing lines of Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1960 *Spelman Address* “If you can’t fly, run; if you can’t run, walk; if you can’t walk, crawl; but by all means keep moving,” (King, 1960, p 17) and the resilience and determination required to overcome social injustice. However, these words also come from a great leader who experienced depression, and suicidality, (Ghaemi, 2011) giving them greater weight and meaning in this context. BTS’s modified ending “Even if you have to crawl, gear up” (Pdogg, et al., 2017a) is a call to action, and continues the theme of peer support, which they have provided to each other “We couldn’t do it, failure, because we trusted each other completely” (Pdogg, et al., 2017a). The closing lines extend that peer support to all who listen, especially ARMY, while reinforcing BTS’s role as voice and shield and what it means to be Bulletproof: “Trust me by your side, Together we won’t

die, I trust you by my side, Together we won’t die, Trust the word ‘together’, Trust that we are bulletproof, Trust that we are Bangtan” (Pdogg, et al. 2017a). This exemplifies integration and transformation, with maturity in processing psychological concepts and organic modeling and messaging more clearly established.

## 2.4 Love Yourself

Building on their personal and artistic growth, BTS move beyond self-exploration to self-love, where the mental health-related messages become more direct and build on existing works and themes: BTS invite us on a journey with them to love, face and speak ourselves. “Sea,” “Paradise,” “Truth Untold,” and “Fake Love,” return to themes of emotional and psychological growth. “Sea” revisits the work of Murakami with the chorus taken from *1Q84* “Wherever there is hope, there’s a trial” (2011, p. 539). BTS’s journey continues to be explored in its duality as sea and desert, “Eventually the mirage was caught by us and became reality, and the desert we feared got filled with our blood, sweat, and tears to become the sea, But what are these fears among all this happiness?” (RM et al., 2017) Ultimately there is the recognition of hope and “Everything is the same but with different name” finding equanimity and perspective, a vital mental health insight that releases one from the trap of a victim mentality or associated negative perspective of



<Figure 5> Image of Suicide in BTS. (2016a). *"Epilogue: Young Forever" Official MV.*



<Figure 6> Image of Suicide/Self-Harm in BTS. (2015b). *"Run" Official MV.*



rumination and the inner critic. "Paradise" revisits themes of struggle and dreams about one's life and future, which began with their debut. Now it is an exercise of positive self-talk and reframing "Now stop the stupid race, Stop runnin' for nothin' my friend, Every breath you exhale is already in the paradise" (Lophiile et al., 2018). BTS remind us our happiness comes

from within, and not the external validation and markers the inner critic will use to create a sense of inadequacy.

"Truth Untold," also addresses inadequacy and external validation and builds on "Save Me" with validation from another as the protagonists' goal to perceived healing (Aoki et al., 2018). "Fake Love" challenges and refutes this with

the recognition of loss of self in the love and identification with another, which comes at the expense of wellbeing and individuation, recognizing such a dynamic is fake and unhealthy, contrary to one's own wellbeing (Pdogg et al., 2018a). These songs engage with concepts associated with attachment styles and the realization that comes from self-exploration about our value and identity.

"Serendipity," "Singularity," and "Euphoria" are love songs reflecting on the nature, dynamic and impact of loving another, culminating in the "Epiphany" of love and acceptance of the imperfect self. "Serendipity," sees the return to the familiar trap/trope of perfect fated love, asking for permission to love the object of affection, rather than a dynamic of reciprocity (Slow Rabbit et al., 2018a). It repeats the familiar and unhealthy romantic dynamic, demonstrated in previous songs, with loss, longing, and a sense of inadequacy. "Singularity" articulates that loss of self to love and identification with another, "You know I threw myself in that lake, You know I buried my voice for you" and asks "Have I lost myself, or have I gained you?" Ending with the question "should I have not thrown myself away?... what should I have done then?" (Perry & RM, 2018). Here we see struggle and growing realization of the need for separation from immersing in the other, and the need to thaw the ice that freezes one in such unhealthy relationships.

While "Euphoria" still places value and one's

happiness in relationship to the other, it replaces longing and despair with invitation to a journey of exploration and happiness, asking the other about their own path and pain along the way, wondering if they too are still connected to fulfilling dreams of their youth (Young et al., 2018). The energy and lyrical content embody a desire to share a journey of love and relationship on equal footing. It is not surprising that this is considered one of the love songs to ARMY and a high point of many live performances. "Epiphany" is the culmination of these songs and growth journeys. It replies to RM's final lines in "Reflection" that through all of these years, relationships, and self-exploration, "I got to fully reveal my true self under the smiling mask, I'm the one I should love in this world, The shining me, the precious soul of mine, I realize only now, so I love me, Though I'm not perfect, I'm so beautiful" (Slow Rabbit et al., 2018b). This message of loving oneself became the defining concept of the era, a mantra and theme central to the identity of BTS and ARMY. As we have seen so far, these are not new or isolated ideas, but rather blossoming of the seeds sown earlier.

In tandem, there is more explicit organic mental health modeling and parasocial engagement. In "Pied Piper" BTS acknowledge the parasocial relationship and asks ARMY to critically interrogate and challenge it as an act of self-knowledge and self-care: "I know, you like them so much that you can't help, Stop, analyze the

<Figure 7> Image of Domestic Abuse and Trauma in BTS. (2015a). "I NEED U" Official MV.



music video later,” reminding ARMY that “This song is a prize that I’m giving to you” (Pdogg et al., 2017c). Recognition of a power imbalance in a relationship and a desire to equalize and mitigate its impact is a mature and mentally healthy approach, modeling healthy behavior and mutual respect. BTS recognize themselves as the object of affection and choose not to demand ARMYs’ loss of self as part of the relationship dynamic. Just as they have recognized the need for self-love and healthy boundaries, they remind ARMY to do the same.

Returning to intertextual themes two more songs provide strong examples of clear mental health and empowerment messages. First, “Anpanman” identifies compassion as a superpower taking BTS beyond bulletproof shields to become a new generation of empathetic superheroes, embracing reframing and positive psychology. The message of “I’ll muster up my strength a

little more, I’ll be your strength” continues the peer support messaging of earlier works and reminds the listener that strength comes from compassion. Like Anpanman, BTS offer up a piece of themselves as the flawed and imperfect people they know they are, as more complex and human than idols on a celebrity pedestal (Pdogg et al., 2018b). Paired with “Pied Piper” the power of childhood characters retain value as metaphors to explore complex issues in a familiar, relatable, and effective manner.

BTS continue their personal growth journey through meditation and mindfulness. Inspired by James R. Doty’s autobiographical *Into the Magic Shop* (2017), BTS move further into praxis and modeling. “Magic Shop” is a BTS mental health trifecta: first in inspiration from a book about the healing power of meditation, second in peer support modeling, and finally replicating the psychodramatic therapeutic model.

BTS reinforces Doty’s message of mindfulness, connection, and compassion, “I wanted to comfort and move your heart, I want to take away your sorrow and pain” (Jungkook et al., 2018) and the necessity of taming our inner critic, “On a day you hate being yourself, on a day you want to disappear forever, let’s build a door in your mind, Once you open the door and enter, this place will wait for you, It’s okay to believe Magic Shop that will comfort you” (Jungkook et al., 2018.). These lines speak the language of peer support: active listening, compassion, and unconditional support, and the

creation of a safe space for that support. This song is the embodiment of the intragroup peer support dynamic and its extension beyond BTS in dynamic relationship with ARMY. The psychodramatic aspect of this song is explored in a later section, as further expanding positive parasocial dynamics between BTS and ARMY.

“I’m Fine” completes a quest for healing begun with “Save Me,” as a love song to the self, acknowledging, that even with our imperfections, we are our own salvation. The chiasmic structure of these two songs, like the associated ambigram (Figures 8 & 9) reinforces their intertextual

<Figure 8> Chiasmic structure of “Save Me” and “I’m Fine” (grk637, 2018)



〈Figure 9〉 “Save Me” and “I’m Fine” ambigram (BTS, 2018)



relationship and the duality that exists within them in about mental health and well-being. “Though the darkness on a pitch-black night, shakes my dream that is asleep, I’m not afraid - it’s okay, it’s okay, I’m feeling just fine, fine, fine, Now I’ll let go of your hand, I know I’m all mine, mine, mine, Cuz I’m just fine” (Pdogg et al., 2018c). Recognizing the darkness, there is no longer desperation for the hand or salvation of the other, rather the suggestion of letting go, of a crutch, of the past, of whatever, or whoever may be holding us back on our growth journey. Along with “Not Today” this is one of the most powerful mental health anthems with BTS’s catalogue, grounded in the “Epiphany” of self-love.

## 2.5 Map of Soul

BTS return to Jungian analysis via Murray Stein’s work of the same name (1998), exploring aspects of the psyche in “Intro: Persona,” “Interlude: Shadow,” and “Outro: Ego. Each is an archetypal and personal interrogation and introspection that such mapping requires to

uncover, confront, and integrate dualities that exist within us. (Hiss Noise et al., 2019, Suga, et al., 2020, J-Hope et al., 2020a). The intertextual relationship expands further in this era with Stein continuing his *Map of the Soul* series by exploring the richness and complexity of BTS’s lyrical and symbolic content in relationship to Jungian archetypes, symbolism, and personal growth (2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). From a mental health perspective each song is a personal reflection of the vulnerability, acceptance, and growth associated with these processes, modeling positivity while accepting darker aspects of the self, without succumbing to negative self-talk. Theory and growth lead to practical modeling of self-love and acceptance in keeping with the trajectory they are on musically and in effectively communicating mental health messages.

In addition to these titular Stein-Jungian tracks, BTS continue to share their stories and struggles as examples for others. “Black Swan” revisits mourning life’s transitions and the implications for identity while referencing back to numerous songs including “Sea” and “Path,”



"I cry out a silent cry. Sea where all light sinks into silence, yeah yeah yeah. It again seizes my ankle that lost the path, yeah yeah yeah" (Pdogg et al., 2020a) recognizing the complexity of their journey and influences to-date, in preparation for what may happen in the future. What has changed since these earlier songs is that in the face of this uncertainty, the sense of self and identity is strong enough to endure the potential loss: "Even if harsh waves brush against me in the darkness, I will never get dragged away again" because "Nothing can swallow me" (Pdogg et al., 2020a). Resilience and related coping skills and supports are now integrated and part of daily life and perspective on life. "ON" builds on earlier anthemic and empowering works, viscerally standing up to life's trials acknowledging the resilience, strength and healing they can provide with calls to "bring the pain" and "In the darkness, they are my oxygen and light, the power of those that make me be me. Even if I fall, I get back up, scream" (Pdogg et al., 2020b). "ON" effectively flips the script on "N.O" and "No More Dream" by reframing and doing things on their terms, bringing the song and the journey full circle and extending the peer support network with "Find me and I'm gonna live with ya" acknowledging like Demian to Sinclair, the permanence and internalization of their support, modeling and messages to each other, and to ARMY (Pdogg et al., 2020b).

Revisiting themes from "Magic Shop," "00:00"

is an eloquent and compassionate CBT reframing tool, allowing us to reset our perspective and mindset, assuring us that hope can arrive with a new day (Pdogg et al., 2020c). This is a song of self-care and self-compassion, two traits that are often the first victims of the depressive or anxious mind. Like "Magic Shop" it provides both singer and listener with an empathetic mantra for flowing through the negative emotions, accepting, and reframing them, rather than succumbing to them.

"Mikrokosmos," "Lights," and "We Are Bulletproof: The Eternal" consolidate earlier messages of self-acceptance, self-love, self-compassion, empathy, and peer support, within BTS and the para-social relationship with ARMY. "Mikrokosmos" expands on the exploration and meaning of the galaxy found in "Magic Shop," and its message of peer support and acceptance: "Like stars, (we shine), Don't disappear because you are one great existence. Let us shine." It suggests that the light we see - the positive things in life - are not external but internal "Perhaps, that tonight is yet again making such a beautiful face, is not because of those stars nor the lights but because of us" (Thomson et al., 2019). It reinforces the ongoing positive parasocial dynamic between BTS and ARMY through this mutual support. This theme of being each other's light and support is reinforced in "Lights" (Sunny Boy et al., 2020), as are acceptance, non-judgement, self-acceptance: continuing existing peer support

and reframing themes. “We Are Bulletproof: The Eternal” culminates the exploration of what it means to be Bangtan or Bulletproof, encapsulating their journey as a group, and with ARMY, acknowledging the symbiotic, rhizomatic, intertextual, and indivisible links between them: “We were only seven, But we have you all now” and “We’re not afraid anymore. We are we are together bulletproof” culminating with “Yeah we are not seven with you” (Audien et al., 2020). What is powerful in this recognition of unity, is that unlike “Save Me” and earlier works that saw the loss of self in the other, BTS acknowledges the role of ARMY as supportive and mutually inclusive without loss of self or identity.

BTS’s mental health messaging has grown from nascent exploration to lived example and is notable, as seen in Stein’s response to their work acknowledging that, “they have taken the message of psychological awareness and the importance of mental health to a global level” (in Herman 2020, p. 241; Stein, 2020d). While this messaging is recognized by those familiar with BTS, it will be the work created during the pandemic that brings their message beyond ARMY and the K-pop fandom with its clarity, strength, and fully formed content. What the outside world will see as a situational mental health message, is rather the result of years of exploration and practice. It is BTS’s long-term process of authentic and organic engagement that results in the success of their

recent message and music on an ever-increasing global scale and, which confirms their effectiveness as mental health advocates and informal peer support providers.

## 2.6 Dynamite & BEyond

In 2020, BTS reflected our sense of loss, and pivoted by reframing to acceptance and hope. Missing a much-anticipated tour, social media platforms filled the gap, enriching parasocial dynamics as part of collective healing processes. BTS connected with an expanding global audience with their authentic stories and messages for graduating class of 2020, (YouTube Originals, 2020). Weverse became a more than a messaging platform as BTS took us into their daily lives when they took us *Into the Soap* and performing for and with us at *Bang Bang Con* and *Map of the Soul ON:E*, taking the parasocial relationship and mental health messages out in the open. As if this weren’t enough, they managed to “Light it up like Dynamite,” with the release of multiple versions of their Billboard chart topping “Dynamite,” their first song entirely in English (Stewart & Agomar, 2020). In doing so, BTS brought much needed hope and energy to an exhausted and overwhelmed world. They led by example, effectively modeling recovery from self-doubt and frustration to self-care and creativity.

BTS then engaged in the group-led production of a new album *BE*, which represents full



fruition of their mental health modeling and messaging, overt in presence and content. Beginning with the reassurance of “Life Goes On” echoing messages from their graduation speeches (YouTube Originals, 2020). Here BTS provide the grounded realism associated with overcoming past depressive challenges, the acceptance of rolling with the waves of emotion and uncertainty, while embracing the positivity of finding joy in small things through reframing and support of those around us (Pdogg et al., 2020d). “Blue & Grey” and “Dis-ease” are notable for similarly capturing the overwhelming sense of conflicting emotions felt globally in a pandemic riddled world. Both speak of the vulnerability and confusion, the exhaustion and sense of overwhelm, referencing earlier works while providing messages of hope that have grown from these earlier explorations (Park et al., 2020; J-Hope et al., 2020b). Proposing and presenting research on BTS and mental health before the release of *BE*, had me optimistic about what mental health messages and modeling the album would address, and I was not disappointed in seeing the next steps taken by them in their organic, authentic and effective mental health messaging. *BE* is a culmination of BTS’s mental health journey, building on a rich and demonstrable legacy. It contains songs and videos they created for their own mental health, for ARMY, and for whoever needed to hear the message. It is not a pandemic feel-good once-off but is a

significant development of their larger organic and authentic legacy, hence it’s resonance and success with both existing and new fans.

### III. Literary & Psychological Influences: Integration & Interplay

BTS’s body of work demonstrates psychological exploration as a foundation for mental health messaging and modeling, organically arrived at through personal growth for individual wellbeing. Inspired by complex intertextual engagement with literary and psychological sources, BTS tell stories of pain and healing, either personal or through their *BU* alter-egos.

Within mental health modalities, especially psychotherapy, CBT, and peer support, we tell our stories as part of exploration and healing. BTS’s act of speaking themselves is the cornerstone of their modeling and the first step to ending stigma. Here, in their parasocial relationship with ARMY they encourage and model healing for others, through the sharing of stories. Within a mental health context, telling our stories may lead to a diagnosis or be part of treating one. A clinical diagnosis or its public disclosure, is not the sole source of validity for our personal stories, rather sharing stories to gain insight and growth builds empathy, compassion, and empowerment within parasocial, peer support and therapeutic clinical

relationships (Achor, 2010, Brooks, 2013, Dennis, 2003, Doty, 2017, Greenberger and Padesky, 2016, Jung, 1966, Kolle, 2011, Lebow, 2012).

Over the course of seven years, we have heard each member speak of feelings of anxiety, depression, insecurity, and inadequacy, with *2019 Festa Bangtan Attic* (BTS, 2019a) video and *Break The Silence* docuseries and movie (BTS, 2020a & b) being excellent examples. They also describe reframing, recovery, peer support, and optimism, even referencing counselling as part of the mental health supports provided at Big Hit (Kim, 2019). BTS discuss with compassion Jimin's experience of body image issues resulting in disordered eating behaviours (BTS, 2020b). While most explicit is Suga's disclosure of depression, compulsions, social phobia, and suicidality in "The Last" (Agust D et al., 2016). Suga also jokes about his inability and frustration with meditation due to ADHD in *BTS World Tour Europe* video (2019b): a scene that resonates with my own experience. It is a scene that makes me laugh and feel heard and understood, knowing that I am not alone in what it's like to live with ADHD: the wonder of hyper-focus and creativity in some moments, and the inability to sit still in others. It is this vulnerability, openness and modeling and its resonance that builds positive parasocial dynamics inspiring growth, healing, and co-creation by ARMY.

Most recently Jin shared the struggles and counselling associated with his song "Abyss"

(BUMZU et al., 2020) and Suga reinforced messages associated with the need for emotional expression as a healthy outlet and one not always available to, or encouraged for men, reinforcing earlier messages of BTS rejecting toxic masculinity in favour of mentally healthy behaviours (Guillaume, 2020). While it is refreshing to see mainstream media acknowledge BTS's role, what has been demonstrated here is that these are examples within a longer and larger legacy, and part of an ongoing dialogue amongst themselves and their fans for over seven years, and grounded in years of personal exploration influenced by significant psychological and literary works.

#### IV. Interpersonal & Intertextual Responses: Organic Mental Health Modeling

We have seen how BTS's journey combining their artistry and empathy has resulted in their ability to organically embed unscripted modeling of mental health therapies and tools including, peer support, CBT, positive psychology, and reframing. We have also seen how over the course of seven years it has evolved to genuine and public mental health commentary by BTS.

As part of this messaging, it has also been embedded in their idol activities, including performance. In naming the annual fan meeting

or Muster “Magic Shop” BTS creates a multi-layered modeling adding to Doty’s influence and peer support modeling, with inclusion of Jacob Moreno’s psychodramatic Magic Shop therapy, where one enters into exchange processes to get needs met or release unwanted psychological items (Kolle, 2011). Performances replicate the therapeutic model in real time, with BTS and ARMY as active parasocial participants meeting each other’s need for empathy and unconditional acceptance while helping the other shed insecurity, loneliness, and self-doubt. While this exchange is not exclusive to Muster performances, and was even carried into on-line interaction with ARMY during *Map of the Soul ON:E*, the name selection must be seen within the larger context provided by Doty and Moreno, and demonstrated here. It is not a coincidence, as much as it is one more significant mental health message woven throughout the rich tapestry of their music and creative production.

Through branded apps BTS’s effective mental health messages are further developed, expanding the *Bangtan Universe*, parasocial relationships and inviting co-creation. *Weverse* has seen members invite ARMY to play video games and share support on career goals, while *BTS World* encourages compassionate engagement to level up, and *BU Story* invites ARMY to create new stories and different outcomes than the existing *BU* canon. Such a dynamic has inspired fan-created mental health content.

## V. Transformations: Personal & Para-social to Peer Support

Fanfic, fan-created art, and fandom-based YouTube channels are not unique to BTS, however, what I have not encountered in other fandoms, are the creation of groups, projects, or organizations related to mental health and well-being. BTS’s positive parasocial dynamic with consistent mental health messaging, has created a dialogue within ARMY about mental health, leading to unique co-creation that parallels BTS’s innovation and authenticity in mental health messaging.

Examples of such projects include BTS-inspired *Mikrokosmos Project* and *Break The Silence Projects* from the ARMY-based volunteer organization *K-Pop for Peace*, where ARMY are encouraged to engage in community activities and events sharing the power of BTS in mental health while giving back to the community (K-pop for Peace, 2020). An entirely BTS focused mental health curriculum is contained within *Bulletproof to Stigma*, designed and delivered by the author: a former nursing and social work instructor, and former Health Minister, and peer support professional. It is a program grounded in a diverse range of mental health tools and resources and the mental health tools and messages of BTS (Speak Up, 2020). In addition to the work they do separately, these two fandom-created mental health programs

collaborated in September 2020 for suicide prevention month. They created and delivered a month-long mental health resource sharing and weekly workshop platform offered online called *The BangTan Strong Project*, framed through BTS creative content, creating engagement with therapeutic tools through fandom and shared space as ARMY (BangTan Strong, 2020). In addition to these projects, other ARMYs are engaged in BTS-inspired mental health projects: from videographers in Canada, to anthology compilers in Argentina.

Additional research and collaboration in this area is in early stages and ongoing, and will include ARMY testimonials, and surveys and exit interviews with participants in the mental health programs, and collaborators in the fan-based video and anthology projects. Findings on the relevance and impact of BTS's message and modelling in mental health will include both qualitative and quantitative data, and applied to the growth and evolution of the *Bulletproof to Stigma* program for increased efficacy for participants, with findings published in a mental health anthology anticipated for publication in 2022.

## VI. Conclusions

With increasing awareness and dialogue about mental health and wellbeing, there is a growing

effort to deliver resources and end stigma. One challenge is finding vehicles to authentically connect with audiences. Too often content is packaged and delivered by human resource, mental health, and marketing professionals who rely on data, clinical research, and other mediated sources to shape and deliver messages. So how do we reach people more effectively? With authentic voices, role modeling, and engaging formats and content that resonate and inspire.

This research demonstrates that BTS have consistently produced content that provides an authentic and relatable voice on mental health issues, providing important and effective messages organically. The creative environment created by Big Hit Entertainment fostered BTS's mental health and wellbeing and helped normalize mental health content and modelling mentally healthy behaviours. BTS became mental health role models in a nuanced and authentic way, rather than brand ambassadors for public service announcements, demonstrated in their content creation and parasocial dynamics with ARMY, including fan-created mental health content. The author has seen the positive impact on clients when using BTS as a framework for engaging them with resources, tools, and supports. By tapping into what people are passionate about and finding authentic messages within those passions, great success in mental health and wellbeing can be achieved. BTS provides such a platform and example to others.

BTS's personal engagement with psychological sources and organic mental health modeling and messaging has extended their peer support from a constellation of seven to a galaxy of millions. The effectiveness of their mental health messaging and modeling crossing language and culture barriers and inspiring fan-created mental health content, a unique innovation for musical performers, either within, or outside of the K-pop realm, BTS has organically transformed traditional idol activities and creative production into integrated and effective mental health and wellbeing platforms for themselves and their fans. Additionally, their integration of inspirational sources ranging from Hermann Hesse and Haruki Murakami, to Martin Luther King, James R. Doty, and Murray Stein indicate a desire to explore their own mental health challenges and wellbeing, allowing them to reflect this process back in their creative production, in conversation with each other, their previous works, and their audience.

Within BTS's innovative style of mental health dialogue is their ability to seamlessly embed integrated, authentic, and arguably natural and unscripted modeling of mental health therapies and tools including, peer support, cognitive behavioural therapy, positive psychology, and anxiety reappraisal. While immediate connections to the work of Doty, Jung, and Stein are evident in song titles like "Magic Shop," "Intro: Persona," "Interlude: Shadow," and "Outro: Ego," these however,

are only the tip of the lyrical and psychological iceberg of mental health innovation within their music and the *Bangtan Universe*. Their multi-layered development of Moreno's psychodramatic Magic Shop therapy in both lyrical content and peer support community building with ARMY is brilliant and nuanced in its scope and impact, with the creation of a peer support community ritual. BTS's mental health message and modeling manifests within their creative content, intergroup dynamics, and in engagement with ARMY, extending into social media, online and ARMY created environments. BTS's clear, consistent, comprehensive, empowering, and effective mental health messages and modelling inspire ARMY to further mental health innovation with the creation of complimentary mental health tools, discourse, and communities within ARMY.

The author's goal is to continue research in this area, expanding and enhancing the *Bulletproof to Stigma* mental health program and from that work publish findings about the impact of BTS to the mental health and well-being of ARMYs both within and beyond the program. By recognizing mental health programs require content deemed engaging by the recipients for long-term impact and success and by utilizing BTS as a content source, this work can open opportunities for more impactful and sustaining programming. Within peer support we often say "Nothing about us, without us" and the exploration of mental health within the context of ARMY and BTS, is a field ripe

for exploration and practical application benefiting ARMY and others open to musically inspired mental health programming as part of their mental health education and recovery journey.

BTS provide real-time lived examples of peer support within their group and creative dynamic. Coupled with the expansion of this dynamic into relationship with ARMY and the modeling of various mental health techniques marks a level of mental health innovation unprecedented in the music industry. When looking at BTS, mental health and wellbeing does not appear to be a cause to be championed, so much as an example to be lived, and a relationship to be had. It is their natural, grounded, authentic, and integrated approach that has succeeded in reaching their audience, resonating, and innovating along the way. BTS inspired us to “Begin” our journey knowing that through the “Rain,” “Stigma” and “Dis-ease” we may experience in life that we can, through our connection to them and fellow ARMY, be assured “You Never Walk Alone,” because together “We are Bulletproof” and no matter what happens, “Life Goes On.”

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