

# Contractualism in the ARMY fandom: a legion prepared and mobilised at BTS's service

*Contractualismo en el fandom ARMY: una legión preparada y movilizada al servicio de BTS*

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## Abstract

*Although the phenomenon of fandom had its origins in the 19th century, in recent years, it has undergone significant evolution, becoming a fundamental component of the expansion and proliferation of transmedia universes. Currently, one of the largest and most globalised fan communities is ARMY, the fandom of the K-pop group BTS.*

*The purpose of this manuscript is to reflect on the distinctive elements that characterise the ARMY community, understand its unique relationship with BTS in relation to contractualist theories, and analyse the peculiarities of its content production. Through a questionnaire-type survey directed at BTS followers, with the participation of 275 people in English and 128 in Spanish, quantitative information was collected. The goal was to extrapolate, through structured procedures, certain aspects of the behaviour of BTS fans.*

*The results obtained allow for establishing the points of connection between the band and its fandom, understanding the importance of narrative as a driver of fan loyalty, evaluating the predominant influence of YouTube compared to other content consumption channels, and finally extrapolating these characteristics as a model that stimulates fan communities through fundamental elements of contractualism.*

**Keywords:** ARMY, BTS, K-pop, fandom, contractualism.

## Resumen

Aunque el fenómeno del *fandom* tuvo sus inicios en el siglo XIX, en los últimos años ha experimentado una evolución significativa, convirtiéndose en un componente fundamental para la expansión y proliferación de universos

transmedia. En la actualidad, una de las comunidades de seguidores más extensas y globalizadas es ARMY, el *fandom* del grupo de música k-pop BTS.

El propósito de este manuscrito es reflexionar sobre los elementos distintivos que caracterizan a la comunidad ARMY, comprender su singular relación con BTS en relación con las teorías contractualistas y analizar las peculiaridades de su producción de contenidos. A través de una encuesta tipo cuestionario dirigida a los seguidores de BTS, con la participación de 275 personas en inglés y 128 en español, se recogió información cuantitativa. El objetivo era extrapolar, mediante procedimientos estructurados, determinados aspectos del comportamiento de los fans de BTS.

Los resultados obtenidos permiten establecer los puntos de conexión entre la banda y su *fandom*, comprender la importancia de la narrativa como motor de fidelización de los fans, evaluar la influencia predominante de YouTube frente a otros canales de consumo de contenidos y, finalmente, extrapolar estas características como un modelo que estimula las comunidades de fans a través de elementos fundamentales del contractualismo.

**Palabras Clave:** ARMY, BTS, K-pop, *fandom*, contractualismo.

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## 1. Introduction

The term *fandom*, understood as a large group of people united around a theme or cultural dimension (Torti & Schandor, 2013), traditionally dates its emergence to the early nineteenth century with the publication of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). Readers gathered to discuss the work and share their opinions about the plot, its characters, and the narrative subtext. This marked the beginning of a community of literary fans who congregated to discuss and celebrate their favourite works. J.R.R. Tolkien himself, author of *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1949), and *The Silmarillion* (1977), was also part of a small community of literature fans called the *inklings*, in which he coincided with C.S. Lewis, author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956).

However, the fan concept took on a new dimension in the 1960s thanks to the mass phenomenon and musical idol Elvis Presley and bands that marked a turning point in the history of music, such as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. Fans began to follow their idols around the world; it even started to become a problem as some became obsessed with them, breaking their private spheres or even being dangerous. Since the digital era, the fan phenomenon has crossed the barrier of presentiality, as can be seen in the fandoms of One Direction (Directioners), Justin Bieber (Beliebers), or Taylor Swift (Swifties), among others. This digital era has given followers a voice, providing them with agile and effective tools to communicate, congregate, and share the content created (Busquet, 2012). A phenomenon already noted by Jenkins: "The web provides a powerful new distribution channel for amateur cultural production. Amateurs have been making home movies for decades; these movies are becoming public" (2010, p. 137).

Regarding other fields such as cinema, two of the longest and most extensive *fandom* communities in history were born, such as those of the Star Trek transmedia narrative universe and, above all, the one belonging to Star Wars. While in comics, Marvel and DC Comics stand out. All of them are clear examples of how a narrative can expand for decades thanks to the intertextual element's characteristics of this type of universe, such as expansion and depth (Freire-Sánchez *et al.*, 2022) and strategies based on transmedia branded content (Waqas *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, these types of

narrative universes continue to grow, crossing the media and formats in which they originated and keeping loyal and alive a countless legion of followers who consume, distribute, and create all kinds of content related to that universe.

Nonetheless, unlike these success stories that have been forged and built over many decades, in recent years a fandom community has emerged that has expanded exponentially and at a dizzying pace compared to others. This is ARMY, the fan community of the most important South Korean k-pop music group: BTS.

Regarding the characteristics of fandom, Hills (2002) already warned that fans consume content, but they also interpret it in an active, conscientious, and active way. In the same way, the author states that there is a constant tension between fans and the rest of pop culture, as they seek their place in it. McCormick (2018) also highlights the importance of fan love and passion in the development of the narrative of idols and their musical groups. Zubernis and Larsen (2012) add the effect of rejection or shame that the fan may feel if their idols do actions that are morally reprehensible, such as drinking in public, committing a crime, or getting into altercations with paparazzi. Juneyong and Younglee (2022) add further perspectives on the characteristics of fandom, such as the social capital that fandom generates or the social relationship, akin to contractualism, that might occur, among other factors.

### 1.1. The Korean fandom

The RAE (2023) defines a fan as: “Admirer or follower of someone.” However, in South Korea, this definition does not reach the real dimension of the follower. Behind every K-pop group is a series of fans willing to do whatever it takes to ensure that their favourite group succeeds. South Korean fans are some of the most dedicated fans, understanding that being a fan is an intrinsic part of their lives and emerging as protectors of the music group. In this sense, it is more correct to use the term *fansumer* (union of fan and consumer), as it refers to the extremes to which the follower can go (Delivered Korea, 2022).

Just as each group has its own name, the fans of each well-known Korean band also have an official name, and some of them even have their own corporate visual identity. For example, fans of the group BTS are called ARMY, and those of Tomorrow X Together are designated MOA (Arnaud, 2021). The nicknames are not chosen randomly but possess meaning and fit perfectly with the group's creative concept and narrative. In K-pop, mostly, fans are in charge of listening to and promoting the music of their favourite groups. This is their main function, as they support their bands and help them climb the local and global music charts. This becomes even more important as the number of views, likes, and comments is part of the criteria for South Korean music award shows. Consequently, fans are involved in the achievement of milestones, successes, or failures by bands, acquiring a greater active value than in other countries. Another way in which fans often support their idols is by purchasing advertisements (Beats, 2022).

In South Korea, posters promoting a band member's birthday or an album release are common. Much of the advertising investment used to purchase advertising space is funded by fans. Many times, crowdfunding actions are carried out among the fans in order to finance such advertising campaigns. These ads are usually placed in bus and subway shelters, or simply near the building of an entertainment company. However, the fans' promotion does not end here; they even plan events for

them. These are called fancafes (Arnaud, 2021) and are events organised by their followers, in which they also normally celebrate the release of an album or the anniversary of a member of the band, who are known as idols.

These idols have to maintain a perfect aesthetic, even in their day-to-day lives, in addition to showing a morally impeccable image and not being involved in legal or interpersonal problems. In the event that any idol is involved in any scandal or performs any action outside the exemplary model, they would be harshly judged by fans on social media. Also, there are many cases of Korean fans harassing singers to try to find out confidential information or find them doing something immoral. In Korea, such fans who pursue their idols and invade their privacy are called *sasaeng*. Many of these incidents have ended in episodes of bullying by Korean society, causing the artists to take a break or even leave the group. Also, it can reach such extreme points that the idol decides to take his or her own life, as happened with soloist Choi Jin Ri, better known as Sulli (BBC News, 2019).

Therefore, it is possible to say that the Korean fandom has an immense power of influence, almost more than the singers themselves. Unlike other fan groups, they are characterised by double standards, as they are as willing to do anything for their idols as they are to be extremely ruthless and cruel when an idol breaches that unwritten moral code with their fans.

## 1.2. The BTS phenomenon

One cannot talk about K-pop without mentioning BTS, the group that has overcome all kinds of cultural and demographic barriers (Arnaud, 2021), equaling international artists of great level: “they have millions of reproductions in their video clips, with numbers that have even broken major world records, surpassing artists such as Ariana Grande or Taylor Swift” (Hidalgo *et al.*, 2021). Although the band is recognised worldwide, the artists in the band are still from Korea, and their music is primarily for Korean audiences (Pham, 2020). However, their company president, Bang Shi-Hyuk, revealed that he intended for the group to be the perfect blend of South Korean and Western culture in order to break into the global music industry. The fact that BTS has been so popular is called a miracle by many K-pop experts. Since they came from a very small company on the verge of bankruptcy, it was created in 2005, being part of an extremely saturated industry that was heavily dominated by The Big Three: JYP Entertainment, SM Entertainment, and YG Entertainment. For that reason, the band was mistreated during its early years by other companies and even by the media (Pham, 2020).

Nevertheless, at the present time, his company, formerly called Big Hit Entertainment, which now goes by the name HYBE, has a total turnover of 402.4 billion Korean won, surpassing the sum of the three companies that used to dominate the market (JYP, SM, and YG). Moreover, BTS played such a pivotal role in spreading Korean culture that, in 2018, the country's former president, Moon Jae-in, decided to award them with the Hwagwan Orders of Cultural Merit for their outstanding services in promoting their culture and development (Herman, 2018).

On social media, BTS is the most-tweeted music group in recent years (Chan, 2021). In addition, the band holds 25 Guinness World Records, some of which are music groups with the most followers on both TikTok and Twitter and the most-viewed music videos in 24 hours on *YouTube*. Likewise, BTS also had a notable impact on Instagram, especially at the end of 2021, when the production company HYBE created personal accounts for each of the BTS members. At that instant, vocalist Kim

Taehyung (V) became the person who, in the shortest time, has reached 1 million, 10 million, and 40 million followers, respectively (Guinness World Records, 2021). The fact that BTS is an exemplary standard in the South Korean and international music industry is not open to debate (Herman, 2018). They are considered a national treasure contributing more than \$3.6 billion to the country's economy (Eaton, 2022), in large part, thanks to a long and extensive strategy based on the creation of branded content, something very typical of the most important K-pop bands (Yoon, 2020).

### 1.3. Their fans: ARMY

Their supporters are called ARMY, an acronym for Adorable Representative MC for Youth, following the group's meaning, "bulletproof boys", and referencing their work to protect the band from all kinds of hate. The band chose this name for their fans and made it official on July 9, 2013. Currently, this fandom is considered one of the most numerous and recognised in the music industry, counting more than 41 million fans (Moon, 2020). Even the artists acknowledge that much of their success is due to ARMY, which relentlessly, engages in playing and promoting all their songs, interacting with all the news about the artists, supporting them no matter what, and participating in all the award voting (Channel Korea, 2019). In addition, fans of this group generate a lot of content: drawings, literary pieces, videos, challenges, etc. The most curious one is #ARMYSelcaDay, which is a day on Twitter in which fans of the group upload a picture of themselves next to their favourite BTS member, trying to make the image as similar as possible to the artist. Therefore, there are many accounts on various social networks dedicated to this group, some with their role in the fandom, such as translators or people who are dedicated to giving information at any time of the day about the members. As for translations, because many fans are not from South Korea and therefore do not know the language, there are accounts that lend themselves to performing live translations of all the content that BTS publishes, either in Weverse or live videos on VLive, an application that closed at the end of 2022. Some of these profiles have more than 2 million followers. On the other hand, there are also accounts that are in charge of informing fans with the latest news of the group and the members separately about any aspect, such as the plays that different BTS songs receive daily and the records they continuously break. An example would be the Twitter profile of @btschartdata, which, with a total of 2.3 million followers, communicates what is happening in the music charts in reference to the group.

Likewise, just as BTS has its own concept and emblem, so do its fans. In 2017, the group decided to update their brand image, leaving behind their old logo, which was based on a bulletproof vest, and announcing the new one that shows doors, ushering in their new era. This new logo is intended to show their intention to transcend the established, as their concept says: beyond the scene. In this way, they presented a symbol composed of two trapezoids, representing two doors that are ajar. At the same time, they decided to release the logo for their fans, becoming one of the first fandoms to have their own emblem officially created by the company (Channel Korea, 2019). BTS's logo features two doors that open on the inside, and while ARMY's logo also contains two half-open doors, theirs open on the outside. Symbolising that bond between the group and its fans plus the need to always remain united in order to open the door and go beyond the scene. In addition, by joining the two logos together, a bulletproof shield is formed, reminiscent of their first logo and concept, both representing a weapon of protection and an unbreakable defence against the prejudices of society (Media Caterer, 2020).

One of the elements that sets ARMY apart from other fan bases is its extraordinary preparedness. Fans take a proactive approach and do everything they can to promote the band and make sure their

content reaches the maximum number of views and plays. At comeback (album release) time, fans decide to create advertisements to spread the word, from videos to posters. They also propose targets for each music streaming platform: Billboard, Spotify, Shazam, Apple Music, YouTube, iTunes, Deezer, etc. In this way, all ARMY members know perfectly what the purposes of the song or video are. In the same vein, fans publish guides ensure correct streaming. Normally, they are made for YouTube, since it is a platform with a very complicated policy of reproductions and likes. This way, they make sure that all the people who watch the music video or listen to the song do it properly in order to count for playlists and awards.

Currently, ARMY is considered the biggest fan base due to their incredible deeds. For example, they made BTS the first K-pop group to reach the top ten of the Billboard 200 chart, made the band win the Best Social Artist award at the Billboard Music Awards (2018) with over 300 million votes worldwide, and matched BTS's donation of one million dollars to the *Black Lives Matter* movement, among other actions that demonstrate ARMY's facet as a social movement and hacktivism (Kim & Hutt, 2021).

Based on the importance, genuineness, and peculiarities of ARMY (Kam *et al.*, 2022) that distinguish it from other fan groupings, this manuscript aims to detect the elements that characterise this fandom, understand ARMY's relationship with BTS, and learn about the branded content consumption habits of its band-driven followers.

## 2. Methodology

In line with the established goals, the study aims to 1) pinpoint the unique traits of this fan community, 2) delve into the relationship between ARMY and BTS, and 3) examine the patterns in which its members engage with branded content. A predominantly quantitative approach was selected, leveraging the Army Census 2022 as a foundational secondary source to inform the development of a questionnaire-based survey. While the initial target was to gather data from 100 surveys, the final count reached 275 surveys in English and 128 in Spanish. This expanded sample size enabled the collection of substantial quantitative data, facilitating the extrapolation of key behavioural tendencies within the ARMY through structured analytical methods.

It is a simple random probability sampling since each respondent had the same possibility of accessing the questionnaire. The information collection method has been the online survey, following the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) technique, in Google Forms and distributed by platforms on which this set of people frequent: Twitter, Weverse, Reddit, Tumblr, TikTok, and Instagram. The survey has focused on the universe of people who consider themselves fans of the musical ensemble without exclusion by age, including a series of demographic questions in order to segment this sample. It has been chosen to divide it into three parts, the first serving as a filter question, identifying whether the respondent fits the universe or not. Next, a section is included with all the questions on sociodemographic and personal data, results that are compared with the ARMY Census 2022 sample. Finally, questions of a specific nature have been incorporated, focused on the subject to be investigated, including a section in which the different branded contents are presented, so that the subject can select those in which he or she has participated. Regarding the format of the questionnaire, there are open, semi-closed, closed dichotomous, and multichotomous style questions. The questionnaire is composed of a total of 15 questions.

Two versions of the same questionnaire have been prepared, one in Spanish and the other in English, in order to reach more people, not only Spanish speakers. However, they have the same structure, questions, and answers in order to be able to analyse them at the same time, merge the results, and, in this way, make the weighting. Before carrying out this questionnaire, the survey was validated by a team of three experts, and a pilot test was sent to five people. In this way, the corresponding modifications were made, resulting in the definitive version.

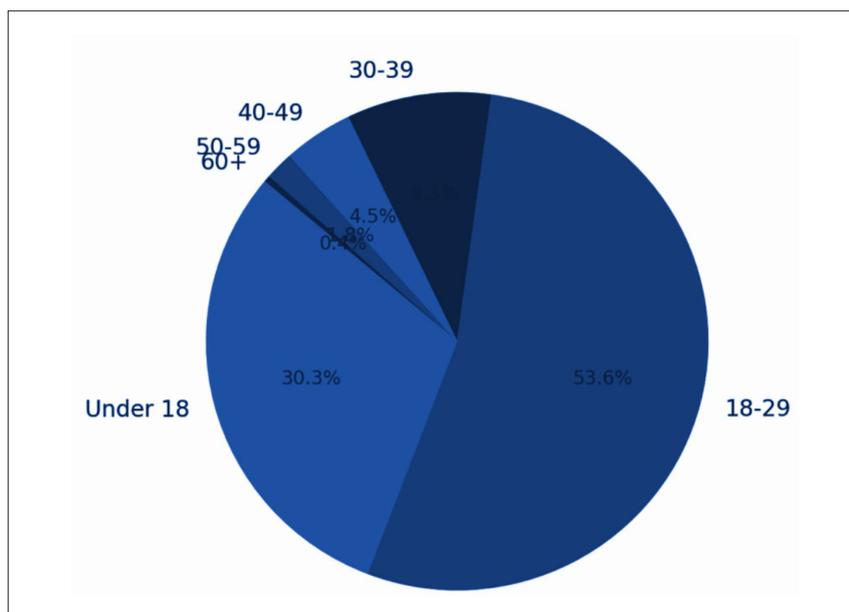
### 3. Results

#### 3.1. ARMY Census 2022 results

The *ARMY Census 2022*, The collection of information was conducted from April 1 to May 31, 2022, through online surveys. It has a total of 562,280 respondents from more than 100 different countries. The questionnaire was available in 36 languages and disseminated through its own social networks under the hashtag #ARMYCensus, which trended worldwide on Twitter and Weverse. Its purpose was to provide a quantitative approach to the fandom and to demonstrate how fans go far beyond the stereotypes imposed on them.

Regarding age (view figure 1), 69.7 % of ARMY are adults 18 years of age or older. The largest age group is the 18- to 29-year-old group, consisting of 53.63 %, or 301,566 respondents. Next, there is the group of those under 18 years of age that make up 30.30 %, with 170,379 responses. Next, we have the 30- to 39-year-olds, which is 9.31 %, with 52,333 people. Next, we find the group from 40 to 49 years old with 4.49 % and 25,270 responses. Also, we have the 50- to 59-year-olds, which gave 1.83 % and 10,316 responses. Finally, there are those over 60 years of age, with 0.43 % and 2,416 responses.

**Figure 1.**  
*Age distribution of ARMY*



Note. Source: own elaboration from census results.

About their place of residence, Central and South American territories predominate, with 8 countries in the top 20 regions with more BTS fans and with Mexico being in first position. The order goes like this: Peru, Indonesia, the United States, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Russia, India, the Philippines, Ecuador, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Bolivia, South Korea, Guatemala, Thailand, Taiwan, Egypt, and Japan.

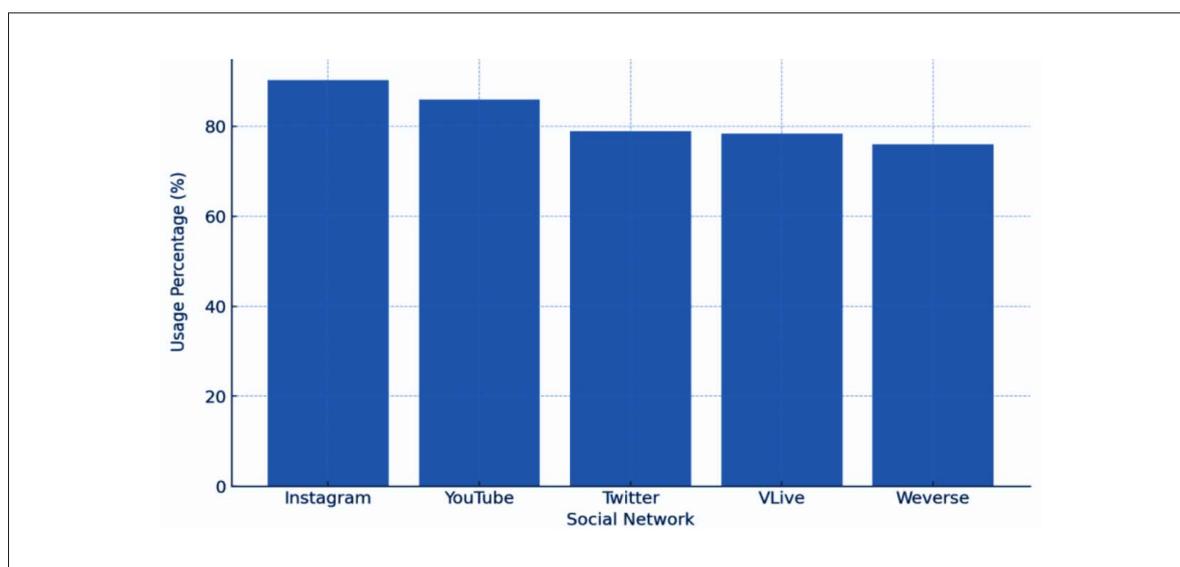
As for the gender that BTS fans identify with, it is no surprise that 96.23 % are female, with 541,096 respondents. Next, there are certain who describe themselves as non-binary: 1.78 % and 9,998 respondents. Finally, it is the male gender, with 1.35 % and 7,575 men. Taking into account the highest level of education acquired, it is shown that one out of three fans has some type of university education. The majority have a high school diploma, i.e., what is known here as Bachelor, with 27.99 % and 150,407 responses. In addition, there are 23.57 % of people, 132,528, who have a kind of university degree. However, there are 17.66 %, consisting of 99,324 people, who have not completed any degree and are still in primary or secondary education. Following that, there are those who are studying at university, which represents 12.16 % with 68,346 answers. Also, we find other levels such as professional education (5.42 %), vocational studies (5.40 %), masters (3.39 %), associate studies (2.58 %), and doctorate (0.70 %).

Regarding the current economic and employment situation, most of the fans are students or unemployed (53.76 %), for a total of 302,277 people. Next, 18.11 %, 101,853 respondents, are working full-time. While 7.40 % are self-employed, 41,600 people are self-employed. In addition, there are fans who are unemployed because of the pandemic (1.45 %) and others who are retired (0.46 %).

In reference to the most used social networks by ARMY we find (view figure 2): Instagram (90.24 %), YouTube (85.98 %), Twitter (78.87 %), VLive (78.35 %), and Weverse (75.96 %).

**Figure 2.**

*Most popular social networks*



Note. Source: own elaboration from census results.

Regarding the time in which this studied population decided to start being part of the fandom, we can see a considerable increase during the pandemic: 23.90 % (134,361) in 2020 and 16.53 % (92,968) in 2021. Followed, we find the next data: The data also shows the following: 2019 (15.65 %), 2018 (13.08 %), 2017 (12.06 %), 2016 (7.83 %), 2015 (4.35 %), 2014 (2.74 %), 2013 (2.35 %), and 2022 (1.51 %). Although this study only represents the people surveyed, it is useful to have an overview of what the target universe is like and how it behaves. Many of these results have been implemented to draft the questions in the questionnaire.

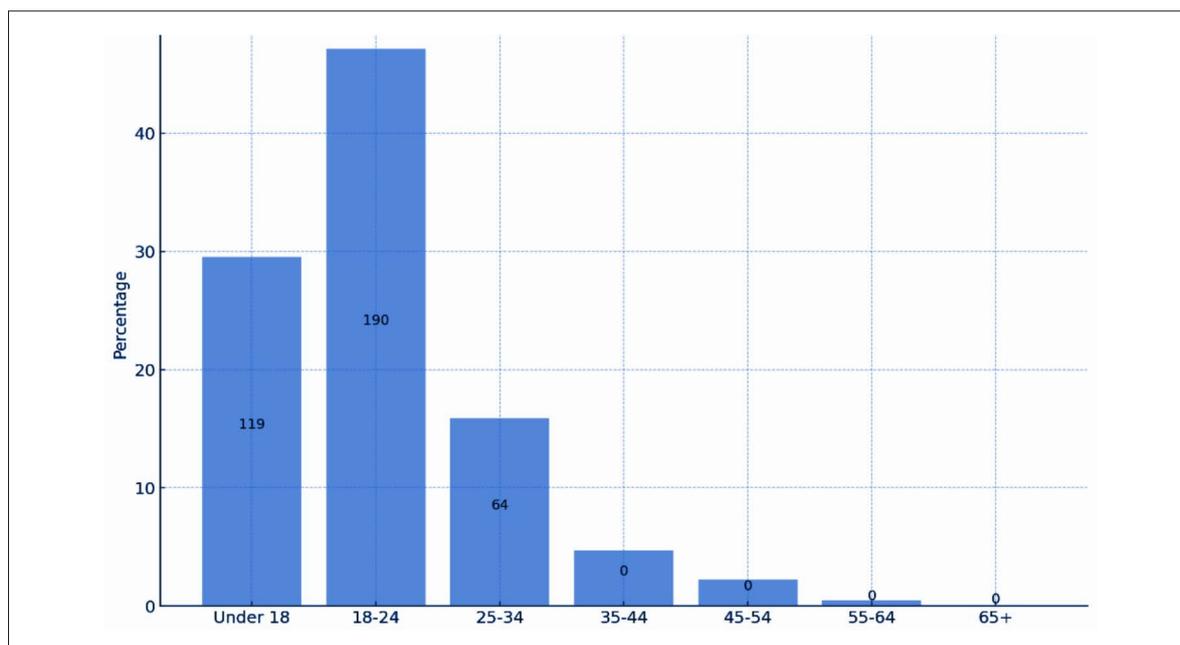
### 3.2. Survey results

The total number of responses was 403: 128 in the Spanish version and 275 in the English version. The survey took place from July 7th to July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

100 % of the 403 respondents were of ARMY, starting with the initial filter question, being able to affirm or deny the question, “Do you consider yourself ARMY?”. If they answered no, it was not possible to continue with the questionnaire. Thus, the data seemed to indicate that the entire sample is true to the chosen universe, composed of BTS fans. Therefore, it was possible to continue with the sociodemographic questions. In terms of age (view figure 3), the predominant group is 18 to 24 years old, with 47.15 % and 190 people, 55 from the Spanish questionnaire and 135 from the English one. Next, we have those under 18 years of age, who make up 29.53 % of the sample and 119 respondents, with 53 from the Spanish and 66 from the English questionnaire. Next, we have the 25-34 age group, which is 15.88 % with 64 responses, 14 in Spanish, and 50 in English. In addition, we can see other groups such as: 35-44 years old (4.71 %), 45-54 years old (2.23 %), 55-64 years old (0.5 %), and those over 65-54 years old, which are not represented.

**Figure 3.**

*Age distribution of ARMY*



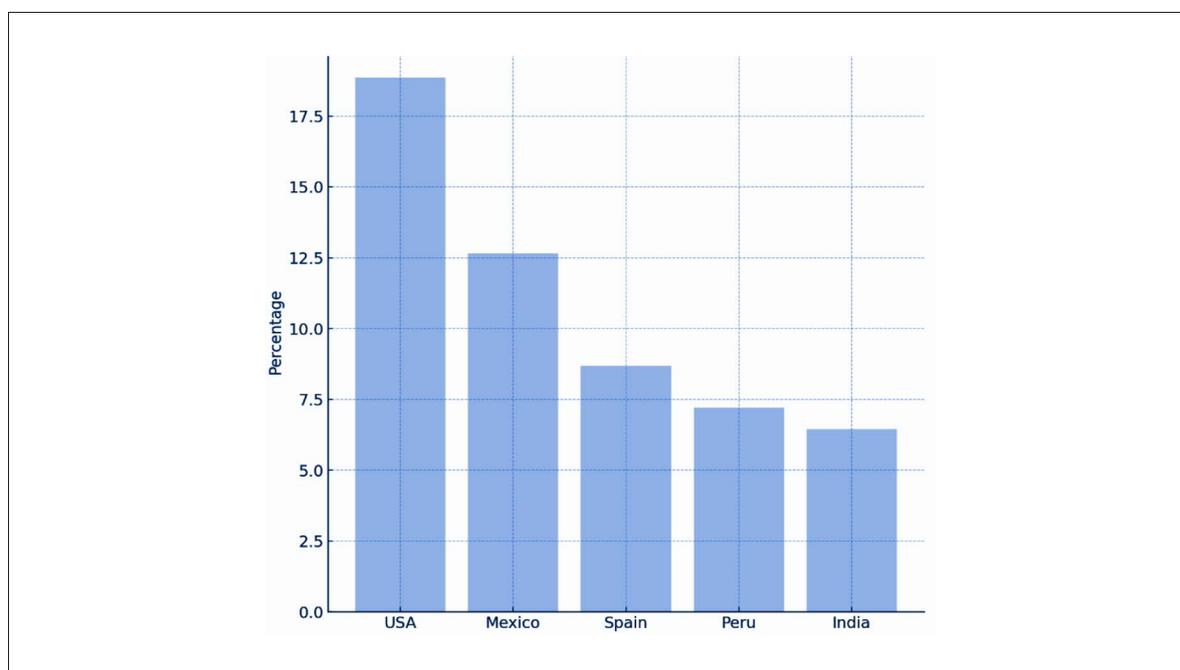
Note. Source: own elaboration from survey results.

Taking into account the place of residence factor (view figure 4), the country with the highest representation in the sample was the United States of America with 18.86 % and 76 respondents. Followed by: Mexico (12.66 %, 51 responses), Spain (8.68 %, 35 responses), Peru (7.2 %, 29 responses), and India (6.45 %, 26 responses). Even though there were more places considered in the study, the ones previously mentioned had the most significant impact on the research, with a variation in the nationalities.

Firstly, Mexicans had a result of 13.65 % and 55 respondents. Secondly, Americans registered 13.15 % and 53 people. Thirdly, the Spaniards had 8.93 % and 36 responses. Fourthly, the Indians with 6.45 %, and fifthly, the Philippines with 4.51 % and 19 responses.

**Figure 4.**

*Regions BTS fans*



Note. Source: own elaboration from survey results.

With reference to their gender, the numbers showed that the females predominate, with 88.83 % and 358 women, 116 from the Spanish language questionnaire and 242 from the English one. The non-binary goes in second place with 6.7 % and 27 people (four from the Spanish version and 23 from English). Then, we find men with 3.23 % and 13 respondents, to end with 1.24 % of those who prefer not to answer.

On the subject of the maximum level of studies acquired, the majority of the sample had a secondary education degree, either first stage such as ESO or second stage such as Bachillerato, with 28.29 % and 114 responses, 38 Spanish speakers and 76 English speakers. Subsequently, 27.3 % completed a university degree, specifically 110 people, 29 from the Spanish questionnaire, and 81 from the English questionnaire. Following the 20.35 % of people who finished secondary education and completed

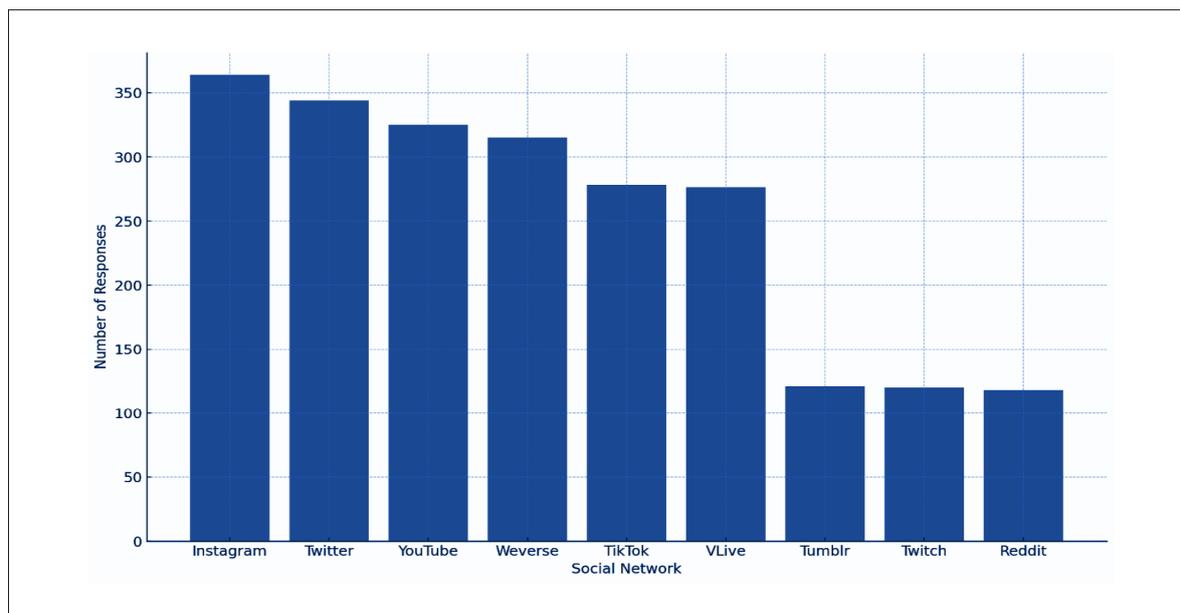
cycles or were currently at university: 82 people, 18 from the Spanish survey and 64 from the English survey. Finally, 16.13 % were those who obtained an elementary education degree (65 people), 7.2 % had a master's or postgraduate degree (29), and 0.74 % had a doctorate (3).

Regarding the employment status of the survey, students led the data with 252 responses: 66 from the Spanish questionnaire and 186 from the English questionnaire. From then on, the employed appeared with 160 responses, and behind them were the unemployed with 60 responses. It is important to highlight that there were no retired respondents. As this was a multi-dichotomous question, i.e., multiple choice, the results cannot be extrapolated.

In relation to social network activity (view figure 5), we could see that Instagram is the most used with 364 responses. Followed by: Twitter with 344, YouTube with 325, Weverse with 315, TikTok with 278, VLive with 276, Tumblr with 121, Twitch with 120, and, finally, Reddit with 118. Moreover, they had the option to use any platform on which they felt free to interact, including some of them: Facebook, Snapchat, Pinterest, WhatsApp, Discord, and Telegram.

**Figure 5.**

*Most popular social networks*



*Note. Source: own elaboration from survey results.*

In reference to the time in which they decided to become ARMY, just like in *ARMY Census 2022*, we could see a clear increase during the pandemic, since in 2020 23.33 % (94 people) joined the fandom and in 2021 16.87 % (68 people). Also, it is shown that in 2018, with the release of the album *Love Yourself: Tear and Answer*, there is another increase with 15.63 % (63 people). Followed by 2019 (11.17 %), 2017 (8.93 %), 2016 (7.94 %), 2014 (4.96 %), 2015 (4.71 %), 2022 (2.98 %), and finally, in 2013, there were fans before and during that year who reflected 1.74 % each. For this reason they joined ARMY, mainly discovering the music, with 348 responses and 276 performances. The curious thing

is that in third place has been the publication of content, with 265 respondents. Right after there is the personality of the group with 256, choreographies with 248, musical talent with 225, the message they convey through their music with 224, and, finally, there is the appearance of the group members.

On the branded content that BTS was posted, the data seemed to indicate how the two YouTube projects, both their channel (*Bangtan TV*) and the short video style (*Bangtan Bomb*) had the highest number of responses with 351. Next, the series in which members participate in various games, *Run BTS!* was revealed with 343. Later, came the most recent mobile game, *BTS Island: In the SEOM*, with 336 responses. At the same time, there is *Summer Package* with the same number. On the other hand, it is followed by the series compiling BTS' vacation, *Bon Voyage*, with a total of 320 responses. In addition, other contents appeared subsequently: BT21 (314), *Chakra 7 Fates* (266), *Love Myself Campaign* (263), *Break The Silence* (256), *BTS World* (253), *Burn The Stage* (244), *Winter Package* (242), *Bring The Soul* (231), *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life: Save Me* (230), *Rhythm Hive* (228), *American Hustle Life* (228), *BTS Gayo* (194), *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life: The Notes* (190), *Rookie King* (167) and, finally, *Go! BTS* (136).

In relation to content consumption habits, especially how often they watch content, the data seemed to indicate that the majority of ARMYs watch this type of content several times a day, specifically 71.96 % and 290 people. However, 22.33 % watch three to five times a week, 90 fans. Also, we found 3.72 %, fifteen people, consume this content once a week, 0.99 % once a fortnight (4 responses), and 0.74 % (three individuals) once a month.

As whether they were prescribers of the content, i.e., they shared it with family or friends, 347 fans said "yes", specifically 86.1 %. Meanwhile, 13.9 %, in absolute data, 56 people, said that they do not disseminate it. Regarding the creation of content related to the band by the user, 73.2 %, 295 people, ratified that they publish some kind of content, whether it was a tweet talking about the artists or a YouTube video. This contrasts with the 26.8 % and 108 respondents which answered that they do not publish this content.

Concerning loyalty to the band, regardless of whether they thought that they would always be part of this fandom or not, there is an overwhelming majority of 93.3 % of the sample, 376 people, who certified that they do. This compares to 4.96 % who do not know, and 1.74 % who believe they will not remain ARMY.

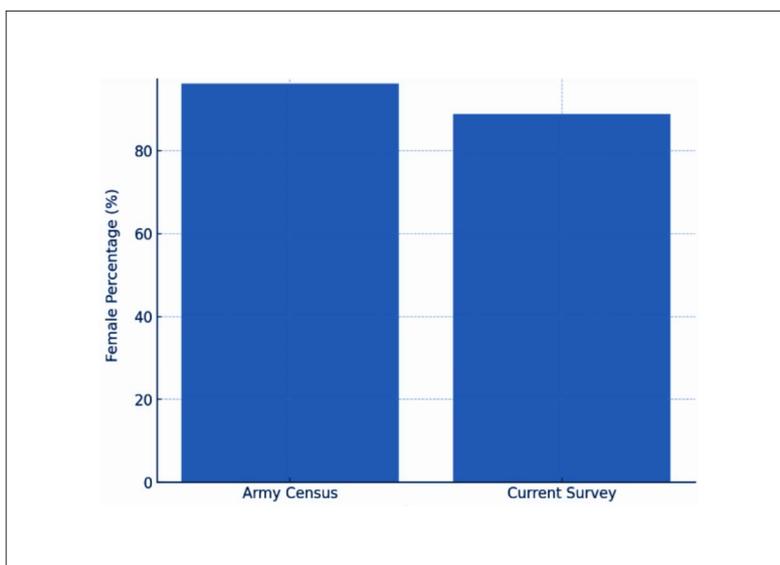
### 3.3. Comparison results

Taking into account the demographic results, we have tried to make the sample as similar as possible to that of the *ARMY Census 2022*, since we are trying to represent the universe faithfully.

*ARMY Census 2022* had 562,280 respondents, while the sample for the owner survey was 403. Even though the demographic qualities of the respondents are very similar, in the first study, the most substantial age groups were those between 18 and 29 years old with 53.63 % and those under 18 with 30.30 %. In the recent one, those between 18 and 24 years old are the most significant with 47.15 % and, also, minors with 29.53 %. As for the place of residence, in both results, the American territories predominate, in particular Central and South America, with special emphasis on Mexico, Argentina, and Peru.

In reference to gender differentiation (view figure 6), both in the *Army Census* and in the survey itself, the female population far exceeds all other genders, in the former with 96.23 % and in the current one with 88.83 %.

**Figure 6.**  
*Gender differentiation in two different surveys*



Note. Source: own elaboration.

In terms of educational background, high school graduates is the largest group, at 27.99 % and 28.29 %. This is followed by those who have already finished university, with 23.57 % and 27.3 %. With regard to their economic situation, students in both studies predominate with 53.76 % in the first one and with 252 responses. The next group is composed of those who have a job, with 18.11 % and 160 responses. In the survey itself, this question was multi dichotomous, i.e., multiple choice, so the results cannot be extrapolated.

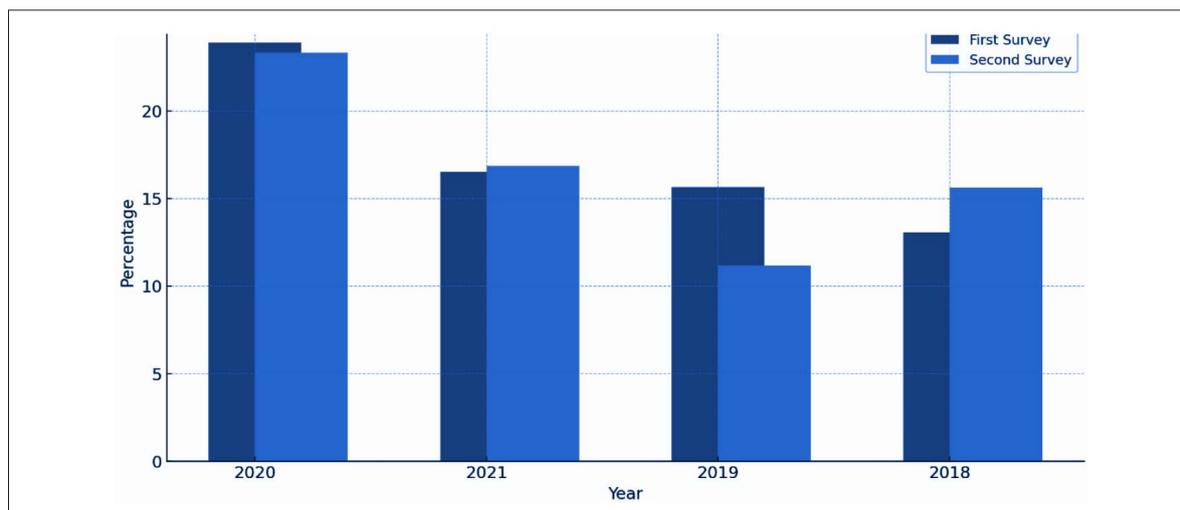
Regarding the use of social networks, the application with the highest number of responses was Instagram with 90.24 % and 364 respondents. While the second most used network varies in the surveys, in the *Army Census 2022* is *YouTube* with 85.88 % and in its own survey is *Twitter* with 344 responses. This is followed by *Weverse* and *Vlive*.

Finally, in relation to the time in which they started to be part of the fandom (view figure 7), there is a clear increase that went along with the pandemic in 2020, which was the year in which more fans joined, with 23.90 % in the first survey and 23.33 % in the second. Then, there is 2021 with 16.53 % and 16.87 %. The next years are 2019 and 2018, with 15.65 % and 11.17 %, the former, and 13.08 % and 15.63 %, the latter.

Despite being different studies, both present a sample with a very similar demographic profile. This observation reinforces our confidence in the validity of the complementary data collected by our own survey. Thus, the sample obtained is certainly as representative as possible of the whole.

**Figure 7.**

Comparison of the percentages for the years 2020, 2021, 2019 and 2018 in both surveys



Note. Source: own elaboration.

## 4. Discussion

As for ARMY's relationship with contractualism, thanks to the results, we believe that fans establish a kind of implicit social contract with BTS. In this sense, we agree with the theories of Hills (2002) and June-Yond and Lee (2022) in that ARMY generates social capital and reaches a kind of tacit, implicit agreement with the group. However, in ARMY the fan's constant surveillance of the group's behaviour and morals is also fulfilled, according to the theories of Zubernis and Larsen (2012). The group's fans offer their support, time, and money to the group and, consequently, to its production company, while the group provides entertainment and a unique emotional connection beyond the music. This exchange could be interpreted as a win-win social contract in which both parties benefit and fulfil specific roles.

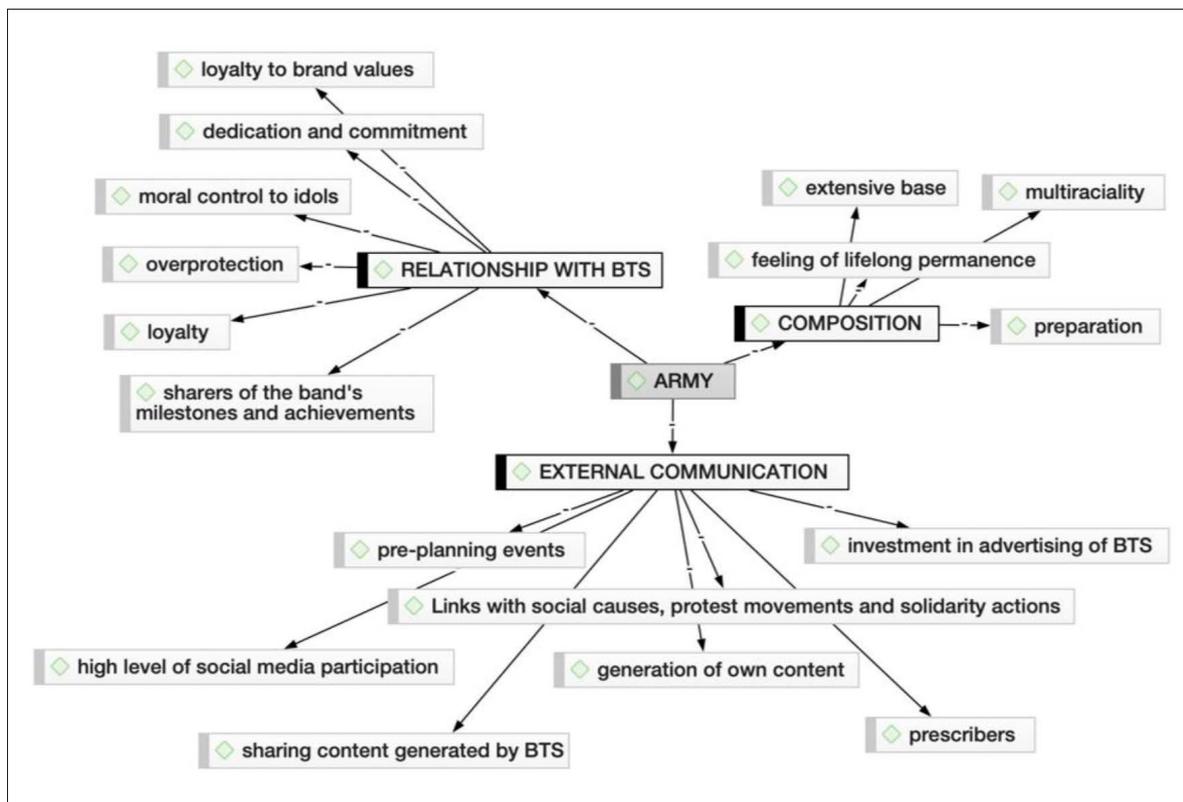
Furthermore, fan loyalty and continued participation could be compared to the idea of continued consent in contractualist theories, where the relationship persists as long as both parties fulfil certain expectations and obligations, thanks to their love and passion for the band, a thought agreed with McCormick (2018). Therefore, ARMY paves the way for new models of fandom that remain connected to musical bands, feeling part of them and helping them on their way to success and fame, while ensuring that the group upholds the brand's values and aesthetics, adding a dimension beyond the conventional.

## 5. Conclusions: What makes ARMY different

ARMY is known for being a very loyal, extensive, and multiracial fandom, although the focal point is Korean fans. They are fans internationally recognised for their obsessive dedication and commitment to the band (history, members, and values). At the same time, they set themselves up as protectors of the band, ensuring that the members of the band are faithful to their own values, even with too much zeal, sometimes acting in an exaggerated and overprotective manner. This fandom is also characterised by its links to social causes, protest movements, and solidarity actions. However, it

is also a fandom recognized for some actions that have violated the rights and privacy of its idols. Some of their fans have been accused of spreading hate speech on social media, especially directed at other artists or music groups that may be considered rivals or competitors of BTS. Considering that much of the band's success is due to the drive, actions, and content generated by ARMY, it is possible to consider that their fate goes hand in hand with the band and that they will always succeed if the fandom continues to push the band and protect them. As for ARMY's attitude towards the release of content, it has been possible to see how they are absolutely loyal to the band and everything they release, whether it is a song or a movie. A large percentage of respondents said that they share content with friends and family, that they create complementary content on their social networks, and, in addition, they believe that they will always be part of this fandom community. Basically, they are prescribers, content creators, and loyal followers. Figure 8 below shows the definition and various characteristics of ARMY found in this research.

**Figure 8.**  
 Conceptual map of ARMY's features made in Atlas.ti



Note. Source: own elaboration.

On the other hand, stars serve as both referents and mirrors of the social collective that raises and projects them. Therefore, ARMY and BTS share many similarities and peculiarities that distinguish them from other idol-fandom relationships. Specifically, we have found the following peculiarities and points of union that can be extrapolated as an effective model for other bands, artists, and their fan groups:

- *The fictionalised story.* The narrative of the band members' lives empathises with the fans, who have seen how the artist-characters have been overcoming difficulties, growing, evolving, and living experiences. Fans have grown up with their idols thanks to their fictionalised stories.
- *Values.* Being ARMY means adapting and defending a series of values, but also ensuring that their idols are consistent with and respect those values. The brand values of fans and idols are one of the most important signs, and which translate into social actions and adherence to solidarity and social movements, such as Black Lives Matter.
- *Symbolism.* The band is the one that gives the name to its fans, as well as the logo and the visual identity. This symbiotic communion around branding is a peculiarity of K-pop that differentiates it from other Western fandoms. In the case of ARMY, moreover, it has a strong symbolic charge, insofar as it is a legion of fans who protect the band.
- *Symbiotic feedback.* Some of the major Korean awards are based on fan-created content and fan activity on social networks. This has two direct consequences for the band's union: fans feel invested in the band's success and also feel responsible for its triumphs or failures. This prevents the fandom from being an inactive or passive group of fans. Therefore, the relationship between the band and its fandom is symbiotic. The fandom's activity contributes to the band's growth and success, while the band's achievements strengthen the fandom. However, excessive fandom behaviour can be counterproductive and even dangerous, such as when fans exceed limits or violate the idols' privacy.
- *New star-system.* The content production format of Korean companies in the music sector is not limited to the creation of stars or idols but to the promotion of fans. This requires including them in communication, actions, events, and even in the narrative, with ARMY being the protagonist of some lyrics or melodies and being very present in the group's narrative.
- *The power of the image.* The aesthetic and visual part is one of the core points of ARMY's *raison d'être*. Beyond the power of video in terms of videoclips, advertising campaigns, and branded content strategies, the followers emphasise a lot on the aesthetics of the idols and that they always maintain a perfect image. In the same way, they try to imitate their styles and aesthetic features, maintaining certain aesthetic parallels between the band and their fans. The visual part of the band is specially taken care of, from the logos to the photocards and all this together with strong symbolism and narrative.
- *Preparation and sacrifice.* One of the main characteristics of ARMY, that differentiates it from other fan groups, is its preparation. Being ARMY is a lifestyle that requires dedication, effort, and time. Fans are willing to work hard to push the group in all aspects, even financially.
- *Universe and means of their own.* Unlike other fandoms, ARMY has developed a content creation strategy that goes beyond the content generated by the band or its production company, HYBE, and the interaction tools of different media and platforms. They translate the content created by the band, celebrate milestones and birthdays of the members, and defend their band against other fan groups. This makes them a militarised and strategic force with a greater amalgam of proprietary content than most fandoms.
- *Loyalty for life.* The survey showed that the majority of fans believe that ARMY will always exist. Only an insignificant percentage expressed the opposite. Therefore, the relationship is really intense, far beyond what it means to be a supporter or follower, responding more to the etymological meaning of a fan. Although nowadays, the term fan is mostly used to refer to a follower of something.

These findings demonstrate that ARMY fandom can be considered different, as one of the forerunners of this symbiotic model between fans and bands. It has not only driven K-pop, but it is also a pattern that is being extrapolated within the Asian continent to other musical styles.

We can conclude, therefore, that the relationship between fandom and band is based on contractualism. In the first place, because the fan who wants to consider himself ARMY acquires a social contract practically for life based on the restriction of the fan's freedoms. He or she spends part of his or her life, time, money, and motivations to promote the band, follow it, consume all its content –beyond the musical–, invest in promotion, and, in a certain way, adapt his lifestyle to the values processed by the band. In return, the fans receive or expect to receive a series of rewards or incentives. These could be: feeling part of the brand's milestones and achievements; receiving the attention and recognition of the idols; respecting the lifestyle, aesthetics, and values processed by the band; as well as constant content that keeps the relationship alive. Secondly, the idols' freedom is also restricted. As constantly monitored by the fans, they must maintain the ethical models and aesthetic standards required, plus be devoted to their fandom.

### Specific contribution of each of the authors

- Design and conceptualization. Author 1, author 2.
- Administration and management. Author 3.
- Bibliographic search. Author 1, author 2, author 3.
- Summary. Author 1, author 2, author 3.
- Introduction. Author 1, author 2, author 3.
- Methodology. Author 2, author 3.
- Original research. Author 1.
- Results and discussion. Author 1, author 2, author 3.
- Statistics. Author 1.
- Content display (graphs, tables...). Author 3.
- Conclusions. Author 2, author 2.
- Final review and editing. Author 3.

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