

BTScience and Beyond: Unpacking the K-Pop Phenomenon in Scientific Literature and Its Socioeconomic Impact

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Abstract

This article delves into the global cultural phenomenon of Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS), utilising hermeneutic analysis to explore the group's profound impact across various dimensions. It examines 100 academic articles in multiple languages to understand BTS's roles in mental health advocacy, economic contributions, digital media engagement, and transcultural influence. Such studies reveal BTS's unique departure from traditional music band models and illuminate its profound influence on economic, socio-cultural, and musical dynamics. This research analyses the perception of the BTS phenomenon within the academic community, offering insights into how BTS reshapes global cultural perceptions and advocates for social issues, thus making a multifaceted impact on its worldwide audience.

KEYWORDS: Bangtan Sonyeondan, ARMY, Cultural Diplomacy, Transcultural Impact, Soft Power, Fan Dynamics

Introduction

The global fascination with the K-pop group Bangtan Sonyeondan (방탄소년단, BTS) transcends mere musical interest, signalling a substantial cultural and socio-economic shift that extends beyond its homeland of South Korea. This article explores BTS's role as a vanguard in the K-pop phenomenon, catalysing a significant socio-economic revolution. Utilising a hermeneutic analysis of 100 academic articles covering topics such as mental health, economic influence,

sociological impacts, musical innovation, and marketing strategies, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of BTS's multidimensional impact. It seeks to dissect the BTS phenomenon from the perspective of the international scientific community, offering a nuanced view of its transformative power across various dimensions.

Conceptual background

The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*, 한류), driven by South Korea's strategic cultural investments following the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, has transformed K-pop into a transnational cultural phenomenon, with BTS at its forefront.

BTS's success both contributes to and results from dynamic shifts within the music industry landscape. Over the past two decades, technological innovations—such as the development of digital platforms and the proliferation of streaming services—have transformed music distribution from a predominantly local market into a continuously expanding international arena. These changes have fostered a unified media environment and radically transformed how individuals interact with media, embodying what Jenkins (2006) defines as convergent culture. In this new landscape, users are active participants who shape, circulate, and reinterpret cultural content within networked communities.

Within this evolved media space, users engage with platforms to fulfil psychological and social needs—e.g. entertainment, socialisation, and identity formation. Building on the classic *Uses and Gratifications* framework, Sundar and Limperos (2013) state that the new technological affordances have generated new gratifications that were previously unavailable. These affordances invite users to engage with content in ways that enable active meaning-making and become integrated into everyday routines. Recent research supports this perspective: for example, social media use has been shown to enhance both social relationships and psychological well-being (Bhatiasevi, 2024).

The integration of digital media into everyday life extends beyond virtual spaces, influencing tangible aspects of daily offline life through phenomena such as language hybridisation in multicultural contexts, fusion cuisine, and hybrid fashion. These manifestations exemplify the material effects of global digital culture, where diverse traditions and symbolic systems merge and transform.

This hybridisation is a key characteristic of *Hallyu* which, originally sparked by the export of television dramas to nearby Asian countries like Japan and China, has evolved significantly over the years. From *Hallyu 1.0*, characterised by traditional media broadcasts, to *Hallyu 2.0*, marked by digital platforms like YouTube and social networks (Jin 2016), these phases demonstrate the profound transformation in how cultural content is consumed and distributed globally. The concept of *mugukjeok* (non-national) proposed by Sun Jung (2010), highlights its hybrid nature, describing how specific Korean elements combine with global influences to enable South Korean culture to move seamlessly across borders. Furthermore, Jin (2022) suggests that some South Korean popular culture products resonate with global audiences through what he defines as *transnational proximity*: an affinity grounded in shared experiences of contemporary global issues such as social inequality and the pressures of modern capitalist society that transcends geographical boundaries.

Understanding the dynamics of cultural production and consumption within this interconnected digital environment is essential. Insights gained from research on media and the cultural and identity impacts of the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs), particularly in the case of mass-oriented pop phenomena like BTS, are invaluable. This dynamic recalls Scannell's notion of "for-anyone-as-someone" (2000), illustrating how cultural products foster identities that are both deeply personal and globally resonant. This intersection between the personal and the global helps explain BTS's ability to resonate across cultures, amplifying both their emotional impact and international appeal.

The international scholarly discussion around BTS seeks to unpack the complexity of its phenomenon and integrate it within a broader academic dialogue. The significant domestic and international attention surrounding BTS prompts an exploration of why and how they are extensively discussed in academia. This work aims to map the diverse dimensions intercepted by academic discourse in analysing the BTS phenomenon.

BTS: a socio-economic phenomenon

Debuting in 2013 under Big Hit Entertainment, BTS is a seven-member K-pop group renowned for its diverse musical influences and authentic engagement with social issues. Originally influenced by American hip-hop, BTS has embraced the hybrid nature of Korean pop culture, merging local musical traditions with global trends to create a distinct identity. From its debut, the group has been "proactively involved in writing lyrics, as well as deeply engages in composition, arrangement, and every other process of music production" (Kim Y. 2019: 317)—a rare practice within the systematised K-pop industry, where creative autonomy is typically limited to commercially established acts with established fanbases (Kim Y. 2019; Choi 2023). Its lyrics address themes like societal pressures, mental health, self-respect, and social alienation, which resonate across different cultures and foster a strong emotional connection with listeners. This resonance is reflected in its achievement as the most-streamed group on Spotify and its notable presence on the Billboard 200 chart with six different albums (Mahanta 2023).

The exponential growth of social media in the 2010s profoundly reshaped artist-fan relations. In an industry where agencies traditionally exercised strict control over idols' behaviour, appearance, relationships, and online presence (Choi 2023), BTS was among the first K-pop acts to use social media as a space for genuine self-expression and direct communication. From its debut, it opened official social media accounts to share daily updates and personal reflection, reaching international audiences without mediation. This strategy—reminiscent of approaches adopted by British artists such as One Direction—enabled it to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, compete with South Korea's "Big Three" labels (JYP, SM, and YG Entertainment), and cultivate a transnational fandom characterised by immediacy and affective participation (Kim J.O. 2021).

Unlike typical localisation strategies in K-pop's global expansion (e.g. recruiting foreign members as cultural mediators, recording tracks or albums in target languages, or collaborating with local producers), BTS achieved global success without deliberately targeting the United States. As Kim (2019) observes, it is precisely this absence of strategic localisation that distinguishes it. The unexpected

foreign success of BTS—beginning in the U.S. and echoing back to Asia—represents a unique ‘two-way’ or ‘reversed import’ pattern in global K-pop, challenging traditional pathways of Korean musical popularity. Their success rests on what Kim terms ‘narrative authenticity’: an authenticity rooted in coherent and sincere self-narration, built around universal themes of youth, growth, hardship, hope, and reflecting genuine experiences and shared values. This approach enabled them to transcend the so-called ‘factory idol’ stereotype, used in early-2010s North American discourse to denote manufactured, interchangeable pop products which had previously hindered K-pop’s reception. Even today, the ‘idol factory’ label oversimplifies a far more intricate system of affective labour and creative negotiation, while ignoring analogous exploitative structures within Western music industries, often concealed beneath the commercial myth of authenticity (Choi 2023).

K-pop has evolved through successive waves of innovation, with each generation progressively renegotiating its relationship with production and performance. The first generation (1996–2003) was largely domestic, while the second (2004–2011) expanded across East and Southeast Asia, laying the foundations for transnational fandoms and accelerating global exposure through social media. The third (2012–2017), including EXO, BTS, and BLACKPINK, achieved unprecedented international visibility. Within this continuum, BTS represents a transformative stage. Its breakthrough in the late 2010s marked a turning point, influencing fifth-generation idols who now address social issues and promote empathy and mental-health awareness (Cho & Lee 2025a). Their participatory authorship and emotional transparency redefine authenticity as both an industrial strategy and an affective construct—a synthesis that also underpins their global reach through highly organised fandom practices. These fan-driven efforts have been instrumental in amplifying BTS’s visibility beyond Asia: before their hit *Dynamite* (2020), they faced limited radio play in the United States due to Korean lyrics—illustrating the barriers of a traditionally closed American music industry, barriers that were gradually challenged and overcome through the fandom’s cohesive and highly coordinated activity (Cho & Lee 2025b).

The group’s influence extends beyond music to humanitarian and civic engagement. A notable instance of this occurred during the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, where the profound bond between BTS and their international fanbase, known as ARMY (Adorable Representative MC for Youth), was evident. The fanbase not only matched but exceeded a one-million-dollar donation initially made by BTS. This event also highlighted the substantial capacity for collective action possessed by BTS and their supporters (Lynch 2021).

According to the Hyundai Research Institute’s report (2018), BTS contributes approximately \$3.54 billion annually to South Korea’s GDP. This economic impact even surpasses that of major national events, such as the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. Since their debut in 2013, BTS has also significantly influenced tourism, attracting an average of 79,600 visitors per year – roughly 7.6% of total 104.16 million foreign entries in 2022 (Lee 2018).

BTS’s rise to global prominence is intricately linked with the South Korean government’s deliberate strategies, especially under President Moon Jae-In (2017–2022). Recognising their significant cultural and economic contributions, in July

2021 President Moon appointed BTS as Presidential Special Envoys for Future Generations and Culture: this role enabled the group to represent their country at the United Nations General Assembly (Chae & Lee 2021), significantly elevating their diplomatic status and their importance as global cultural ambassadors. Supported by Nye's soft power framework (2008), this strategic use of BTS by the South Korean government suggests that cultural influence can effectively alter global perceptions and policies through attraction rather than coercion. BTS's activities highlight the role of CClIs in today's media-saturated environment, where artists as "symbol creators" (Hesmondhalgh 2015) convey cultural and social meaning.

The synergy between BTS's advocacy and South Korea's diplomatic strategies at forums such as the United Nations epitomizes a strategic alignment of cultural influence and political objectives. The global appeal of K-Pop, propelled by BTS, has attracted international audiences to South Korean culture, encouraging a favourable national image. Moreover, the phenomenon of ARMY is instrumental in this context: their extensive engagement in social initiatives not only bolsters BTS's success but also facilitates the global dissemination of South Korean culture.

Methodological Note

Given the multifaceted implications of the BTS phenomenon, this subject has garnered extensive attention within the international scientific community. Recognized as a complex cultural phenomenon, BTS exerts influence across a myriad of dimensions, which necessitates a structured approach to understanding the diverse interpretations of its global significance. To this end, this analysis explicitly addresses the following research questions:

- Which dimensions of BTS have most significantly captured scholarly attention?
- How have scholars explained and interpreted the phenomenon of BTS within the broader socio-cultural and economic contexts?

This study undertook a comprehensive bibliographic investigation through hermeneutic analysis, examining 100 academic articles published between 2016 and 2023 across a range of international journals. To overcome linguistic and cultural barriers, the selection process included sources in multiple languages—English, Italian, Indonesian, Filipino, Russian, and Korean. Sources in English and Italian were examined in their original form, while texts in other languages were translated using automatic tools, primarily DeepL. Although these tools considerably enhance access to international readers, they also entail interpretative limitations. Automatic translation, while increasingly sophisticated, cannot always capture the cultural and semantic nuances of the source language and its capacities are limited to the amount of similar data used to train its algorithm. Korean, for instance, employs context-dependent vocabulary with multiple meanings, while Russian's complexity and semantic nuances are not easily transferable to Romance languages, and a plausible lack of texts given to DeepL's algorithm on this topic could explain the shift of evaluative tone and descriptive emphasis which arose in the translation.

To mitigate these limitations, translations were cross verified using different tools and compared with contextual or secondary sources about the publications and their authors. This triangulated approach aimed to ensure conceptual accuracy and preserve the intended analytical meaning of the original texts. The intention was not to produce philological translations, but to achieve a faithful understanding of how BTS is represented and theorised across diverse cultural frameworks. Despite the inherent constraints of machine translation, this approach enabled a comprehensive and culturally sensitive mapping of BTS's global reception, balancing analytical rigour with inclusivity across languages and regions.

By leveraging academic search engines with specific keywords “Bangtan” and “BTS”, the focus was narrowed to articles offering substantive insights into the essence of BTS's impact. Studies that did not contribute to the understanding of their global cultural significance on a deeper level were excluded from the study.

Out of the 100 articles analysed for this study, four specifically highlight the contributions of individual BTS members. Two of these centre on Jeon Jungkook (Jungkook), offering nuanced insights into the representation of masculinity within the K-pop genre. One provides a detailed examination of Jungkook's participation in the opening ceremony of the 2022 football world championships in Qatar (Annisa 2023). It critiques the public's reaction to his androgynous appearance, engaging with the broader discourse on soft masculinity—a concept frequently associated with BTS members who challenge traditional gender norms and embody a shift from conventional masculinity definitions. The centrality of soft masculinity persists in the analysis provided by the second article, which investigates the ascent of K-pop on the global stage, attributing its widespread appeal to its visually oriented production values (Luo 2023).

On the other hand, Kim Namjoon (RM) is prominently analysed for his leadership and rhetorical ability as BTS's spokesperson. His six-minute speech at the 73rd UN General Assembly in 2018 is particularly noteworthy. This instance demonstrated the global reach of BTS as well as Kim Namjoon's exceptional skills as a spokesperson. His leadership, fluency in English, and ability to relay deep messages effectively were instrumental in this context. This event underscored BTS's commitment as youth ambassadors who use their platform to address global youth issues—a stance that led UNICEF to select them as ambassadors, recognizing their profound influence on young audiences (Rahmawati & Dasep 2021).

[...] Kim has inspired many people out there to use self-love and advocate for the people around us so that we may continue to influence them positively as a strong leader. His figure is not only seen as a great leader for BTS, but also known as one reason why many American non-BTS fans fall in love with his leadership role who's then becoming ARMY after that (Rahmawati 2022: 241).

All articles were sourced from open academic databases and chosen for their relevance in providing diverse perspectives on the BTS phenomenon. The adopted methodology aimed to develop a comprehensive cross-sectional understanding of how this phenomenon is approached within the scientific community. Initially, each article underwent a detailed review to establish familiarity with the content, ensuring consistent interpretation and minimising potential misunderstandings or

thematic overlaps. An analytical table, organized into six columns, proved essential for efficiently cataloguing important technical data—such as title, author(s), and publication details—and for offering a concise, schematic overview of each article, thereby facilitating subsequent analyses and comparisons between works.

The investigation of each article focused on identifying its primary themes, keywords, and significant expressions. This allowed for a systematic categorisation of the content, providing insights into the descriptive and interpretive language prevalent in the considered scientific literature on BTS.

Two main analytical trajectories emerged: the first concentrates on the central theme of each article, painting a comprehensive picture of the diverse aspects of the BTS phenomenon as explored by the academic community; the second aims at discerning the unique attributes of BTS, striving to capture how the group and its endeavours are perceived and characterised through the lens of scholarly research.

Unpacking BTS: Insights from Scientific Literature

To explore thematic patterns and evolutions within BTS-related literature, this study conducted a thematic analysis centred on the main subjects of each article. This approach aims to pinpoint the most recurrent analytical focuses and examine how they correlate with publication dates.

These categories, emerging from an in-depth reading of the initial articles, facilitate the identification of themes relevant to the analysis and highlight key dimensions of the BTS phenomenon outlined earlier in this work.

The defined thematic categories are as follows:

- **Diplomatic Activity:** Investigates BTS's contributions as cultural ambassadors.
- **Who are BTS:** Delves into the group's identity and backstory.
- **Internationalisation:** Examines their global expansion and their role in the diffusion of K-culture worldwide.
- **Relationship with ARMY:** Examines the profound bond between BTS and their fandom.
- **Representation of Masculinity:** Analyses BTS's challenge to and reinterpretation of traditional gender norms.
- **Sponsorship and Marketing:** Delves into BTS's branding, commercial strategies, and their collaborations with various brands.
- **Social Themes and Mental Health:** Considers the societal and psychological impact of BTS's work.
- **Use of Technology:** Studies the role of technological innovation and digitalisation in BTS's activities.

This structured analytical framework enables a comprehensive understanding of the scholarly discourse surrounding BTS.

TABLE 1. Main themes emerging from the analysis of 100 international academic articles discussing K-pop group BTS.

Main themes emerging from the analysis of 100 academic articles discussing BTS									
THEMES	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	TOTAL
Diplomatic Activity						1	2	1	4
Who are BTS				2	4	2	1		9
Internationalisation		2	2	1	1	2	3	1	12
Relationship with ARMY			1	2	6	5	5	2	21
Representation of Masculinity				1	4	1	2	1	9
Sponsorship and Marketing			1		1	4	2	4	12
Social Themes and Mental Health					3	7	4	3	17
Use of Technology	1			2	4	5	4		16
TOTAL	1	2	4	8	23	27	23	12	100

The analysis reveals notable trends and shifts across the years, with particular emphasis on *Relationship with ARMY* and *Social Themes and Mental Health*. Coupled with themes such as *Internationalisation*, *Representation of Masculinity*, and *Use of Technology*, this offers a multidimensional view of BTS's global cultural impact.

While this thematic categorisation offers an overview of scholarly trends, it also acknowledges that academic discourse on K-pop is culturally situated. A notable example is found in a Russian study examining the reception of K-pop—and BTS in particular—within Russian society (Kashina 2023). The author critically reflects on the challenges faced by Russian fans, especially women, in navigating cultural differences. Beyond the benefits of cultural enrichment, the study highlights how adherence to masculine ideals profoundly different from traditional Russian norms may create difficulties in romantic and interpersonal relationships with men. This analysis demonstrates cultural sensitivity not through overt bias, but by situating gender debates within a distinctly Russian cultural framework, thereby revealing how local contexts shape the reception and meaning of masculinity.

Who are BTS and Relationship with ARMY

Who are BTS examines the group's identity both collectively and as individuals. Articles characterise it as among the most influential K-pop acts, exploring its artistic evolution, hybrid aesthetics, and cultural impact within Korean pop music. Through narratives of self-love, soft masculinity, and artistic autonomy, BTS articulates a transnational authenticity transcending linguistic and geographic boundaries—a foundation upon which both its international reach and relational fandom dynamics are built.

As shown in Table 1, the theme *Relationship with ARMY* reached its peak in 2020, with six academic publications focusing on fan dynamics. The increase from a single article in 2018 to six in 2020 reflects the growing recognition within academic discourse of BTS's capacity to redefine fan engagement through digital platforms.

The surge in 2020 coincides with the global ascent of BTS's hit *Dynamite* and with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought unprecedented challenges and shifted much of global communication online. Scholars note that during this period, BTS's innovative use of digital platforms—no longer merely promotional tools—strengthened its intimacy with ARMY throughout global lockdowns. This trend underscores a broader shift within the entertainment industry, moving from hierarchical, one-way communication to interactive and participatory fan–artist relationships. Across the literature, scholars consistently portray ARMY as active participants rather than passive consumers within a shared communicative ecosystem. Through direct exchanges on social media, BTS fosters a sense of belonging and emotional proximity that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. The subsequent decline in publications after 2021 may indicate topic saturation or a diversification of research interests.

The literature emphasizes both ARMYs' profound loyalty and their impact on BTS's success. It highlights their distinctive consumption behaviours, their unwavering loyalty, and their defensive mobilisation against external criticism, whether from the media or other fandoms. Several studies also address the fandom's participation in humanitarian initiatives and its influence on BTS's international political standing.

A 2019 study identifies an emerging theme: the cultivation of a shared culture between ARMY and BTS, characterised by organic, dialogic interactions. This evolving relationship impacts not only pop culture but also broader societal structures, reflecting a significant shift towards new forms of social solidarity. The ARMY community embodies a "horizontalism" that reframes political action beyond conventional arenas, illustrating a profound departure from traditional fandom dynamics. As digital media plays an increasingly central role in facilitating intimacy, BTS-ARMY exchanges have grown to have significant social implications, establishing ARMY as a sociocultural force that offers a new social model for the digital future (Chang & Park 2019).

This dynamic has generated a global movement that influences both the media landscape and the personal lives of fans and band members. Live interactions and the sharing of personal moments on social media—such as informal livestreams, solving puzzles, dishwashing, or karaoke sessions—cultivate a sense of mutual care and authenticity. In this context, authenticity emerges from informal modes of communication, where artists share private spaces, everyday habits, and emotionally charged moments.

ARMYs also act as agents of cultural translation, voluntarily subtitling and disseminating BTS content to reach non-Korean audiences. Such proactive engagement not only broadens BTS's global reach but also situates fans as key intermediaries in the transnational circulation of Korean culture.

More importantly, the BTS phenomenon, which could continue, should be understood through the exploration of the formation of transcultural fan

identities. That BTS and their ARMY have made such an impact on the global stage in such a short period of time indicates the continuation of cross-border cultural flows in a new media era, further complicating the negotiation of cultural exchange in a globalized world (McLaren & Jin 2020: 123).

Emphasising ARMYs' role as audience, co-creators, and cultural ambassadors reveals a new paradigm in fandom—collaborative, transnational, and affectively invested—where fan practices merge cultural advocacy with marketing agency, consolidating BTS's global presence while redefining the parameters of participatory culture. Yet this close artist–fan relationship, though widely celebrated, has also prompted debates over whether this connection is entirely organic or merely a strategic approach to foster fan loyalty and secure long-term commercial success.

Use of Technology

The theme *Use of Technology* has attracted increasing scholarly attention, culminating in significant discussions from 2020 onwards. This trend reflects the broader integration of digital technologies into cultural production and BTS's use of these platforms to extend their global presence and reshape the fan–artist dynamic.

For BTS, social media is not just a fan-management tool but also a daily home ground that allows fans and band members to share their lives, opinions, and critical comments about their work. [...] BTS communicates their lives through social media, creating casual dialogues with ARMY, which in turn feed BTS members with sources of creative inspiration. This active communication via social media creates a reciprocal, creative, and social intimacy between BTS and ARMY members (Chang & Park 2019: 270).

Beyond social media, BTS employs a range of technological tools to construct a transmedia ecosystem. Its narratives unfold across multiple media—music videos, web series, games, and novels—each adding a distinct layer of meaning to a broader narrative ecosystem. Lazore (2021) highlights how BTS's self-referential narrative of “growing youth” anchors a digitally integrated brand architecture, where storytelling serves both as artistic and as strategic functions. By aligning emotional authenticity with technological innovation across digital platforms, BTS consolidates artistic coherence and strengthens its global brand identity. Together, these strategies exemplify BTS's distinct use of digital communication to enhance fan engagement and influence global cultural trends, positioning them as leaders in both the music scene and digital culture.

Sponsorship and Marketing

The South Korean group has also been the subject of scholarly analysis for its innovative branding strategies and commercial collaborations. The growing attention in 2021 and 2022 likely reflects the global expansion and maturation of the BTS brand. Research highlights how the group leverages strategic partnerships

and marketing campaigns to strengthen its global image, setting new industry standards and strengthening its brand identity. Studies on collaborations with brands such as McDonald's show how BTS's cultural capital translates into consumer behaviour and shapes brand perception (Singer & Hidayat 2021). These efforts have positioned BTS as leading influencers in the pop culture sphere, whose impact extends beyond the music industry.

Social Themes and Mental Health

The analysis identifies 2021 as a critical year in BTS-related scholarship, marked by a surge in studies focusing on *Social Themes and Mental Health*. This attention reflects BTS's profound impact on promoting mental wellness and resilience amid societal pressures exacerbated by the 2020 pandemic, especially among young people.

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 (Blady 2021: 119).

Its music has become a therapeutic outlet for fans, facilitating emotional processing and occasionally influencing personal growth and future outlooks (Lee et al. 2021). Through social media initiatives such as *#BTSLoveMyself*, the group underscores its commitment to mental health advocacy—particularly through fundraising campaigns that support patients and promote educational programmes (Hermanto & Salindeho 2021).

Studies in this area reveal two main trajectories: one analyses BTS's collaborations with organisations like UNICEF since 2017 to spread messages of hope and self-love; the other investigates how BTS influences ARMY's participation in humanitarian causes and global advocacy. The universality of these messages unites individuals from diverse backgrounds, drawn by BTS's authentic artistry and its proactive engagement across various platforms.

Through decentralised social media networks, ARMY acts as an organised and influential force, employing algorithms and hashtags to coordinate global social movements (Jin 2021). In doing so, they amplify BTS's messages of hope and positivity, redefining traditional systems to shape a more inclusive global cultural discourse.

[...] the activism of ARMYs breaks with the idea of "pop" being merely linked to the aesthetic (and ethical) canons of the Western world, which thus pay attention to and validate cultural industries beyond the "central axis" of the world. In this sense, ARMYs have helped to propel the Hallyu movement beyond the regional aspect of the Far East context and have deliberately questioned American policies and positions on the global spectrum (Urbano et al. 2020: 183).¹

Representation of Masculinity

A distinctive theme emerging from the literature concerns the *Representation of Masculinity*. Articles explore various facets of this theme: the rising interest observed in 2019 and 2020 and its diffusion into North Atlantic popular culture; reflections and debates surrounding gender fluidity and masculinity within contemporary pop culture; and the cultural repercussions in regions where such topics remain taboo. Each aspect underscores the role of BTS as agents of cultural change.

Hallyu has long been marked by a distinctive focus on male representation. Prominent since the spread of K-dramas, this emphasis can be traced back to the Confucian tradition (Jung 2010). Traditionally, masculinity has been defined through attributes such as physical strength, dominance, independence as markers of virility—traits that vary across historical and cultural contexts. In comparison Korean idols like BTS present a blend of conventionally virile physical traits with elements derived from the Chinese Confucian *wen* tradition, which emphasizes a more nuanced representation. They are often described as “cute”, “beautiful”, and with features such as “clear and smooth skin, curved eyelashes, soft and styled hair, and even well-groomed and manicured nails”, reflecting a feminine aesthetic and sensibility (Loo & Loo 2021). Articles in this category explore how BTS portrays a softer, more inclusive form of masculinity—expressed through openness, care, and physical intimacy—that starkly contrasts with traditional representations often seen in Euro-American media. This shift is significant not only in the realm of global pop culture but also reflects broader societal changes concerning gender identity and expression, challenging established norms of masculinity.

The androgynous appearance promoted by BTS, initially adhering to more traditional masculinity norms, has evolved to challenge and reinterpret these standards. This aesthetic choice has elicited diverse reactions, particularly in American and other culturally conservative contexts, where it is sometimes perceived as a radical departure from normative standards.

Among ARMY within the U.S., for example, it is recognized that the group’s members embody a form of “non-hegemonic masculinity”. However, some preferences for heteronormativity remain apparent, especially among heterosexual white male ARMY who feel societal pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity norms (Putri & Mintarsih 2020). Furthermore, despite the popularity and widespread acceptance of the soft masculinity portrayed by Korean idols, many still view it as a construct primarily designed for media consumption (Luo 2023). These interpretations underscore how perceptions of gender fluidity remain contingent upon the observer’s cultural framework and ideological lens.

Diplomatic Activity and Internationalisation

In domestic contexts, researchers have highlighted South Korea’s strategic use of BTS not only to enhance the nation’s musical influence but also to advance various diplomatic and cultural initiatives. This strategy has notably elevated South Korea’s global image by promoting its cultural and historical identity.

Scholarship on *Internationalisation*, in contrast, examines the structural mechanisms enabling BTS’s global expansion. Research examines Billboard

achievements, economic impact, their participation in international talk shows and the creation of non-musical content—like reality programmes—that facilitates cultural understanding globally.

Through their artistic endeavours, BTS articulates the aspirations of the Korean populace, serving as a conduit between Korea and the global stage, thereby boosting the nation's soft power.

Additionally, it is observed that a typical ARMY member often possesses substantial knowledge about South Korean culture, including familiarity with Korean cuisine and, occasionally, the language. According to Kashina (2023) becoming a fan of BTS, therefore, often translates into a broader appreciation and fandom for South Korea itself. Regarding this theme, critics have noted the idealization of South Korea, influenced heavily by the narratives crafted by South Korean cultural industries.

The thematic analysis of academic articles provides deep insights into the group's multifaceted impact on global culture. From reshaping fan interaction dynamics and advancing digital innovation to challenging traditional gender norms and participating in global diplomacy, BTS's influence permeates various spheres of social and cultural activity. This analysis highlights the breadth of BTS's impact and the evolving nature of global pop culture, as mediated by technological advancements and changing social norms. As BTS continues to innovate and engage with global audiences, the academic interest in their activities is likely to continue evolving, offering new insights into the intersections of culture, technology, and social change.

Defining BTS: Characterisations in Scholarly Literature

In a subsequent phase of the study, a second criterion was applied to elucidate the predominant characteristics of BTS as depicted in scholarly discourse. This involved a detailed examination of the literature, during which phrases and adjectives used by authors to characterise BTS's essence and influence were extracted. The analysis identified 350 unique expressions, which were organized into thematic macro-areas to enhance analytical clarity. Each article often reveals multiple dimensions, underscoring the complexity and depth of BTS as a musical and cultural phenomenon.

This approach facilitated a multidimensional understanding of BTS, highlighting the group's substantial impact within contemporary musical and cultural contexts.

TABLE 2. Characteristics of BTS emerged from the analysis of the 100 international academic articles.

Characteristics of BTS	frequency	%
They are the most prominent and popular K-pop group	62	17,7%
They actively communicate with fans across various platforms	60	17,1%
They produce music addressing significant issues such as bullying, meeting fan expectations	25	7,1%
Their activities have a strong positive impact as a country's image in diplomatic activities	14	4%
They are renowned primarily for their fanbase and their ability to engage it	42	12%
Description of BTS through fundamental information	58	16,6%
They use fashion as a means to express a freedom that transcends gender boundaries	8	2,3%
They demonstrate skill in combining various themes and subjects in their narrative	14	4%
They are very active in collaborations and commercial initiatives	20	5,7%
They are seen as reliable and competent in their field	23	6,6%
They are considered for their cultural authenticity	14	4%
They are philanthropic and, through both direct actions and ARMY, make donations	10	2,9%
TOTAL	350	100%

BTS's prominence in the K-pop music scene is both notable and internationally recognized, accounting for 17.7% of references in the analysed articles. Its significant standing in the K-music industry is underpinned by impressive metrics, signifying a cultural influence that has reshaped the industry. Rooted in a cohesive and distinctive blend of musical and cultural identities, BTS's universal appeal lies in its ability to harmonise its Korean cultural roots with a globally resonant musical language (Kim Y.Y. 2020). This identity, embedded in their origin culture yet crafted to be flexible and adaptable, enables fans from diverse backgrounds to connect with their music and messages, positioning BTS as a cultural bridge in an increasingly globalized world.

Simultaneously, BTS's engagement with its fanbase is a cornerstone of its identity, accounting for nearly 30% of occurrences in the analysed articles. This finding aligns with the previous discussion of the *Relationship with ARMY*, which was addressed more extensively within the corpus—appearing in 21 of 100 articles—compared to other thematic dimensions (Table 1). This engagement goes beyond mere marketing, representing an integral part of its artistic ethos. The group commitment to maintaining genuine, reciprocal relationships with its audience is evident through frequent and transparent interactions across various digital platforms. These efforts not only keep BTS accessible amid its rising fame but also involve its fans at every stage of its artistic journey. This communication strategy has built a robust and loyal community, transforming fans from passive consumers into active participants and co-creators of the BTS phenomenon (Utami 2016). In

an era where digital media could widen the gap between artists and fans, BTS has used technology to bridge this divide, setting a model of interaction that many others aspire to replicate.

Data from Tables 1 and 2 emphasize that BTS's effective communication with fans is a recurring theme in scholarly articles and an area of growing academic interest. The escalating number of studies on this topic indicates significant academic relevance, influencing broader research in mass communication and marketing.

Musically, BTS transcends mere catchy tunes: its songs often address social issues, aligning with fans' demands for substantive content. This socially conscious dimension of its music, highlighted in 7% of the analysed literature, underscores the depth and relevance of its lyrical messages. BTS's involvement in songwriting and composition, along with creativity, hard work, and sincere self-expression exemplify what McLaren and Jin (2020) describe as authenticity.

The group is also often studied for its role as cultural ambassador of South Korea, a position that extends beyond mere symbolism. Through its artistic efforts and outreach, it has significantly raised its country's international cultural prestige. The group's global presence not only promotes South Korean culture, values, and history enhancing global understanding and appreciation, but also bolsters national identity and fosters international connections through cultural diplomacy and soft power tactics (Băjenaru 2022). Consistently, BTS maintains its Korean identity by incorporating the Korean language and cultural references into their social media and public appearances, aligning with the vision of former South Korean President Moon Jae-In to use pop culture to elevate national prestige and promote a "people-centered, innovative, and inclusive" South Korea (ABC News 2021).

Despite encountering "*anti-Hallyu* sentiment", especially from neighbouring countries like China (Wang 2022), BTS and its fanbase have successfully navigated cultural and political challenges, promoting K-pop globally through direct fan engagement and media innovation. Its journey from outsiders to global superstars mirrors the broader narrative of South Korea itself (Proctor 2021)—a nation that has rapidly transformed into a vibrant cultural exporter within a few decades. This alignment of individual and national narratives enhances BTS's authenticity and relatability, making them effective cultural representatives on the international stage.

In its dynamic international performances, BTS transcends the typical role of global music icons, operating as active participants in cultural exchange and showcasing South Korean culture through a blend of tradition and modernity. Maintaining its Korean linguistic identity by performing and conducting interviews primarily in its native language, each performance serves as a live exhibition of cultural fusion that captivates and educates global audiences.

This transformation is attributed to their ability to reach the standards of a typical K-pop group—stage presence, performance, complex choreography, impeccable outfits—and correlate their idol status with natural human reactions based on honesty and authenticity. They are recognized not just as a musical phenomenon but as a catalyst for Korean cultural recognition worldwide, influencing far beyond the K-pop music industry and known as the "BTS wave" (Băjenaru 2022: 171).

Their involvement in promoting Korea's tourism industry and their active collaboration with UNICEF, including impactful speeches at the United Nations General Assembly, underline their influential diplomatic status. Their *#LoveMyself* campaign with UNICEF integrates themes of love, acceptance, and non-violence into their music, reinforcing their impactful role in global diplomacy.

Moreover, the influence of BTS extends to cultural engagement through ARMY. This global community actively engages with non-musical programs that explore various aspects of Korean life—from language and customs to cuisine and social interactions, serving as informal yet significant cultural lessons, especially appealing to young adults, the most active demographic within BTS's audience. These interactions not only enhance the global appeal of K-culture but also spark discussions about the soft power exerted by pop culture icons, positioning BTS as modern-day cultural innovators who bridge cultural gaps and foster a global dialogue about South Korean culture, making it more accessible and appealing to international audiences (Razi et al. 2021).

This analysis concludes by highlighting BTS's dual role as both talented artists and adept navigators of the entertainment industry. Often portrayed as reliable and competent figures, their expertise is evident not only in their musical abilities but also in their capacity to manage the complexities of the entertainment industry, consistently upholding high professional standards. More importantly, BTS are recognized as bearers of authentic values. In an era and an industry where authenticity is frequently questioned, they stand out as genuine proponents of deeply resonant messages—from mental health advocacy to anti-bullying campaigns—rooted in personal experiences. Together, these attributes create a compelling image of a group that not only produces quality music but also upholds principles that resonate with millions globally.

The cross-comparison between the thematic clusters (Table 1) and the lexical findings (Table 2) reveals a consistent alignment around three dimensions: cultural leadership (manifested through technological innovation and branding strategies), authentic engagement with ARMY, and a transnational authentic identity. Most of the adjectives and expressions identified in the literature reinforce these themes, portraying BTS as authentic cultural mediators whose artistic integrity and global resonance underpin their diplomatic and affective power. Yet, the lexical analysis also adds complexity to the earlier thematic interpretation. In some studies, the language used conveys an admiring or empathetic tone, suggesting that scholarly discourse on BTS is not entirely detached from the affective dynamics it describes. Rather than diminishing analytical rigour, this subtle subjectivity highlights how popular music scholarship itself participates in the negotiation of cultural value, authenticity, and identity within global pop culture.

Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis demonstrates that BTS's cultural, economic, and social influence exemplifies a transformation in how global icons can shape contemporary society. The group promotes a culture of empathy, connectivity, and communal values, challenging the norms of an increasingly materialistic and competitive neoliberal landscape. Its global prominence shows how affective

connections and collective engagement can catalyse meaningful social bonds in an ever-evolving world. Through heartfelt music and authentic public personas, BTS challenge conventional notions of celebrity success, prioritising genuine connections and emotional resonance over mere commercial gain.

Extending its affective connection into the public sphere, BTS has taken part in humanitarian projects addressing mental health and youth empowerment, while simultaneously serving as strategic assets for South Korea's national image. Their role as cultural ambassadors illustrates how popular artists can operate at the intersection of cultural diplomacy and global marketing. In this sense, BTS act as genuine symbol creators (Hesmondhalgh 2015), enriching cultural experience and contributing to the symbolic economy of global pop culture.

Within this framework, BTS's openness about personal struggles and growth becomes a source of recognition and solidarity for their audience, transforming ARMY from a fanbase into a participatory community grounded in shared emotional experience. This dynamic confirms the connection already identified by Jin (2022) between BTS's music and the notion of transnational proximity. Its focus on critical issues such as mental health, self-acceptance and resilience resonates with individuals grappling with contemporary identity crises and societal pressures. The group's inclusive approach to global engagement—characterised by openness and respect for diversity—fosters a global community bounded by shared human values and mutual respect. The main conclusion that emerges from this work is therefore the group's remarkable ability to enable people to forge lasting and meaningful relationships. ARMY seems not just something to be a part of but something to embody. The fanbase appears as a global network that supports each other, shares experiences, and unites for common causes.

However, this affective intensity is not devoid of ambivalence. BTS and their fans, while largely positive, also have a darker aspect that can be particularly harmful for younger audiences. In some cases, fan culture can lead to "toxic interactions", unrealistic social comparisons and cyberbullying (Maqsood & Bano 2025). While not unique to BTS, such instances reveal the complex interplay between affect, identity, celebrity worship and the dynamics of digital fan culture.

BTS influence extends to commercial and branding practices. Their ability to translate fan participation into a commercial asset exemplifies how contemporary cultural industries mobilise emotional engagement as a strategic resource. Yet, as Parc (2021) observes, the influence of *Hallyu* is context-dependent: collaborations such as LG's 2018 campaign with BTS demonstrate that the cultural power of K-pop does not automatically ensure success across all sectors.

Overall, this analysis identifies three determinants of BTS's global success: the skilful innovative use of digital technology (examined in 16 studies), the organised and systematic support of ARMY (21 studies), and their authentic identity both as individuals and as a group. These operate synergistically rather than independently, with each dimension reinforcing the others.

In conclusion, the case of BTS is one of profound cultural resonance and societal influence. Its ability to foster empathy and understanding amidst the pressures of modern life elevates it beyond mere artists to pivotal figures shaping contemporary social narratives. Its journey provides deep insights into identity, success, and human connection in the 21st century, illustrating the significant potential of cultural icons to drive global social change.

Future research could delve into a transcultural analysis of BTS, exploring how its influence in cultural diplomacy, international relations, and global media continues to offer rich opportunities for academic and societal reflection. Its legacy provides a blueprint for future cultural interactions in a globalised world, highlighting how art and empathy intersect to foster a more connected and compassionate global community. Further studies might compare how the BTS phenomenon is perceived across different cultures to understand its universality or cultural specificity. Additionally, examining the evolution of BTS as mature artists within the South Korean music industry could provide valuable perspectives on its continued artistic journey. This work aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the transformative impact of BTS and its enduring legacy.

Endnotes

(1) Original text in Portuguese, translated using DeepL.

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