

K-POP GIRLIES: AN INVESTIGATION
INTO PHOTOCARD
COLLECTING

by

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ABSTRACT

The lived experiences of girlies have predominantly existed in the K-pop fandom space. However, girlies have long been ignored in academic spaces as their practices are seen as temporal, with effects limited to the fleeting nature of youth and popular culture. This qualitative thesis seeks to understand who K-pop girlies are and how their engagement in fandom spaces, including collecting photocards, shapes their life. Therefore, representing a crucial aspect of interpersonal communication and community crafting. Through qualitative interviews with 11 K-pop girlies and my own autoethnography, this thesis utilized a phenomenological approach to investigate three research questions attending to girlies, photocard collecting, and my own experiences as a BTS fan. Interviews were then subjected to thematic analysis. Specifically, to be a girlie, one must actively engage with a community, pass the vibe check, have a strong feminist collection, and demonstrate radical inclusivity. Photocard girlie practices specifically are shaped by love for their idols, the randomized nature of photocards, motivation to complete their collection, actively taking part in consumerism, and having an emotional connection to their photocards. This investigation into photocard collecting offered a unique insight into the communicative practices of girlies and the importance of physicality in fandom. Photocards provide a vehicle for the emotional intensity K-pop girlies have for their favorite artists. Looking forward, this thesis serves as the foundation for future K-pop consumption research and girlie studies, advancing scholarship centering girlie perspectives.

Keywords: fandom, K-pop, BTS, music, photocards, girlie, phenomenology, autoethnography

DEDICATION

For BTS. Thank you for saving me.

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INTRODUCTION

In November of 2021, my best friend and I flew across the country to Los Angeles for BTS's first concert in two years. The Korean pop boy group BTS, or *Bangtan Sonyeondan* in Korean, dominates the global music scene and I am one of many fans who have fallen for their charm. After the devastating 2020 pandemic, concerts began to come back and I was not going to miss the opportunity to see the love of my life, Yoongi . The day before the concert, my bestie and I stood in line for nine hours to buy BTS's fan lightstick¹ and venue-exclusive lucky draw photocards. While I am the first to admit nine hours is a wild amount of time to stand in line, the experience itself felt otherworldly. I met many fellow ARMY (the acronym for BTS's fandom standing for "Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth")² from across the world, exchanged freebies and fan-made photocards, and I pulled J-hope's photocard from the lucky draw box (Figure 1). It was all totally worth it.

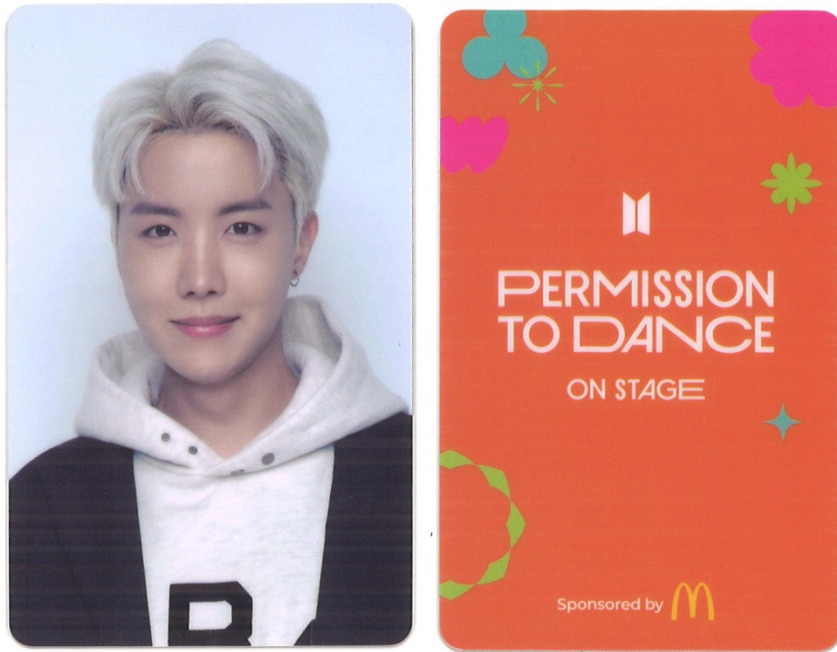
Devoted fans willing to wait in long lines are not new, rather the opposite. From purchasing merchandise to forming fan clubs, participation is at the heart of fandom. Jenkins (1992) explained, Participatory Culture Theory or the transformation of media consumption into the production of new texts, culture, and strong community, is the center of fan studies. Modernly, people who create or share social media content are part of this participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009). The widespread use of the internet and social media makes it increasingly easier

¹ A fan lightstick is a custom flashlight-like item that will light up during live K-pop performances. Each K-pop group has their own and BTS's is the ARMY bomb and retails for \$59 USD.

² BTS, like many K-pop groups, was influenced by American hip-hop and rap artists. In this case, M.C. comes from the hip-hop nomenclature "Master of Ceremonies" though this has not been clarified by BTS.

Figure 1

J-hope Permission to Dance in L.A. Lucky Draw



Note. In order to get these lucky draw photocards you needed to purchase a BTS album at SoFi Stadium while BTS was in Los Angeles for their “Permission to Dance” concerts. One lucky draw photocard was distributed per album purchase. From my collection.

to participate in fandom, but fans have always produced these fanworks. In music fandom, spanning from Frank Sinatra to the Beatles, young people demonstrated devotion to pop icons since pop music's inception (Ehrenreich et al., 1992; Hollenbach, 2019). The concept of fandom began as a way to describe passionate sports fans (Shulman, 1996). However, this definition has broadened to include anything a group of people can support (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Fandom is modernly described as a passion for something, expressed through solidarity with others (Jang, 2022). Additionally, fandom is inherently feminist and queer. Scott (2019) explained, in the 1980s, communities of femme³ fans writing homoerotic *slash* Star Trek fanfiction gave both feminism and moments of queerness, a space in fandom. While fangirls remain ever-present in fandom spaces, gender remains a central construct within popular culture.

Collecting comprises a large part of the participatory nature of fandom. Though collecting dates back to 4000 BCE, from a historian's perspective, the history of collecting mainly covers collections housed in museums (Burgess, 2020). Collecting is part of the human experience. Dillon (2019) elaborated, "[collecting is] best understood to exist on a continuum of human engagement with objects... rendering us all collectors of some kind..." (p. 276). We collect clothes in our closet in the same way early humans collected records of travel and trade: to showcase interest, identity, or personal satisfaction (Dillon, 2019). Modernly, the collecting of comic books or other popular culture memorabilia acts as the center of collecting culture (Geraghty, 2014). In fan spaces, "personal histories become embodied in the collected objects of popular culture, and archives devoted to their preservation are rebuilt through remediation" (Geraghty, 2014, p. 4). Collecting marks a vital piece of fan communities.

³ Traditionally these Trekkie-fan girls were described as females. However, there were queer men within the fanfiction community, so fanfiction Trekkies are represented as femme people here.

Korean popular music, as a music genre and active fandom, has grown in popularity over the past few decades. Cho (2017) highlighted that *Hallyu* or the Korean wave, denotes the growing global popularity of Korean media, such as Korean television shows and Korean popular music, known widely as K-dramas and K-pop. The first wave of Hallyu began in the early 1990s and has since grown to not only include TV and music, but food, skincare, cellphones, and cars⁴ (Yoon & Jin, 2017). Hallyu encompasses the South Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism's desire to export Korean popular culture to a global market (Yoon & Jin, 2017). Since the 1990s, the entertainment industry and government in South Korea have invested in the K-pop industry (Ono & Kwon, 2013; Sherman, 2020). Flashy choreography, catchy melodies, and polished performers define K-pop (Yoon & Jin, 2017). Additional K-pop music criteria includes music performed primarily in Korean, released by a Korean music label, by artists who trained at an agency in Korea.⁵

The music genre of K-pop started in 1992 with the group Seo Taiji and the Boys (Yoon & Jin, 2017). Seo Taiji and the Boys, are widely regarded as the first to experiment with the combination of American 90s Hip-Hop and rap, and the Korean language, specifically their song "Come Back Home."⁶ In 1996 the group H.O.T., signed to SM Entertainment, further developed the melodic structure established by Seo Taiji and the Boys, becoming the first idol group.⁷ K-pop culture goes beyond a music genre; it is a "...multimedia performance with a heavy emphasis on visuals" (S. Kim, 2018, p. 2). K-pop idols must sing, rap, dance, and act to thrive in the

⁴ BTS have been ambassadors for all of these categories; BBQ Chicken, Chilsung Cider, Mediheal, Hyundai, and Samsung. All of these collaborations have photocards.

⁵ While these are the three things needed for a group to be widely accepted as a K-pop group, there are exceptions. For example, JYP's survival show *America 2 Korea (A2K)* specifically debuted a global group of performers from America. Additionally, the K-pop group Black Swan received criticism from Western media for not having any active Korean members.

⁶ In 2017, BTS released a cover of "Come Back Home."

⁷ In 2022, NCT DREAM released a cover of H.O.T.'s "Candy." Both H.O.T. and NCT are SM Entertainment groups and the re-release of this song acted as a nod to K-pop's history.

industry or even debut in a group. These idols are heavily manufactured by their entertainment companies, but throughout their training process, they do not lose their individual personality, drawing people into the industry (S. Kim, 2018).

Since the 1990s, K-pop has grown and Hallyu has spread. Hallyu 2.0 describes a second wave of Korean pop culture, beginning in the 2010s. This second wave has also spread Korean popular culture to other Asian and Western countries (Jin & Yoon, 2014). Hallyu 2.0 was fueled by an increase in online digital communication (Han et al., 2019). Not only does this encompass groups posting content on platforms like YouTube, but also fans communicating with each other and artists interacting with a now global fanbase (J. O. Kim, 2021). Small or independent music companies rely on YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, etc., as television coverage is often monopolized by larger K-pop companies.⁸ Since many K-pop groups have found success using these digital networks, many K-pop groups now tour internationally in order to interact with more of their global fans, extending the Korean wave (S. Kim, 2018).

K-pop has some of the largest and most complex global fandoms, containing a multitude of subcultures (Yoon & Jin, 2017). While some K-pop fandom subcultures can be categorized as outright harmful, not all can be easily labeled. For example, *delulus*, a word for delusional fans, is often thrown around with a hint of irony. If you were to join a Weverse live from any BTS member, you are guaranteed to see one phrase in the comments, ‘Yoongi marry me?’ A bold question to type in a live chat to a man you have never met, especially if that man is not Yoongi himself. This behavior is certainly delusional 🤪. However, the ARMY who type this in the chat are not offering a real proposal or committing any real crime. Rather, BTS’s engagement with

⁸ The *big-three* K-pop companies are S.M. Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment. These companies have not only spearheaded K-pop as a genre but still produce top-tier idol groups. Following BTS’s success, their record label’s conglomerate, HYBE, is now just as big as the big three. K-pop companies outside of these four are considered independent or small, despite often bringing in millions of dollars.

this phrase, such as reading the comments out loud with a laugh, has turned ‘Yoongi, marry me?’ into an inside joke between BTS and ARMY. This delulu interaction builds a bond between artist and fan, further showcasing the complexities of K-pop fandom.

The phrase *girlie* remains new in popular culture and not exclusive to fandom spaces. It has become a catch-all term for passionate young people who have something to share. Girlies are not exclusively feminine women, “essentially, if you can group people together, they can be girlies” (Baah, 2022, para. 3). Although *girlie* includes the word “girl,” it is a gender-neutral word pervasive in internet culture and pop culture. While *girlie* is not tied to gender identity, it remains a feminine word because “...to reject girliness altogether is to allow patriarchal standards to determine proper pop culture” (Rossman, 2022, para 2.3). *Girlie*, as a term, allows fan studies to embrace the feminine nature of fandom without excluding fans based on gender. Research on the term *girlie* remains limited, but *girlie*’s widespread usage and vague definition prove useful to describe the photocard collectors present in this research.

Photocard collectors are a subculture of K-pop fandom. There are a large number of K-pop fans who buy their favorite artists’ albums to support their favorite groups with no desire to collect the photocards. These fans often put photocards on their walls or in their phone cases to enjoy the pictures of the idols, yet little attention is paid to the value of these cards. On the other hand, intense collectors can buy dozens or hundreds of albums with the intent to collect photocards. These two subgroups are both technically photocard collectors but have widely different perspectives with differing intensities. This thesis seeks to understand photocard collectors as a whole, both casual and committed, because together, they drive a large number of K-pop album sales and are central to K-pop fandom as a whole.

As streaming becomes the primary way to consume music, K-pop companies are finding ways to capitalize on K-pop albums and photocard collectors (Gloria, 2022). Photocards are little paper cards, often 2 ¼” x 3 ½”, featuring a photo of an idol (Figure 2). These can be selfies, concept photos, units, or full group photos. Standard photocards are ones that come with an album, though there are also DVD/BluRay cards, lucky draw cards, merch cards, tour cards, broadcast cards, event cards, etc. The most popular photocards to collect are random member album inclusions that are standard trading card sized, (bonus points if they are a selfie 🥰). Photocards are collected, stored, and displayed differently depending on the girlie and something about those little cards makes them appreciated universally.

The first random member K-pop photocards came with the 2010 Girl’s Generation album, *Oh!*. Since 2010, the community has grown and photocard collecting has become a globalized trend among K-pop fans. Although K-pop has been extensively studied, there are no academic articles about photocard collecting and only a handful of popular press sites have mentioned the phenomena (Gloria, 2022; L. Tran, 2023). However, photocard buying, trading, and collecting are a central component of K-pop fandom, begging for analysis.

In order to study the phenomenon of photocard collecting within K-pop fandom, this thesis will use a phenomenological qualitative approach through interviews and autoethnography. Girlie practices can be understood as lived experiences. When asked the question “What does it mean to be a fangirl in the provinces?”⁹ (Pixid, 2023, 11:21). Fan girlies responded, “you fangirl during the toughest time because that’s when they come and comfort you” (Pixid, 2023, 11:43). This makes phenomenological qualitative research a useful method for this study to fully investigate lived experience.

⁹ “A fangirl in the provinces” refers to areas in Korea outside of Seoul. Provincial fans often have to make a greater effort to “fangirl” because it can be challenging to travel for concerts, participate in fan events, and purchase albums.

Figure 2

RM *Map of the Soul : Persona* Version 3



Note. An RM selfie photocard from BTS's *Map of the Soul: Persona* album released in 2019.

RM's pose winking and flashing a peace sign for the camera are representative of an *aegyo* or overly cute photocard pose. From my collection.

Phenomenological research questions should address both society as a whole and the researcher as an individual (Giorgi, 1997). The research questions investigated through this thesis seek to understand girlies as a cultural phenomenon and the interviewer as a girlie, encompassing others through interviews and myself in autoethnography. Photocard collecting can be understood as a unique phenomenon. The concept of a photocard appears simple, but the community, rituals, and myths surrounding them are complex. This study aims to obtain rich descriptions from participants and also understand the outliers and will actively seek out a diverse population of collectors. In phenomenology specifically, participants are able to share their lived experience through their own voice which then builds to foundational understanding (Moustakas, 1994). Fan girlie practices are something that can only be studied through rich descriptions where the study participants are seen as research collaborators.

When studying fandom specifically, scholars must take the role of both the fan and the academic. Jenkins specifically used the term aca-fan to describe this position (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 2011). Zwaan and Duffett (2016) elaborated, “the field of fan studies is based on a holistic methodology that combines auto-ethnography with interviews and other forms of ethnographic study” (p. 3). In order to fulfill my role as an aca-fan, I conducted an autoethnography about my own experience as a K-pop girlie 💖. The method of autoethnography combines the methods of observational social research like ethnography, with that of personal narrative (Mannaning & Adams, 2019). Ellis et al. (2011) argued, “[autoethnography] expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research...” (p. 275). Rodriguez (2022) employed this technique directly in his book about British post-punk music and the culture’s subsequent impact on the Latinx population in the United States, combining his memoir with critical analysis. Tiffany (2021) used

a similar approach which allowed her experiences as a One Direction *Directioner* to inform her analysis of how fangirls shaped modern internet culture. When belonging to a fandom becomes part of one's identity, separating the academic from the fan becomes impossible, making autoethnographic elements necessary for this research. Pieces of my personal narrative and experience as an ARMY fan girlie are present throughout this thesis, as observed in the opening paragraphs.

This thesis is written by a girlie for girlies, so this thesis must be fun 🎉. As such there are many photos, emojis, and pop-culture references to maintain the level of girlieness necessary for the integrity of this thesis. Teen girl culture has often been viewed as unacademic or immature, however, girls have highly developed organizational and communication skills and are often introspective to a fault (McRobbie & Garber, 2006; Hollenbach, 2019). Hollenbach (2019) argued that early fangirls in the 1940s used fandom to develop professional skills when analyzing and responding to their idol. The presence of skilled fangirls has only increased as technology and access to a wider range of fandom practices has broadened. Additionally, Danesi (2016) found that while emojis are part of popular culture, they also act as a counter-hegemonic global language. Emojis bolster the meaning of communication while being inherently playful (Danesi, 2016). While photos and emojis do not define all of girlie culture, aspects of their communication style must be integrated into this thesis to fully understand the subject matter. Through this thesis, I shed light on K-pop girlies and how photocard collecting has shaped fandom. Chapter 1, the literature review, introduces Participatory Culture Theory, and addresses past research on fandom, collecting, K-pop, girlies, and photocard collectors. Chapter 2, methods, focuses on the research participants and how both qualitative and autoethnographic research methods were used. Chapter 3 details the findings and answers the three research

questions posed in this thesis. Chapter 4 then discuss overall emergent themes, implications, and future directions.

Positionality Statement

I am a large K-pop fan and in-group member of the photocard collecting community. Separating my love for BTS and the inspiration their music has given me would be an impossibility. Cruz (2023) highlighted, ARMY who write about BTS are in a better position than alleged “neutral” writers of BTS because they have a more informed position and demonstrate respect towards the band. My own experiences loving K-pop and BTS serve as a foundation for this study. Additionally, I am not Korean, nor do I fluently speak Korean. As a bi-racial Asian American woman living in the United States (U.S.), I understand some nuance surrounding Asian culture, however my Asian-ness has been lived exclusively in America. I have been lucky enough to have a close relationship with my mom and her family, celebrate my Singaporean heritage, and learn about my culture. However, I do not and could not fully understand Korean culture or the lived Korean experience.

This thesis is written within the context of the U.S. and participants are American K-pop fans. Many quotes and translations present throughout this paper come from ARMY translators or Korean researchers. It would be nearly impossible for an outsider to study this community as there are so many rules, norms, and even vocabulary unique to photocard gurlies. Through this study, I embrace my bias and speak freely about my love of BTS and the joy photocard collecting has brought me. In 2019, I bought my first K-pop album and pulled my first Yoongi photocard (Figure 3). I sat on my bed alone and unboxed the album. I felt such a rush of endorphins as I flipped through the photobook, admiring artful photos of my favorite boys, and scanning the song credits pages for BTS members SUGA, RM, and J-hope to be listed as songwriters and producers. Technically, all of the album’s content was available for me to view

Figure 3

SUGA *Love Yourself : Answer* Version S



Note. A SUGA selfie photocard from BTS's *Love Yourself : Answer* album released in 2018. The back of this photocard is holographic and the sweeping lines on the back align with all the other cards from this album, forming the full album cover design. From my collection.

online and most of written content was in Korean I could not read. However, for me, getting to flip through the album made me feel close to the boys I gained so much joy from. I did not have any sleeves to store the photocard or a binder to display it in, so I just put the card back into the album. Every few days I would pull it off my shelf, just to flip through the pages again and look at Yoongi's photocard. I felt closeness during an isolating period of my life, and connectedness with BTS that I would not feel at the same intensity until I saw them in concert two years later. My introduction to photocards was private yet full of emotions I hope to share throughout this thesis.

CHAPTER 1 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Girlies and photocard collectors have carved a spot for themselves in modern popular culture. However, existing research on these phenomenon's remain limited. The existing research guiding this thesis starts with the preexisting theoretical framework currently guiding fan studies research within communication studies: participatory culture theory. Then, this chapter explores fandom, fangirls, fan collecting, music collecting, and card collecting. Finally, research on K-pop, K-pop fandom, and K-pop photocard collecting is discussed to fully understand the context of the three research questions guiding this thesis.

Participatory Culture Theory

In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (1992) outlined Participatory Culture Theory as the transformation of media consumption into production whether through new communities, agendas, or texts. There are five components to Jenkins' participatory culture

1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others
3. Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. Members who believe that their contributions matter
5. Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another

(Jenkins et al., 2009, pp. 5-6)

While this list acts more like a definition of participatory culture, Turk (2014) detailed, “media fandom runs on the engine of production, but much of what we produce is not art [like fan art or

fan fiction] but information, discussion, architecture, access, resources, metadata” (para. 2.3). A gifting culture then leads to a strong sense of community, not only benefiting the fandom but growing it (Turk, 2014). Participatory culture, through the lens of geek girls, critiques and centers the marginalization of women in fandom communities (Scott, 2019). Historically, women have been discriminated against both in and outside of fandom spaces, but participatory fandom has its own culture, economy, and rules that are written down and abided by, creating a space for young femme people to express themselves more freely (Scott, 2019). Geraghty (2014) posited, “one could argue that the history of fandom is very much a history of gendered discourses around production, consumption, participation and celebration” (p. 55). Femme people sit at the center of participatory fan culture.

Baym (2018) argued, music fandom specifically operates as both communication and participation. Music does not have meaning until the audience interprets it and recorded music played back at any time, is the most susceptible to diverse interpretations. Often these meanings are personal. Music is inherently about community. “One need only look at the commonalities among fandoms around the boy bands of the day over time... to see that they have much more to do with the pleasures and lessons girls experience in building community with one another through common practices that set them apart from other demographic groups than with the specific young men around whom those practices take form” (Baym, 2018, p. 47). Music circulates, and its gifting economy is central to a culture that relies on trust (Baym, 2018). The culture around listening to music, sharing playlists, attending concerts, and generally fangirling fits within the understanding of participatory culture theory.

Fandom

The word *fan* itself is shortened from the word *fanatic* meaning extreme energy towards a single thing. Fanatic’s Latin counterpart *fanaticus*, originally meant a temple goer or temple

devotee but was later used to describe people who shared their political beliefs in loud and overly enthusiastic ways (Jenkins, 1992). Fan in the abbreviated form was first used to describe overly passionate baseball fans in the late 1880s by sports journalists (Shulman, 1996). These fans were later grouped into a fandom, defined by Reysen and Branscombe (2010) as the community and happiness around an interest. One fan is simply deemed as overly devoted and single-minded, but when grouped together, fans are able to find a community to share their passions with.

Fanship started as a component of sports fandom, but popular culture fandom does not often include aspects of fanship. Reysen and Branscombe (2010) identified fanship as an individual person's attachment to their interest. While fandom is rooted in community, fanship relies on individuality. Laffan (2021) elaborated, fanship can also be a psychological experience and even lead to identity construction. In the context of sports, fanship acts as someone who identifies with a team of athletes while fandom is considered identifying with other fans. In pop culture fandom, identity construction manifests as belonging to a fandom, not necessarily "fan worship" (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010, p. 177). Modern fandom now amounts to a passion for something expressed in solidarity with others (Jang, 2022). Community remains central when looking at fan behaviors (Laffan, 2021). However, regardless of whether someone participates in fandom or fanship, they are constructing their identity through fan practices. While an investigation into sports fans is beyond the scope of this thesis, the origins of fan studies must be acknowledged as sports fandom often mirrors pop culture fandom.

Modern fan communities gather both in person and online. Conventions or "cons" have widely been the primary space for large fan gatherings (Geraghty, 2014). However, as technology and social media have advanced, online sites like Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit have become the new primary fan-gathering locations (Duffett, 2014; Laffan, 2020; Tiffany, 2021).

Online communities are traditionally understood as people with a common interest gathering in an online space (Han et al., 2019). In their study looking specifically at South Korean fan spaces, Han et al. (2019) found participation in online communities increases loyalty to their fandom and positively impacts their overall quality of life. Additionally, these online fan communities have been studied as a way to understand modern fan communities, but a gap in the research exists when investigating how online social media sites function as a hub for collectors. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic moved most spaces online, it makes sense how existing online communities attracted and retained new members; however, more research is necessary to fully understand how these sites are used by fans.

Fangirls

In 1991, “very little seems to have been written about the role of girls in youth cultural groupings” (McRobbie & Garber, 1991, p. 1). This was accurate when McRobbie and Garber (1991) wrote their first iteration of this piece in 1978 and even when girls were studied, it was only through their relation to men or perceived conventional attractiveness. When British subculture in the 1960s became softer and more feminized, including the unisex look of *mod men*, girls gained more authority in mainstream subculture (McRobbie & Garber, 1991). Though it was clear that these girls were just taking up space in male subcultures but soon gained notoriety for their own communities, fashion, and practices.

Historically, there has been a gender divide between fans, mostly created by observers and scholars, relaying that *psychotic* fans are masculine and *eroticized* fans are feminine (Jenkins, 1992). Tiffany (2022) explained, “...we have had so many screaming girls. Every time we see them we’re like, ‘they’re screaming.’ And that’s it. It’s not that the image of the screaming fan isn’t true... it’s that the screaming fan doesn’t scream for nothing, and screaming isn’t all the fan is doing” (p. 31). Feminine practices can range from screaming at high

frequencies for their favorite boy band, to designing friendship bracelets to exchange at concerts, to making friends with fellow fans in Instagram group chats. By taking place in actions looked down upon by a fandom's masculine majority, femme fans create space for themselves and each other (Scott, 2019). Feminine fandom practices have historically been looked down on, called *hysterical* and *immature*, and reduced to *teenyboppers*, *groupies*, and *tweens* (Coates, 2003; Hollenbach, 2019; Rossman, 2022). Scott (2019) argued, fangirls are a vital piece of fandom culture, but are often overlooked or even cast out. Jenkins (1992) described how "Trekkies," the nomenclature for Star Trek fans, were stereotyped as brainless consumers, socially awkward misfits, and people dedicated to knowing useless knowledge. While these stereotypes were harmful to traditionally masculine fans, they completely ignored femme fans who bolstered the Trekkie fandom by writing homoerotic slash fanfiction. Jenkins (1992) continued, feminine rock music fans were specifically seen as *orgiastic* and inherently sexual. However, this gendered divide was not constructed by fans but rather by perceived generalized gendered performance.

Gender is not a given fact, rather, created and reinforced by a cycle of performance (Butler, 1990). In the same way that gender is culturally formed, fan practices are culturally formed and the definition changes over time. Even the use of the word *girl*, as a gendered term, influences how fans behave. Butler (1993) expanded:

Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an "it" to a "she" or a "he," and in that naming, the girl is "girled," brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that "girling" of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various

intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. (pp. 7-8)

The girl is *girl*ed when gender is imposed on her, and when she lives her life within the normative cultural boundaries of what it means to be a girl. Butler's (1993) articulation showcases the physicality of sex while highlighting, being a girl is materialized through culturally reinforced performance. While fangirl was used to lump groups of young femme fans together, that label was not entirely accurate because a multitude of genders are encompassed in a group of fans, especially young fans. Geraghty (2014) argued, "perhaps, then, the perceived differences between male and female fans and the practices associated with both is more a matter of what gets written about and by whom" (p. 56). The persistent insistence of a gender binary within fandom completely ignored and invalidated the experience of fans who were of any other gender identity, pushing away the sense of community central to fandom and creating an unnecessary divide. In the same way that gender is a social construct, separating fans into male and female categories creates an inaccurate picture of what it means to be a modern fan. When talking about the plights the early fangirls faced, the fact that they were not exclusively female-identifying but rather taking part in fan practices deemed by outsiders as feminine must be acknowledged. For example, Beatles fans were viewed as girls who, "did not riot for anything, except the chance to remain in the proximity of their idols and hence to remain screaming" (Ehrenreich et al., 1992, p. 85). However, it would be inaccurate to claim that every single Beatles fan is a girl or a literal female child. Rather, the generalization of passionate screaming fans as fangirls created this widespread stereotype.

The gendering of music fans, lead to the chronic discrediting of any feminine fan. Historically, women were not just kept out of music fandom but "actively disdained" (Coates,

2003, p. 67). However, women have historically relied on fan communities for support. Bacon-Smith (1992) elaborated, “in [fan]fiction, the women of the fan community construct a safe discourse with which to explore the dangerous subject of their own lives” (p. 203). This community building was present even in the fan clubs of the 1940s. Hollenbach (2019) explained how Frank Sinatra fangirls put so much energy into supporting their idol to give them a sense of control over their lives during WWII. Fangirling gave these teenage girls purpose and led predominantly feminine communities to engage with topics of identity and love in order to regain autonomy over their lives and find solace with each other.

As the phrase teenyboppers was phased out and replaced with *fangirl*, awareness of the “teen girl” status became a marketing strategy (Ehrenreich et al., 1992). Things marketed specifically to young feminine fans, like boy bands, were thus deemed inauthentic and unappealing to everyone else. BTS and Kang (2023) elaborated, “...there is also the highly misogynistic assumption that because fans of idol music tend to be women in their teens and twenties, the music must be of a poor quality” (p. 327). This judgment persists today. Tiffany (2022) echoed, “if fangirls seem powerful, that power still comes from taciturn platforms that want them almost solely for the ease of selling ads that align with their interests—it can be taken away at any time” (p. 24). Not only are young fans trivialized but they are used for capitalist intentions. Sherman (2020) countered; fangirls give boy bands their power. Without girlies, there is no pop culture.

Collecting

Humans as a species have always been collectors. From gathering items as part of a burial ritual to stealing loot during times of war, humans love to collect and display items as signs of wealth, to educate others, or to map travel and trade (Dillon, 2019). Burgess (2020) highlighted, “understanding the histories of how objects were collected, traded, gifted, bought

and stolen is hence essential to recognizing the flows of wealth, power and politics that determine how we know what we know about history globally” (p. 108). Collecting has been motivated by general interest, representation of personal identity, pleasure gained, and a want to display (Dillon, 2019). Shuker (2014) added:

Collectors and the collecting process are variously associated with longing, desire, and pleasure; ritualistic, near-sacred and repetitive acquisition; passionate and selective consumption; stewardship and cultural preservation; and obsession and linked pathologies such as completism, accumulation and a preoccupation with collection size. (p. 167)

The complexities of collecting are boundless, complex yet universal.

Collections can exist in many different spaces. Museums remain the most formal, but specifically amongst teenagers, there is an established bedroom culture. Bedrooms are a dialectic space for teenagers – both functional and meaningful, stabilizing identity and providing space to experiment with identity, a refuge and a place where teens can experience pain, a place to escape and a place regulated by parents or guardians (Lincoln, 2015). The aesthetics of girlhood and youth culture specifically take place in these bedroom spaces because modernly, the transitional period between childhood and adulthood is fluid, with girlhood specifically becoming hyper scrutinized (Harris, 2001). This critical lens focused on girls caused girlhood culture to retreat back to bedroom spaces, because in private, young people are free of public discourse. Bedrooms have once again become an ideal place for cultural production and collection. Harris (2001) explained, “...the public sphere may not be the preferred site for young women’s political expression precisely because it is so saturated with idealized or demonized images of girlhood” (p. 136). Thus, collections are often stored and displayed in bedrooms, because these private

spaces are inherently personal in the same way collected items are personal. Geraghty (2014) elaborated, storing items like DVD box sets, comic books, or Hollywood memorabilia in domestic spaces, turns the home into a pop culture archive.

The discussion of gender must be considered when studying collecting. Gender and sexuality are inherently tied to collections because people collect and display collections as a construction and showcase of identity (Geraghty, 2014). Historically, women were pushed aside as collectors. For example, Straw (1997) argued, record collecting is intertwined with masculinity because records are “popular culture artifacts” that shape masculine domestic spaces. However, feminine collectors were labeled as unorganized and obsessive consumers because of claims they did not catalog or organize their collections like the men (Geraghty, 2014). However, this exclusion of women collectors was relatively unfounded. Just because not everyone understands a collection of shoes or Pyrex, does not mean the collecting of these functional items is not valued or organized. Geraghty (2014) clarified, “...what appears to be important in this process [of collecting] is not the fact either men or women collect things or that the things they collect are different depending on their gendered identity. It is that both men and women use the past as an arena for self-identification and recall moments from childhood through the collection and preservation of physical objects” (p. 70). While Geraghty’s (2014) statement was still rooted in the gender binary, we can understand that collecting is essentially genderless and inherently human.

Music Collecting

Record collecting remains a prevalent way to demonstrate fan labor, but this type of music collecting has been historically masculine (Straw, 1997). Anderton (2016) highlighted, even as streaming becomes the primary way to consume music, the romanticization and nostalgia of records keeps sales afloat. However, Shuker (2014) explained, record collectors and music

collectors in general are not just aging fans reaching for nostalgia, they are a distinct category of passionate music fans. The collecting of physical music has become a showcase of fan labor but is mainly studied through the masculine perspective. While record collecting has revealed a strong relationship between music collecting and masculinity (Straw, 1997, 2009), there is little research on the collecting of photocards and femininity. Although 1960s Beatles fans “exchanged Beatle magazines or cards” (Ehrenreich et al., 1992, p. 87) this did not become a staple of the fandom.

However, CDs do not often get this romanization. Sheffield (2022) plainly stated, “CDs will never be as sexy as vinyl albums” (para. 18). Any fondness surrounding CDs seems to be for their functionality. CDs themselves had a unique position in culture as they were seen as an upgrade from records and LPs, both by record labels and fans. Straw (2009) stated, “...the CDs physical lightness and easy portability detach music from the packaging, annotation and design intended to ensure the CDs value and integrity as a distinct cultural form. Automobile CD players, portable listening devices and laptop computers all encourage us to transport, store and play the CD apart from the texts and images intended to circumscribe and illuminate its musical content” (p. 82). In this way, we see that a physical CD perhaps exists as a unique paratext, in some ways separate from the music and even the album cover.

Additionally, streaming has taken over as the optimum way to listen to the widest range of music for the lowest cost. In order for CDs to remain relevant, there has to be a romantic aspect to them because the original appeal of functionality is gone. Straw (2009) furthered, when the way music is consumed is no longer aesthetic or shaping meaning, “it fails to inspire loyalty or fetishistic attachment in the face of cheaper, more abundant alternatives...” (p. 85). Platforms such as Spotify have created their own communities and cultures while eliminating the multi-

step process of consuming music that physical versions require (Morris, 2020). Fans no longer need to drive to a music store and wait in line to purchase favorite artist's new release. Instead, music is uploaded to streaming sites for everyone to view and listen to, often at 11:59 EST on the dot (Swift, 2023).

While streaming remains the dominant music listening medium, CD consumption is on the rise. In 2021, CD revenue grew 21% from 2020 and it was the first time CD sales have grown since 2004 (Friedlander & Bass, 2022). In 2019, Taylor Swift released four deluxe versions of her album *Lover*, each including different scanned pages from her journals throughout the year. By framing the *Lover* deluxe albums as a literal labor of love, Swift evades arguments that she is just trying to make money because she frames everything she makes as emotional and authentic (Rossman, 2022). Essentially, "Swift is the epitome of both/and. Her marketing heightens interest in girlhood and girl culture and the expression of emotion, but it is also entirely produced in a neoliberal context" (Rossman, 2022, para 5.2). Sheffield (2022) argued, modern artists like Adele, Taylor Swift, and BTS are the cause of the CD resurgence. However, BTS are not alone in selling millions of copies of K-pop albums. The K-pop industry utilizes physical copies of albums to boost sales; from vinyl, to cassette tapes, to CDs, to QR codes (Weverse, 2023a). Often K-pop fans will pre-order physical copies of albums months before their release. Although K-pop albums have revived this practice and can widely be linked to the rise in overall CD sales (Yang, 2021; Sisario, 2022). As fans aim to collect albums and any inclusions that come inside, they buy many copies every comeback, regardless of high shipping prices or ease of access, demonstrating the labor involved in collecting CDs and fighting to keep the practice relevant.

Card Collecting

Though somewhat disconnected from music collecting, it is imperative to investigate card collecting as a whole in order to understand K-pop photocards. The two most widely collected cards are Pokémon and baseball (Ward & Clark, 2002). Similarly to records and CDs, collecting in general has been linked to feelings of nostalgia (Sotelo-Duarte, 2022). Baseball cards were originally created for children to play with, but as time went on, the nostalgia of these cards caused prices to rise over time (Moskowitz, 2019). Pokémon cards followed a similar path. They started out as a supplementary card game to the Pokémon video game franchise in the late 1990s but within their card community, there are both players and collectors (Ward & Clark, 2002). Unique to sports and card game cards, is the grading economy. Collectors can send their cards to companies like PSA and have them graded on a scale from 0-10, with ten meaning perfect condition (Moskowitz, 2019). If the card gets a high grade, both the value and rarity increase. Many modern card collectors now balance nostalgia, with general fanship love, and hope for the appreciation of value.

Card Trading

Trading cards adds an additional variable to existing collecting scholarship. For example, Frank Sinatra fan club members would mail photos or snapshots, which they called *snap*s, of Sinatra back and forth to trade for other snaps, newspaper clippings, or even song recordings (Hollenbach, 2019). This commodification of an artist's image gave fangirls a sense of ownership over their fan practices. Essentially, "...possessing and admiring visual representations of Sinatra's face and body in a way armed teenage girls with a certain amount of power; power to freely adore Sinatra and speak openly about his body within the safety of their [fan]clubs, while society expected them to maintain sexual innocence and mainstream characteristics of femininity" (Hollenbach, 2019, p. 157). This trading even happened on an international level

because Sinatra was an artist who was open about his acceptance of everyone from all backgrounds.¹⁰ This was formerly known as the “Adopt-a-Foreign Fan Association” or AAFFA and spearheaded by Marjorie Diven, an official member of Frank Sinatra’s management team (Hollenback, 2019).

Fan work and fan labor often rely on a gifting culture (Turk, 2014). This could be designing, paying for, and distributing physical gifts like banners, beaded bracelets, or even coffee trucks or it could be the gift of time like writing a YouTube comment, running a translation Twitter account, or creating fan art. Gifts made by fans for fans hold the most value within traditional fan spaces (Turk, 2014). Hence why Sinatra snaps were so precious amongst fans. Modernly, this translates to the inclusion of *freebies*, or small free gifts, given alongside trades of traditional trading cards. Fans put in extra labor, adding value to official items and reinforcing a fan economy.

K-pop

Korean popular music, or K-pop, is a genre of music defined not only by language but by the sonic Western influence, flashy performance style, and the trainee period idols go through to participate in the industry. Hallyu, or the “Korean wave,” is a blanket word used to describe any part of contemporary Korean culture consumed outside of Korea (Jin & Yoon, 2016). Hallyu is best described as “...the rapid growth of Korea’s cultural industries and their exports of cultural products, including television shows, popular music (K-pop), animation, and digital games, since 1997” (Yoon & Jin, 2017, p. xi). The term Hallyu was first used by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Korea when it created an album of K-pop, with the goal of spreading Korean culture,

¹⁰ Jazz music obsessed BTS member Taehyung is very Frank Sinatra coded.

in 1999 (Yoon & Jin, 2017). The meaning of the word Hallyu is broad, but this inherently reflects the expansion of Korean culture over the last 25 years.

The increased use of digital technologies led to Hallyu 2.0, which was an extension of Hallyu made more widespread by social media (Jin, 2012). Hallyu 2.0 is also used to describe K-pop's widespread global popularity facilitated by sites like YouTube (Jin & Yoon, 2016). It would be remiss to talk about Hallyu 2.0 and not mention the catalyst, PSY's 2012 music video for "Gangnam Style," which now has over 4.8 billion views on YouTube¹¹ (Psy, 2012). Ahn (2018) furthers, YouTube has been at the center of K-pop's global consumption. "Gangnam Style" was the first instance of a viral K-pop song and found global popularity.

Something that separates Hallyu 2.0 K-pop fans from other music fans is their organization and structure. K-pop fans are known for their active social media presence. Tiffany (2021) explained, K-pop fans took an active role in supporting Black activists during the 2020 BLM protests. "People who had never taken any interest in K-pop fandom before started suggesting that K-pop fans be trusted to run the U.S. government..." (Tiffany, 2021, p. 252). BTS donated one million dollars to BLM and ARMY matched that amount (Chatman, 2020). While there is definitely ARMY who truly support BLM, there are a number of fans who donated just because BTS did. So much of K-pop culture comes from hip hop and rap culture, something created and popularized by Black Americans. However, Black culture can be underappreciated and un-celebrated in fan spaces. Tiffany (2021) elaborated, "[the support for BLM] ...didn't mean that K-pop fans were suddenly the most politically active people in the world; it meant that K-pop fans were the best in the world at flooding social media with easily

¹¹ PSY remains a K-pop icon. He now has his own entertainment company, P Nation.

repeated messages” (p. 254). K-pop fans have a clear command of social media and use it as a tool for whatever they please.

The word fandom in K-pop refers to the community of fans surrounding an idol group. Fans cannot separate themselves from the official fandom (Kang et al., 2022). K-pop fandoms are given official names like ARMY for BTS, BLINK for BLACKPINK, and CARAT for SEVENTEEN. Fan coordination happens organically between fans, or officially from K-pop companies. The K-pop industry has designated fandom names, fan chants, lightsticks, idol representative emojis 🐱, fandom representative colors 💜, and a whole vocabulary, but fans are the ones who adopt this communication style.¹² Since fans themselves help to shape the industry, cultivating a strong sense of community among K-pop fans.

A strong fan community also translates to a community between fans and their idols. Fans are able to connect with each other because of an idol’s activities like official album promotions, appearances on variety shows, or livestreams and social media posts. Another large part of the K-pop industry is the constant stream of content (Jin & Yoon, 2016). While Western artists might release an album every one to two years, a K-pop group often releases an album every four to six months. There is pressure on any young musical artists to build a relationship with their fans. The possibility of hiding away in mansions has disappeared, but the K-pop companies have integrated this into idol culture (Baym, 2020; Iwicka, 2018). K-pop idols are a constant in a fan’s life, adding to feelings of support and obligation. The fast-paced industry and constant release of content provide fans with a constant and unchanging relationship with idols.

Additionally, while K-pop idols are real people, their public personas are close to fictional. The idolization of these musicians can be seen in their identification as an “idol.”

¹² Yoongi’s representative emoji is the cat 🐱 and BTS’s official color is purple 💜.

While the personas idols present might be authentic, the blend between character and real person fosters a potential parasocial connection (Laffan, 2021). K-pop fan practices go beyond listening to a music genre and instead form lasting and intense relationships supported by capitalism. Additionally, the industry puts pressure on K-pop idols to become more like “artists” the longer their careers progress. The manufactured and flashy nature of idol music causes outsiders to look down on the genre. Myeongseok Kang, author of BTS’s official book *Beyond the Story: 10 year record of BTS* furthers, “...there is also the highly misogynistic assumption that because fans of idol music tend to be women in their teens and twenties, the music must be of a poor quality” (BTS & Kang, 2023, p. 327). The belief women and girls devalue music is a long-standing destructive notion, rooted in toxic patriarchal thought. The power of popular music lies with the fans meaning, girlies are the true force propelling the music industry.

The identity of these idols must also be addressed. The genre of K-pop is not exclusive to performers of Korean descent however, the majority of idols are East-Asian. Sikarskie (2023) discussed these East-Asian idols through the lens of colonialism. She articulated, through colonialist thinking, East-Asian countries were viewed as feminine causing East-Asian men to be stereotypically thought of as feminine and passive (Sikarskie, 2023). White women play a large role in this fetishization of Asian men, specifically within idol culture, asking idols to portray objects of their desire. This also led to an idealization of East-Asian countries and a rejection of South-Eastern and Southern Asian countries in the West. British colonial rule also contributed to colorism within Asia. Light skin is often associated with the elites, causing Asian whitening/brightening skincare products to remain on store shelves. While K-pop fans no longer exclusively favor male idols with extremely light skin and feminine qualities, these colonial beauty standards remain. Sikarskie (2023) elaborated, “...the events of 2020 and 2021—

including the politicized rhetoric of the so-called “China virus” and the racially-motivated murders of Asian women in the Atlanta, Georgia area—demonstrate that stereotypes against Asian people still thrive in the West” (p. 149). This thesis does not have the capacity to cover all the nuances surrounding Asian history, but the historical context by which Westerners have not only colonized parts of Asia but often still subscribe to stereotypical or racist beliefs must be mentioned.

K-pop Fandom

K-pop fan activities often take place primarily online, especially for fans outside of Korea (McLaren & Jin, 2020). However, differences in language can keep fans out of fandom spaces and smaller fandoms often rely on fan translators to access supplementary content. In the early days of BTS, BigHit could not afford translations and so a collective of multilingual fans translated all of their social media content, music videos, live streams, and behind the scenes content. Specifically, the online fan collective “BangtanSubs” (<https://www.bangtansubs.com/>) was critical to helping BTS reach audiences outside of Korea. The dedication of multilingual ARMY allowed fans to access all of BTS’s content and subsequently created a fan community.

K-pop fandom can be divided into a multitude of subcategories. There are casual listeners, *netizens*, fan club organizers, archivists, translators, cover dancers, people who create fan edits and fan art, fanfiction writers, *Sasaengs*, *Koreaboos*, solo stans, *delulus*, and of course our beloved photocard collectors. These fan subcultures are necessary to understand K-pop fandom as a whole. Casual listeners can be defined as people who might have come across some popular K-pop songs or know group names but are not fans of the genre. As K-pop has integrated into Western culture, songs like “Cupid” by FIFTY FIFTY or “DARARI” by TREASURE gained immense popularity on platforms like TikTok. Someone defined as a casual listener might listen to these songs without realizing they are listening to K-pop or taking part in

fan practices. Netizens describes someone who spends a lot of time online, essentially a citizen of the internet. The concept of a netizen both originated and remains the most used in Chinese popular culture (Fung, 2012). These K-pop netizens might know the drama surrounding an idol or group, or be familiar with popular songs, but would not identify as a fan. Fan club organizers began within earlier pop fandoms like Frank Sinatra and the Beatles (Ehrenreich, et al., 1992; Hollenbach, 2019). Modernly, these fan club organizers might run websites like US ARMY (<https://www.usbtsarmy.com/>) that act as a well-established and organized platform but are not officially endorsed by BTS or BigHit. Archivists and translators primarily operate on social media sites like Twitter but might also have official set-ups (<https://www.bangtansubs.com/>). These accounts are not officially endorsed, similar to fan club organizers, yet provide a service to fans such as keeping a record of an idol's social media posts or providing translations for media only released in Korean. These fans are highly valued within the fandom since they provide invaluable resources without any official compensation or recognition. Cover dancers are fans who replicate idol's dances and share their performances on social media (Oh, 2020). These fans showcase their love for their idol by studying and replicating their intricate dance moves while sharing the original group's music.

People who create fan edits, fan artists, and fanfiction writers operate in a similar space as K-pop cover dancers in that they create media to showcase their love for a group or idol. While some fan edits and fan art are meant to just show admiration or appreciation for an idol, there are some creators who operate along the same lines as traditional Star Trek *slash* fan fiction writers (Bacon-Smith, 1992). This includes creating drawings or writing smut fan fiction for popular *ships* or relationship pairings within the fandom like Namgi (Namjoon and Yoongi) or Jikook (Jimin and Jungkook) for BTS. Similar to slash fan fiction, these pairings are often

between two men with little consideration of these idols' actual sexuality. While these fans are not inherently delusional, this subcategory of fans starts to dip into unhealthy territory by placing a sexuality upon an idol without any official knowledge of their actual sexual identity.

While some of these subcultures can be categorized as outright harmful, not all can be easily labeled. Sasaengs and solo stans for example often cross boundaries and break laws to get close to their favorite idol and are generally negatively viewed by K-pop fans as a whole (Iwicka, 2018). So are Koreaboos which can be classified as fans who fetishize Korean culture, confusing the lines between manufactured celebrity and Korean person (J. J. Lee et al., 2020). Solo stans are often closely associated with Sasaengs and are defined as fans who only like one member out of a group, often pitting their favorite idol against everyone else in an aggressive manner. These three subgroups of fans are often ostracized by K-pop fans and toe the line between cringe and criminal. However, delulus, a word for delusional fans, is often thrown around with a hint of irony. No one is harmed by delulu fans, so they are not deemed harmful by the fandom, but they are not seen as “normal” by outgroup members either. The same can be said for fan editors, fan artists, and fan fiction writers. While they are more delusional than a standard K-pop fan, they are harmless to the idols so are rarely ostracized by the fandom as a whole.

Photocard collectors fall into a similar in-between. There are a large number of K-pop fans who buy their favorite artists' albums to just support them with no desire to collect photocards. These fans often put photocards on their walls or in their phone cases to enjoy the pictures of the idols but there is little attention paid to the value of these cards. On the other hand, intense collectors can buy dozens or hundreds of albums with the intent to collect photocards. K-pop fans can also describe themselves as “OT” collectors. OT stands for “one true” and is followed by the number of members in a group (i.e. OT7 in the case of BTS). The

goal of OT5, OT8, OT13, etc. collectors is to communicate they love all members of a group equally, despite potentially being biased towards one. Even the use of “bias” to describe an affinity for a certain member seeks to eliminate potential favoritism or come across as a solo stan. Both casual and intense photocard collectors have widely different perspectives despite existing in the same collecting space. This thesis seeks to understand photocard collectors, both casual and committed because together they drive a large number of K-pop album sales.

K-pop Girlies

K-pop has a thriving fandom because international fans rely on each other for things like translations from Korean and access to exclusive merchandise. This fandom thrives online on sites such as, Weverse, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Fan dedication to K-pop groups is intense and participatory, often viewed as a way to give back to idols who give so much to their fans (Donabedian, 2021). For example, after a new song is released, if fans want the song to be number one, the fandom collectively, sets streaming goals. These goals are organized fan efforts aimed to break records by creating playlists and sharing specific numeric Spotify or YouTube goals on sites like Twitter. Fans will also crowdsource money on Twitter so as many people as possible will purchase the digital single, even if certain fans are unable to spend their own money.

Uniquely, although K-pop idols are meticulously trained, often they have an authentic relationship with fans. The feminine voices of idols and fans shape each other’s identities (Chang, 2020). Modern fangirls are transcending gender and patriarchal expectations making it imperative we study K-pop *girlies* to understand their actions and potential implications. The term fangirl has now been replaced with girlie. In the same way fangirls are not exclusively feminine women, neither are girlies (Baah, 2022). Girlie has become a catchall term for young people who share a passion for something. This can include fandom love like “girlies who love

Yoongi,” though there are also girlies who love doing taxes, girlies who exfoliate, and girlies who have IBS. Although girlie includes the word “girl,” it acts as a gender-neutral word to describe groupings of people who relate to each other. The lack of research about the term girlie and the widespread usage and vague definition, allow this thesis to continue discussions of how girlies exist in popular culture.

While girlies are detached from strict gender roles, it is impossible to ignore the beauty standards that fans fall victim to in K-pop fan spaces. While Korean beauty standards are often imposed onto K-pop idols, fans are not immune. Specifically, “...knowledge and ownership of the fashions, foods, and diets of idols have become intertwined in the performance of K-pop fandom” (T. Tran, 2023, p. 238). This showcases “aesthetic labor” or the practice of showing the work that goes into maintaining expected idol beauty. The curtain of “maybe she’s born with it” does not exist. Idols showcase the work that goes into their music, dancing, beauty, and body; and young fans want to try these methods out for themselves (T. Tran, 2023). While predominantly girls and women make up K-pop fandom, they are not the only population represented. Boys, men, and people who identify beyond the binary are central to K-pop fandom, thus for this thesis the term girlie includes everyone. However, girlie does not seek to erase the gendered differences between fans, nor does it ignore the patriarchal power structures in place.

The Bangtan Boys

The seven-member K-pop boy group BTS or *Bangtan Sonyeondan*¹³ in Korean, which translates to “bulletproof boy scouts,” features members Kim Namjoon, Kim Seokjin, Min Yoongi 🥰, Jung Hoseok, Park Jimin, Kim Taehyung, and Jeon Jungkook who also go by their

¹³ BTS’s Korean name, 방탄소년단, is often Romanized to Bangtan Sonyeondan by international and U.S. ARMY or shortened to just Bangtan.

stage names; RM (formally Rap Monster), Jin, SUGA (known as Agust D for solo projects 😎), J-hope, Jimin, V, and Jungkook respectively. BTS's members not only have designated positions within the group but distinct personality traits that ARMY can recognize and interact with. For example, RM writes songs, raps, and produces songs for BTS but also loves to visit museums, bicycle along the Han River in Seoul, and is generally seen as the gentle buff giant leader of BTS. Each member has a unique positionality within the group. BTS debuted with the small entertainment company, BigHit, on June 13th, 2013 with the song "No More Dream," and have since grown to global stardom becoming the biggest boy band in the world (BTS & Kang, 2023). Specifically, "as the leading figure in the pop industry, BTS has engaged in the power dynamics with the national, regional, and global media industries in multi-faceted and multi-layered ways" (J. O. Kim, 2021, p. 1069). Their popularity has reached such great heights because fans not only fall in love with BTS's music, but the Bangtan Boys themselves. The group has seemingly transcended language and location with their music and supplementary content.

BTS are extremely popular in South Korea, often topping music charts and winning *Daesang*, or grand prize awards. *Daesangs* are comparable to Album of the Year and Artist of the Year awards given out at American award shows but seen as a great honor within South Korean pop culture. However, BTS's global popularity, including topping charts and winning awards abroad, makes them particularly distinctive. Their diverse fanbase, ARMY, religiously streams their new music, watches music videos, and buys physical albums to support every comeback.¹⁴ They often view behind-the-scenes and supplementary content, sometimes even purchasing digital content like BTS's reality shows *Bon Voyage* or *In The Soop*. In addition to purchasing their music and paying to be a member of the official fan club,¹⁵ BTS also sells a

¹⁴ A comeback is the K-pop fandom term for new release or new album cycle.

¹⁵ To be a member of BTS's official fanclub costs an average of 25 USD per year.

wide range of physical items like apparel, plushies, home decor, photobooks, and lightsicks. Fans are willing to pay high global shipping costs, sometimes amounting to hundreds of dollars, to obtain these goods and BTS's growing success means more merch and more money for the group and K-pop industry.

BTS has created a unique relationship between themselves and ARMY. Cruz (2023) described it as, "... if the players on your favorite sports team... were also your favorite musicians and the stars of your favorite reality-TV show and you thought of them as family members" (p. 13). This sort of relationship can be quite overwhelming, but BTS are big fans of ARMY (J. O. Kim, 2021). The candidness with which BTS talks about themselves and their lives has led to a stronger relationship between artist and fan. Specifically, "the critically hopeful message that BTS' music carries, stemming from the members' lived experience, serves to reinforce their authentic image and resonates not only with youth in Korea but across the globe..." (McLaren & Jin, 2020, p. 121-122). Additionally, BTS has literally been shown to improve ARMY's mental health (J. H. Lee et al., 2021). Lee and colleagues (2021) found that listening to BTS's music allowed people to cope, reflect, grow, and even improve behavior and outlook on life. BTS creates songs for all stages of life; happiness, anger, joy, grief, celebration, longing, love, etc. and fans turn to BTS's music when they need it. Perceived authenticity, through music, and fan interaction built ARMY.

When BTS debuted in 2013, BigHit Entertainment was small and independent. However, because of their popularity and global success, BigHit has grown into HYBE Corporation. HYBE now owns many subsidiaries globally and BigHit has since rebranded as BigHit Music. As of 2023, BigHit still manages BTS and TOMORROW X TOGETHER (TXT), another K-pop boy band, operating independently of their parent company HYBE. HYBE also controls the

platform Weverse which serves not only as a social media site where fans and idols can post, but also hosts artists' livestreams, live concerts, digital content, articles, interviews, and press releases. For HYBE groups, Weverse operates as the primary site where fans can purchase fan club memberships, albums, and merchandise. Weverse has become a catch-all for a majority of idol activities and has grown to the point where many artists on the platform are not even part of HYBE. Popular K-pop groups BLACKPINK and G(I)-DLE are under YG Entertainment and Cube Entertainment respectively, but have vibrant Weverse communities. Weverse acts as the bridge between digital content and physical content, selling both to fans.

K-pop Photocard Collecting

While the first K-pop group is widely considered to be the three-member boy band Seo Taiji and Boys who debuted in 1992 (S. Kim, 2018), the first random member K-pop photocards came with the 2010 Girl's Generation album, *Oh!*. It is not surprising that the titan SM Entertainment was the company to spearhead the movement. Since 2010, the community has grown and photocard collecting has become a globalized trend among K-pop fans. Today, photocard buying, trading, and collecting are "rooted in community and fan spirit" (Gloria, 2022, para. 27). Thus, becoming a hallmark of K-pop fandom. Photocard collectors have become such a vibrant community that K-pop companies capitalize on photocard collectors to increase album sales. K-pop companies will often release two to four to 21 versions of the same album. K-pop group SEVENTEEN, often abbreviated SVT, released 21 different physical versions of their 2022 album *Face the Sun* (Weverse, 2023b). There has also been an increase in "platform albums," which are albums that only include a photocard, small inclusions like stickers, and a QR code to download the album (Figure 4). Variations on platform albums are based on companies. SM Entertainment has released one album with multiple photobook versions, member jewel case versions, member SMini versions, and specialty versions such as the

Figure 4

Soyeon *I Feel* Platform Album



Note. Platform albums are simply a QR code linking to an entertainment company’s website or app where fans can listen to or download a digital copy. (G)I-DLE’s *I Feel* platform album itself was a photocard, not only incentivizing the purchase of the album but potentially the desire to directly purchase multiple album copies. From my collection.

“Vending Machine” version for NCT Dream’s ISTJ album (SM Global, 2023). Especially with streaming becoming the primary way to consume music, K-pop companies are finding a way to capitalize on K-pop albums and photocard collectors.

CHAPTER 2 – RESEARCH METHODS

This study explored K-pop girlies through both phenomenological and autoethnographic qualitative approaches to answer three research questions: what is a K-pop girlie, how are K-pop girlie practices shaped by photocard collecting, and how are my K-pop girlie practices shaped by my participation in the BTS ARMY, specifically photocard collecting? Ellis and colleagues (2011) stated, often researchers conduct both interviews and reflective writings to create comprehensive qualitative narratives. Moustakas (1994) furthered, phenomenological studies aim to explore rich descriptions and lived experiences of participants. Specifically, phenomenological studies allow participants to share their lived experiences through their own voices, building foundational understanding (Moustakas, 1994). To understand girlies differently than myself, semi-structured interviews were conducted to discover girlie practices as lived experiences. Phenomenological qualitative research attends to the open-ended and affective nature of fangirling since it captures rich descriptions of personal experience.

Additionally, Zwaan and Duffett (2016) elaborated, “the field of fan studies is based on a holistic methodology that combines autoethnography with interviews and other forms of ethnographic study” (p. 3). Combined with Jenkins’ (2011) introduction of the acafan, an autoethnographic approach is central to this study. Cooper and Lilyea (2022) explained, autoethnography builds on traditional qualitative characteristics like narrative research, ethnography, and research through art but emphasizes personal narrative construction from the researcher’s own life. This autobiographical focus celebrates bias and allows research to dive deep into a phenomenon, sharing comprehensive findings (Ellis et al., 2011). This study

employed both rich descriptions from participants and my understanding of how my personal experience as a girlie has shaped my experience as a BTS ARMY. Utilizing both of these methods contributed to a holistic phenomenological study.

Participants & Recruitment

The participants for this study fit the following requirements to be eligible for participation: (1) between the ages of 13-90 years old,¹⁶ (2) speak English, (3) live in the United States, and (4) self-identify as a K-pop fan or photocard collector. The recruitment messaging for this study mentioned I would be studying K-pop fan practices with an emphasis on photocard collecting, so participants must self-identify as either a K-pop fan, collector, or both.

Recruitment was open to both fans and collectors because photocards are so ingrained into K-pop fan culture that even if someone does not identify as a photocard collector, they likely have lived experiences connected to photocards and the general gift-giving culture present in fandom. The targeted number of participants was dependent on when saturation was reached and when data collection stopped providing new information or insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Eleven interviews were conducted and analyzed for this thesis.

This thesis utilized both purposive and snowball sampling. The initial purposive sample was directed at photocard collectors directly contacted via Instagram or email, in the case of The University of Alabama K-pop club members. The recruitment messages let potential participants know the eligibility requirements, the content of my thesis, and what commitment to participating would entail. After distributing the call for participants by and posting it on both my personal and photocard collecting Instagram, I received an overwhelmingly positive response.

¹⁶ Girlie practices take place between both adults and adolescents, making it vital that persons under the age of 18 are included in this research. Since most photocard selling/trading happens on Instagram, the age requirement follows Instagram's requirement to join the platform, which is 13.

Not only did I get direct messages (DMs) from people who wanted to participate, but also many interested parties wanted to share the call with their friends. DMs included mentions of “I think it’s so cool you’re doing research about PCs. I’d love to participate!! 🎧 ✨” or “omg, I love any opportunity to talk about my collection 😊”. I even had former students of mine asking to post the recruitment message on Tumblr and friends from my undergraduate university sharing it on their Instagram stories. From the day I posted the image, I was receiving constant DMs and emails for weeks. For me, this was a moment that truly demonstrated how much of a community photocard collecting had become for me and how willing K-pop fans were to support each other. I had the privilege of talking to so many K-pop fans and photocard collectors who wanted to see themselves represented in research. Many who were just happy to have an opportunity to talk to someone about their photocard collection. Each interview shaped my own perception of my personal photocard collection and grew my understanding of the K-pop fandom community.


Since fan culture is participatory in nature, talking to people within the fandom lead to overwhelming snowball sampling. My call for participants was shared with K-pop fandoms I am not a part of, growing the sample and exposing me to niches within the photocard collecting space. The goal of this sample was to have as many varying lived experiences as possible; therefore, both of these sampling methods were necessary to broaden the reach. In total there are 11 participants featured in this study (Table 1). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 45, had been listening to K-pop for one to 15 years, buying albums for eight months to 13 years, and collecting photocards for three months to four years. There were 18 different K-pop groups identified as participant’s ults and BTS was listed the most. **Table 1** illustrates the demographic data, the length participants had been listening to K-pop, buying albums, and collecting photocards, and the ult groups and biases of each participant alphabetically by alias.

Table 1

Participants

Alias	Pronouns	Age	Race/ Ethnic Group	Listening to K-pop	Buying Albums	Collecting Photocards	Ult Group(s)	Bias(s)
Archer	they/he	24	White	1.5 yr.	1 yr.	1 yr.	Stray Kids, BTS	Bang Chan
August	she/her	24	Asian	7 yr.	5 yr.	2 yr.	Seventeen, BTS, Enhyphen, Twice, Le Sserafim, New Jeans	Wonwoo
Breezy	she/her	21	White	7 yr.	6 yr.	1.5 yr.	ONEUS, ONEWE, AB6IX, ZB1	Keonhee & Leedo, Donghyun, Gunwook, Kang Daniel
Cornelia	she/her	45	White	1 yr.	1 yr.	3 mo.	ATEEZ, NCT 127	San
Drew	he/him	25	White	4 yr.	3 yr.	3 yr.	Red Velvet, BLACKPINK, Twice	Rose, Yeri, Nayeon
Inez	she/her	30	Hispanic /Latina	12 yr.	3.5 yr.	3 yr.	Monsta X, ATEEZ, SVT, BTS	Joooney, SUGA, Wonwoo, San
Ivy	she/her	27	Black	15 yr.	8 mo.	8 mo.	SHINee, ATEEZ, SVT, NOMAD	Key, Hoshi, Yeosang, Doy
Kinsley	she/her	18	Hispanic /Latina	4 yr.	4 yr.	4 yr.	Stray Kids	Jeongin
Taylor	she/her	28	Hispanic /Latina	5 yr.	3 yr.	3 yr.	BTS	V
Willow	she/her	26	Asian	15 yr.	13 yr.	3 yr.	BTS	SUGA, RM
Winter	she/her	34	White	5 yr.	3.5 yr.	3 yr.	Monsta X, BTS, ATEEZ	Joooney, Jungkook, Yunho

Procedures

After sending me an email or Instagram DM , I sent each potential participant a link to a Qualtrics survey which collected preliminary information, including an email address I used to coordinate an interview time. The Qualtrics form began by asking if a participant was 18 years old or under. If they were under 18 years old, they were prompted to input both their and their parent's or legal guardian's email addresses. I then sent them and their parents a DocuSign to sign the parental consent and child assent Institutional Review Board (IRB) forms. If minor participants only had one parent or legal guardian, one consent form was collected. After I received the signed consent forms, they were able to continue filling out the preliminary survey. If a participant was over 18, they were just prompted to read and sign the IRB consent form in Qualtrics.

After formally consenting to participate in the study, participants were prompted to answer some short questions. The preliminary survey collected individual demographic data (i.e., name, pronouns, and age) and general information (i.e., ult groups,¹⁷ time spent listening to K-pop, and the quantity of their collection) about their favorite K-pop groups (see Appendix A). The goal of this preliminary survey was to ensure that I had the necessary information to conduct a productive interview and was extremely valuable when talking to participants themselves. I was able to fluently talk about the distinct culture behind each fandom, the timeline of songs groups had released, and the biased members of my participants. The end of the survey had an optional prompt asking participants to submit a photo of their favorite photocard or photocards from their collection. I received so many photos of photocards in decorated toppers, filling up binder pages, and spread out on kitchen tables and rugs (Appendix A). Before interviews even

¹⁷ An “ult” refers to an ultimate favorite group or idol. Different from bias or favorite, your ult’s are seen as the top of the top. (e.g. BTS is my ult and Yoongi is my ult bias.) Some girlies have one ult but many have multiple.

began, I noticed this bubbling excitement and anticipation from both my participants and myself. Every time someone new filled out the Qualtrics survey, I could not wait to see what groups they liked, how long they had been collecting photocards, and what cards they shared with me. The in-group nature of K-pop fandom created a bond between the girlies and me before I even met them 💕.

After participants completed the preliminary survey, they were emailed to set up a time to be interviewed over Zoom. Participants could have selected an in-person or Zoom interview but all participants chose Zoom. Data was collected using semi-structured long interviews (see Appendix B). Essentially, these interviews aim to be more like conversations between a participant and a researcher (Moustakas, 1994). The interview guide included informal, interactive, and open-ended questions obtaining rich descriptions, and the semi-structured nature of the conversations allowed for additional probing questions that emerged throughout the conversation (Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 1997). Not all questions were asked to each participant and participants who stanned groups that overlapped with my ult groups, specifically BTS. This study was pilot-tested by one K-pop girlie (Taylor, Interview, 25 March 2023) to identify whether or not the interview guide would be successful in gathering information on girlie practices and collecting. Minor amendments were made to the interview guide present in this thesis. The following depicts the content of the semi-structured interview content.

Fan Practices

The opening question for all participants stood to situate them within the K-pop fandom space (“How did you get introduced to K-pop?”). This question prompted a variety of responses ranging in length and content but functioned well as an escalation into the interview. The rest of the questions investigating fan practices asked how participants demonstrate their love for their

ultimate favorite K-pop group (e.g., “In your own words, how would you describe your fan practices for supporting your ult groups?”) diving into fan practices broadly.

Album Collecting

This section of questions situated a girlie’s fandom experience to their collection, as the purchasing of albums might be thought of as a way to monetarily support K-pop artists. Specifically, this series of questions examined the relation between album purchasing and K-pop group support (e.g., “How important is purchasing albums to supporting an artist or group?”) and how that might differ from streaming (e.g., “How important is streaming albums to supporting an artist or group?”). These questions attended to the experience of K-pop fans who might not consider themselves a collector. Additionally, these questions were the first to address group orders (e.g., “Have you ever joined a group order for an album?”). Group orders (GOs) are instrumental to international fans wanting to purchase albums because of high international shipping costs.¹⁸ Many girlies also collect more items than just albums and photocards however, albums were often the natural gateway from K-pop listening to collecting.

Photocard Collecting

The collection of photocards is both a public and private practice. Not every photocard collector utilizes social media to buy or trade cards. Participants might have photocards and albums in their homes but not display them in public or online. Conversely, some photocard collectors are extremely active, creating dedicated accounts just to share content about their K-pop collection or running GOs and making photocard templates. This section of questions aims to investigate the individual perspectives of all participant’s regardless of public engagement. (e.g., “In your own words, how would you describe your K-pop collection?”). Questions about

¹⁸ Group orders (as discussed on p. 32) refers to when one person will bulk order albums, photocards, or merchandise from outside the U.S. to collectively save money on shipping or obtain limited items.

how cards are interacted with (e.g., “Can you describe how you store and display your photocards?”) and the motivation behind collecting (e.g., “How did you determine which group and member’s cards to collect?”) will also be asked. This section of questions had the most deviation from the interview guide, as the photocards released for each group varies. ATEEZ for example is known for their copious amounts of POB¹⁹ photocards while BTS released solo albums for all seven members. Each fandom has their own collecting habits, release schedule, and customs.

Photocard Trading

Unique from collecting, trading is deeply rooted in fan community and interpersonal interactions. These questions attended to the specifics of photocard collecting (e.g., “Think about the last time you traded photocards. Can you tell me about the process that you follow when trading from initiating the trade to receiving the card?”) and potential conflict that arises from these interpersonal connections (e.g., “Have you ever been scammed out of money or photocards? If so, can you describe that experience?”). Often, the goal of trading photocards is to obtain a specific member or group’s cards without relying on luck. This section investigated the completionist²⁰ nature of collecting too (e.g., “How important is having a complete photocard collection to supporting an artist or group?”). All participants had different goals for their collection. Some were extremely motivated to complete collections while others collected purely based on vibes. This section sought to understand the connection between individual collectors and the collecting community.

¹⁹ Pre order benefits (POBs) are free gifts, commonly photocards, various Asian music stores give out as an incentive to purchase a K-pop album from their store. POBs from Asian music stores come outside of the album. However, because of U.S. laws, American companies are not allowed to offer POBs so, stores like Hello82 or Target offer ‘exclusive photocards’ sealed inside an album with the rest of the inclusions.

²⁰ Some collectors find satisfaction in completing collections (e.g. all Yoongi DVD/Blu-Ray cards or all Jungkook POB’s). Geraghty (2014) found, while many fan collectors are driven by their human desire to complete collections, exhibiting completionist behavior, this is only part of the motivation to collect.

Closing

Each interview ended with the same question investigating the use of girlie (e.g., “In your own words, what is a girlie?”) within fan spaces. This question aimed to understand the affective nature and phenomenon of the photocard collecting community. Participants were then asked if there was anything additional, I did not ask about, but they would like to share with me. Many participants were curious about the research itself and asked me questions about how I got into K-pop, who I collected, and what the goal of my research was. It was so encouraging to interact with girlies who were not only interested in my K-pop research but excited to see photocard collectors represented in academic spaces. This alone made me feel like my research goals were being fulfilled and my participants were active collaborators for this thesis.

Analysis

To understand who K-pop girlies are (RQ1) and how K-pop fan girlie practices are shaped by photocard collecting (RQ2), data analysis included profiling, quality checks, and overall monitoring to turn individual interviews into general findings. Thematic analysis was conducted in three phases as outlined by Sundler et al. (2019).

I first went through each Qualtrics survey response before the interview, specifically pulling who their ult groups and biases are, and how long they had been listening to K-pop, buying albums, and collecting photocards. During the interview, I was memoing and jotting down my girlie thoughts in addition to any additional questions I wanted to ask. This process served as an opportunity to become familiar with the transcripts and conduct initial data analysis for the interviews. After the interview, I cleaned up the auto-transcriptions and made notes for my autoethnographic reflections (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Sundler et al., 2019). Second, I searched for general meaning and themes, describing similarities, and organizing patterns. I analyzed the entire transcripts, trimming the transcripts down to only what is needed, clustering

and theming interviews, and then locating any “invariant constituents” (Moustakas, 1994). I went through each interview and pulled pieces I felt attended to the three research questions. Open coding and early theme development was completed by hand in Google Docs where I was able to visualize all participants’ interviews together and organize initial themes. After this initial data analysis, I sent trustworthy checks to included participants to ensure accuracy. Finally, I organized all emergent themes, described them in my own words, and included quotations from participants for both RQ1 and RQ2. I then ascribe names to these themes and structured them in the form of an E.P., with each theme acting as a track. Sundler et al. (2019) explained, this process centers on reflexivity, meaningful findings, and useful data, demonstrating the rigor and validity of qualitative research.

To explore how my girlieness influenced my participation in the BTS ARMY (RQ3), I wrote about experiences from my own memory and developed self-reflective data throughout the interviewing process. Cooper and Lilyea (2022) argued, it is important to approach both memory data and self-reflective data as something that holds meaning rather than something objective.

Alexander (2021) stated:

For me, doing critical autoethnography is sometimes like capturing a picture of yourself in a glass borderless frame; a picture in which an image of you is represented and there are sightless borders of containment; containments called race, sex, gender, culture, and occasions of human social experience fixed in time and space, floating in a fixed liquidity of memory, giving shape to experience, structuring vision and engagement with the intent for others to see and know you differently as you story the meaningfulness of personal experience in a cultural context. (p. 32)

I subscribed to these same ideas, allowing my personal identity and experience to lead the autoethnographic data analysis. This study did not inherently seek to explore identity, but identity remained tied to fandom participation. As mentioned in my positionality statement, I am a bi-racial girlie who grew up in the midwestern U.S. and who has always loved all things girlie. My identity as an Asian American woman and my life experience of growing up in predominantly white spaces is reflected in my autoethnographic writings. My love of BTS, pride in being part of ARMY, and experience navigating academia as a girlie are framed by my identity and lived experience. Autoethnography aims to share both information and meaning (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). I aim to do the same through this thesis, embarrassing the vulnerability that comes with being a fangirl to showcase the communicative value present in ARMY.

Trustworthy Checks

These trustworthy checks included member checks to serve as an opportunity for me to reach out to participants and share initial findings (Brit et al., 2016). I contacted all 11 participants via email and shared initial findings to check for accuracy. Since the participants for this study are experts in K-pop, allowing them to provide their expert opinion was crucial. Member checking works to establish both credibility and accuracy, especially when studying human experiences (McKim, 2023). These checks evaluated the findings and truly investigated if I reported quotations and interpreted the data accurately. This practice allowed my research practices to be as ethical as possible and helped to reduce additional risk.

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter 3 answers three research questions based on the data collected from qualitative in-depth interviews with participants and autoethnographic data. This chapter summarizes the themes emerging from participant interviews to collectively understand who K-pop girlies are and the impact of photocard collecting, as well as findings from my autoethnographic analysis of how I became a part of the BTS ARMY and how photocard collecting and interviewing participants for this research shaped my own girliness.

Question 1: What is a K-pop girlie?

Girlie, though a widely used slang term, originated in the K-pop fan community. Each of my participants had a unique perspective when asked “What is a girlie?” and “Would you consider yourself a girlie?” all participants connected their answer to K-pop, love for their ult groups, and connection with other K-pop fans, even though K-pop was not directly present in these questions. This RQ takes the form of an E.P. with four tracks which emerged throughout the interview process and all must be present for a girlie to be a girlie: active community engagement, reliance on emotional vibe, strong feminist connection, and radical inclusivity.

Track 1: Active Community Engagement

There is no girlie without the girlies 🙌. Active community engagement is a core tenet of being a girlie and often manifests as outward confidence and emotional intensity within the fandom. Breezy (ONEUS Keonhee and Leedo bias) indicated:

I feel like it’s just someone who appreciates K-pop like, gets excited to talk about it and that kind of thing and, and like just vibes... Regardless of whether you vote or your stream or you collect like everybody is like shows their support in a different way... the

big thing is like being a part of the community... being able to talk about K-pop with other people and um talk about the things that you like and that kind of thing. If you get it, you get it. (Interview, 28 January 2024)

This concept of talking to others, online or in real life, who may or may not be interested in K-pop is a large part of being a girlie because not only is girlie a way to self-identify but also identify with a group. K-pop fans, regardless of gender identity or age, are often looked down on by non-girlies (anti-girlies?) so to combat this external criticism, being a girlie requires an outward confidence. This outward confidence is often preceded by emotional intensity. Taylor (BTS Taehyung bias) explained:

This is a dumpster fire, like a lot of emotions like it's, it's intense... [toxic fans] stand by the people that they said save their lives, which I truly believe. It makes sense that they get combative but like, I much more gravitate towards like, 'I really love them, they're a really fun band, I love listening to their music um because, I think that should be, in and of itself, enough to be considered a girlie. (Interview, 25 March 2023)

One of the best parts of being a girlie is having fun. Constantly worrying about the opinions of anti-girlies does nothing but hamper potential fun. A strong sense of self bolsters a willingness to identify as a girlie. Additionally, even participants who didn't consider themselves a girlie at the beginning of answering the question ended up including themselves in their definitions. Cornelia (Ateez San bias) when asked if she was a girlie detailed:

Oh gosh, um maybe? I have a weird time saying that about myself, cause I'm not young person anymore. So I wouldn't really call myself a girlie, I'd just call myself more of a fan. Um but I guess I am. Ahh, I don't know... I guess it's um a really, really huge fan of a K-pop group or groups that is very involved in the culture and the community, maybe obsessed with it. Which, all those things, I guess I am. So I guess I could consider myself one. (Interview, 30 January 2024)

This emphasis on intensity perhaps seeks to combat the Western media narrative of crazed fans. Girlies are saying that yes, perhaps we are intense, and for good reason. The love shown towards these K-pop idols surpasses the love many Western artists receive in a way that feels

intimidating for anti-girlies. Confidence in your identity as a girlie combats a capitalist need to be both quiet and productive; instead, girlies aim to be loud and fun as a collective.

Track 2: Emotional Vibe

Much of being a girlie and identifying as a girlie is based on vibes. This identification process relies on emotional indicators over physical ones. Collecting, buying, going to concerts, or even streaming pale in comparison to the affective response girlies have when interacting with each other. While vibes might be an abstract and nuanced concept, so is the bond grouping girlies together. Winter (Monsta X Joohoney bias) stated:

I think a girlie is anybody that gets it. I know people say like, the girlies who get it, get it, and the girlies that don't, don't. But I think the girlies get it and they're into like supporting and slash egging each other on. (Interview, 23 January 2024)

By using the commonly used phrase “the girls who get it, get it” and adopting it for the girlies, Winter essentially situates girlie in pre-existing teen-girl culture while highlighting support as a contributor to the label. There is no firm identification for being a girlie, it is just a vibe thing. Additionally, there is a low expectation of any physical indicators, such as spending money or collecting albums and photocards. Ivy (SHINee Key bias) explained:

Oh, yeah, I'm definitely a girlie... Honestly, anybody could be a girlie like if you're just enjoying and like you know, being in it and having fun like you're, you're a girlie... you don't have to get the albums. You don't have to collect photocards. You don't have to do any of that stuff like, I think we hear this a lot from our idols... as long as you care about us and as long as you stay with us like, the other stuff does not matter. (Interview, 23 January 2024)

While all participants for this thesis were photocard collectors, there was a common theme of forgoing collecting in lieu of strong admiration for your ult groups. Collecting is so important to many of the girlies I talked to, but it paled in comparison to the love they have for their ult group's music or digital content. There is no physical indicator required to be a girlie; simply loving K-pop is enough.

Track 3: Feminist Connection

Ignoring the feminine nature of the word *girlie* would do the term a disservice, but *girlies* have transcended beyond girls. *Girlie* was indicated by all participants to be both gender-neutral and self-affirming. Examples from other phrases indicating support, traditionally between women but modernly, expanded to everyone. Inez (Monsta X Jooheon and BTS Yoongi bias) echoed this sentiment:

I feel like a *girlie*, it's like a girl's girl in a sense... I feel like I've used the term as like, oh my god we're gonna get together with all the *girlies* and go to a K-pop concert you know?... Cause it's not like *girly* cause I don't even consider myself *girly*. But I am a *girlie*. (Interview, 28 January 2024)

Inez distinctly separates being *girly*, a phrase commonly used to identify traditionally feminine girls who love stereotypical dresses and pink, from a *girlie*. While *girlie* is inherently feminine, there is a gender-neutral component distinguishing the phrase from previous phrases seeking to connect young women together. Archer (Stray Kids Bang Chan bias) elaborated:

I think a K-pop *girlie* is like, I don't know it's just kind of vibes. Like, it feels a little gender neutral, but it's not like, it in um, in my heart I'm a k-pop *girlie*, gender neutral... a K-pop *girlie* is someone whose personality is K-pop, but not in a bad way. Kind of thing. That's what that, I think that's what that means to me. (Interview, 23 January 2024)

Even though *girlie* is viewed as gender-neutral, the inherent connection to femininity can make it uncomfortable for non-female-identifying K-pop fans to relate to. This feminist connotation for *girlie* also impacts how K-pop idols themselves are viewed. Drew (Blackpink Rose bias) stated:

I think of the *girlie* more as the performer than the fan. So like if I said I'm a K-pop *girlie*, I guess that means I'm a K-pop stan. But like I'd pointed a picture of the idols and be like, look at those K-pop *girlies*... I think it's cool whenever they're just so talented, and they put in so much work that they can really show it in those ways. I guess that's what makes a *girlie*. Like almost similar to an it-girl, or like an ace. (Interview, 16 January 2024)

While both Archer and Drew are not women, their definitions do include themselves but in a less outwardly expressive way than other participants. At times, it can feel like being a girl under capitalism is all about consumption and having pretty things.

Track 4: Radical Inclusivity

While many fandoms have a reputation of gatekeeping entry, girlies are quite the opposite and radically include anyone who wants to be a part of the K-pop scene. There is a low barrier of inclusion, and many participants communicated a welcomeness that permeates the phenomenon. August (Seventeen Wonwoo bias) explained:

I think I definitely would consider myself a girlie... I use it probably every day I'm like talking to my friends. I just kind of, it's kind of like the term bestie. I think it's like an endearing term... even if it is a feminine term it's like, I feel like it's just so comforting... (Interview, 20 January 2024)

August identified, the term girlie is meant to include everyone. Likening the “ie” from girlie to the “ie” in bestie. However, radical inclusion is often preceded by a comparison to others and a desire to distance oneself from the competitive nature that can be present among K-pop fans and potential toxicity. Taylor (BTS Taehyung bias) articulated:

I think there's a lot of animosity, unfortunately, with like kind of like an insider outsider group of like. You can only deserve to be a stan or a girlie if you do x, y, and z and then at the same time, people are like, if you just listened to a song by a K-pop group once like, and you loved them, that's enough support to be considered, you know, part of the fandom part of the group, an ARMY, for example. So that's always kind of playing in my head like, I'm always questioning myself like, do I not own enough albums? Or like am I not making enough of an effort to, to you know what I mean? I think that's always kind of in your head. (Interview, 25 March 2023)

Even though Taylor's definition of girlie is inclusive, there is a presence of anti-girlies persistent in her fan psyche. While purchasing and owning a physical representation of her dedication to BTS is not a criterion identified by girlies, the competitive nature of anti-girlies persists. Winter (Monsta X Jooheon bias) elaborated:

[A girlie is]...just being like open with each other and not feeling competitive. Cause, I can't handle the competitive nature that sometimes gets imbued into K-pop community. I like the people that are just like, go on with your bad self, enjoy it and like to me, that's what a girlie is. And I think I'm part of that group. (Interview, 23 January 2024)

Both participants identify an exclusionary component to fandom itself. While girlie aims to be inclusionary it becomes impossible to interact within the K-pop fan space online and not encounter some sort of toxicity, whether that is fans of different groups fighting with each other or attempting to establish a fan hierarchy of who votes, streams, and buys the most deserving concert tickets more than others. There have also been instances of fans attacking other celebrities, particularly in the West, for being disrespectful to their favorite idols or *sasaeng*'s stalking and endangering the idols themselves. Girlies acknowledge this toxicity and competitive nature but seek to distance themselves from it. Instead, lifting each other up and radically including each other in the fold. Simply, a K-pop girlie is someone who outwardly expresses their love for K-pop with others in an inclusionary, fun, and intense way, with a positive vibe and compassion for others.

Question 2: How are K-pop girlie practices shaped by photocard collecting?

Research question two addresses the heart of this thesis's goals surrounding the culture of photocard collecting. This research question E.P. has five tracks: public love, that's so random, completing the collection, slaying consumerism, and paper boyfriends.

Track 1: Public Love

All of the participants for this research started their photocard collecting journey by listening to K-pop. For many of them, BTS or Blackpink were the gateway groups. Since BTS's first U.S. televised performance at the AMAs, they have only grown in popularity, introducing girlies to the K-pop genre. Blackpink has had a similar introduction to the Western music industry performing on late-night talk shows and even headlining Coachella. After consuming

popular BTS or Blackpink content, ranging from music videos to live performances, many participants started getting recommended other K-pop groups by their YouTube algorithm. When asked how she got into K-pop, August recounted:

Um I would say, it's kind of very basic. I think 2017? When BTS started blowing up um in the U.S. and so I think that's how I got introduced, and then that was like my gateway. So they were my first group and then that door opened up, yeah, down the rabbit hole. ...it was my friend that introduced me to [Seventeen]. They released their most recent um album and, so at that time was *Attacca* and "Rock with you" was that, their new, like their newest title track. And so she sent me the link to the, to the video. And usually, normally, I'm kind of picky cause BTS has been my, I literally didn't really like other groups. I only liked BTS, boy group wise. Um and it was kind of hard for me to get into boy groups at the time because, they were just my ult. I just really love them so much and so, but then like, I don't know, like I really liked the music. I'm also picky too cause I have to really like the music as well, and I fell in love with their um songs. (Interview, 20 January 2024)

Even though August is a Wonwoo bias, she did not start her K-pop journey with Seventeen. One thing potentially lifting BTS to mega stardom is the commitment of fans who were ARMY first, even if their ult groups have now changed. Music is the driving force for the K-pop fandom.

Drew explained:

I remember the date, Natalie. It was May 29th, 2020, of course, right, the beginning of the pandemic for many of us. I, it was the date of *Chromatica*'s release and Spotify was buggy, it was messed up, so I couldn't listen to *Chromatica* on Spotify. I had to go on YouTube and listen to it track by track. Well, it just so happens, the feature on the album is Blackpink and "Sour Candy" blew my freaking mind. I was like, this song goes so hard, I had to listen to it twice. I had to interrupt the album like listening to listen to "Sour Candy" twice. And then when I was done, because it was YouTube, they had all the other recommendations in the side, and so I remember the first video I saw was of the "BOOMBAYAH" debut stage. And I was like, if they can freaking do that and that's their first time ever, they're just crazy. And then I guess it slid down from there like, I saw the "Kill This Love" video um "How You Like That" came out like 3 weeks later. So that was just enough to be like, hey I like this thing. (Interview, 16 January 2024)

Blackpink remains one of Drew's ult groups and further showcases this Western pop girlie (i.e. Charlie XCX, Ariana Grande, Lady Gaga) to K-pop girl group pipeline. Additionally, both August and Drew recount their excitement when discovering their favorite groups, demonstrating

a strong emotional tie between fan and idol group. Therefore, a desire to support a favorite artist often becomes a motivation to purchase K-pop albums, exposing girlies to photocards. Willow (BTS Yoongi and Namjoon bias) explained:

I think for me, like personally, I think [streaming and buying albums] they're equally important. I do like like, I'm thinking about it like I guess, monetarily like how much they actually make from streams and probably buying albums is more of a like financial support for them, right. Um so like I do, I'm also not like a heavy, heavy streamer. Like, I try to stream um like I just like, you know, I put on a playlist like I don't think I've streamed anything as hard since I've streamed for Dynamite and Butter... I remember, streaming for Dynamite, and I was like, I remember having headaches streaming *laughs* so I was just like, I don't think I will ever stream anything as like for everything as hard as that. Maybe when they come back but um, but I like, I think, for me, like I think [streaming and buying albums are] equally important for different reasons. But I do think that album purchases is probably like where I like am able to support more than just, then streaming. Yeah. It feels more tangible to me. (Interview, 13 January 2024)

In an increasingly digital space, there is merit in physical music. The purchasing of albums becomes not only a way to collect but to show love for an ult group. Many multi stans will purchase albums for groups they do not collect the photocards for rather, they do so to support artists. The tie between emotions and collecting is not always necessary but extremely important.

Archer elaborated:

I, um some official, like some of the official like apparel, is a little different. What I really like on official um little chachkies and things, not necessarily the photocards, but... I like the expansive designs that people make um that are both fit the vibe but aren't something that JYP would sell or make. Or not just JYP, but like the companies would make. So I tend to like the unofficial merch a bit more... I, having like a physical thing to be like, I love this group, for me, is one of my favorite parts of liking something in general, because I, if I have a pin or I have a sticker or something like that, and I'm out in public walking around, someone will be like, oh, I like your shirt, oh I like this, and I do the same thing. Um and sure, we're never like we're, it's just in passing and like we're never gonna talk. But just like that little bit of moment of connection is really great, where, if I don't have anything physical to be like, I like this thing that no one would know unless I talk to them about it. So it's just nice to have that like, little connection quickly. (Interview, 23 January 2024)

Archer identified himself as a collector, something that will be elaborated in track 3. A connection between two people who like the same things is a primary effect of collecting

photocards. Girlies love to show love for their ult groups and collecting acts as a vehicle to publicize that devotion.

Track 2: That's So Random

Photocards included inside K-pop albums are often random, building anticipation and motivating girlies to purchase multiple copies or trade photocards with each other. While there may be many random album inclusions such as postcards, posters, or even coasters included inside albums, random member photocards are the most desirable to collect. The randomized nature of pulling a photocard adds a layer of excitement to collecting. Some participants even mentioned being *blessed* or *cursed* by a certain member when pulling inclusions from an album. Jungkook has been my personal photocard curse/blessing. I have pulled his photocard in nearly half of the sealed BTS albums and merchandise I have bought over the years. From POBs to album cards to DVDs, Jungkook always finds his way into my photocard binder (Figure 5). Inez got introduced to the concept of trading cards from social media and direct interactions with others. She explained:

So I was on TikTok, as one is you know, and um I think it was during this time where my TikTok started like really giving me K-pop content. And I think someone came up they're like, 'oh, do you like BTS but like also a multi and don't know like who to talk to or do you want like K-pop friends?' And I'm like, I do want K-pop friends. So they had a discord server. So I joined the server. And I actually, that's like the first person... I met, like K-pop wise. My friend, she lives in Canada, and actually we went to go see PTD LA day one together, like we met and everything... But she was like, I went into the server and I think um I asked a question, and they were like, 'oh, there's a channel for the cards,' because I had a question. I'm like, 'how do you guys like get who you want like, or do you just buy a bunch of albums?' Or is, someone was talking about trading. I'm like, 'oh, you can trade?'... I'm like, ahh I'll think about it. I think I thought about it for like 2 months, and I was like, seems like a lot of work like for a piece of paper. For a piece of paper. 13 binders later, a piece of paper. (Interview, 28 January 2024)

Inez's journey from joining a discord server, to meeting an ARMY friend in person, to having 13 binders full of photocards highlights how important community engagement is to photocard girlies specifically. Drew further recounts his introduction, then, to photocards:

Figure 5

Jungkook *Butter* Version Cream



Note. BTS member Jungkook's photocard from *Butter*, Cream version. One thing that turns my Jungkook curse into a blessing is how popular he is to collect. I am often able to quickly find a trade for my Jungkook pulls or, if I am trying to complete an OT7 set, I do not have to overpay for his card in the future. From my collection.

I usually get like 3 or 4 [albums] at a time, so I turn it into a whole little event. I just like sit at my desk, opening them one by one. Um there is this the fear. There's partially the fear of like, am I going to break something? I think when I opened my season's greetings from Rose like, there was one thing that was packaged strangely and I thought I had torn it. I didn't thankfully, but that's one fear. And then the other fear is, that you just said, like am I getting the card that I, I want, and it's doubled down because you don't know where the card actually is. Sometimes they give you a book and then it falls out of the book. Sometimes it's sitting nicely on top of the book. Sometimes it's like in its own little container. So I guess it's a little hunt and search game of what am I supposed to get and where the heck is that thing. (Interview, 16 January 2024)

Album photocards are the most widely collected. While many participants highlighted collecting non-album cards (i.e. season's greetings, POBs, apparel) album cards are inevitable in photocard collections. Since artist support directly connects to album purchasing which in turn connects to photocard collecting, album cards are the easiest to purchase, trade, and collect.

Additionally, it becomes impossible to ignore the fact that Korean entertainment companies are capitalizing on photocard collectors, specifically by releasing many variants of the same album or a plethora of POBs. Ivy detailed:

I think it's the unknown nature of it, right. ...it's like, oh well you know, like um these stickers are always gonna be in this album. But is this Yeosang PC gonna be in this album? Is this Seonghwa PC gonna be in this album? Is this Minho PC is gonna be in this album? You know what I mean? So I think that's the aspect that draws a lot of people... (Interview, 21 January 2024)

In her interview, Ivy compared the randomized nature of photocards to loot bags gacha games (i.e. Fifa or Genshin Impact). While this randomized nature has shaped photocard trading, not all effects of random photocard inclusions are positive. Kinsley recounted an instance where, due to a lack of experience hosting GOs and navigating random POBs, she lost a lot of money because of photocards. Kinsley explained:

Actually, in ODDINARY era, there was a Barnes & Noble exclusive that came out and um I figured, I want the Barnes & Noble card. I don't want to wait for it to get to me. And also, the Barnes & Noble cards is kind of expensive. So I figured, I'll host my own group order! Mhh *laughs* that one did not go well um, pretty much the Barnes & Noble uh pre-order benefits were expensive, because the album from Barnes & Noble, for some

reason, was over \$30... and I ended up saying like, 'oh, that photo card, \$13.' When the album was 30, like over 30. And so anyways, so it got to me and the Barnes & Noble um group orders. The thing that I didn't um account for was when you buy from a store in Korea the pre-order benefits come outside the album. So like the album's, will be all sealed up and nice, and then the photo cards will be just like separately sealed off by themselves. I thought, that's how the Barnes & Noble ones would come... um but in Barnes & Noble, it's random. So, I actually only ended up getting one I.N card that entire time. I only pulled one I.N card. And because I was really nice, at first I was like, oh like you know, I would be, it would be mean of me if I kept it to myself like, let me give it to my group order joiner cause, there's one other person who claimed I.N and so I was like, well, you can have it. And then, a few days later I was like, I just made the biggest mistake of my life. Now I'm like \$200 in debt and also, I didn't even get the card that I wanted. (Interview, 13 January 2024)

While Kinsley has since recouped her money and now has a much more complex system to prevent losing money by hosing GOs, her story is not uncommon. Photocard collecting was a unique way for the K-pop industry, specifically in South Korea, of getting fans to purchase a lot of albums or merchandise but as Western stores started to include "exclusive" cards inside albums, the line between POB and store exclusive becomes blurred. Photocards (POBs, store exclusives, and lucky draws) are seen as a marketing technique, often negatively impacting young collectors. The randomized nature of photocards shapes the community and adds additional excitement to purchasing albums or motivation to join sorted group orders. However, there can be detrimental effects simply because photocards can be seen by companies as a commodity and new fans are kept out of the loop.

Track 3: Completing the Collection

While photocard collecting can be casual or extreme, each collector defined complete differently. For some, a complete collection meant owning all albums from one group. For others, it was collecting every album photocard for their bias. However, most of the time, complete collection centered around photocards and simply owning all of the photocards they wanted marked a collection complete. While some fans do care heavily about albums, see track 1, there are some fans who prioritize photocards over albums. Cornelia detailed:

Um, the albums I don't really have a need for cause I don't, I don't need the physical disc, and the books are nice to look at but like... I, I guess around the same time, maybe what got me more into collecting the photocards is I met um, starting meeting people locally who are into K-pop, um and some that were more my age, and they were all collecting photocards and... the photocard collecting is like a big part of the social group um, and so it was just kind of a, it's just kind of evolved into that. And now I'm like obsessed *laughs* and I actually have money like... I have probably more photocards and better photocards than the most people in the group because they're, most of them, younger than me and they don't have much money. I'm married, I have money, I have a job, I make money, so like I, I spend a lot of it [on K-pop]. (Interview, 30 January 2024)

The concept of completing a collection often depends on who girlies connect with, who they can share a collection with, and also what their ability is to pay for and collect cards. However, not all fans prioritize photocards when thinking about their K-pop collection. Ivy explained:

It's not super important to buy the albums, because not everybody has the ability to buy the albums, but um with like YouTube um and then, like Spotify it's more accessible for people to just stream it, and you know, talk about it on Twitter, talk about on Reddit. Whatever you wanna do. Um for me personally um I like having the physical copies, too, like um it's kinda cool, especially like how CDs are still like very much so produced um and that like form of like having music has not gone away yet. I think it's super important to like preserve that as well. Um Especially since I came from an era where, like, you know, having Cds walking around with your CD player like um was something that the cool kids did. So yeah, definitely, I definitely I definitely think that probably just interacting with the with the music is probably the best thing that you can do and the most important thing that you can do. (Interview, 21 January 2024)

While completing a collection might be personally important, a connection to the music comes to the forefront. Ivy furthered:

I have like a very possessive type of personality. Um so like what I collect is what I want to keep for the most part. So unless I have a duplicate, it's not going anywhere. Like, if I pulled it from my album, guess what it's staying for me like um because I'm OT, you know. OT5 for SHINee, OT8 for ATEEZ, um OT13 for SEVENTEEN like, um I don't like to give up the photocards that I get. Um even in spite of my bias, right? Like, if I want to collect more of my bias I'll just go to Pokamarket and get more of my bias. You know what I mean? Um so yeah only, only if I have um only if I have duplicates like, I have like 3 ATEEZ duplicates right now, like I'm willing to, hey do you have a Yeosang PC, that you're willing to part ways with? Like, go ahead, hit me up... (Interview, 21 January 2024)

Collections are important to collectors and completing a collection can be fun and exciting.

Winter explained:

There's nothing stressful to me about like Monsta X. It's just all like good vibes for me. Um, like my BTS collection gives me stress in like, cause I remember like some of the stress that I felt when I was collecting them like hardcore. So I don't often flip through my BTS binders. And I sometimes feel like sad about that that I have this like binder that I'm like, not you, you know? Like I have those feelings or whatever, but in general, like most of my collections, I flip through, and I'm just like, Oh, I love this... (Interview, 23 January 2024)

Monsta X is an extremely successful group with a vibrant collecting community, but their cards remain easy to trade and affordable to purchase. However, not all groups have this same collecting ideology. BTS, for example, has a vibrant collecting community, but because they are so popular and their *maknae* line is habitually overpriced, completing a collection can often be unobtainable.²¹ Inez detailed:

I hate that I'm a completionist. Like, I have like when I was looking, I was like stuff that I have that I like, I didn't get to finish like I couldn't finish. I didn't get to finish Yoongi's whole *D-Day* um, the whole album stuff. Or like even just like, I was dead set on getting all the cards, like everything. I just couldn't keep up. He then kept releasing stuff. I'm like here's a purse with a photocard, here's a jacket with a photocard here, I'm like. Why are you doing this to me!? And I'm like, I can't. I can't keep up. I couldn't. (Interview, 28 January 2024)

While Inez is a Monsta X ult, she is also a BTS ult who biases Yoongi. After the release of *D-Day*, so many Yoongi stans were excited to collect the cards for his first official solo album. As of February 2024, there are over 60 photocards in association with the album or the corresponding D-Day tour, making collecting all the cards overwhelming and, in some cases, completely unobtainable. Numerous participants identified themselves as collectors of many

²¹ Maknae or 막내 directly translates to “youngest person” and is often romanized by international fans. The maknae line in BTS is Jungkook, Taehyung, and Jimin. Not every group's maknae line photocards are overpriced but in BTS, these are the three most collected members and therefore, their cards are often priced higher than other members by resellers or people who partake in “member pricing.” Member pricers vary the price of photocards based on idol's popularity and this behavior is frowned upon by photocard girlies.

things or completionists. Photocards act as a vehicle for a physical representation of your fandom, and also tap into a human desire to collect things. Having a complete collection can be fun and exciting but quickly become a massive undertaking.

Track 4: Slaying Consumerism

The monetary nature of photocards is inevitable when living in a late-stage capitalistic society. Do we really need to talk about capitalism? Yes 😞. It was disheartening to see so many fans burdened by monetary restrictions or feel as if they were less than because of the size of their photocard collection. Ivy explained:

[Sometimes] you have somebody who likes a group but, like, you know, they can't really afford to like, spend all the money that it takes for buying albums, especially with like some of these areas, the shipping is absolutely just insane... (Interview, 23 January 2024)

Many POB, lucky draw, or venue exclusive photocards are released for Korean K-pop fans, exacerbating strain on international collectors. There is something to the fact that sometimes it is just inaccessible to show your love in the form of collecting. Taylor described her connection with collecting both official and unofficial merch. She expounds:

I remember my little cou, my little cousin has like bounced from [BTS] member to member. She stans every member I think, every 2 years is her thing. She's like, okay, I'm switching members. She wants to just be so kind to each of them. Right now she's a Jungkook stan, but... she was a Taehyung fan at the time, but for Christmas I bought her like this giant collection of photo cards, and like trinkets and and things like that, and so they weren't considered like official, you know, like they didn't come well, official in the sense of like they didn't come from an album, or they didn't come, you know, directly from photocard sellers. People just made them like on Etsy, and I think those are just as official, if not better. I think they're stunning. I think they're also like much more affordable for people that really just love [BTS]... I, I would say that a lot of my restrictions with photocards is just because I don't have the money. (Interview, 25 March 2023)

Capitalism plays a role in photocard collecting and often companies take notice. Ivy furthered:

I can go on and on about the Target and Walmart and Hello82 and Everline like, all of these like, other companies that you know, prioritize like you know, FOMO²² basically, fear of missing out like, if I can't get this photocard then like, oh my god, what am I gonna do you, know what I mean? ...I think that's what draws pretty much everybody. (Interview, 21 January 2024)

Releasing a copious amount of photocards while understanding not only the financial burden this creates but also a toxic FOMO culture is especially predatory to young fans. ATEEZ specifically is known to release tons of POBs with each album release (Figure 6). While ATEEZ members have communicated to fans, "you don't need to buy them," their company knows: fans will. This constant releasing of photocards may not exclusively be a bad thing. Track 1 mentioned the importance of showing love and some ways fans do that is by giving into our society's capitalist structure. However, they do not do so passively and in some cases, even streaming becomes an all-consuming task. Winter explained:

I take streaming really seriously when they come out with new albums. Like, I'm streaming like on different music platforms, I'm streaming their music videos, I'm like logging into multiple accounts, I'm, I do that um like um like know what it's called but it's like where we create like radio stations so people can like tune in, and then it like links to their accounts so that you're replaying the song.²³ Like I do a lot of streaming for Monsta X like a lot. Like I really, and I keep tabs on like where their view count is on their music videos and stuff like that. I look up their record sales and I see where they're at. So I would say that I, I feel like I do a lot to like help them with streaming. Help them, I mean, they have lots of fans like it's not like they need one person, but altogether, right? We're all there um, which is like funny, because, like, I know that, like a lot of K-pop is like about chart manipulation by fans doing such things like that and buying extra albums and all that sort of stuff. Also, like, I buy a lot of Monsta X albums I like join a lot of group orders to help other people like with fancalls too and stuff like that. So like, I spend a lot of money on them. I guess that's another way. I don't know if it's like me, necessarily like showing my love for them. I think the streaming aspect is like, me showing my love for them and then um a symptom of my love is that I spent a lot of money on them. (Interview, 23 January 2024)

Every participant identified that their ult's music comes first and everything else is secondary.

²² FOMO is an acronym for "fear of missing out."

²³ This service is called Stationhead. Some idols even host their own Stationhead streams where they play their music and add commentary.

Figure 6

Yunho *The World Ep. Fin: Will* Target Pre Order Benefit



Note. ATEEZ is well known for their copious amounts of POB photocards. This set featured the members holding photocards of themselves, a sort of photocard inception, further proving that companies know fans love photocards. The more photocards released, the more girlies will buy. From my collection.

Girlies slay consumerism not in the sense that they defeat it, but rather that they acknowledge the necessary evil of potential overconsumption when curating a collection of memorabilia. Breezy detailed:

Oh, my God! It took me, it took me like well um, almost a year to sell the ONEUS albums I had. So when I did their fansign, it was when I was in Korea, I got like the digi-packs, which are a lot smaller, a lot easier to manage, uh and also less expensive. So I did that intentionally. But I got 50 cause I wanted to like, I wanted to make sure that I was there. Um and then I only kept like one for each member... and I think I ended up, anyway, I still had like 44 copies left, or something like that. Um, and I didn't wanna throw them away like I uh wrote a paper when I was at Yonsei about like how wasteful collecting is for the environment a lot of the times, um because I saw firsthand like people at the dorms at Yonsei, would buy like a shit ton of albums, and then take all of the photocards, and then just leave like the albums, with no inclusions, just like the photobook and CD, on the table um like in the lobby, and there would be hundreds, and they would just sit there for like weeks at a time, because nobody wanted them if they didn't have inclusions... So, it was very important for me to not be one of those people uh so I brought them with me back to the U.S.... I didn't actually get rid of them until I saw ONEUS in concert, and I walked down the line, and I was like, I am selling these albums. Please buy them from me. They are \$5. (Interview, 28 January 2024)

The consumerist culture around photocard collecting heavily influences how fans navigate their purchasing habits. Talking about collecting, even within fandom, becomes nearly impossible without first acknowledging the extreme consumerism connected to the practice. Girlies love their ult groups and their photocards, yet ignoring the potential harm collecting can do goes against what being a girlie is all about. Girlie practices center around showing love for both K-pop and fellow fans; the girlies I talked to were excited to share their passions while quick to point out potential dangers of the enterprise. Photocard collecting exists under the capitalist structure and to be a photocard girlie requires both excitement and pride around a collection paired with an acknowledgement and owning of consumerism.

Track 5: Paper Boyfriends

While girlies who have an ult group always love all the members, collecting every card for a group that has seven, 13, or even 26 members is often an unobtainable task both logistically

and financially. The concept of paper boyfriends acknowledges the emotions of collecting and the motivation to just collect your bias or bias line. August detailed:

I think [photocards], it's kind of just like a cute little um human thing. They just like to have like *laughs* like, if like, it's kind of more personal. Like a selfie of your favorite member. And you know, like you can just um put in like a holder, and you can carry around, you can look at it. I think it's just um, I don't know. I, I think it's just because it's like a picture, like a selfie of your member that they probably took, and which is um weird because, like postcards, sometimes they're like that. But it's not the same as photocards. So I really don't know. (Interview, 20 January 2024)

Photocards are cute and fun! At the heart, that is what draws people to them. The compact nature of photocards also contributes to the phenomenon. Cornelia explained:

I mean, I'm, I'm an adult. I'm a 45-year-old woman with a husband and kids so like, I don't put posters on my walls, you know. If I was a teenager, yes, I would have my walls plastered with stuff, and I would buy that kind of stuff now but I, I don't do that. Um not really interested in that. I'm just collecting my little boy papers in a binder and nobody has to see it. (Interview, 30 January 2024)

Photocards are a potentially discreet way to be absolutely delusional and extreme with fandom. Posters were formerly a staple of teenybopper culture because for young girls, dating in real life comes with significant risks and societal expectations but “the fantasy boys of pop make no such demands. They ‘love’ their fans without asking anything in return” (McRobbie & Garber, 1991, p. 112). The culture of kissing of pop idol posters represented in McRobbie and Garber's (1991) research has seemingly relocated to photocard collecting culture. While I did not come across any gurlies who physically kissed their photocards, the emotional intensity tied to these pieces of paper is persistent. Winter explained “I collect everything I can get my hands on for Joohoney like, everything” (Interview, 23 January 2024). There is a special affinity many collectors and K-pop has for their bias that curates a unique relationship. Winter detailed:

...I think, cause some people get very possessive over their ults and their biases, and they're like, how do you have a, how do you have a fancall with my boyfriend? That's weird? Oh, he's your boyfriend? That's weird because he's my husband! I'm like, it's just all of it's like really funny. Um, and sometimes I think like I'm a little bit of like an

outlier with a lot of it, cause I'm like a, an older collector, and I think I just see things like a little bit different in that way. But I still am like, I'm here, too. (Interview, 23 January 2024)

This concept of calling a K-pop idol your boyfriend or husband is a playful way for girlies to relate to each other. While photocard collectors know that the objects of their affinity are not their actual boyfriends or husbands, there is fun to be had in being a little delusional. Leaning into the delulu nature of being an intense K-pop fan further builds community and strengthens the emotional connection between girlies and their photocards. However, this affinity for K-pop idols does not only exist as a delusion. Winter continued:

I love like so much about [Monsta X] as like entertainers. Like the music, the dancing, like the content that's great, the variety show content, like self um produced content, them as like guest hosts and stuff like that. Like I, I just love them so much. I have this like intense like love for them... But I think like for my ult, I have this like, it's like a safe space. I, I think of it often of like, like, I carry a photocard of Joohoney with me everywhere I go. Like, I always have one, either, like on a photocard holder, like on my bag. But normally it's like inside my bag. I just like keep it with me... So I've been in meetings where I'm like, either bored or a little stressed and I'll like look at Joohoney and I'm like *sigh* I'm okay. And I know people joke about the like emotional support photocard. I'm like, that is a real thing. That's for real. I like definitely feel that. It's like a feeling of like things are okay. Things are like at ease because of like when I look at them. (Interview, 23 January 2024)

Girlie practices are shaped by photocard collecting and integrated with the practice. The idea of these paper boyfriends highlights how photocard collecting is both a private and public practice. Girlies might store their albums and photocard binders in their bedrooms, but display photocards in holders on their purses in public spaces, often as a signal to other fans. Sometimes the world can feel so fast and overwhelming, especially for girlies. Photocards give girlies room to have fun, connect with each other, and celebrate their girliness. While some photocard collectors, myself included, are totally delusional and tell people that their photocards are pictures of their husband, that is not necessarily a prerequisite. However, all photocard collectors find something

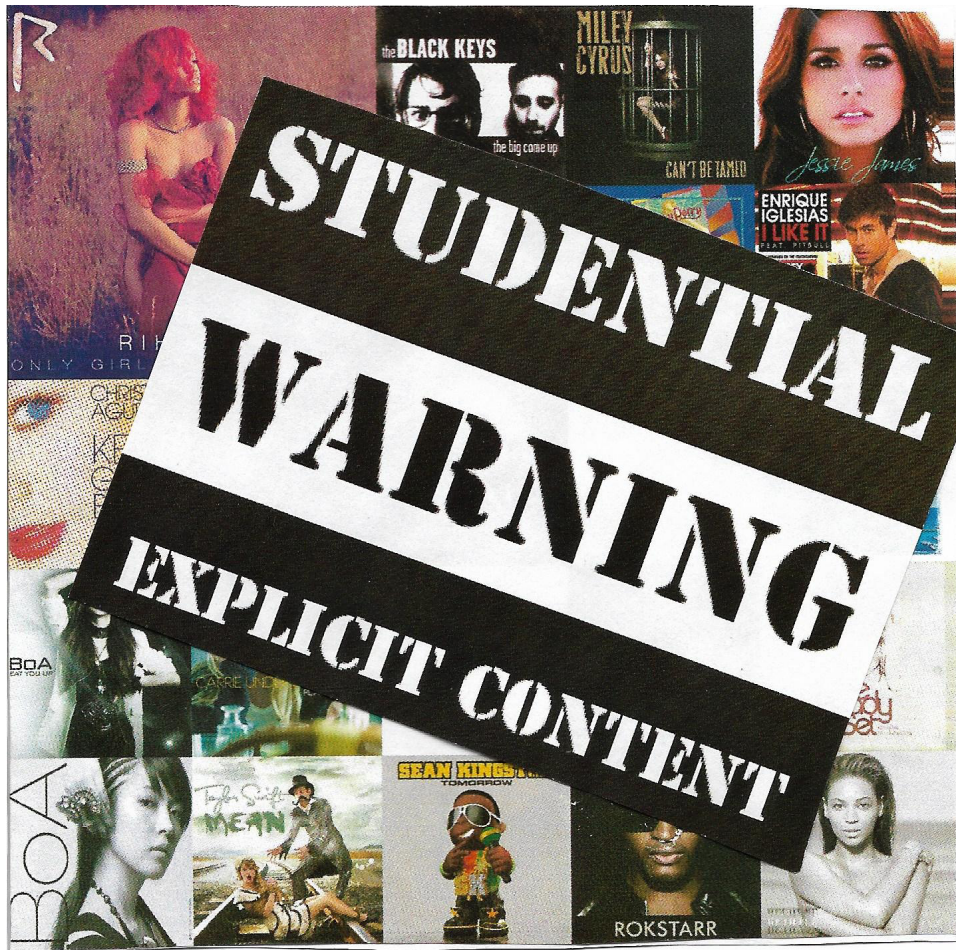
appealing about the cards themselves, the little paper boyfriends, that not only brings them joy but comfort and safety they can carry with them.

Question 3: How are my K-pop girly practices shaped by my participation in the BTS ARMY, specifically photocard collecting?

Research question three attended to my personal experience with K-pop and I sought out this answer by journaling after interviews with fellow ARMY, answering questions from my own interview guide, and spending time with other's critiques of K-pop fan spaces. I started each interview with the same question, "How did you get introduced to K-pop?" and while answers varied, an overwhelming amount of participants cited BTS as their gateway. Personally, for most of my life I listened to nothing other than Christian music and some Disney hits under my parent's watchful eye 🙄. Once I went to middle school and started wanting to fit in, my best friend at the time would make mix CDs in iTunes for me (Figure 8). These mix CDs often included the top 40 hits of 2008 but also a variety of K-pop. Songs like "Eat You Up" by BoA, "Oh!" and "Gee" by Girl's Generation, and "Lucifer" by SHINee kickstarted me into the genre of K-pop. I was drawn to the fast paced and campy sounds that defined 2010s second-gen K-pop. Black Queen's dance cover of "Boom Boom Pow" by the Black Eyed Peas lived rent free in my head for years. Even then, to me, K-pop was not just a music genre defined by eclectic sounds, but by flashy choreography and highly trained performers. As time went on, songs like "Bubble Pop" by HyunA, "Mr. Simple" by Super Junior, "Lipstick" by Orange Caramel, and "너 때문에 미쳐 [You Drive Me Crazy]" by T-ARA were all downloaded to my silver iPod Nano and listened to for years. As friend groups and trends changed, my mini K-pop era faded until BTS found their way to me in 2020. Ironically, I stopped listening to K-pop just a few months before BTS debuted ❤️. This E.P. of my journey with BTS has four tracks: "Save ME," "I'm Fine," "HOME," and "Telepathy."

Figure 7

Cover of Handmade Mix CD *Studential Warning*



Note. The scanned cover of a mix tape a friend made me around 2010 featuring a myriad of pop songs and artists I had never been exposed to, including K-pop icon BoA, who's album covers can be seen in the lower left corner. From my collection.

Track 1: “Save ME”

“Save ME” is my favorite BTS song and one that was introduced to me early into my ARMY journey. Released in 2016 on the repackage and final album in BTS’s “The Most Beautiful Moment in Life” series titled *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life: Young Forever*. “Save ME” is one of the group’s more EDM sounding songs with an electrifying dance break in the middle of the song. The music video features the seven boys dancing on the beach on a rainy day. Although simple, their complex choreography and ✨stunning✨ visuals make the music video memorable and iconic, garnering over 734 million views on YouTube as of February 2024. I even got to see this song performed live at my PTD LA show (with the dance break and everything 🥹) and HYBE released an HD recording with the *BTS Permission to Dance On Stage in the US* digital code.²⁴ The pre-chorus, however, remains the part of the song I love the most, simply stating:

내 심장소릴 들어봐, 제멋대로 널 부르잖아
이 까만 어둠 속에서 너는 이렇게 빛나니까
그 손을 내밀어줘, save me, save me
I need your love before I fall, fall (BTS, 2016, 0:41)

The lyrics translate to, “listen to my heart beat. It’s calling you at its own will. In this black darkness, you are shining so bright. Give me your hands, save me, save me. I need your love before I fall, fall” (Hybe Labels, 2016, 0:49). This song has remained a constant in my participation in ARMY, not only in moments I need to be uplifted, but moments to celebrate too.

A common phrase used among ARMY, and even mentioned by some of my participants, is “BTS finds you when you need them.” Which could not be more true. In 2020, I was re-

²⁴ Los Angeles night 1 and Las Vegas night 4 were the dates to be selected for the digital code. At the concert I told my bestie, I had a feeling they would choose our night to put on the DVD and even though HYBE has transitioned away from DVDs and Blu-Rays to digital codes, I am so happy to be cemented on a piece of BTS content forever.

introduced to K-pop by my bestie who, in just over a year, would be traveling across the country with me to see BTS in person. 2020 was a disaster for just about everyone as a global pandemic reshaped the world in ways we are still feeling four years later. In August of 2020 I was moving to Michigan for an opportunity at a different Communication department and by September, I was moving back home. Ravished by exclusively online graduate school, an unsupportive boss, and an abusive ex-girlfriend, I hit a bottom that I did not know if I could ever rise out of. Enter, BTS 💜. My best friend sent me their music video for “Dynamite” and everything spiraled from there. I was immediately enamored by the seven Bangtan Boys and watched every music video, concert recording, variety show appearance, and Run! BTS episode. When an ARMY says that BTS saved their life, it is not an exaggeration. At least, it was not for me. They gave me something to look forward to, music that encouraged me, and a community to be a part of. I attended intense therapy three times a week for a year in the months following my September from hell but at my core, I know BTS saved my life.

Track 2: “I’m Fine”

“I’m Fine” is the sister song to “Save ME” and samples the electronic into. “I’m Fine” layers a multitude of instrumentals over the “Save ME” sample before breaking into a more upbeat hip-hop style verse rapped by RM. The chorus proclaims:

I’m feeling just fine, fine, fine
이젠 너의 손을 놓을게
I know I’m all mine, mine, mine
Cuz I’m just fine (BTS, 2018a, 1:13)

The translation, of “이젠 너의 손을 놓을게 [I’ll let go of your hand now]” directly mirrors the lyrics to “Save Me” (BTS, 2018b). BTS is not suggesting they are leaving ARMY by letting go of their hand but rather implying that ARMY helped them to overcome tough times and there is

only happiness ahead. “I’m Fine” was released on the repackage and final album for the “Love Yourself” series *Love Yourself: Answer* in 2018.

In December of 2020, my dad bought me BTS’s *BE* deluxe album for Christmas which comes with a set of seven concept photocards (Figure 8). Just a few short weeks later, I was at Target myself picking up *Love Yourself: Answer*, pulling Yoongi’s random photocard, and I felt a moment of fate. I went on YouTube looking for a way to store or display my photocards when I stumbled across photocard storing videos from YouTuber “shawolzenl.” Shawolzenl, or Katie, has over 288,000 subscribers and has posted 50 “storying new photocards in my binders” videos as of February 2024. Katie’s channel exposed me to the concept of sleeving photocards cards and storing them in binders. She also re-introduced me to K-pop groups I had once loved and introduced me to new groups who had assumedly debuted after 2013. I started sleeving my cards, storing them in binders, buying more albums and loose photocards, and essentially established my current photocard collection. Many participants identified that social media, like TikTok or YouTube, is what introduced them to the concept of collecting photocards. This taps into the girlie requirement of active community engagement. While this engagement can be in person or one on one with friends, fan produced content about photocards curates girlie connections. I would not have the photocard collection, or the joy that my collection brings me, without Katie’s YouTube and the permission from other girlies to be a little extreme about my favorite K-pop group 🥹.

Track 3: “HOME”

“HOME” was released on BTS’s sixth E.P. *Map of the Soul: Persona* in 2019 and starts out with RM proclaiming “I’m exhausted, man. Oh, guess what? I just wanna go home” (BTS, 2019, 0:04). “HOME” has both a calmer production than our previous tracks and message simply

Figure 8

SUGA *BE* Deluxe



Note. Instead of coming with a random member photocard, BTS's *BE* deluxe album included a set of eight photocards, one of each member and a group. The back of the photocard has *BE* written by the member themselves. From my collection.

stating, wherever ARMY is, that is BTS's home. My favorite performance of "HOME" was during BTS week on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon. For all five of the Fallon performances, BTS brought out all the stops including performing on roller skates, in an overgrown cathedral set, and at Gyeongbok Palace. The set for "HOME" however was simpler and understated with a set decorated to look like a house and a slow-moving rotating room that tumbled the BTS members like socks in a dryer. This performance captured the vibe of "HOME" featuring BTS being playful with each other throughout the song while singing about how ARMY is everything to them in a way that has grown to become domestic and a part of their daily lives.

Throughout the interview process, many participants indicated they also began their journey with BTS either in 2020 with "Dynamite," 2019 with "Boy with Luv" featuring Halsey, or in 2017 with "DNA." As BTS built their presence in the Western music industry, they were collecting fans and lifting them up. I had interacted with other ARMY both in person at the PTD LA concert and online as I have traded and sold photocards. I had the privilege of speaking with three of my closest K-pop friends for this research and we were able to reminisce about the time we went to the BTS concert or traded our first cards or when I joined their first group order. Loving K-pop has become a staple in my life because interacting with my girlies feels so natural to me. I feel accepted and celebrated not in spite of the fact that I love BTS but because we all love BTS together.

In November of 2021, I received my first Buyee shipment of photocards and I called my co-worker from my shitty job and we just opened the package together on FaceTime. He knew nothing about K-pop or BTS but we were able to share a moment of joy together in the midst of insurmountable hardship. Photocard collecting provides a medium for girlies to connect on a

deep level because their connection to their photocards is profound. While photocards are physical items that exist in a set space, my photocard collection feels temporal in that I have my life before and after photocards. When my participants identified their collections as a safe space, I felt so strongly for them because I have had so many moments in my life where emotional safety felt like an impossible ask. My photocard collection, specifically my Yoongi cards, provide a method for me to safely talk about being a girlie, for me to be unapologetically myself. Loving BTS feels like coming home.

Track 4: “Telepathy”

I had to end our journey through RQ3 with a song written by the love of my life, Yoongi. His verse in “잠시 [Telepathy]” goes:

별일은 없지 (없지)
예, 아픈 곳은 없겠지
난 요즘에 글썸 (글썸)
음, 붕 떠 버린 것 같아
예, 많은 시간 덕에, 예 (덕에)
예, 이런 노렐 쓰네 (쓰네)
예, 이걸 너를 위한 노래 (노래)
예, 노래 (노래), 예, 노래, ayy (BTS, 2020b, 0:36)

“Telepathy” was released on BTS’s 2020 pandemic album titled *BE*. The album also featured songs “Dynamite” and “Life Goes On,” which topped the Billboard Hot 100, but the B-sides of *BE* highlight BTS’s pandemic life in a way only the members could write themselves. Yoongi sings lyrics checking in with ARMY about how they have been and how he loves having free time to write songs for “you [ARMY].” Except, Yoongi is also struggling with his personal anxiety around not having a packed schedule, a similar experience to many others during the pandemic. His verse translates:

Everything’s fine, right? You’re doing well, right?
I feel like I’m, well, floating on air these days

Thanks to having so much time
With this much time I'm writing a song like this
This is a song for you, yeah, song, yeah, song (BTS, 2020c, 0:36)

I have often talked about my love for the BTS boys in the context of parasocial relationships. For example, I often refer to Yoongi as my husband or Jungkook as my nemesis. However, the strongest relationship I feel for the Bangtan Boys is my love for them as a fan, a member of ARMY. From watching *Run! BTS* episodes, to seeing them in concert, I feel so grateful that I get to be an ARMY and bear witness to their overwhelming success. BTS serves as a reminder to me of how hard work can pay off, how important friendship is, and how the effects of gratitude can ripple across the world. While I have collected many paper boyfriends throughout the years, BTS is more than just a boy band I can throw my love at. Being an ARMY has given me a sense of pride. Therefore, I feel no shame or judgment when talking about my hobbies and things I love. I will always talk about BTS to anyone who will listen. There are so many nuances to being an ARMY, more than I can put into words here, but if I could pick one it would be comfort.

BTS found me when I had nothing in life to look forward to. I was living at home with my parents, navigating virtual school and forensics coaching, paying for an empty apartment in Michigan, and healing from physical and mental scars left by the hands of an ex-girlfriend. I needed a lifeline. That lifeline came in the form of a BTS music video, *Run! BTS* episodes, a *Love Yourself: Answer* CD, a performance at the Grammys, a J-hope lucky draw photocard, and a night at SoFi Stadium. All of these experiences together make up my ARMYness. I take up space in the fandom by loving them with my whole heart. My collection represents a physical manifestation of that love, but it does not show the full picture. The full picture is me at 2AM listening to “Magic Shop” for the first time and letting tears stream down my cheeks as Jimin sings “You gave me the best of me. So you’ll give you the best of you” (BTS, 2018). The full

picture is me watching BTS music videos with my fellow forensics teaching assistants after an emotionally draining day of working with students, laughing together in our office. The full picture is me presenting this research to you now with my whole heart, knowing that there might only be three people in the world who ever read it. BTS has inspired me to love myself. I give the best of my girlie self because I know it is what BTS would want me to do and as an ARMY; I want to make them proud. Photocard collecting gave me a physical hobby which encapsulated my intense enthusiasm for BTS, but my collection does not make me an ARMY. Instead, the admiration I have for them in my heart is enough.

CHAPTER 4 – DISCUSSION

Being a girlie makes someone part of a community. The definition of girlie formed through this research is as follows: A girlie is someone of any gender who actively engages with passionate others, identifying them based on emotional indicators and radical inclusivity, while centering an inherently feminist mindset. To be a girlie is to be a feminist while taking part in feminine practices. Girlies exist and identify each other based purely on vibes, while being excited to include anyone who wants to be in their girlie collective.

Limitations and Future Directions

This qualitative research employed analysis of the lived experiences of 11 girlies and therefore is limited to the responses collected during the months this thesis was written. With more time to recruit and interview participants, this research could acknowledge a wider range of perspectives concerning the nuances behind being a girlie and collecting K-pop photocards. Similarly, the first research question was potentially limited by the strong connection to K-pop fandom. Girlies are everywhere and although the term was created by K-pop fans, girlie has become a cultural phenomenon beyond fandom (Baah, 2022). Additionally, many of the participants for this study gravitated more towards K-pop boy groups instead of girl groups or groups inclusive of all genders. While many multi-stans collect a wide variety of groups, only two participants listed girl groups as their ults. Studying girlies who collect only girl group photocards could potentially influence the impact of *Paper Boyfriends*. Since women have been historically treated as commodities, shifting from paper boyfriends to paper girlfriends adds a layer of patriarchal reinforcement not present when broadly discussing the affective nature of

having an emotional support photocard. This is not to say K-pop girl group fans are not emotionally connected to their collections in the same way as the participants of this thesis, but more research must be done to investigate the influence of gender on photocard collectors.

Looking to the future, it is possible to apply girlie to collectives beyond K-pop or even fandom. Girlies are not bound by photocard collecting or participatory fandom because they seek to create an inclusive community where there was none. The first research question's tracks one through four serves as criteria a person must fulfill to be considered a girlie. These tracks do not need to happen sequentially, the E.P. can be put on shuffle. However, all tracks must be listened to for the girlie transformation to be complete. For without community, good vibes, radical inclusivity and a belief that gender is a social construct, the girlie would lack the necessary basis for what girliness seeks to be.

Moving forward, we should look to establish a girlie theory. Girlie as a theoretical framework should seek to understand how communities form, function, or fail based on how they align with the girlie criteria. In this thesis, girlies were solely attached to K-pop fandom. However, there are girlies everywhere. Girlies who collect comic books, have IBS, or do their taxes have the potential to fulfill the same criteria defining K-pop girlies. When looking to the future of girlie scholarship or girlie theory, being mindful to examine girlies beyond fandom. Additionally, we must formally acknowledge the way gender impacts the effects of girlie as an identifier. While feminine in nature, a main component of being a girlie is an inherent connection to feminist ideals, represented by track 3: feminist connection. Girlies took note to delineate girlie from girly as girly has long been used to label something "youthfully feminine" (Battistella, 2006, p. 104). However, when girly was used to describe men, this was viewed as a homophobic reference to queer men. Acting as an "attenuation rather than intensification"

(Battistella, 2006, p. 106). While girlie embarrasses femineity, the term does not seek to be placed onto masculine people to insult them. Rather, masculine girlies are embraced and celebrated as equal members of a community. Gender must be acknowledged as something socially constructed and reinforced by performance for femininity to not be viewed as an insult (Butler, 1990). Women and girls have been looked down upon and belittled by the enforcement of patriarchal ideas but girlie seeks to transcend any negative connotations associated with femininity. Girlies seek to embrace femininity while rejecting the construction of gender.

Addressing Participatory Culture Theory

Looking back to Jenkins' (1992) Participatory Culture Theory, I must acknowledge how the participatory nature of K-pop girlies converges and diverges from Jenkins' established framework. For example, to be a K-pop girlie, there is a low barrier to expressing love for a fandom or engaging with other girlies. Girlies do believe their contributions to the fandom matter and feel some social connectedness with each other. These three components of participatory culture are fulfilled however, where girlies differ is this inherent need to create or share creations. Jenkins (2009) articulated, there must be "strong support for creating and sharing creations with others" (p. 5). However, not all girlies create, and even when considering collecting as a form of creation, girlies specifically articulated those physical manifestations of supporting K-pop artists, like buying albums or collecting photocards, pales in comparison to enjoying the music. K-pop fandom, specifically my experience with the BTS ARMY, is rich with creators but creation is not a requirement for fan membership. Rather, consumption comes to the forefront. Consuming BTS's music and supplementary content, even casually, supports the fandom and the Bangtan Boys. For the BTS ARMY, the only requirement is that you love all the members of BTS and their music. For K-pop fans, streaming music, watching content, or even consuming other fan's creations and fan works is enough to mark someone as an active part of

the fandom. The concept of passion has always been connected to music collectors simply because collecting is a process that requires an excess of time and money (Shuker, 2014). However, record collectors have long fallen into two camps, those who love the music and those who prioritize collection value, rarity, and size (Shuker, 2014). I have yet to encounter anyone who collects photocards purely because of their perceived value. Girlies love K-pop and in an effort to physically showcase their passion, collect photocards.

Furthermore, Jenkins (2009) argued, participatory culture includes “some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (p. 6). While girlies have cultivated a culture of connectivity, this mentorship has yet to be explored. Many participants for this thesis identified friends who introduced them to K-pop however, it was YouTube or TikTok content creators who taught them about the culture surrounding photocard collecting. While collectors must interact with each other in order to join group orders or trade photocards, the presence of an informal mentorship process remains unclear and could be studied in future research. While Jenkins’ (1992) theory provided a framework for fandom, girlies have both overlapped and deviated, leaving potential for girlie theory.

Girlie Collectors

Being a collector is not solely determined by the size or value of physical items. Geraghty (2014) argued, memory and nostalgia are common emotional elements present when investigating the role of physical objects in fandoms. In music fandom, record collectors “...affective (and economic) investment in the collecting process is often maintained over a considerable period: many record collectors were originally youthful fans of the performers and styles of music they now collect” (Shuker, 2014, p. 167). However, while photocards might invoke positive memories for collectors, some of these memories are only a few years old,

making the argument for nostalgia questionable. For example, J-hope's PTD LA lucky draw or SUGA's *Love Yourself: Answer* album photocard are particularly sentimental to me, as described in this thesis (Figure 1; Figure 3), but these memories do not make me long for the past. Rather, they remind me of positive memories which have influenced my present. The recency of many girlie collection's highlights, these collectors are not seeking out these items to memories to only reminisce about their youth. Card collecting for the popular franchise Pokémon often starts in youth and continues through adulthood. Adult collectors often go to conventions or participate in bidding wars on eBay listings to reclaim lucrative and now-expensive cards they remember from their youth (Ward & Clark, 2002). However, photocard collectors are not primarily motivated by rarity or value. While expensive or rare photocards might be necessary to complete their collection, for the majority of collectors, these items are out of reach and therefore not important to the heart of their collection or fandom experience. This highlights a hidden track for E.P. 2.

Track 6: Fuck, Capitalism?

This track is not meant to be read as “fuck capitalism” but rather “fuck, capitalism?” Like ugh, really? Yes, really 😭. As mentioned in track 4: slaying consumerism, capitalism plays a huge role in photocard collecting and thus, girlie culture. While girlies slay (as in murder) capitalist expectations to always be productive by producing and working, girlies also slay (as in exceed in 🍷) embracing the consumption culture pushed on to femme people. Especially in late-stage capitalism, women have been expected to reproduce and consume to keep the capitalist society functioning (Öztimur, 2007). The vulgar name of this track is necessitated by the way that femme people are treated under capitalism 🍷. Young women specifically were meant to consume products to maintain the appearance and image of their bodies to be desirable for men

(Öztimur, 2007). Girlies turn this capitalistic heteronormativity on its head by consuming for themselves and their happiness.

Additionally, girlie collecting does not aim to create the culture of exclusion, hierarchy, or gatekeeping present in many male-dominated fandoms. Shuker (2014) highlighted, simply owning rare items does not make someone a collector instead, it is the hunt, acquisition process, and continuous interest in new things for the collection. Photocard girlies, by simply buying new albums, are actively acquiring new photocards for their collection. When girlies trade photocards with each other, embracing the random distribution of photocards, they further mark themselves as collectors. However, the nature of collecting items, especially in our late-stage capitalistic society, brings to light a unique set of problems. Willow reflected:

Initially, I felt like I was just collecting to collect. I think more recently there was, I think there was a point where I was getting kind of overwhelmed because I was like, oh, I'm missing this Yoongi photo card and this Yoongi photo card. And then, like, I had my whole reevaluation. Right? Of what I should buy period. And I was like, you know, you only really need to buy the things you really want. (Interview, 13 January 2024)

Willow represents a legion of girlies who got sucked into a consumerist trap that Korean entertainment companies deliberately create by releasing so many album versions and complimentary merchandise, so the cycle becomes buy-buy-buy. The vibrant selling and trading community for photocards then exacerbates this consumerist mindset. However, because photocard collecting does not happen in isolation, many girlies often reevaluate their collections, with the help of fellow collectors and friends, collecting only the photocards they like.

Dropping²⁵ a collection also becomes manageable if you already have a community of girlies on Instagram, further making mindful collecting a realistic possibility. The public and private nature

²⁵ Dropping a collection simply means selling your entire collection of photocards or other merchandise for one group or member. This practice can be done to make emergency money quickly or make maintaining other collections more manageable.

of photocard collecting, specifically photocard's mobility and shareability, shapes how girlies interact with the culture of consumerism.

Photocard collecting is both a consumeristic and emotional practice, essentially quantifying the vibes of what it takes to be a girlie. Photocard girlies are almost ambivalent to the role they play in the music industry's desire to sell a product. BTS's hit song "Butter" is a great example of this phenomenon. In 2021, following BTS's success with their first all-English song "Dynamite," the group released "Butter" engineered to be a "dance pop track that easily becomes listeners' favorite earworm" (BigHit, 2021, para. 1). While RM has writing credits on the track, many of the writers and producers are makers of American or European pop-hits, and to anti-BTS fans, this globalization appeared to be a cash grab for BigHit and HYBE. The physical *Butter* album featured only two songs but had two versions. Each version had eight photocards to collect and three stores had lucky draw photocards for a grand total of two songs but 37 album photocards.²⁶ This demonstrates the ambivalence girlies have towards the capitalistic goals of K-pop entertainment companies. If photocards are released, girlies will collect them. Sometimes, the pressure and FOMO present within the buying and fast-paced culture of K-pop's release schedule overwhelms the desire to intentionally and mindfully collect.

K-pop photocard collectors do acknowledge the potential negative effects of their collecting. When trading photocards, girlies aim to be as eco-friendly as possible. Saving plastic sleeves and top loaders after receiving photocard trades, switching to cardboard Shipping Shields when mailing out group orders, and prioritizing using washi tape and post-it notes inside cards so that as many items can be reused as possible. Some girlies (notably Willow and Kinsley) recounted their introduction to photocard trading and the rituals of the practice. Specifically, they

²⁶ In my first copy of *Butter*, if you remember, I pulled Jungkook's photocard (Figure 5).

recalled reading rules written by group order managers and buy/sell/trade accounts, the time it took to build up proofs,²⁷ and the multi-step processes of packing, sending, and receiving photocards in the mail. Notably, a desire to be as eco-friendly as possible is at the heart of these created rules and rituals. Girlies work together dialectically, to both encourage consumerism and lessen its negative effects.

Essentially, through photocard collecting, girlies cultivate their own fandom practices. Previously, fangirls have been understood as trying to exist in a pre-existing male-dominated fan space, forced to carve out a slice for themselves (Scott, 2019). Girlies are not interested in fitting into a male dominant space. Instead, girlies create their own feminine dominant culture; working towards making girlie culture *the* dominant culture and fandom resistive. While it is uncommon for subcultures to exist within popular media, girlies (and their girliness) aim to burn down the current capitalist system, not designed for them, and takeover. Girlies shape culture, as a whole, to become more radically inclusive, feminist, and communal. The system of group orders and group order managers was created by girlies to aid each other in purchasing the K-pop merchandise they wanted. Girlies created their own rules and practices to help other girlies navigate the current complex financial system. When forced to confront the overwhelming weight of capitalism, girlies formed a community.

Girlie Collectors Continued

Photocard girlies exist in opposition to both fan collectors and fan participators. Jenkins told the New York Times in 1997, “fan fiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done

²⁷ Proofs are the primary way photocard buyers and traders verify if the Instagram accounts they are interacting with are reputable. After a sale or trade is complete, the receiver of the photocard will share a photo of the packaged photocard to verify everything arrived safely. The sender will then share that image on their Instagram story and add it to a highlight for future buyers or traders to see. If girlies have less than 15 proofs, they will often be asked to send their half of a photocard trade first and after it is received, the photocard they are trading for will be sent out.

in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk” (Harmon, 1997, para. 9). This quotation has been celebrated by many fan fiction writers and fandom members over the years. While collectors seem to exist in opposition to creators and participators, girlies acknowledge and own their consumerism as opposed to just following a crowd. Girlies know that much of their fandom is under the ownership of Korean entertainment companies, some of which have been known to be predatory or abusive towards their own idols. However, girlies take an active stance in their consumerism. There is nothing passive about achieving a complete photocard collection. Often it takes many hours of scrolling through Instagram, bartering on eBay, shipping to Korean proxy addresses, and interacting with other girlies to curate a meaningful collection.

Collecting photocards has proven to differ from collecting records or even CDs. Record collectors can be immense fans of the music they collect (Straw 1997; Shuker, 2014). However, the compact nature of photocards alone highlights a difference. Not only do Korean entertainment companies release multiple versions of the same album with different photocards, but also identical album versions with POB or lucky draw photocards. The physical album and CD is important to collectors, but quickly becomes a vehicle to get photocards into collections. Some group order managers offer an “inclusion only” options where girlies can pay cheaper international shipping by receiving only the photocards from an album instead of the album in its entirety. The masculine nature of music collecting has also been dispelled by photocard girlies. Straw’s (1997) characterization of the nerd, brute, and hip record collector fail to apply to photocard girlies. While there is room in girliness for these classifications, many girlies do not align with these personas. Girlies have little to prove with their collections and simply want to have fun and show love for their ults.

Additionally, when considering the randomized nature of receiving K-pop photocards, ties to blind bags or loot boxes in video games emerged. The presence of loot boxes as a primary way to receive exclusive digital items has been connected to online gambling, especially because many players pay exorbitant amounts of real money for in-game benefits (Amano & Simonov, 2023). This gambling connection poses a risk to photocard collectors, especially young fans. Photocards bring joy to K-pop girlies but even then, collectors are not ignorant of how they support or fall into the trap of capitalist culture. Conversely, observing photocard collectors might yield different observations than being one. Reflecting on the pejorative terms used to describe fangirls, like hysterical and immature, remains imperative when studying K-pop girlies (Ehrenreich, et al., 1992). To only observe a collector from the outside is to miss out on how impactful photocards can be.

Collecting Community

Photocard collecting is both a private and public practice. Many participants reflected on how excited they were to talk to someone about their collection; someone who understands all of the nuances behind the little paper cards. Most communication about photocards happens online through the creation of content or simply in Instagram DMs. The opportunity to talk to someone new about your highly curated collection is rare and exhilarating. Cornelia explained:

I'm a high school librarian and... I started a K-pop Club here at my school. Um so I have bunch of teenagers, about 15 of them, and we meet once a week and um. It's fun to to be with them and be with the young people. But the photocards is, one thing about the photo cards is they, they in general don't have a lot of money so, a lot of times I would just give them my extras. Um, I definitely buy a ton of Lomo²⁸ cards for them, but sometimes I'll give them official ones, and they like, they're so appreciative. And I am, it's just a nice way to, I don't know. Give back? I don't know what, how to say that... and it's, it's really nice for my girls that are in the club. We don't, well there's only girls, no guys come, but they're welcome! Um, because they get to know each other, and then they

²⁸ Lomo cards are unofficial photocards made from official or unofficial photos of K-pop idols. Oftentimes fans make these themselves to send as freebies in sales or trades, but Lomo cards can also be purchased in bulk from retailers like AliExpress or Amazon.

don't feel as isolated, because sometimes K-[pop], you know, people can make fun of K-pop fans, or they feel like they can't talk to anybody because nobody else gets it, or nobody else likes it. So now they have each other, and they're meeting people they never knew or they're, they've gone to school together, but they didn't know they had this connection. With and so, they're making new connections and making new friends. Um and the library and the K-pop Club is like, kind of like a safe place for them to just be themselves. Which is, is kinda neat that I'm be able to provide that. That's one, that's pretty much, I mean that's, I would say that's my biggest mission actually as a librarian, is just to provide this um safe space for kids that maybe don't, and, and not even K-pop related, it could be about anything, that maybe don't feel like they have a place in the school, or maybe they're a little different. And um they, those are the people that tend to congregate here. And um that, that's kind of my mission. Just to provide that space for them, and to let them feel like they can be themselves and be okay with what whoever they are and whatever they like um and to make connections with each other and with me as an adult... Like I said, there's hardly anybody my age I, at least I know, that likes K-pop. So I mean I can bond with these teenagers over something, you know? And they think I'm kind of cool, cause I like something they like. Um so I mean, I, I love K-pop Club every week. I mean, it's something I do at school that I'm like, oh, like I can't miss it like I cannot wait to come to K-pop club. Cause I get to, like, you know, hang out with other fans and even though we're totally different ages, you know, we watch videos together, and we play games, and we do crafts and um it's just fun to have other people talk to about your interests. (Interview, 30 January 2024)

In this case, Cornelia uses photocards, both official and unofficial, to connect with young people who might feel ostracized otherwise. K-pop Club became a space for Cornelia, in addition to students at her school. From the outside, collecting photocards might seem silly or wasteful but on the contrary. The effect of collecting runs deep, pushing the fandom further into the hearts of K-pop admirers.

K-pop fandom is a safe space for many girlies and girlie collectors. In the introduction of this thesis, I offered you a rather intense taxonomy of K-pop fans.²⁹ When reflecting on the types of K-pop fans, our beloved photocard collectors deviate from other fan orientations. For example, Sasaengs or Koreaboos would not be considered girlies as their stalking or appropriating of Korean culture acts in opposition to everything girlies stand for. Girlie does not

²⁹ The list (as discussed on p. 28-29) includes casual listeners, netizens, fan club organizers, archivists, translators, cover dancers, people who create fan edits and fan art, fanfiction writers, Sasaengs, Koreaboos, solo stans, delulus, and collectors.

seek to capture the essence of all K-pop fans rather, fans decide to become a girlie once they actively engage in the K-pop fandom community, pass the vibe check, reject the construct of gender while embracing their femininity, and seek to radically include potential girlies into the culture. Regardless of the role one plays in the fandom, K-pop has become a vibrant community full of people from a variety of backgrounds and life stages, curating a richness not present in all fandom spaces. Community can look like collecting photocards, or it can look like playing K-pop for your friends in the car when you have the aux chord, or it can look like finding refuge in an old *Run! BTS* episode after a hard day. The K-pop community is active, omnipresent, and charming. To outsiders, sometimes the only front-facing fandom members are the Koreaboos and delulus. However, it is the photocard collectors that might be the truest representation of the heart of K-pop.

Photocard collectors must actively engage with one another to curate their collections. Likewise, music from their ult groups always comes to the forefront, whether that is to stay on top of comebacks from all groups or purchase new releases from their ults. Photocard collectors have a private nature to their fandom participation. Their photocard binders and albums often do not leave their designate shelves and because photocards are small, they are unobtrusive inside a living space. However, many girlies mentioned bringing photocards with them when they leave the house, either displayed in a photocard holder keychain or just in their bag. Photocard girlies also bring their photocards with them to K-pop events, on their college campuses or in their community, and to K-pop concerts. This further establishes their categorization as collectors within the broad fandom space. By centering K-pop music while participating in secondary activities, like buying albums and attending concerts, photocard girlies are unapologetic and bold

by publicizing their collective nature while privatizing the bulk of their collection. The dialectic exhibited by photocard girlies represents the beautifully complex nature of K-pop fandom.

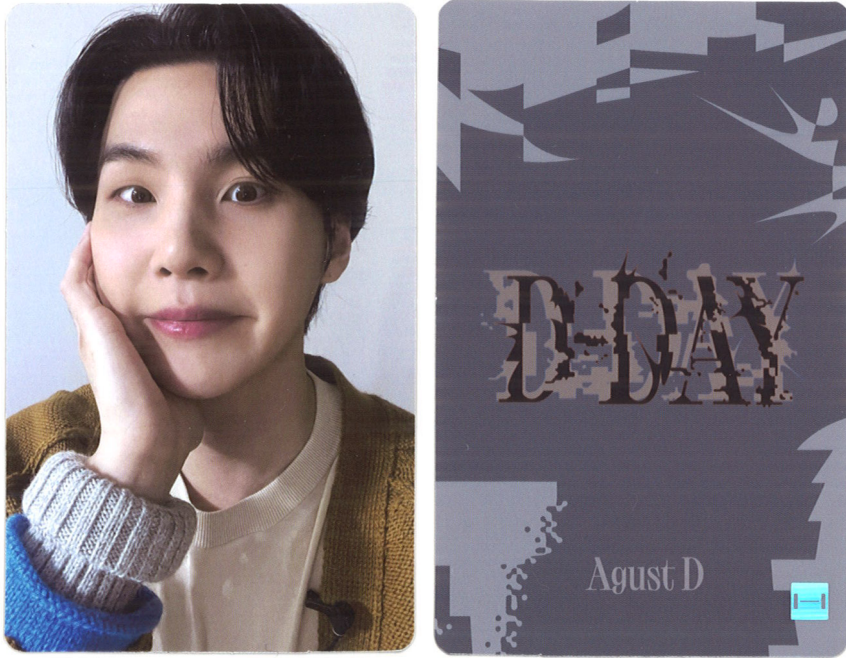
Conclusion

As the genre of K-pop grows, more and more girlies are becoming fans. They are spending time, money, and resources on these K-pop groups in ways that have gone virtually unstudied. Collecting goes beyond loving the artist and remains a complex, ritualistic part of fandom. Exploring how fangirl practices are shaped by photocard collecting elevates the role of the girlie in fan spaces. Through my conversations with photocard girlies, I myself realized how much of a community member I am. Specifically, how similar I am to many of the girlies I talked to. This thesis got me to think about photocard collecting and BTS girlies in an unfathomably deep way. While many of the practices girlies shared with me were rituals I had taken part in, the expansive effects of my little boyfriend papers were virtually unknown to me.

In April of 2023, after Yoongi released his first official solo album under his rap alias Agust D, I was so excited to support his music by buying the album and of course, collecting the photocards (Figure 9). Although I cannot wait for 2025 when all the BTS members will return from their military service, the release of BTS solo projects reinforced the OT7 nature of ARMY. To be an ARMY is to support all seven members by listening to their music and giving them adoration. Not only was I ecstatic to collect Yoongi's solo project photocards, but I also bought the solo albums by all seven members and even bought a separate photocard binder to keep all the inclusions in. K-pop girlies and photocard collectors exemplify the joy of fandom, and the power of collecting to build community. Collecting gives people a space to be happy and excited about their interests, unbridled by societal expectations. Passion, joy, and love is the heart of it all.

Figure 9

Agust D *D-Day* Soundwave Lucky Draw



Note. One thing I particularly loved about his *D-Day* photocards was the range. He had some photocards with a bad boy concept and some, like this one, where he is just wearing a cute little sweater. He is just so cute 🥹 I love him so much. From my collection.

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APPENDIX A – PRELIMINARY SURVEY

These first few questions collect demographic and personal information. None of your personal information will be linked back to you in the final research study. This information is collected so the researcher can report the general population of participants.

1. Please list your full name, as you want me to refer to you
2. Please list your pronouns
3. Please list your email address, this will be used to schedule your interview
4. How old are you?
5. What racial or ethnic groups describe you?

The next two questions are optional. If you choose to respond, your answers will be included in the study unless indicated otherwise.

1. Social media handle for your sale/trade account
2. This study will use aliases for all participants. If you have a preferred potential alias, please list it below

These next questions will allow me to accurately prepare for our interview. If you do not wish to disclose this information or do not know the answer, feel free to move on to the next question.

1. Who are your ult groups? (Can list one or multiple)
2. Who are your ult biases? (Can list one or multiple)
3. For about how long have you been listening to K-pop?
4. For about how long have you been buying K-pop albums?
5. For about how long have you been collecting photocards?

6. About how many photocards do you have in your collection? (Can list number of cards, number of binders, etc. Can be official or unofficial. Please quantify your collection in your own words.)
7. Optional: Please submit a photo of your favorite photocard(s) from your collection
8. Is there any other information you would like me to know before our interview?

A sample of photocard pictures received from the preliminary form.





APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction and Basic Points

Good [morning/afternoon/evening]! Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today! As you may know, my name is Natalie Hedberg, and I am a Master's student at The University of Alabama. I am working on a research project investigating K-pop album and photocard collecting. (Repeat these points if individuals have questions about the consent forms they have signed.) Every opinion is valuable, and I only want to know your thoughts and opinions. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You may choose to skip a question or stop the interview at any time and for any reason with no penalty. Your information will stay secure. I will not share your personal information, including your name or social media usernames with anyone else unless you consent otherwise. This interview is being audio-recorded in case I need to listen to it later to clarify something from the notes. This recording will not be shared with others and will be destroyed at the end of this research. The interview should take no longer than an hour. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Opening

1. How did you get introduced to K-pop?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about how you got introduced to photocard collecting?

Fan Practices

1. How many K-pop groups do you currently stan?
2. In your own words, how would you describe your fan practices for supporting your ult groups?

Album Collecting

1. About how often do you purchase K-pop albums?
2. Have you ever joined a group order for an album?
3. Have you ever joined a group order for pre-order benefits or inclusions only?
4. Can you describe your most recent group order experience?
5. How important is purchasing albums to supporting an artist or group?
6. How important is streaming albums to supporting an artist or group?

Photocard Collecting

1. Can you describe the feeling of pulling a photocard from an album?
2. In your own words, how would you describe your K-pop collection? (number of groups, number of people, only album cards, fan-made goods, etc.)
3. Can you describe how you store and display your photocards?
4. What are some emotions (joy, happiness, overwhelmed, etc.) you would attach to your collection?

Photocard Trading

1. Have you ever traded photocards online before?
2. Have you ever traded photocards in-person before?
3. What is the primary platform you use to trade photocards?
4. How did you determine which group and member's cards to collect?
5. Think about the last time you traded photocards. Can you tell me about the process that you follow when trading from initiating the trade to receiving the card?
6. Have you ever been scammed out of money or photocards? If so, can you describe that experience?

7. How important is having a complete photocard collection to supporting an artist or group?

Girlie Questions

1. Would you consider yourself a girlie?
2. In your own words, what is a girlie?

Closing

1. Are there any questions you have for me or anything I didn't ask you that you would like to share?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Would you be willing to be contacted again in the future should I need to conduct a follow-up interview at a later date? In addition, can I contact you once I have preliminary results from my study to ensure your perspective is represented?

APPENDIX C – PLAYLIST

The following playlist includes song representative of the chapters present in this thesis.

There are five tracks for each section listed below, plus one bonus song for the conclusion.

Introduction

1. No More Dream (BTS, 2013)
2. Come Back Home (Seotaiji and Boys, 1995)
3. Candy (H.O.T., 1996)
4. Oh! (Girls' Generation, 2010)
5. Yet To Come (BTS, 2022)

Literature Review

1. The Way You Look Tonight (Frank Sinatra, 1964)
2. I Want to Hold Your Hand (The Beatles, 1964)
3. Best Song Ever (One Direction, 2013)
4. Gangnam Style [강남스타일] (PSY, 2012)
5. Dynamite (BTS, 2020)

Research Methods

1. Feel Special (Twice, 2019)
2. View (SHINee, 2015)
3. HERO (Monsta X, 2015)
4. After School (Weekly, 2021)
5. People (Agust D, 2020)

Research Findings

1. Perfect Night (Le Sserafim, 2023)
2. Rock With You (Seventeen, 2021)
3. Sour Candy (Lady Gaga & Blackpink, 2020)
4. BLACK MIRROR (Oneus, 2021)
5. Utopia (Ateez, 2019)

Discussion

1. Eat You Up (BoA, 2008)
2. Save ME (BTS, 2016)
3. I'm Fine (BTS, 2018)
4. HOME (BTS, 2019)
5. Telepathy (BTS, 2020)
6. D-Day (Agust D, 2023)