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CREATING PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH BRAND COMMUNITIES USING CONTENT AND STORYTELLING MARKETING: CASE OF BTS AND ARMY[1]

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ABSTRACT

Consumers can engage with companies that meet their needs and catch their attention. Businesses are trying to create strong bonds and interactions with the target audience to survive in an increasingly competitive environment and move forward. For this reason, companies make strategies that will respond to customer needs and attract their interest. For this purpose, today, businesses have focused on content and storytelling marketing. In the TV series, there is a para-social relationship between the persona and viewers. The story created for the persona is the critical factor in establishing the para-social relationship between the persona and the viewer. Realistic and exciting stories can increase the possibility of creating para-social relationships. For this purpose, it examined the effect of content and storytelling marketing in creating a para-social relationship with the target audience in this research. The first part of the research will give information about content marketing, storytelling marketing, and para-social relationship. The theoretical research concept is supported by the South Korean Pop Group "BTS" and their fan "ARMY." The content/story marketing followed by the group and their reactions were analyzed with the content analysis method. As a result of the study, it observed that brands could create a para-social relationship with the target audience using effective content and storytelling marketing.

Keywords: Content and Storytelling Marketing, BTS, Para-social Relationships, ARMY.

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İÇERİK VE ÖYKÜLEŞTİRME PAZARLAMASI İLE MARKA TOPLULUKLARIYLA PARASOSYAL İLİŞKİ YARATMAK: BTS VE ARMY ÖRNEĞİ

ÖZET

Tüketiciler, kendilerine katkı sağlayan ve duygularına hitap edebilen markalar ile bağ kurabilmektedirler. Bu bağ günümüz piyasalarında, rekabet gücünü artırarak fiyat bariyerini ortadan kaldırırken, sadık tüketici grubunu ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Bu bağı oluşturabilmek için markalar, tüketicilerin temel ihtiyaçlarının yanı sıra duygularına da hitap edecek ve ilgilerini çekecek stratejiler oluşturmaya çalışmaktadır. Günümüzde tüketici ile kol kola yürümenin değerinin farkındalığına varan markalar, içerik ve öyküleştirme pazarlama stratejilerine yönelmiştir. Amaç içerik ve öyküleştirme pazarlamaları sayesinde tüketici ile para-sosyal ilişki oluşturup, karlılığı artırmaktır.

Günümüzde bu strateji birçok alanda kullanılmakla beraber en apaçık olanlarından biri ise dizi sektörüdür. Dizideki karakterler ile izleyici arasında oluşan para-sosyal ilişki hem yeniden üretimi sağlarken hem de markaların da karlılığını artırmaktadır. Temelde bu para-sosyal ilişki kurulumunu sağlayan asıl faktörlerden birinin, karakterler için yaratılan öyküler olduğu düşünülmektedir. Yaratılan bir öykü, ne kadar ilgi çekici ve gerçekçi ise karakter ile izleyici arasındaki bağın kuvvetlendiği düşünülmektedir. Bu amaç ile bu araştırmada, markaların izleyecekleri içerik ve öyküleştirme pazarlamasıyla hedef kitle ile para-sosyal ilişki yaratılıp yaratılamayacağı incelenmiştir. Araştırmada, içerik/öyküleştirme pazarlamaları ve para-sosyal ilişki kavramsal olarak incelenmiş olup, örneklem BTS grubu ve hayranları ARMY üzerinden incelemeler yapılmıştır. İçerik analizi yöntemi ile grubun izlemiş olduğu içerik/öyküleştirme pazarlaması ve bunlara gelen tepkiler analiz edilmiştir. Araştırma sonucunda etkili içerik ve öyküleştirme pazarlaması ile hedef kitleyle para-sosyal ilişki kurulabildiği gözlemlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İçerik ve Öyküleştirme Pazarlaması, BTS, Para-Sosyal İlişki, ARMY.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers' behaviors, needs, and wants have changed over the years, and companies have started to be customer-oriented with this change. Companies try to build strong customer relationships to survive in a competitive market. Content and storytelling marketing strategies are best for building customer relationships (greatcontent.com, 2021) because stories and contents are catchy, motivating, and impressive.

Parasocial-relationship is the relationship between viewers and media characters (Horton-Wohl, 1956). According to Vonderohe (2016), parasocial-relationship can be in different ways like romantic, empathetic, family-oriented, etc.

The viewers can show behavioral reactions because of the para-social relationship. Viewers, who have a para-social relationship with the TV series character, can buy the outfit the media character wears in the series. Most TV shows or movies put their official fan merch (cups, t-shirts, bags, etc.) out to market for their fandoms. The main reason to put the fan product to market is to get a sales advantage by using a para-social relationship. In TV series and movies, a para-social relationship between media characters and viewers create through characters' stories. Characters' stories get catchy, realistic, and emotional, and para-social relationships strengthen. From this point, this research examines content and storytelling marketing's effect on creating parasocial-relationship.

There are many types of research on content and storytelling marketing. But there is no research on this topic, so this research is essential to understand how to create a para-social relationship with fan communities through content and storytelling marketing. The first part of the research will give information about content marketing, storytelling marketing, and para-social relationship. The South Korean Pop Group "BTS" and their fan "ARMY" support the theoretical research concept. The content/story marketing followed by the group and their reactions were analyzed with the content analysis method.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Content and Storytelling Marketing

According to Sarıtaş (2018:233-234), content marketing is creating catchy, unique, and providing needs content that the companies get the preference and loyalty of consumers. Content Marketing Institute (2011) defined content marketing as creating sharable and valuable content for customers based on their needs and wants. Companies should choose potential customers and provide their needs for successful content marketing. After choosing potential customers and getting to know their needs, companies create unique, valuable, shareable content (İnal,2019) and share them on the proper channels (social media, games, Etc.). Content marketing has many benefits, such as brand awareness, brand loyalty (Karkar,2016:338-339). Most companies prefer content marketing for these benefits.

Storytelling marketing delivers a brand message via stories to potential customers (Booker,2019). Companies use stories to impress, motivate people and touch their hearts. Storytelling marketing separates into two; visual storytelling and transmedia storytelling.

Visual storytelling is the art of forwarding stories via photos, infographics, and other visual materials (Hu, Et al. 2020:7970). Stories get more memorable with visual usage (Vickory,2014:8-9). Companies use visual storytelling marketing to be memorable and noticeable. "*Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.*

Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. "(Jenkins,2007). According to Canales (2020:59-60), transmedia storytelling can present different and unique parts of one story world. Transmedia storytelling presents via multiple channels such as games, books, tv series, and social media (Kucur,2018:89). Multiple channel usage in transmedia storytelling gives the advantage of expanding the target audience. Using different stories in each channel help to catch the interest of the audience (Çetinkaya,2017:571).

Content and storytelling marketing are the best way to reach and expand the target audience and create interaction with them.

Para-Social Relationship

The concept of para-social relationship was defined in the article "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction" by Horton and Wohl in 1956 for the first time as a one-sided relationship between media characters and viewers. (Keskin, 2020:28). Media characters are called "Persona" in the para-social relationship. According to Giles (2010:12), para-social relationships are established with both real and fictional characters. Viewers interact with media characters with similar acts, experiences, life, and thoughts. (Turner, 1993). In the para-social relationship, viewers are busy with media characters and want to know every detail about the persona. Viewers get information about the persona, and para-social relationships get deep (Şeker, 2011:10). Viewers and persona can break up in the same para-social relationship as in real life. A para-social breakup occurs when a person leaves tv shows or dies (Cohen, 2004:195). Para-social relationships have three processes which are behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Sood-Rogers,2000). The cognitive process starts with the persona getting noticed by the viewers, and after that, viewers try to understand the persona's act and personality (Sood-Rogers,2000). If the viewers love and engage with the persona, it keeps following. In the emotional process, viewers share the persona's feelings; for example, football fans celebrate winning with the team and share their happiness (Tayanç-Varol, 2019:267-268). In the behavioral process, viewers support the persona by attending the fan meeting, watching the persona's movies/tv series, or buying official products. Also, viewers try to be like a persona or mimic them (Gümüş, vd. 2021:757-759).

Vonderohe separated para-social relationships into different types in his research in 2016. These are;

Romantic: The viewers are impressed by the persona's physical appearance and feel romantic feelings (Vonderohe, 2016:4).

Idolization: The viewers see the persona as a role model or hero and follow the persona for him/her leadership, talent, intelligence (Vonderohe, 2016:4-5).

Family-Oriented: The viewers connect with the persona similar to family members (Kaya, 2020:37-58).

Friendship: The viewers choose a person who can be friends in the same way as in real life (Tayanç -Varol, 2019:269).

Empathetic/Sympathetic: The viewers get to connect with the persona emotionally and share the persona's feelings (Vonderohe, 2016:5).

Hatred: When the persona reminds the viewer's bad experience, or viewers do not like the persona's personality, behavior, or thoughts, para-social relationships are established in a negative way (Sanderson-Truax, 2014).

Actor/Actress: The viewers follow the persona for him/her talent (Stever, 2019:18).

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

Research Method

Content analysis was used in this research. Content analysis is one of the most using analysis method in social science. Content analysis is the method of examine visual, written materials. Researchers create code from data, analyze them, find the theme and interpret it, in the content analysis (Yalçın, 2019). There are two general types of content analysis: conceptual analysis and relational analysis. Conceptual analysis determines the existence and frequency of concepts in a text. Relational analysis develops the conceptual analysis further by examining the relationships among concepts in a text. Each type of analysis may lead to different results, conclusions, interpretations and meanings (Columbia Public Health,2022: https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/research/population-health-methods/content-analysis).

Uses of Content Analysis;

- Identify the intentions, focus or communication trends of an individual, group or institution
- Describe attitudinal and behavioral responses to communications
- Determine the psychological or emotional state of persons or groups (Columbia Public Health,2022: https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/research/population-health-methods/content-analysis)

Research Sample

These research samples are the popular South Korean boy band BTS and their fandom, ARMY. BTS debuted on June 13, 2013, under BigHit Entertainment. Group has seven members (Kim Nam Joon, Kim SeokJin, MinYoonGi, JungHoSeok, Park JiMin, Kim Taehyung, and Jeon JungKook). (wikipedia.org, 01.06.2021). BTS is the most popular boyband, and they have a massive fan club worldwide.

The group has over 90 million fans worldwide based on their social media accounts(Khushboo,2022). BTS also make a huge gain for their home country. Hyundai Research Institute had in 2018 estimated that the group was bringing in over USD 3.6 billion to the South Korean economy every year and generating USD 1.1 billion in consumer goods exports in a single year. According to the researchers, one in every 13 tourists arriving in South Korea was there because of BTS. In 2020, Forbes estimated the net worth of BTS to be around USD 50 million (Gupta,2022). The analysts projected BTS would have contributed $29.1 trillion to the South Korean economy between 2014 and 2023(Richards,2022). It is safe to say BTS is the biggest success in the South Korean entertainment industry. Behind the BTS's critical success factors are storytelling and content marketing, which the company used for them. The company has pursued content and storytelling marketing strategies for BTS from their pre-debut. Bang Si Hyuk, the founder of Big Hit, revealed that he had envisioned BTS as an idol group that was both strong and relatable. He recalled, "I recently came across a company document from [2012] the year before BTS debuted, in which we were debating what kind of idol group to create. It said, *'What kind of hero is the youth of today looking for? Not someone who dogmatically preaches from above. Rather, it seems like they need a hero who can lend them a shoulder to lean on, even without speaking a single word.'" "I didn't want them to be false idols," he explained. "I wanted to create a BTS that could become a close friend."* Bang Shi Hyuk talked about BTS's strengths, saying that he thought the group had impressed listeners with its honest lyrics. *"What BTS does well is tell their own stories,"* he remarked. *"In the case of [BTS's] 'The Most Beautiful Moment in Life" album series, we didn't want to glorify youth. In reality, the youth of today is sad and painful, and we should feel apologetic about the fact that they have to face this kind of world."*

"Since we decided that BTS would be singers who told the truth about reality, we said, 'Let's talk about pain, and let's say that instead of just living passively, we should work hard to overcome obstacles. Whether we win or lose, it's having dreams that makes us young.'" (https://www.soompi.com, Accessed 01.05.2021).

There is a strong relationship between the BTS group and their fan community ARMY. The ARMY fan community demonstrates this strong relationship by supporting the band, purchasing fan merchandise and albums, making donations on behalf of the band and their communities, and helping them set new records quickly. (Hollingsworth and Seo, 2019). Considering the group's worldwide success, the power of fan communities, the bond they establish with their fans, and the marketing strategies followed, the BTS group and fan communities of ARMY were chosen as the sample in this research.



Photo 1: BTS (Source: google.com)

The research process is shown below in figure 1.

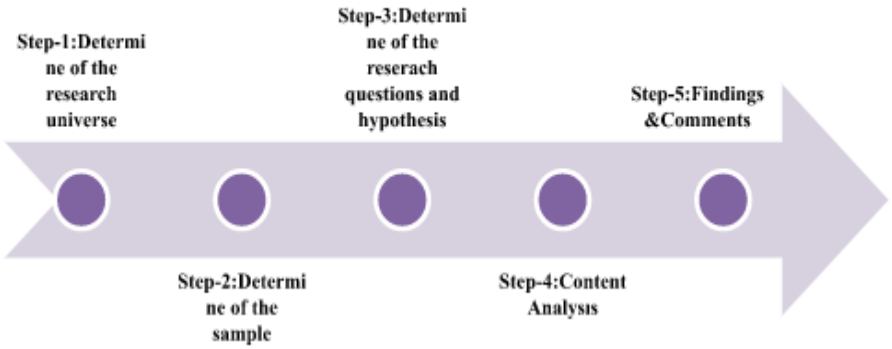


Figure 1: Research Proces

Research Questions:

- How does BTS implement content and storytelling marketing?
- How do content and storytelling marketing usage affect establishing para-social relationships?
- Is there any effect to establishing para-social relationships that BTS's stories and contents have similarities with the audience's life?
- What types of para-social relationships are between BTS and ARMY?

The contents shared by BTS and fans' comments were analyzed to verify questions. In order to find the relations and themes, made coding through maxqda and excel.

Reliability and Validity:

In the content analysis, researchers have to make descriptions and focus on details for reliability and validity. The researcher approaches the subject objectively for the reliability and validity. (Kunduracıoğlu,2018:46). Fans' comments used this research support all contents and findings. All fans comment analyzed objectively. It is assumed that the fans' attitudes are easily measurable through the comments.

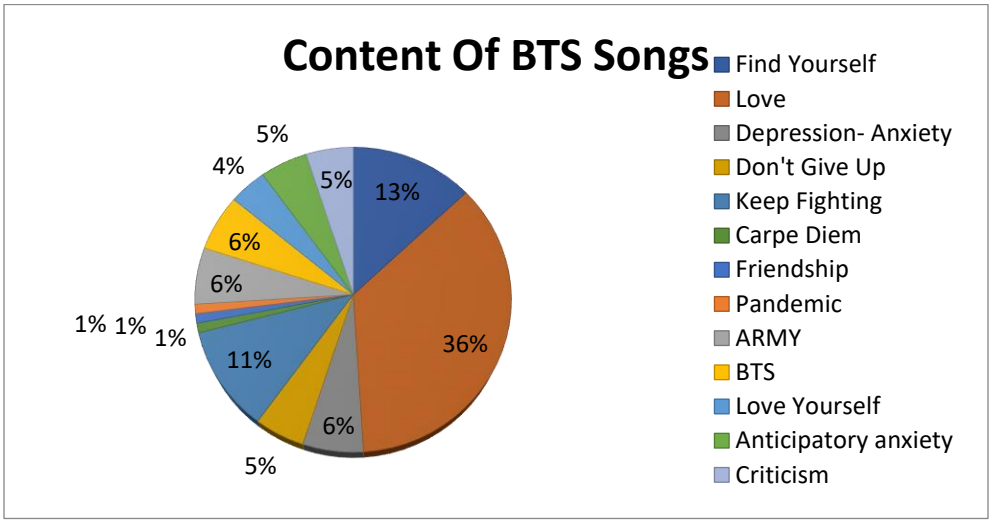
Limitations:

BTS has many contents from many channels, making it hard to analyze all fans' comments. To avoid this disadvantage sample size was tried to be kept high.

Analysis:

BTS and Content Marketing

All the official channels and accounts of BTS were analyzed to understand how BTS used content marketing strategy. Firstly, all songs were analyzed to find messages the BTS gave to their fans as an artist. From their first album to the last one, nearly 250 songs were analyzed and found themes. All themes are shown in Graph 1.



Graph 1: Themes of BTS songs

BTS touches on realistic problems everyone faces it. The main message of their song is *"You can make a mistakes, it is okay to you don't have any dreams, you are precious just the way you are so love yourself and go your own way. We are just like you and will always be there for you."*

BTS shares its content through multiple channels, such as social media, blogs, games, movies, Etc. Contents and channels are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Contents- Channels

PLATFORM	PROGRAM NAME	CONTENT
Youtube	Bangtan TV	Dance practise videos, behind scenes
Vlive	Run BTS	BTS Show program. In each episode, members play different games and do various activities. Fans get a chance to explore member's different sides through this program
Vlive	Indıvidual or group broadcast	BTS get contact with their fans
Mobile App	Weverse	BTS and their fans share posts and make comments to all posts
Movie	BurnTheStage, Bring The Soul, Break The Silence	Behind Scenes of concert and interviews
TV-Weverse	BTS in theSoop	Reality show
Game	BTS World	In the game, fans get back into time and go BTS pre-debut year. Fans try to get together all BTS members and make their debut. BTS shooted many videos for this game. Fans get fake connections with members through the game.
Youtube-Blog	BT21	"BT21" is animation characters, and BTS members created all characters and their stories. For the BT21 project, BTS company opened a youtube channel. Fans watch BT21 stories through this channel. Also, fans can buy official merch through the website or LİNE pop-up store.
Twitter-Weverse	TINYTAN	TINYTAN is the animation version of BTS created for unique and limitless contents.

BTS has 5.14 Mn. followers on BT21 youtube channel, 31 Mn. Followers on vlive and 4.1 Mn. Followers on TINYTAN Twitter account. Over the ten million people downloaded "BTS World" game (googleplay.com,2022). TINYTAN made brand collaboration with many brands such as Tea Kaden, Downy, Haagen-Dazs, Binggrae, estcola, Clear (TINYTAN Official Twitter Account, Twitter.com,2022)

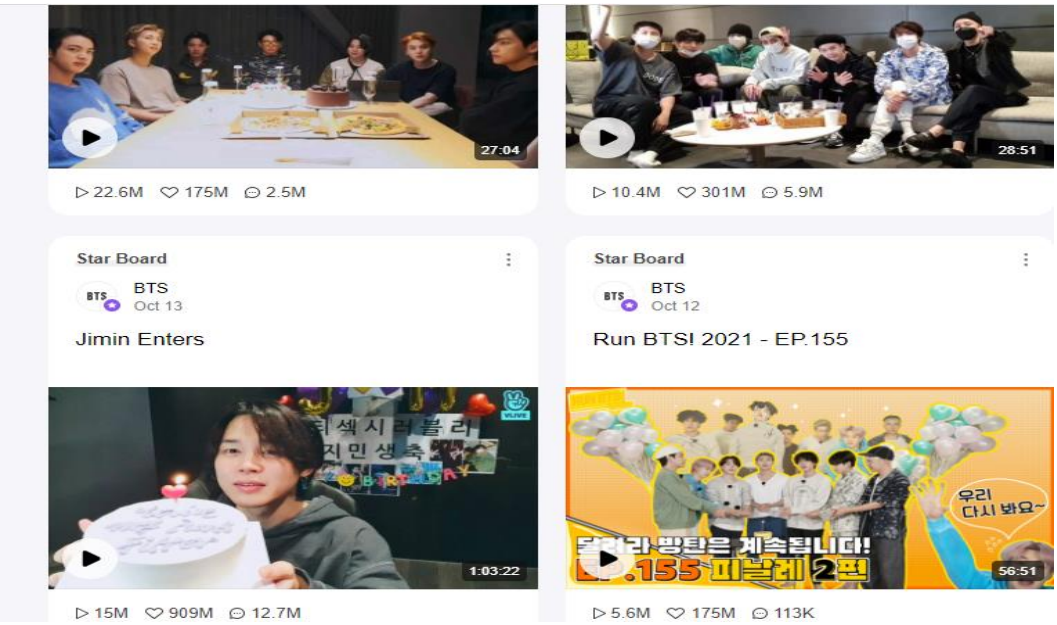


Photo 2: BTS Vlive Channel (Source: vlive.tv)



Photo 3: BTS World Game (Source: youtube.com)



Photo 4: BT21 and TINYTAN

BTS and Storytelling Marketing

BTS uses transmedia storytelling named "BTS UNIVERSE." The "BTS UNIVERSE" storyline is independent of BTS members' real lives. Transmedia storytelling started with music videos and kept with webtoons (comic book/manhwa) (Wikipedia.org, 2021). Webtoon's story is about seven best friends who separated because of many problems they faced. One of them has a unique talent. This member goes back in time and tries to change his friend's lousy fortune (www.webtoons.com, 2021). The webtoon storyline is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: BTS Universe

Character Name	Member	Story
Jin	Kim Seok Jin	He can go back to time
Suga	Min Yoon Gi	Lost his mom in fire. He tried to suicide
RM	Kim Nam Joon	He works at gas station. He has money problems
J-Hope	Jung Ho Seok	Abondened by his mother
Jimin	Park Jimin	He has traumas and stays in the hospital for mental issues.
V	Kim Tae Hyung	Suffer cause of alcoholic dad
Jungkook	Jeon Jungkook	His familiy ignore him



Photo 5: BTS Universe (Source: www.google.com)

The storyline continued with the game "BTS Universe Story," and fans got a chance to create their own stories for the universe. In this way, fans also get to be part of the BTS Universe (https://btsuniversestory.netmarble.com/en/, 27.07.2021). Over the one million people downloaded "BTS World" game(googleplay.com,2022).

BTS touches on real-life problems in their songs and BTS Universe storyline. Members shared their tough times with fans through Vlive and Weverse chats. BT21 and TINYTAN characters also have their own stories, and animation characters can do everything real BTS or others cannot. It helps to create unlimited content. BTS keeps getting fans' interest with content and storytelling strategies.

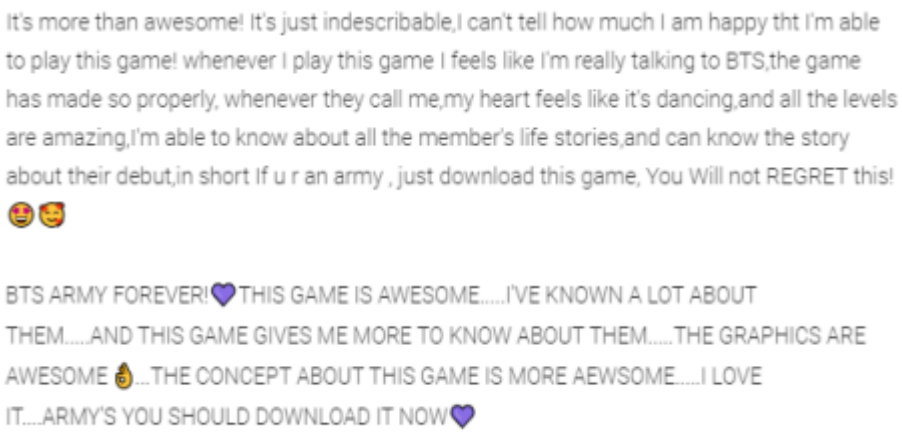
Para-social relationship between BTS and ARMY

In this chapter, the para-social relationship (between BTS and ARMY) was analyzed in three sections.

Factors' effect on the creation of para-Social relationships between ARMY and BTS:

Reality: Persona's story is a crucial factor in interacting with an audience. If the persona has a realistic story, the audience feels empathy with it, making it easy to create a para-social relationship. In the case of BTS, the group not just shared their own stories but also created a realistic storyline with "BTS Universe" and BT21.

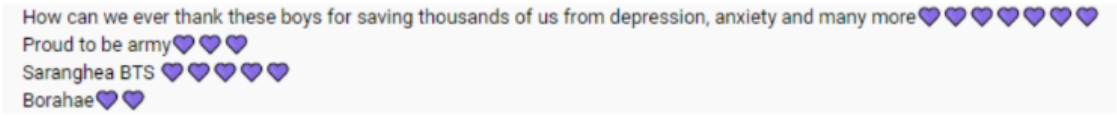
Decreasing uncertainty: Decreasing uncertainty about persona makes it easy to create para-social relationships. BTS was used social media since its pre-debut years actively. The fans learned about all members' lives, thoughts, likes, Etc. Also, fans learned new things about members through the BTS game "BTS World." Here are some examples;

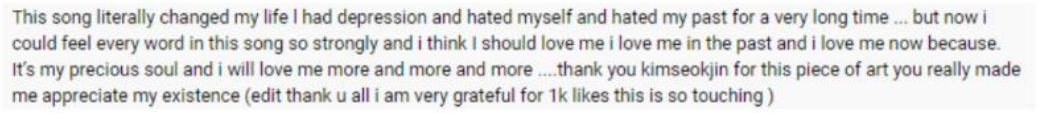


BTS gave details about them in the content, and fans got happy to learn about them. It contributed to create a para-social relationship between ARMY and BTS.

Persona's personality and skills: Persona's personality and skills affect para-social relationship creation. BTS showed their talent as an artist with tv shows, social media, concerts, Etc. Also, members showed their personalities with their social media posts, interviews, and reality shows.

Audiences' personality and skills: The Audiences' personalities and skills also affect the para-social relationship. In this research, even if it cannot make generalized when analyzing fans' comments examined, most fans have depression, anxiety, hard childhood, and struggle with life. Most researchers found lonely people, neurotic people, or unsocial people interact with media characters easy than others (Şeker-2018, Rubin-1985, Arslan-2013).





Parasocial Process

Cognitive process: The cognitive process in the parasocial relationship starts with the media character catching the audience's attention (Sood and Rogers,2000:390)**.** Analyze to first interaction between BTS and ARMY was examined through fan comments in the BTS debut stage. The video has 5k fan comments in the total. In this case just analyzed debut date fan comments to understand first interaction. Approximately %60 of comments were about members' talent and beautiful lyrics.

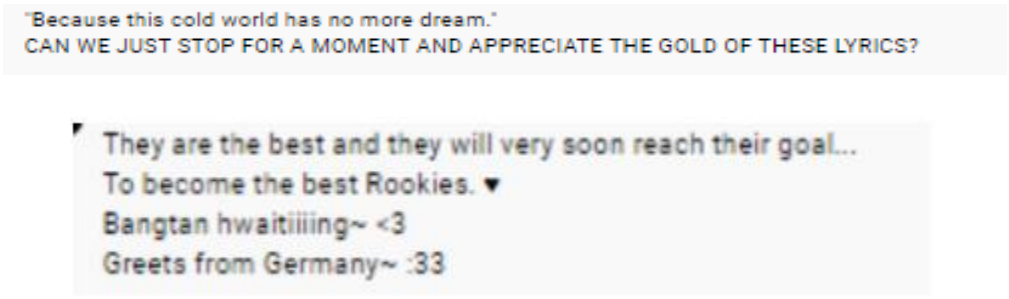


Photo 6: BTS Debut Stage Fan Comment (Source: www.youtube.com)

Emotional Process: It was observed through fan comments that ARMY (BTS fandom) shares members' happiness and sadness.

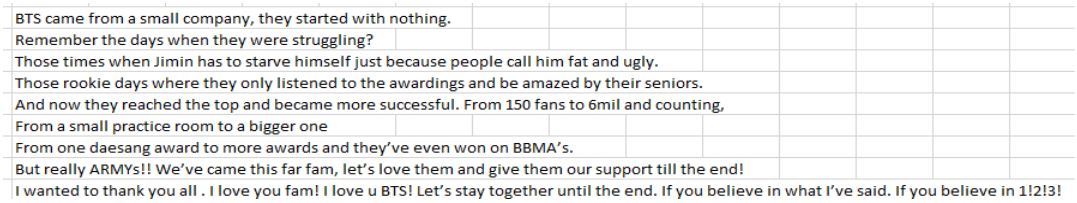


Photo 7: Fan Comment (Source: www.youtube.com)

Behavioral Process: ARMY buys all BTS albums and official merch about BTS, go fan meetings and concerts, and it proves the behavioral process of para-social relationships.



Photo 8: Jungkook's Vlive (Source: www.koreaboo.com)

The wine brand, JungKook drank in the video,attracted great attention and the brand sold all the wine involved(koreaboo.com,28.08.2021).

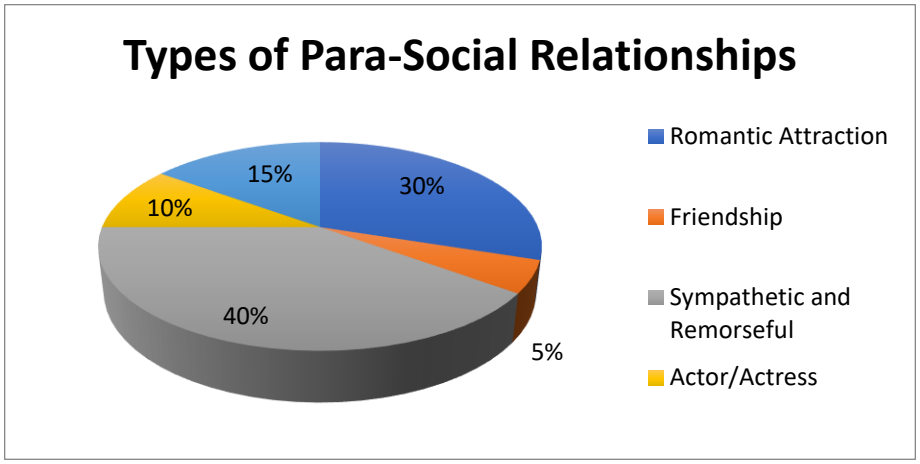
BTS group has cooperated with many brands. Some of those are Hyundai, Snickers, Coway, Samsonite, Chilsung, etc. Mcdonalds' made special menus for BTS. Samsung launched the "BTS Galaxy Fan Edition " phone. Acccording to The Korea Herald, the Galaxy S20+ and Galaxy Buds+ BTS Edition were sold out one hour after pre-orders (Rox,2020).

BTS teams up with Starbucks to launch the "Be the Brightest Stars" campaign, including limited-edition beverages, food and merchandise exclusively in South Korea (stories.starbucks.com,28.08.2021). Merchs sold out so fast and global fans want Starbucks to make this campaing global (Hong,2020).

BTS bring attention to brands them collaborated. Fans engaged with the brands because of BTS (Nicholson,2021). It is safe to say BTS has strong ınflues on the fans.

Para-Social Relationship Types:

According to fan comments para-social relationship types between BTS and ARMY were shown in Graph 2.

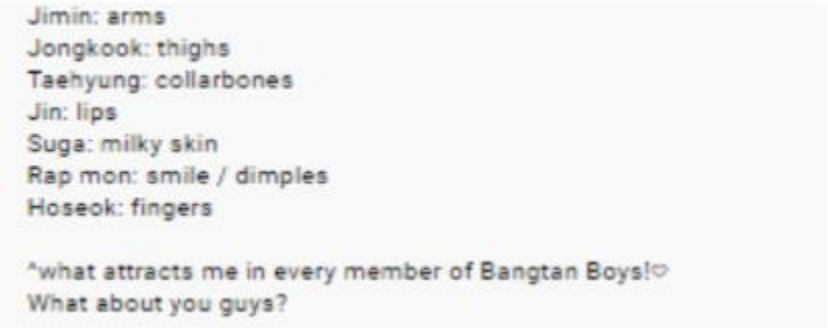


Graph 2: Para-Social Relationships Types

Romantic:

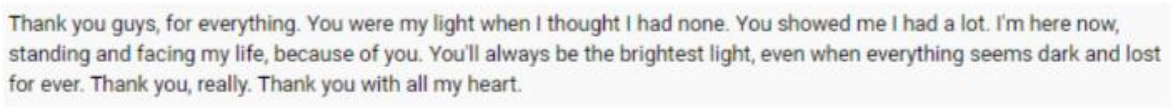
Fans were impressed by BTS members' looks and personalities. Most fans have romantic feelings about members and see members as ideal types.

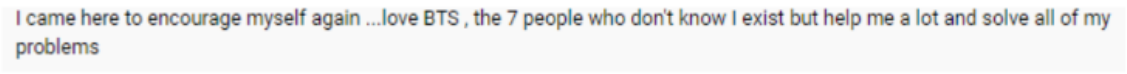




Sympathetic and Remorseful:

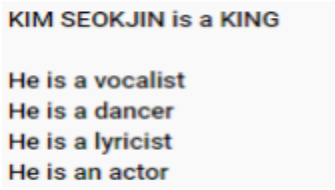
Fans who have the same experience and problems with members feel sympathy for BTS. Establishing para-social relationships is easy if the stories and contents are similar to the audience's life.

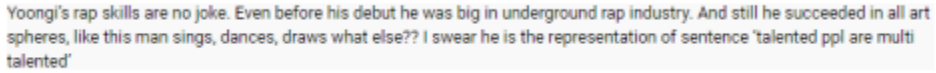




Actor/Actress:

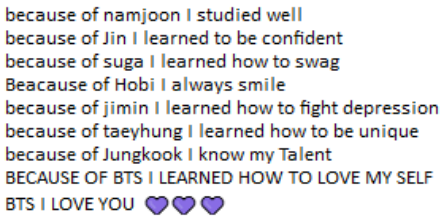
Each BTS member impress fans with talent. Fans always are proud of their talents.





Idolization:

ARMY see BTS as a hero and take them as a role model. Most fans commented on how they get over depression and anxiety and love themselves through BTS.





Friendship:

Fans commented on how much they like members' friendship and want a friend like them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research examined the effect of content and storytelling marketing on creating a para-social relationship with brand/fan communities. BTS and their fans, ARMY, were examined as a sample. In the first part, content and storytelling marketing and para-social relationships were explained as conceptual. The second part, ıt was analyzed how BTS used these marketing strategies and examined the para-social relationship with fans through content analysis.

BTS has used content and storytelling marketing since the pre-debut years. The group has provided information about itself to fans through content, and members showed off their talents through performances and programs. All these contents and programs have reduced the uncertainty about the members and facilitated the establishment of para-social relationships. From here, it can be partible that the transparency of the contents, providing information about brand identity, and reducing uncertainty facilitate the establishment of para-social relationships.

The group addressed realistic topics such as "future anxiety, family problems, love, depression" in content and storytelling marketing strategies. These issues have enabled the target audience who have experienced the relevant situations to establish an emotional connection with the group. The message of content and story that touches on the target audience's feelings make it easier to create a para-social relationship.

Through transmedia storytelling, fans follow the story on different platforms to understand the whole story. Fans watch videos and read manga on Naver webtoons to understand the story.

The "BTS Universe Story" game allowed fans to become part of the storyline. Transmedia storytelling strategy contributed to the behavioral and cognitive process of a para-social relationship between ARMY and BTS.

TINY TAN and BT21 helped to create unlimited and free content.

ARMY bought products, albums, go concerts, watch movies to show their love to BTS. It is safe to say parasocial relationship occurs gain for the brand.

It was observed that brands could build para-social relationships by using realistic, emotional, motivating, and arousing curiosity content&stories. This study can guide brands that want to establish a para-social relationship with brand communities, especially in the entertainment and communication sector. The target audience can relate to brands when they touch on their feelings and provide for their needs.

One of the most significant limitations of the work is that it is only possible to examine some of the fan comments that come to every share made by the BTS group. In a similar study, the focus can be on a single content-storytelling marketing channel or a target audience in a specific age range.

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