

# **Team Bear Versus Tiger**

An Analysis of the Use and Role of Emojis in a K-pop Fan Community

Hanna Haapala

Bachelor's Thesis

Department of English

School of Languages and Translation Studies

Faculty of Humanities

University of Turku

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This thesis analyses how emoji use facilitates belonging and membership within a K-pop fan community. Its aim is to outline typical emoji practices in the context of fan-created language and show how these practices contribute to gaining membership. The data come from posts on X made by fans of the group BTS which include emojis or discussion about the emojis associated with the band. Drawing on the Community of Practice framework, the analysis views learning a social event and demonstrates how the emoji practices serve multiple functions from shorthand referencing to signalling membership. The findings reveal an emoji competence which is not only crucial for engagement within the community but also actively promoted to newcomers by more experienced members. Overall, the study indicates that emojis serve a complex role in the construction and maintenance of a global community. This thesis has important implications for community specific emoji research.

**Key words:** digital language, emojis, fan community, community of practice, social media posts,

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# 1 Introduction

*Hallyu*, the Korean Wave, has become one of the biggest cultural movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Khedun-Burgoine and Kiaer 2022, 1). The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) describes it as “increase in international interest in South Korea and its popular culture” which in turn entails cultural elements from television (known as K-dramas) to food (e.g. K-BBQ). As one of the leading aspects of *Hallyu*, South Korean popular music (henceforth K-pop) has taken over especially the geographically distant western world in the recent decade through digital world (Khedun-Burgoine and Kiaer 2022, 11). Online, via social media, fans have spread K-pop rapidly through their strong presence which emerges in the form of hashtag campaigns, fundraising, organised streaming and voting to name a few common activities (Moon 2020, n.p.). As a result, these communities form their own ways of communicating which together with the digital age bring about specialised practices. For example, the fans of K-pop have formed a system of assigning representative emojis to their favourite artists. The fans “in the know” can then code and decode messages using practices formed and used exclusively within their own community.

Previous research on emojis lacks exploration of emojis used to replace written text which often occurs in the context of K-pop fans (e.g. Danesi 2017). There is also limited research on emoji use specifically in fan communities. Some K-pop-specific language research has been conducted in relation to fan translations (e.g. Aisyah, Zainudin and Yoan 2019) and emoji use at large (e.g. Lee and Park 2025). The emoji code system has been included in research as a feature of wider discussion on neologism within K-pop fan communities (Arivah Zayyan et al. 2023). This thesis then fills a gap in research by highlighting emojis’ role as integrated elements in digital language within a specific community while also contributing to research on K-pop-specific practices. The aim of this thesis is to explore the emoji-for-name practice as a feature of community building among ARMY (the collective name for fans of the K-pop group BTS) based on the fans’ social media posts on X (formerly known as Twitter). The study seeks to answer the following question: how do emoji practices in K-pop fan communities function as shared in group knowledge that helps fans gain membership?

The thesis draws on theory of learning as a social process by Lave and Wenger in which they propose the concept of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, 29). Their primary focus is on learning a profession through apprenticeship and their example cases included midwives and tailors (Lave and Wenger 1991, 65). Although fan activities online are not

traditionally considered a profession and the goal here is not to suggest otherwise, Lave and Wenger have succeeded in their aim to offer a framework to discuss learning as a path to membership in a specific community of practice (Lave and Wener 1991, 29). This framework will help examine and explain how linguistic, cultural, and social practices can be acquired through ongoing participation. Learning in a community of practice is split into three parts: shared interest (domain), engagement, and practice (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 27). In this study the parts are as follows: shared interest in the K-pop group BTS, engagement through posts on the social media platform X, and the practice of assigning representative emojis to members.

The thesis begins with an overview of the theoretical framework in section 2. The section also discusses background motivation for researching emojis in relation to communities and identity. Section 3 describes the data collection and how the data was marked for different features for the analysis. Next, section 4 presents the analysis with relevant data examples and section 5 discusses the findings in relation to the research question. Finally, the thesis ends with a summarising conclusion.

## 2 Theory and Background

This section is a review of the key concepts and previous research which are the basis of this thesis. First, 2.1 outlines the theoretical framework by Lave and Wenger in relation to the concept of community. Secondly, 2.2 introduces the basics of emojis in digital language and relevant literature. Finally, 2.3 gives a more detailed description of the emoji use within the ARMY community.

### 2.1 Community of Practice

The key concepts of the Community of Practice theory support its application to social learning beyond its original context of apprenticeship. Firstly, as mentioned above, Lave and Wenger base their work on viewing learning as a social practice and around the term legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991, 29). The authors do not see learners as isolated individuals but as participants within a community of practice (CoP) who begin as newcomers and in the process of gaining knowledge they also gain membership and move towards full participation (Lave and Wenger 1991, 37). This is crucially connected to the data of this thesis which come from an interactive social media platform.

Secondly, a community of practice itself is a set of people “who share [...] passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 4). The shared practice created in a community can vary from practical skills, as is the case with traditional everyday notion of apprenticeship, to a silent understanding of the shared topic (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 5). This suggests that sharing knowledge is what creates a community, regardless of the shape of the shared content, and that one’s place within the community “deepens” alongside the knowledge they gain. Still, it is important to note that Lave and Wenger do not want to imply that a CoP would have a “centre” of “complete participation” as that would suggest that learning is linear or possible to “complete” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 36).

Lastly, Lave and Wenger see identity and learning as inseparable (Lave and Wenger 1991, 115). This suggests that gaining the membership through knowledge also means gaining identity. From this perspective, learning is not simply the accumulation of knowledge but a process which transforms one’s identity. For a fan this means that demonstrating competence in an in-group practice also signals alignment with a shared social identity with its own norms

and values shared by the whole community. For the purposes of this thesis, the implications of a shared group identity versus one's personal experience will not be considered.

## 2.2 Emojis in Digital Language

*Emoji* is a loan word from Japanese, in which *e* means picture and *moji* character (OED). It is likely only coincidentally akin to the English term *emoticon* which refers to “a facial expression formed by a short sequence of keyboard characters” used in computer mediated communication (CMC) (ibid.). The visual message of emojis (and emoticons) helps communication through different languages around the world (Danesi 2016, vii). In addition to language barriers, emojis make up for features lacking in CMC such as gestures (Hancock et al. 2023, 1335). Semantic studies of emojis have shown that the interpretations of most common emojis remain mostly the same across languages and that closely related languages correlate with each other on even higher levels (Barbieri et al. 2016, 534). These findings suggest that emojis contribute to the concept of a global village by offering connections through a relatively universal language.

On the other hand, emojis are connected to identity. For example, age influences emoji use and interpretation significantly and younger people are expected to have more specialised meanings (Herring and Dainas 2020, 22). Interpretation is also influenced by the surrounding culture for example, is a cat viewed as a household pet, a sacred animal, or a source of food? (Danesi 2016, 123). In addition to these in-group meanings, emoji use is influenced by the platform (WhatsApp vs X) and operating system (iOS vs Android) (Morstatter et al. 2017, n.p.). This suggests the existence of an emoji competence which means that an effective emoji user can code and decode emoji meanings accordingly across platforms and social settings (Danesi 2016, 36). That in turn indicates that there is a specific skill to be learnt.

The idea of a required competence is also supported by the fact that the rules of a language apply to emojis just the same when people use emojis only instead of words to construct full utterances (Danesi 2016, 82). For example, grammatical features such as possessive markers can be attached to emojis and (traditional) words alike. Such examples can be used to challenge the perception of what a ‘word’ is, and to prove that emojis should be regarded as more than just punctuation or aesthetic markers. Both claims are also present in the following data as they function as the motivation behind the analysis of this thesis.

## 2.3 Emojis in K-pop Fan Culture

Emojis have become an integral part of digital language and are particularly relevant in fan-created language. One reason for that is emotional involvement in the subject of the interest which allows for, or even demands, expression of emotion (Vatian et al. 2018, 65). Fans also tend to use community specific language, including but not limited to emojis, to enforce their shared membership with fans of the same thing (Lee and Park 2025, n.p.). Though this is not exclusive to K-pop, for example, membership to a Beyoncé fan community can be expressed with a bee emoji (ibid.).

For fans of K-pop, emojis are in the core of communication because they have taken the emoji coding a step further. They have established a practice of assigning an emoji to represent their favourite idol. The choice of emoji does not base itself on any fixed meaning, that is, sometimes the connection could be a visual resemblance or a personality trait or simply an inside joke between the idol and fans. Regardless, the choice is organically negotiated within in the community. Overall, the emojis are often recognised by the idols themselves and used by fans and official accounts alike. The emoji is then used in place of the person's name in writing in various types of social media posts from updates to translations.

The practice is largely consistent across different fan communities because they all share the orthographic, grammatic, and pragmatic features and only the vocabulary level (i.e. the emoji itself) varies from one community to the next (Arivah Zayyan 2023, 104). This suggests that the practice can be split into two levels. On the base level, a general communicative competence is transferrable across communities after it is once acquired. On the higher level, community specific learning is required for full participation. In addition to enabling participation, the mastered emoji practice is also used to express affiliation with the community. While visible markers of fan identity are traditionally associated with physical merchandise, many of their functions can be attributed to emojis in digital contexts. For example, the meanings signalled through such symbols are targeted at other members of the community, not outsiders (Mohammed and Balqis 2025, 88). In addition, fans can positively influence the narrative surrounding an idol through visible support (Mohammed and Balqis 2025, 91). As such, emoji use does not only construct affiliation but also displays membership.

### 3 Methodology

This section introduces the dataset and describes how it was collected and prepared for the qualitative analysis. Section 3.1 lays out how the data collection came to be from platform and community choices to the criteria for individual posts. Section 3.2 describes the further sorting of the data.

#### 3.1 Data Collection

The key aspect of the data collection was to narrow down the data to the targeted items. Because the target phenomenon is crucially connected to fan translation, the first narrowing down happened with the choice of platform. X is a popular source of (fan)translations because it is real-time and brevity-oriented which benefit from the hashtag system and threaded posts (Aisyah, Zainudin, and Yoan 2019, 52). Moreover, posts can easily combine text with photos, video, audio or links to posts on other platforms. Finally, fans can access multiple translation versions by different accounts in a single place (Aisyah, Zainudin, and Yoan 2019, 51). All these features convenience both the production and consumption of fan translations.

After platform, the community aspect was narrowed down to one group. BTS is among the biggest K-pop groups based on many meters for example, number of monthly Spotify listeners or Instagram followers (BTS 2026a, 2026b). In addition to a large fan community, the length of their career, since debuting in 2013, enables that there has been sufficient time for the establishment of habits as well as other phenomenon, namely change and conflict (Big Hit Music, n.d.).

Furthermore, X itself motivates the formation of a system such as the emoji practice. Since it is a text-based platform, the topic of the post requires written identification, cf. posting photos on Instagram. However, the platform has a character limit of 280 in place for most users, but anyone can purchase a subscription which includes a limit of 25 000 characters (X Developer Platform n.d.). The X operating system counts different glyphs with different weights, for example, a Latin alphabet character counts as one but emojis and Chinese, Japanese, and Korean glyphs count each as two (ibid.). This means that a post about BTS member Jung Kook<sup>1</sup> uses eight characters in English (romanised), four in Korean/Hangul (정국), and two

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of choosing one of the many romanisation systems of Korean, I have decided to use the names as they most commonly appear in media, e.g. Jung Kook over Jeongguk.

with an emoji (🐰/bunny). Below, Table 1 lists the naming options for all seven BTS members excluding Hanguk as all collected data from fans will be in English (i.e., featuring romanised forms).

Table 1. Representative emojis associated with BTS

Stage Name	Real Name	Representative Emoji	Emoji Description
RM	Namjoon	🐼	koala
Jin	Seokjin	🐹	hamster
SUGA	Yoongi	🐭🐱	cat, mouse
j-hope	Hoseok	🐎🦄🐿	horse, unicorn, squirrel
Jimin	Jimin	🐣	chick
V	Taehyung	🐅🐻	tiger, bear
Jung Kook	Jungkook	🐰	bunny

Table 1 demonstrates that within the standard 280-character limit, the choice between the alternatives often makes a considerable difference. In cases where a member has multiple possible representative emojis for example, mouse or cat for SUGA, all variants were included in the data collection. It is worth noting, however, that the status of these alternatives is not equal: the mouse is outdated and largely forgotten, the horse and unicorn carry negative connotations, while the bear and tiger coexist in active use.

The next step was to find BTS translation and update accounts. For inclusion in this dataset, translation or update account needed to have at least 100,000 followers. For these accounts, the X's built-in function to search was used for the relevant emojis used in posts of a particular account. On the search bar it then read "from:[username] [one of the emojis in Table 1]". Some adjacent posts, namely replies and quoted posts, to the results were also included. Additionally, keywords and phrases such as "BTS emoji guide" and "[a member's name] emoji" were used on platform wide searches. For such independent posts (i.e., not found through the account first) a minimum number of 100 likes was set. Both numeric demands aim to ensure that the content and format are understood and approved by fellow community members.

There was no specific timeframe set for the publication time of the posts other than that they would have to be after the group's formation in 2013. However, due to convenience and algorithm influence, recent posts were most accessible. Any additional inclusions in the

original posts, such as photos, were not included in the collection and thus will not be considered in the analysis. Finally, the collected posts came from public accounts to avoid ethical issues.

### **3.2 Methods**

Ahead of the analysis, the qualified posts were compiled into a spreadsheet featuring the text content of the posts, date of posting, and a link to the original post. In addition, the emojis used were included in a separate cell along with the names of the corresponding members. As a final step, the data was sorted more closely according to the Community of Practice framework.

The posts were marked, according to the three-way split of situated learning, for domain, engagement, and practice. The first of the three aspects, domain, was included in the shape of the filters for the data collection. Thus, it did not need to be considered at this time. However, a few topics repeated themselves in the posts and those were marked together to be used as case examples in the analysis. For the second part, engagement, posts with overt engagement were marked. Of course, every post on the platform is engagement in the sense that the person behind the post is partaking in public conversation but for the purposes of this feature, more was needed. Such overtness in this case manifested itself as directly addressing the intended audience or other interactions such as dialogue through the reply function on the platform. For example, educational guideposts explicitly targeted at new fans were sorted as over engagement.

Lastly, attention was paid to the different uses of the practice which resulted in four categories of application. The largest number of posts are in category one which features translation posts. Second come more generic update posts, though overlap with translation posts frequently occurs. The third category is for posts from the official BTS accounts, that is, posts made by the members themselves or the company management behind them. These are also jointly referenced in the thesis as official posts. The final category is for instances of the emojis used in-text rather than as marking the speaker or as part of the aesthetic look of the textpost. Category four also includes all miscellaneous examples. In the next section these categories are used as support for the key aspects that make up the analysis.

## 4 Analysis







This analysis examines the role of emoji use in community building. The aim in this section is to demonstrate the ways in which the practice does accommodate a sense of belonging to a group. The subsection 4.1 showcases examples which prove the need to learn the practice as it appears to be a crucial part of accessing the community. In section 4.2, examples of the learning community aspect are highlighted. Then, sections 4.3 and 4.4 display the case examples that emerged from the sorting of the data.

### 4.1 Common Uses of the Practice

Majority of the posts found using the search function with the relevant emojis were from translation accounts. The collected dataset includes examples from six different translation focused accounts which together have over 3 million followers. Each translator has their own style of producing content which is subject to change (Moon 2020, n.p.). However, for the purposes of this study, such details are not considered beyond the community's ability to evolve. Livestreams are an important part of the promotional activities of a K-pop act and a big contributor in the fans learning "to know" their favourite artists through a casual portal such as a livestream from a car (Kim, Hwang, and Kim 2021, 11). Thus, it is important and of great interest for the fan to be able to access such content provided by the idol(s).

Table 2 below presents two examples of a typical translation post. First, an excerpt of dialogue translated by Account 1 (A1) from a livestream hosted on a separate platform. Second, A2 has posted this translation as a reply to the original Korean post made on the @BTS\_twt X account shared by the members.

Table 2. Examples of a typical translation post.<sup>2</sup>

Account	Content
Account 1:	<p> The process of it all made me tear up</p> <p> I was sobbing too at mine on last day holding the guitar like </p> <p> We know</p> <p> It's the 3rd time he's saying it now, looks like he wants us to focus on that</p> <p> We must acknowledge it! HE SAID HE WAS SOBBING!</p>

<sup>2</sup> The plus sign at the end marks that the translation continues in the replies demonstrating the limitations posed by the character limit.

Account	Content
	+
Account 2:	<p>[ trans ]</p> <p>Taehyungah happy birthday-ing~ (← satoori)  Let's become captain korea next year  #VHappyBday #ItsSugaHyung  #LetsGoToDaeguTogetherNextTime  #YourArmsBecameThicker #ImEnvious</p> <p>[ T/N: He was replying to 🐱's message in SBS Gayo Daejeon and 🐱's arm show off in 🐱's vlive]</p>

The dialogue in A1 is coded and decoded with the help of the emoji practice fast, which benefits both the fan translator and consumer in these simultaneous examples as discussed before. To see a reply post translation, such as the one from A2 can require more effort than the automatic machine translation available, however, the latter does not translate hashtags which in this case form most of the message. Fans are willing to take the extra steps to gain the extra knowledge and accuracy of human translation (Aisyah 2017, 78). In this example the translator has even offered a note on the dialectal tone (*satoori* in the brackets) as well as further context on the references made by the poster that is the cat emoji aka SUGA.

The above examples highlighted the emoji practice used in translations and their importance for a fan seeking to learn about the idols. Table 3 shows examples of other practical uses of the emoji identifier. The first example is a post about a YouTube video posted relation to a solo project of RM who is identified with a hashtag. The featuring guests, SUGA and Jimin, are only included in the form of the emojis. In the second post, made by RM for the shared members' account, he uses the koala emoji to let the fans know which of the seven members posted this.

Table 3. Official accounts participating in the practice.

Account	Content
@bts_bighit	<p>[#방탄밤] #RM 과 고급 인력 🐱🐱 이 함께 한 시아노 타입 아트웍 체험! 🟦🟩 #작품명백안 #A4용지아닙니다</p> <p>#흐린날보다는맑은날추천 🌤️🌞  (<a href="https://youtu.be/98oXJvAkKRU">https://youtu.be/98oXJvAkKRU</a>)</p>
@BTS_twt	<p>형이 왜 거기서 나와..? #택시 #깜놀 🐼</p>

The primary insight from Table 3 is that these are not instances of fan-to-fan communication. The participation of the company as well as the members demonstrates an institutional acceptance of the practice and encourages the behaviour. Moreover, these two examples feature no mention of a name which makes it impossible to try and decode who the post is about without knowledge of the practice, that is, these posts assume familiarity with the emojis and do not offer an opportunity to learn it without secondary help. The next subsection covers learning in the community.

## 4.2 Community Learning

Although Lave and Wenger (1991, 41) emphasise that peripheral learning is possible regardless of the presence of intentional educational form, the explicit teaching examples should not be overlooked. Table 4 includes a thread of three posts meant for newcomers. The first post is clearly marked “guide” and is followed by further explanations to deepen the knowledge. The post from A4 is a listing of what the emojis in their opinion are.

Table 4. Posts to educate newcomers.

Account	Content
Account 3:	EMOJI GUIDE (@BTS_twt ver.) 🐹 = Namjoon 🐹 = Seokjin 🐱 = Yoongi 🐿 = Hoseok 🐣 = Jimin 🐯 = taehyung 🐰 = Jungkook #BBMAsTopSocial BTS
	Brief explanations: 🐹 - Koya 🐹 - looks like a hamster (cute cheeks) 🐱 - lil meow meow 🐿 - looks like a squirrel (cheeks), acorn bag, Namjoon once uploaded a video of a squirrel and called it Hobi 🐣 - looks like a baby chick 🐯 - looks like a baby tiger 🐰 - looks like bunny
	Hoseok used to be known as 🐎 but I believe fans decided to change it because he mentioned on the show “Knowing Brothers” that he didn’t like the nickname by fans “j-horse”!
Account 4:	🐹 Namjoon 🐹 Seokjin 🐱 Yoongi 🐿 Hoseok 🐣 Jimin 🐯 Taehyung 🐰 Jungkook #KraftBearHugs <sup>3</sup>

Mutual engagement, one of the three parts of CoP, is evident in the thread by A3 as it is directly addressed to newcomers who yet do not possess the information offered in the post. The engagement is even more overt in A4 because that is a reply to a newcomer who asked

<sup>3</sup> This hashtag is for a fundraiser and does not relate to V or his bear emoji.

about the mouse and hamster emojis used in a previous translation by A4. The newcomer found their way to a post with the in-group practice in action which demonstrates peripheral participation. Additionally, providing the full list without a request demonstrates eagerness to help newcomers gain that in-group knowledge needed for participation. Such active promotion is also featured in A3's deeper explanations which are likely to rise more new questions.

### 4.3 Case Example 1: Change in the Practice

Much like a language, a thriving community needs to be able to undergo change to stay alive. However, since the emojis are used to replace a proper noun, an individual's name, change is not generally speaking expected. This first case example shows that as unlikely as it might be, it is not impossible to make changes.

As already hinted at by A3 in Table 4, j-hope used to be identified by the horse emoji, then the unicorn, and finally by the squirrel. The horse emoji escalated into the nickname "j-horse" which made the artist uncomfortable enough to speak up on the matter (*Knowing bros*, 2017. Episode 94). It seems unlikely that the pejoration of the horse emoji started within the community of ARMYs, but it certainly reached them through peripheral engagement. The unicorn seems to have been a first attempt in reclaiming a positive association but after j-hope's displeasure, the need for an alternative grew bigger and the squirrel was introduced.

Based on the dataset, the squirrel has been the preferred emoji since 2018-2019. In addition, the data demonstrates a very strict line on adhering to the new norm and correcting any misconduct as seen below. In Table 5, A5 publicly exposes another big<sup>4</sup> account for their misbehaviour by sharing incriminating screenshots from that account's activity.

Table 5. Posts demonstrating change in the practice.

Account	Content
Account 5	Despite knowing HSK does NOT want to be associated with a horse, they retweeted tweets that used the unicorn emoji for him, even though we collectively agreed we will use the squirrel emoji for him. They clearly don't care about him & don't respect his wishes.

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<sup>4</sup> Both have tens of thousands of followers.



A5's strong expression of corrective behaviour demonstrates the community's commitment to the practice and their willingness to police it. It is also evident from A5 that the motivation behind the change is solely the idol's opinion but that the community members are responsible for its execution. It can be said that adherence to the updated emoji practice is the price to keep one's membership. It should be noted that the corrective instructions are not always this extreme but the friendlier interactions between two accounts do not meet the required 100 likes for this dataset.

#### 4.4 Case Example 2: Disagreement on the Practice

Where full change is yet to occur, disagreement can be found. For ARMYs the biggest disagreement can be found between team bear and team tiger as they are known in the community. Originally, BTS member V used the tiger emoji to identify himself on the shared account (see Table 3). Then, an individual who attended a fansign event, a type of meet and greet, found out that as a child V had the nickname "baby bear". The debate truly began when V released a solo song called *Winter Bear* in 2019 (V 2019). He has commented on the disagreement multiple times himself but to no avail. In 2022 he posted an Instagram story with a poll between the two options which was won by the bear with 63% of the vote (Lyons 2022, n.p.). This had no impact on team tiger as can be seen from the stances, or the absence of them, displayed in Table 6 by both fans and official accounts.

Table 6. Posts about the bear vs tiger debate.

Account	Content
Account 6a:	(yes i will continue to use the tiger 🐯 emoji 😊😊😊😊😊)
Account 6b:	🐯 bear or tiger? if a bear and tiger is fighting, which side would <you/i> be on? there's more <ARMYs> who like bears. there's a lot of bears! for me? because ARMYs are saying bear bear bear, i think i like bears more! @BTS_twt
@bts_bighit	[#뷔생일ㄸㅋ] 반짝반짝 빛나는 아미와 🐯가 함께한 시간들 ✨ More photos @ ( <a href="https://facebook.com/bangtan.official/photos/?tab=album&amp;album_id=3229838477031392">https://facebook.com/bangtan.official/photos/?tab=album&amp;album_id=3229838477031392</a> ) #V #김태형 #VANTE #건강맨날해요 #보라해
@bts_bighit	[#뷔생일ㄸㅋ] 아미의 눈을 비춘 빛 태형이의 1년 모아모아 🐯🐻 More photos @( <a href="https://facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=bangtan.official&amp;set=a.4317126931635869">https://facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=bangtan.official&amp;set=a.4317126931635869</a> ) #V

Account	Content
	#김태형 #부 #하얀천사 #VCUT #뷔무행알 #아무행알 #아포방포
@BTS_twt	  #WinterBear <a href="https://btsblog.ibighit.com/394">https://btsblog.ibighit.com/394</a>

Example A6a is an additional note from the translator in the aftermath of the Instagram poll, and it displays the light-hearted almost joking attitude many have for the debate. A6b is a livestream translation demonstrating V's ability to side with team bear coincidentally made by A6 from team tiger. He has, however, also sided with team tiger. In a magazine interview he said: "This [tiger] is V. And this [bear] shows Kim Tae-hyung. [...] Many ARMYs have pointed out that both of these two look like me and asked which one I prefer. Since V is my persona... I'm still more into V" (Elle Korea 2023, 1:30). Finally, in the last example in Table 6 V shares his song *Winter Bear* on the members account and ironically identifies himself with the tiger emoji.

















The presented data shows that fans tend to have a preference between the two options whereas V approves both. There seems to be a bigger bias towards tiger within the sample accounts but that should not be used to draw definitive conclusions when large scale results, such as V's Instagram poll, support the opposite. Moreover, the official account, @bts\_bighit, run by BTS's label can be seen to please both sides. In 2019 V's official birthday post only included the tiger emoji and a year later in 2020 both tiger and bear (as is in Table 6). The double use has been in place by the official account ever since in all posts related to V which feature the assigned emojis.

#### 4.5 The Grammar of Emoji Combinations

The final section here provides examples which further highlight the claims about change and grammar features mentioned above. Table 7 shows an example which was marked for almost every feature included in the sorting. The three lines of emojis in post A6c are three poll options inviting the followers to engage with the process of adding new symbols for the system. In this case, member Jungkook deleted his personal Instagram account and set up one

for his dog (Bam). Post A6d is then the winner of the poll in action in an update post<sup>5</sup>. Finally, A7 uses emojis fully integrated to the text (cf. A2 in Table 2).

Table 7. Posts featuring combined meaning.

Account	Content
Account 6c:	which emoji(s) should i use for insta post translations from bam's account?    
Account 6d:	  's instagram
Account 7:	Last day of #NamJinWeek Memorable...  got motivated and inspired by his pillar  . The way   President  teasing him and member's      reaction is "so precious"

These examples highlight the degree of automation that comes as the practice competence is acquired. In the first case, A6 does not further explain the options and thousands of people participated in the vote. The victory of the dog and bunny combination can indicate a desire to develop the practice to more complicated grammar structures, such as possession here. The in-text use shows a similar deeper decoding process because individually (and just with the help of Table 1) anyone can read the koala as Namjoon and hamster as Jin. However, the two emojis back-to-back can only be read correctly as the merged name *Namjin* by those with deeper in-group knowledge. The use of *Namjin* over *Namjoon and Jin* can carry relevant connotations such as shipping<sup>6</sup> in addition to being shorthand.

Taken together, these examples illustrate how widely spread, acknowledged, and supported the emoji practice is within the BTS/ARMY community. In consequence, it can afford internal disagreement without collapsing the whole practice. The examples demonstrate the main uses from the fans, ARMY, as well as the members and the company behind them. The emoji system can and does evolve when the emojis adopt more intricate grammatical meaning features and thus challenge the relationship between emojis and words.

<sup>5</sup> The original Instagram post had no caption to translate hence overlap between update and translation accounts.

<sup>6</sup> Shipping is advocacy for a couple, usually romantic.

## 5 Discussion

This thesis set out to explore how do emoji practices in K-pop fan communities function as shared in group knowledge that helps fans gain membership. Through the application of the CoP framework the findings suggest that the emoji practice plays a central role in both the construction and maintenance of membership in the community. The practice is shown to be widely spread and supported in the community, as evidenced by the motivation, need, and help to learn it.

The first aspect of situated learning, the domain, manifests here as shared interest in BTS. It is what brings the community together and thus allows for practices to form (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 4). The emoji practice is grounded in the shared reference points that are the BTS members starting from the connection between a member and their assigned emoji. Crucially, access to this domain, BTS and K-pop in general, is highly dependent on fan-driven translation processes (Khedun-Burgoine and Kiaer 2022, 11). Thus, understanding of the emoji references regularly used in translations becomes a prerequisite for engagement in the community and the starting point of peripheral participation. This aligns with CoP's assumption that newcomers want to achieve full membership (Lave and Wenger 1991, 122). Therefore, the domain is what demands and motivates newcomers to learn the emoji practice to then participate as full participatory members of the community. However, it simultaneously creates an additional barrier for access into the K-pop community.

The second aspect, engagement, refers to the active mutual participation in the community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, 35). In this study, it is visible in several ways. Firstly, the act of posting content on a social media platform itself indicates productive participation in the community. Moreover, many of the posts included interactive features such as polls and explicit vocabulary (e.g. guide) but also use of the reply function on the platform. Thus, active participation functions as social interaction but also, crucially for the emoji practice, as a mechanism to exchange knowledge. The newcomers might ask for help directly (A4 in Table 4) or resources might be made available for those in need with more information than the newcomer would even know to ask about (A3 in Table 4). The availability of "teachers" and "learning materials" implies that new community members are wanted. Moreover, the in-group members are aware of the role of base level knowledge required to access more information, and in consequence, the membership. The older members can then use this to

regulate membership because newcomers are required to show ability to engage with the practice to be recognised as legitimate peripheral participants.

The final aspect, which is the practice itself, consists of the shared and evolving emoji use of the community. The need to learn and the availability of a teaching system show that the practice is highly functional. The high status of the practice is also evident in the endorsement it receives from both the idols and their management companies through official content that makes use of the practice. In addition, variation and change in the practice demonstrate that it is not static and allows for deeper inspection into the way the practice is negotiated within the community. Disagreement and change on the practice have not undermined cohesion but rather reinforced participation and proved that active engagement is required for up-to-date knowledge and membership. Thus, the practice demonstrates that learning is an ongoing process and never fully completed within the CoP (Lave and Wenger 1991, 36).

Through these three aspects the analysis shows that knowledge on the emoji practice is a key mechanism to achieve in-group membership. Previous research has similarly identified that learning the jargon specific to K-pop is required to understand the dynamics of the community (Kwon and Lynch-Kimery 2025, 7). However, this study extends those findings by demonstrating that the knowledge is not only functional but also performative. Via participation, the members show their alignment with community norms in routine interactions. In fact, most K-pop fans adopt the community's shared social identity to feel accepted (Maros and Barek 2022, 291, 293). For ARMYs a clear example of this is the formation of team bear and team tiger which function as memberships within the ARMY membership. To make the choice between the two is a performative act through which a fan places themselves into the ongoing community discourse. At the same time, the non-conflictual nature of the division has provided the community with an additional opportunity to perform identity (cf. playful tone of A6 in Table 6).

Taken together, these findings indicate that the emoji practice is actively maintained and transmitted by existing members which positions shared knowledge as the key to both participation and identity formation. In line with Lave and Wenger (1991, 122), identity is transformed and grown alongside knowledge, which indicates that the emoji practice is a major part of becoming ARMY. While previous research has focused on large-scale coordinated practices, such as voting and streaming, (e.g. Nam et al. 2024), this study highlights the equally significant role of everyday communicative practices. The voluntary

adoption of bigger performative roles, such as fan translator, is a way to act out the ARMY identity just the same as decoding the emojis in a translation post. At the same time, the coded emojis can be used decoratively outside the shared community to signal the additional meaning specifically to fellow in-group members. Thus, the emoji practice links together how the ARMY identity is learnt, performed, and recognised.

## 6 Conclusion

This study explored the ways in which the fans of the K-pop group BTS use their emoji practice knowledge to facilitate in-group membership. The collected data supported the underlying hypothesis that knowledge would be an important factor in gaining membership. Firstly, it was commonly assumed by BTS and their management as well as other fans that fans are familiar with the emoji practice and its associations. Secondly, familiarity with the practice proved to be crucial for acquiring deeper knowledge in the future. In this sense, the emojis are more than just shortcuts for convenience.

Drawing on the Community of Practice perspective adopted for this thesis, the findings support the argument that learning is connected to identity. The ARMY membership moves from peripheral participation towards full membership through engagement with other in-group members. In the end, the newcomer has mastered the emoji practice and can use it to display identity and belonging. Learning the practice is then both a requirement for membership as well as a route to participation in the community. This study then demonstrates a successful application of the CoP theory to a predominantly digital contemporary context.

More broadly, this study demonstrates the value of including emojis in research on digital language. Contemporary online communities are shaped by digital language practices, and it is important to not underestimate the depth of potential meaning for seemingly simple constituents such as emojis. At the same time this study also illustrates the constant and rapid change occurring in digital languages. The current study demonstrated how communicative tools can be transformed to suit the needs of a specific community, highlighting that the change can be intentional.

While this study fills a gap in research on emoji use in K-pop communities, it is limited especially in the scope of the collected dataset. Basic implications should be applicable to other K-pop communities but further research to confirm or deny universal similarities is needed. On the other hand, cross-cultural variation in the global communities remains a challenging feature for all research on the topic. Future research could also build on the commercial and marketing aspect of institutional participation. Ultimately, the topic is ever-changing and strongly tied to shaping the identity of a large and influential community, making a longitudinal approach of high interest in the future.

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