An Exploration of Power Reflected in BTS "Love Myself" Campaign

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Abstract: This study examined how power is discursively constructed and circulated in BTS's Love Myself campaign, which has had a significant emotional and social impact, especially among their fans, ARMY. Using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, this study analyzed how RM's speech at the UN in 2018 constructed power relations. The data set consists of six selected excerpts from the speech, supported by news articles and selected screenshots of fans' social media posts. The findings showed that the data demonstrated different forms of horizontal power between BTS and the audience: one symbolic, two persuasive, one normative, and two combining all three forms of power. These three types of discourse strategies are also supported by the active participation of ARMY, which strengthens the campaign in the digital space. The campaign helped shift shame-oriented cultural norms toward a more open and accepting environment regarding insecurity, self-worth, and mental health.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis; Love Myself Campaign; Power

INTRODUCTION

In this era, the popularity of artists exerts considerable influence on their audiences. A prominent example is Bangtan Sonyeondan, known as BTS. BTS's music often addresses social issues, personal struggles, mental health, and societal expectations, resonating with youth audiences (McLaren & Jin, 2020). BTS has also made significant contributions through speeches and humanitarian activities in collaboration with UNICEF. In November 2018, BTS became the first South Korean artist to launch their global campaign titled "Love Myself". This campaign aligns with their album, Love Yourself, which explores themes of love, friendship, and loss (Hasanah et al., 2019).

Several studies from various fields have demonstrated the success of this campaign. For example, Atmaja et al. (2021) analyzed Kim Namjoon's speech at the UN, focusing on four fundamental speech functions. Similarly, Warsidi et al. (2023) examined illocutionary speech acts in Oprah Winfrey's motivational speeches, identifying various forms and functions in motivational discourse. Other studies, including Eun (2023), Velia (2022), and Vetrix & Bangun (2022), demonstrated positive impacts of the campaign on fans, who reported increased self-confidence and personal development as a result of engaging with the campaign's messages. Achmad et al. (2019) explored expressions of self-confidence in BTS song lyrics using Branden's Six Pillars of Self-Confidence. Also, they analyzed the relationship between selected BTS songs and the Love Yourself campaign. Additionally,

Marasno et al. (2024) investigated how the delineation of social power in the novel Bumi Manusia (This Earth of Mankind). The results reveal that social power shaped both individual experiences and broader social structures and hierarchies. Rijal et al. (2022), on the other hand, have examined how language is used in social media, particularly Instagram, in product sales-buying activities. The results showed that the influence of communication in social media has changed the way individuals communicate. The adaptation of code-mixing and informal language taken from tertiary oral language into written form through communication media has become a meeting point for changes in people's language use.

Although few studies have examined the impact of the campaign, none have examined the power wielded in this campaign. Therefore, this study aims to examine how power is discursively constructed in BTS's Love Myself campaign, with a particular focus on RM's 2018 speech at the United Nations, by applying Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Discourse Analysis. Specifically, this study investigates how symbolic, persuasive, and normative forms of power operate textually, are circulated through digital practices, and contribute to the formation of horizontal power relations between BTS and their audience within broader sociocultural contexts.

METHOD

As a study, Discourse Analysis focuses on the function of language and the meaning behind a person's attitude or statement in various social contexts. Fairclough (1995) limited the interpretation of discourse studies to a variety of other things that refer to the formal nature of semiotic artifacts to unite a particular type of text. Gee et al. (2015) also explained that discourse is related to the way people use language and other semiotic systems to achieve certain social actions or refer to broader strategies that act to organize what the person says, writes, or says. Fairclough (1989), in Mu et al. (2021), considered language as discourse as a social practice, and he proposed that discourse is the entire process of social interaction, which includes not only texts, but also processes of social interaction, production, and interpretation. So, there are three elements of discourse involved: text, communication, and social context.

Discourse analysis provides a systematic methodology for describing and analyzing how the structure and content of texts encode ideas and relationships (Hamuddin et al., 2018). It serves as a critical tool for uncovering the layers of power embedded in social communication, enabling researchers to identify how power operates subtly through language choices and the construction of meaning. Power is thus manifested not only through overt coercion but also through symbolic persuasion present in everyday discourse. Fairclough (1995:59)delineated his theoretical framework into three levels of discourse analysis: (1) Micro (textual analysis), (2) Meso (discourse practice), and (3)
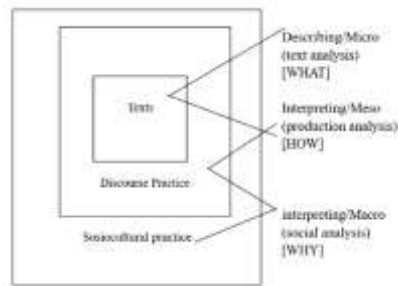
Macro (socio-cultural practice).

Figure 1. Analysis Framework of Three-Dimensional Discourse by Fairclough

In public discourse, identity formation is often closely linked to power. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power explains how influence can be exercised through meaning, legitimacy, and recognition rather than coercion. Symbolic power functions by shaping how social realities are perceived and accepted. In discourse, symbolic power often emerges through personal narratives, metaphors, and identity performances. Charteris-Black (2004) states that metaphors are particularly effective in shaping emotional alignment and moral evaluation, as they allow abstract experiences to be conveyed through vivid imagery. In addition to symbolic strategies, discourse employs persuasive and normative mechanisms to establish influence. Persuasive discourse relies on motivational language, emotional appeals, and calls to action. Perloff (2010) defines persuasion as a symbolic process in which the speaker attempts to influence the attitudes or behaviour of others without using direct force. On the other hand, operates through moral frameworks and value-based claims. Van Leeweun & Machin (2007) identify moral evaluation as the primary form of legitimation, in which actions or identities are justified by reference to shared values such as equality, dignity, or humanity.

The data for this study comprise two primary sources. The first primary data were obtained from the discourse in RM's speech at the United Nations in 2018, accessed via the United Nations' official YouTube channel, with a duration of 6 minutes and 57 seconds. The second primary data consists of a news article, social media content, and previous research relevant to the research. The researchers collected data using online observation and documentary analysis techniques. Subsequently, the researchers discussed and identified findings based on Fairclough's (1995) theoretical concepts.

This study is primarily grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis as the primary analytical framework. The concepts of symbolic, persuasive, and normative power are used as analytical indicators to examined how power is constructed within discourse. These concepts are not treated as independent theoretical frameworks, but rather as supporting perspectives that clarify the way language constructs relational influence. Integrating these concepts within Fairclough's CDA ensured that the

analysis remains coherent and theory-driven.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

In this section, the researcher would explain how power relations are depicted in Kim Namjoon's speech at the UN in 2018 based on Norman Fairclough's Discourse Analysis Theory. This study also shows how discourses can shape horizontal power between BTS and their audience.

1. Power Relations in Kim Namjoon's 2018 Speech at the United Nations

The section shows the forms of power relations that were constructed by BTS. From Kim Namjoon's speech at the UN, the form of power demonstrated is horizontal power with a symbolic, persuasive, and normative approach.

Data 1:

> "Like most people, I've made many and plenty mistakes in my life. I have many faults, and I have many more fears, but I am going to embrace myself as hard as I can, and I'm starting to love myself." (5:50 – 6:05)

In the data 1 above, personal pronouns construct social relations and identify positioning. The power possessed by BTS in this data 1 is symbolically demonstrated through Kim Namjoon's personal experiences. By referring to the pronoun "I," Kim Namjoon shows that he is not only a person who was immediately formed into a perfect leader, but also a human being who can make mistakes and has many fears within himself. In other words, Kim Namjoon tries to put himself on the same level as his fans and shows that self-acceptance begins with the courage to admit his weakness. In this context, the symbolic power used becomes a production of liberating and resistance to shame as aRM tool of social control discourse. The above sentences can also subconsciously create an emotional bond between fans and Namjoon indirectly. While Data 1 emphasizes how symbolic power is constructed through personal vulnerability and identification, this relational foundation is further extended in Data 2, where power operates not only symbolically but also persuasively through collective recognition and audience legitimization.

Data 2:

> "Our fans have become a major part of this campaign with their action and enthusiasm. We truly have the best fans in the world!" (0:40 – 0:49)

The power relations in this data 2 are both symbolic and persuasive. The symbolism conveyed by this sentence aims to legitimize fans as an important part of the campaign. With the above statement, Kim Namjoon symbolically distributes power to the audience, shifting their position from passive consumers to meaningful social actors. It makes sense of belonging and collective identity so that fan participation is considered a legitimate social contribution. The praise of "the best fans" creates a symbolic status that binds them

emotionally. This statement not only serves as symbolic praise that strengthens emotional affiliation and loyalty but also encourages the reproduction of collective action without direct coercion. Thus, persuasive power in this data is formed not through explicit instructions but through the production of meaning, the strengthening of identity, and affection that subtly mobilizes the audience to continue engaging in the campaign. After positioning fans as meaningful social actors through symbolic recognition in Data 2, the speech moves beyond acknowledgment toward active engagement, as shown in Data 3, where persuasive power explicitly invites the audience to voice their own experiences.

Data 3:

> "Tell me your story. I want to hear your voice. I want to hear your conviction. No matter who you are or where you're from, speak yourself." (5:15 – 5:30)

This data 3 shows the power of persuasion in the speech. The above sentences aim to invite active participation from the audience because their voices are also valuable. By choosing the words "I want to hear...", the invitation is more personal and provides space for personal desires, rather than coercion. The phrases "your story" and "your voice" personalize the message, emphasizing that individual experiences have value and deserve to be heard. Align with this, the emphasis on the word "conviction" affirms personal beliefs as a source of legitimacy. The statement "no matter who you are or where you're from" breaks down social, cultural, and even identity barriers, thereby expanding the reach of persuasion. Thus, the persuasive power in this data is conveyed through the creation of a discursive space that encourages the audience to express themselves voluntarily. Whereas Data 3 foregrounds persuasion by opening discursive space for self-expression, Data 4 deepens the ideological dimension of the speech by establishing normative power that reshapes how mistakes, flaws, and personal growth are morally understood.

Data 4:

> "Maybe I made a mistake yesterday, but yesterday's me is still me. Today, I am who I am with all my faults and my mistakes. Tomorrow, I might be a tiny wiser. And that'll be me too. These faults and mistakes are what I am, making the brightest stars in the constellation of my life." (3:42 – 4:13)

In data 4, BTS, represented by Kim Namjoon, shape a new moral value that everybody has the right to love themselves with all their flaws, so mistakes do not erase a person's identity. The normative power in this speech is formed through a process of reframing mistakes and imperfections. Instead of following a shame culture concept that treats mistakes as deviations from ideal norms, this data discursively establishes that mistakes are a legitimate part of one's identity that will continue to exist and persist. The phrase "a tiny wiser" reminds the audience that growth does not require instant perfection, but rather acceptance of the learning process. The metaphor "constellation of my life" is a symbolic

mechanism that normalizes weakness as an element that shapes the meaning of life, not as something that must be erased. Through this data, the normative power aims for the audience interpret their mistakes and turn them into ethical guidelines for loving themselves.

Data 5:

"We have learned to love ourselves, so now I urge you to speak yourself." (4:54 – 5:01)

Building upon this newly constructed moral framework in Data 4, Data 5 integrates symbolic, normative, and persuasive power. The first sentence, "we have learned to love ourselves," is a collective narrative from BTS that fans can use as an example. This sentence emphasizes that insecurity is a phase experienced by all individuals, and such challenges can be overcome. It also implicitly suggests that self-love and self-expression are socially acceptable and expected behaviors. With the words "I urge you," Kim Nam Joon affirms a gentle but firm modality rather than a directive command. This linguistic choice indicates a form of influence that relies on encouragement and shared values, which characterizes horizontal power rather than coercion.

Data 6:

"No matter who you are, where you're from, your skin color, your gender identity, just speak yourself." (5:23 – 5:30)

Similar to the data 4 and data 5, this closing sentence of the speech forms an inclusive power that operates symbolically, normatively, and persuasively through universal and affirmative language. Symbolically, the mention of social identities such as origin, skin color, and gender identity serves as an explicit recognition of diversity, thereby legitimizing the voices of often marginalized groups as equal and worthy of being heard. Normatively, this sentence sets new social norms about equality and the right to expression. Meanwhile, the use of the closing phrase "just speak yourself" acts as a simple but powerful direct invitation, encouraging the audience to express themselves without fear or shame. Thus, the power in this sentence does not work through coercion or hierarchy, but rather through the production of meaning that affirms inclusivity, empowers diverse identities, and mobilizes the audience to internalize the courage to speak up as a legitimate and expected social practice.

From data 1 to 6, it can be seen that Kim Namjoon's speech at the UN in 2018 was transformational because it builds power not through hierarchical authority but through interconnected symbolic, normative, and persuasive power. Symbolic power in this speech operates by normalizing imperfection, legitimizing personal experiences, and affirming the audience as valuable subjects. Persuasive power works through exemplarity, recognition,

and dialogical invitations that encourage voluntary audience participation. Meanwhile, normative power is formed through the reframing of social values, in which loving oneself, accepting mistakes, and daring to speak up are constructed as new moral standards. Thus, this speech points out how language can be a medium of power, shaping collective consciousness and motivating social action through the production of meaning, praise, and the internalization of values.

2. The Formation of Horizontal Power Between BTS and The Audience

This sub-part examines how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed. For BTS's "Love Myself, Love Yourself" campaign. It explores how the campaign's messages are crafted, spread, and interpreted by various audiences. The Love Myself campaign was first introduced on November 1, 2017, by UNICEF following the launch of the first trilogy album installment, *Love Yourself 承 Her,* on September 18, 2017. The production reflects a strategic alignment of BTS's brand identity with UNICEF's mission, and developing themes of self-acceptance and resilience are interwoven into the discourse, targeting both global policymakers and youth audiences.

The campaign was disseminated through various digital platforms, including YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and online articles, allowing its discourse to be repeatedly circulated, normalized, and internalized, which further reinforced BTS's relational influence within digital public spaces. Platforms such as YouTube featured many videos related to the campaign, including Kim Namjoon's 2018 UN speech and several campaign-related Anniversary videos containing messages about self-love. Their hashtags #endviolence and #LoveYourself became rallying points, intensified in social media such as Twitter and Instagram by their extensive fan base (ARMY). Below is the total number of hashtags used during the campaign period.

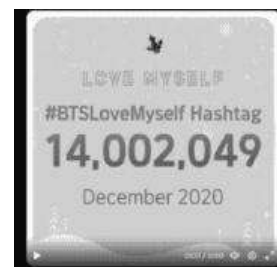*Figure 2. Number of hashtags #ENDviolence and #LoveYourself on Instagram recently*

Figure 3. Number of posts in the hashtag #LoveMyself on Twitter (X) in December 2020

The success of this campaign is inseparable from the enthusiasm of fans who have helped by purchasing merchandise that can help donations and by using the hashtag. On X,

as of December 2020, the hashtag #BTSLoveMyself has been used 14 million times, while on Instagram, the hashtag #loveyourself has reached 125 million posts, and #endviolence reached 300 thousand posts. According to Castells' (2009) concept of network communication power, the visibility and reach of the campaign were strengthened through repeated sharing and reinterpretation by users. The campaign's success lies in its resonance with diverse audiences. Audiences, especially fans, created art, shared personal stories, and organized charity drives under the campaign's banner. Their participation transformed them from passive consumers into active contributors.

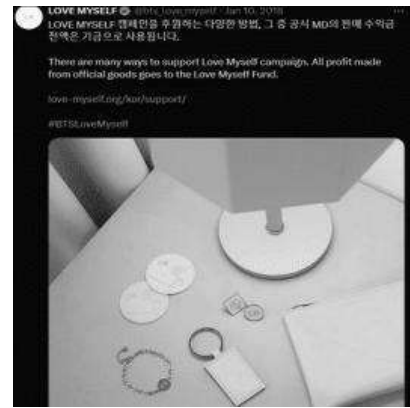**Figure 4.** *The handcraft from ARMY to support the campaign*

Figure 5. *The ARMY project to support the campaign*

Figure 6. *The ARMY supports the campaign through art*

Affirmative statements such as "here's my contribution" and "your comments count" demonstrate the active participation of fans in supporting the ongoing campaign. Supported by affirmations on the official Love Myself account, all profits and support are clearly directed towards helping to collect donations.

Until now, Kim Namjoon's speech 2018 in UN has been viewed more than 19 million times and received many positive reactions from it. Meanwhile, every November in the following years, BTS made a video speech in support of the campaign's anniversary. The first anniversary video was published on the X app and received thousands of feedback from

its viewers (131 thousand likes, 2.2 thousand comments, 51 thousand quotes and retweets, and 1.1 thousand bookmarks), while the other anniversary video on YouTube also received the same positive reactions. The second video titled *"BTS (방탄소년단) LOVE MYSELF Campaign 2nd Anniversary Message"* has been viewed 1.3 million times, the third video titled *"BTS (방탄소단) LOVE MYSELF Campaign 3rd Anniversary Message"* has been viewed 4.7 million times, and the next video titled *"BTS (방탄소년단) LOVE MYSELF Campaign 4th Anniversary Message"* has been viewed 4 million times. Other videos supporting the campaign also received the same response, such as *"BTS (방탄소년단) LOVE MYSELF Campaign Special Announcement",* which has been watched 4.1 million times, and *"BTS (방탄소년단) LOVE MYSELF Global Campaign Video",* which has been watched 17.6 million times. These numbers not only indicate BTS's popularity but also reflect the repeated circulation and normalization of campaign discourse within digital spaces.

A portion of the profits from concerts, album and, merchandise sales, fundraising, and streaming of their songs will then be donated to UNICEF to support and promote this campaign. As of 2021, BTS has donated over US$1 million to UNICEF from their sales, and by March 2024, they contributed more than US$6.6 million. This is described in the following news snippet.
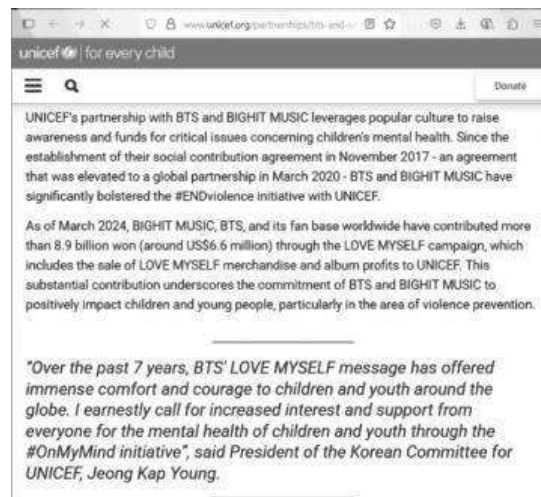

Figure 7. *news snippet in the UNICEF's news in 2024*

In Fairclough's third dimension, social practice, campaign discourse cannot be separated from broader social issues as texts circulate within specific cultural and social conditions. One of them is the high number of bullying cases in South Korea. One of the factors of bullying is related to the shame culture named *chemyeon* (체면) that developed in South Korea. Literally, *chemyeon* means face or image that must be maintained in

socializing. Therefore, South Korean society is very competitive to be a champion or to be the best. In data 7 below, Kim Namjoon explained that life in Korea is very difficult and stressful because each person has a lot of pressure on themselves.

Data 7; Kim Namjoon's interview with El País:

> "In the West, people just don't get it. Korea is a country that has been invaded; there was nothing. But now, the whole world is looking at Korea. How is that possible? How did that happen? Well, because people try so fucking hard to better themselves. You put so much pressure on yourself; life in Korea is so stressful! Well, yes. That's how you get things done. And it's part of what makes K-pop so appealing, although, of course, there's a dark side. Anything that happens too fast and too intensely has side effects."

So, when there is someone who does not have the same spirit or is in the last rank in their studies, that person will be considered a failure and can tarnish the image of the group (in this case, the class or school occupied and can even have an impact on the family.)

Although not directly, fans' reactions in some X/Twitter tweets and the comments section of BTS's music videos (MVs) and campaign videos on YouTube also show that BTS's songs with positive themes and lyrics can also support people to be happier and reconcile with their insecurities. This can be seen in some of the following images:
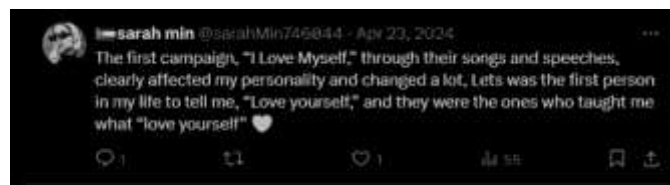

Figure 8. *an ARMY's tweet on twitter/X*

Figure 9. *an ARMY's tweet on twitter/X*

Both images above are not treated as representatives of all audience responses, but as illustrative examples of dominant discursive patterns observed in public engagement. These comments are positive responses from fans showing the positive impact of this BTS campaign. It can be seen that both are in line with the campaign's underlying mission, which is to save teenagers affected by violence and bullying. From both of their comments, they share the same impact of violence is insecurity. And through this campaign (both the song and the speech), they were helped to accept and learn to love themselves. In addition, both of them even felt proud to participate in this campaign as BTS fans.
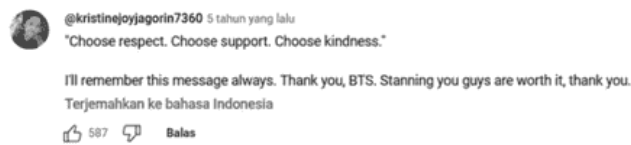
Figure 10. *ARMY's comment on YouTube*

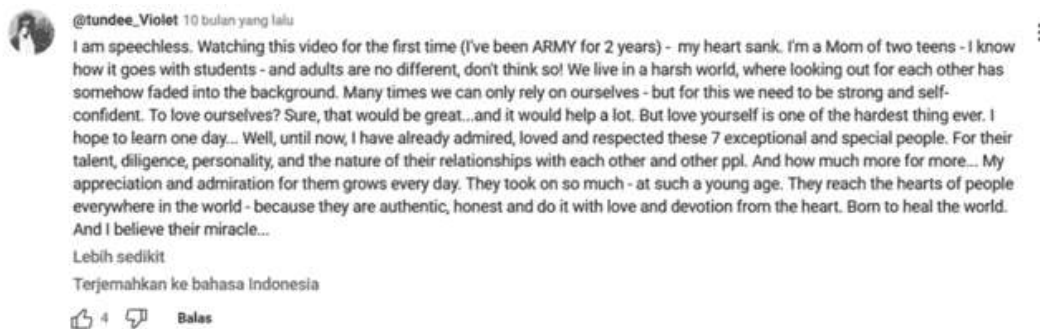**Figure 11.** *ARMY's comment on YouTube*

Figure 12. *ARMY's comment on YouTube*

From the comments above, we can see that the discourse developed by BTS in its campaign is not only a neutral communication tool, but also a medium to break down social standards (the shame culture and insecurities) that are strongly developed in young people globally, especially in South Korea. The discourse of self-love expressed by BTS can be interpreted as offering an alternative narrative to highly competitive social norms that often link personal value to achievement and public image. In this case, the campaign discourse can be understood as contributing to an alternative discursive space that emphasizes emotional acceptance and resilience.

Overall, the production, circulation, and reception of the Love Myself campaign demonstrate the emergence of what this study conceptualizes as horizontal power. This form of power does not operate through direct authority or coercion, but through relational influence, symbolic identification, and participatory engagement. BTS's influence, therefore, can be understood as relational rather than hierarchical, as it relies on shared values and audience engagement rather than top-down control.

Discussion

The Love Myself campaign, launched by BTS in collaboration with UNICEF, represents a form of contemporary transnational cultural intervention in which popular culture, humanitarian discourse, and youth-oriented activism coexist. Building on findings

presented in the previous section, this discussion interprets how the symbolic, persuasive, and normative forms of power identified in RM's speech and its digital circulation operate within broader social and cultural contexts. In a diverse sociocultural context, this campaign operates within existing power structures that shape how messages about vulnerability, self-love, and self-expression are accepted. Several studies have highlighted the positive psychological and social impacts of the Love Myself campaign on fans, as those conducted by Eun (2023), Velia (2022), and Vetrix & Bangun (2022). These findings align with the present study's results, which show that the campaign constructs power horizontally by fostering identification rather than authority. In their studies, fans often use the campaign's messages as motivation to boost their self-confidence, display their perception of their development and improvements, and gain knowledge to better themselves, thereby strengthening areas where they had weaknesses.

A central discursive feature of the campaign is its emphasis on individual self-transformation as a pathway to social change. By highlighting narratives of self-acceptance and personal voice, this campaign is in line with the global discourse on self-care, which often prioritizes psychological resilience over structural criticism. However, as Fairclough's critical perspective reminds us, such discourses may also risk individualizing structural problems. Haulenbeek (2022) shows that 57.9% of BTS fans reported improvements in mental health directly attributed to the campaign. The remaining 42.1% were positively influenced by the surrounding support system. These findings reinforce the argument that audiences are not passive recipients of discourse. Instead, they actively reinterpret and reproduce campaign messages by sharing personal testimonials, creating fan art, and organizing charity events. These actions transform consumption into contribution, reinforcing the idea of collective healing.

Furthermore, the Love Myself campaign illustrates the growing role of celebrities in humanitarian and social advocacy. BTS's moral authority allows the campaign's message to not only reach a wide audience but also blur the line between advocacy and consumption. Nevertheless, the blurring of boundaries between advocacy and popular culture also raises critical questions about the commodification of humanitarian values and the sustainability of celebrity-led social change. In Indonesia, in particular, this campaign has raised awareness and encouraged concrete actions in line with existing laws such as the UN-CRC and the national child protection law (Bahter, 2020). Another thing to note is the lack of the right to speak and be heard for every individual. In this campaign, Achmad et al. (2019) argue that BTS songs have positive messages regarding the concept of self-acceptance that can make it easier for us to respect other people. Also, the songs are very suitable for the aim of the campaign, which is to prevent acts of violence.

Nevertheless, the Love Myself campaign still has social significance as a discursive intervention. By introducing alternative ways to talk about self-esteem, vulnerability, and emotional health in public conversations, it will slowly change individuals' perspectives on mental health and self-identity. Through this lens, the campaign can be understood not merely as a motivational movement but as a site where power, culture, and identity are continuously negotiated.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine how power is discursively constructed and circulated within BTS's Love Myself campaign by employing Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings demonstrate that power in the campaign operates horizontally through interconnected symbolic, persuasive, and normative strategies, rather than through hierarchical authority or coercion. Through RM's speech and its digital circulation, BTS constructs relational influence by legitimizing vulnerability, encouraging self-expression, and reframing self-acceptance as a shared moral value. The active participation of ARMY further reinforces this horizontal power by reproducing and normalizing campaign discourse across digital spaces. Overall, the Love Myself campaign illustrates how language functions as a medium of power that shapes collective consciousness and social engagement, while also revealing the potential and limitations of popular culture–driven discourse as a tool for social transformation.

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