

BTS Albums through the Years

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Amelia Heinze takes readers on a journey through the world of K-pop and South Korean boy band BTS to explore how album covers can act as powerful visual texts that communicate messages about musical genres and the bands that create them.

Remember when music came in the form of vinyl records and CDs? I know, old, right? You would grab the new album and start ripping it open, but have you ever noticed all the aspects of the album that you're holding? Well, you probably noticed the front, who doesn't? But what about the tiny, tiny words on the back? Didn't think so—or at least, I usually don't. When I first thought about writing an article for the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, I didn't start by thinking of album covers. I had other ideas in mind, like dance, bookmarks, song lyrics, and so on. My first choice was digital wallpapers. Most, if not everyone, uses some type of wallpaper, even if it's just a pattern or plain color on your phone or laptop. Since there are so many people who could relate to this topic, I was thinking of conducting a survey asking people what type of wallpaper they had and the reason behind their choice. When it came to the research, the internet gave me recommendations on wallpapers for computers but zero information on when digital wallpapers were invented or how they evolved over time. The results were drastically different from what I had anticipated, and that was really disappointing.

Ultimately, with some help from my writing mentor, Dr. Kieffer,¹ I came up with album covers as a new topic.

People do look at album covers (even if they're just doing a digital download), and cover art is a common topic in pop culture discussions of music. However, while there are definitely some iconic album covers that everyone would recognize, and while we all might look at the images on an album we purchase, we don't often think about the work that album covers do as a genre or the story behind their designs. So, in this article, I want to look at some of those choices and some of the deeper meanings behind the often overlooked, intricate details that make up album covers.

History

This section is just meant to give you a little background information about album covers. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the definition of **album** is as follows,

[The] Latin *album* is literally “white color, whiteness”; it is a noun use of the neuter of the adjective *albus* “white” ... The English word in reference to bound photographic collections is recorded [in use] by 1859. The meaning “long-playing gramophone record” is [in use] by 1951, because the sleeves they came in resembled large albums. (n.d.)

The first album cover was invented in 1939 by Alex Steinweiss (Novin, n.d.). Steinweiss was an art director and a graphic designer. He got the idea when he was hired by Columbia Records. He explains:

I got this idea that the way they were selling these albums was ridiculous. These were shellac records and they were in four- or five-pocket albums to make one symphony. The covers were just brown, tan or green paper. I said: “Who the hell’s going to buy this stuff? There’s no push to it. There’s no attractiveness. There’s no sales appeal.” So I told them I’d like to start designing covers. (n.d., para. 2)

The album cover underwent its first big change in the 1950s, when the use of color photography on album covers became popular. On top of the designers’ work, photographers such as Charles Steward added to the charm of albums by capturing the artists themselves (Novin, n.d.). Many artists in the 1950s (or their studios) also started picking up on typography, creating

1. Dr. Deb Rigger Keiffer is a writing studies scholar whose research includes the study of middle school students and their literacy activities.

logos and trademark colors. An example of this evolution in album artwork is the record label Impulse!, established in 1960, which devised a black, orange, and white color scheme for its albums (Chilton, 2023), and also established the practice of “using cutting edge photographers for its covers” (Impulse! Records, 2023). Color and typography are still a big part of the design in today’s album covers, such as in the case of the Asian group Blackpink with their trademark colors being black and pink, like on their album “Square Up” (2018), and the group TXT with their albums having either a “+” or “x” on the cover, as with “The Dream Chapter: Star” (2019).

So, there you have it, the album cover as original artwork was established when Steinweiss wanted to make album covers look more appealing. Although we often think of album covers—whether vinyl or CD or just images on a music download—as nonessential to the music we’re buying or downloading, they’re actually works of art that have been an important part of art media and history for many years.

Choices, Choices, Choices

So now, what you’ve been waiting for. As I worked on this article, I was advised to narrow down the number of album covers I chose to discuss, and that makes sense. You don’t want to read a 30-page article, after all! But choosing the covers I wanted to discuss was a real challenge. Think about it, having to choose just three, out of millions. I wanted to use examples that I know a bit about and that had a deep meaning for me. So, in the end, I chose:

- 1) BTS’s “BE”
- 2) BTS’s “LOVE YOURSELF: ANSWER,” and
- 3) BTS’s “DARK&WILD.”

And now you might be asking, “Who are BTS? What does BTS even stand for?” Well, BTS is a South Korean boy band that debuted in June 2013 (Chon, 2020). There are seven members: Kim Seokjin, Min Yoongi, Jung Hoseok, Kim Namjoon, Park Jimin, Kim Taehyung, and Jeon Jungkook (listed oldest to youngest). BTS was also the first Korean band to get nominated for a Grammy in 2021. Now, if you’re into BTS, you’re probably thinking, “OMG! SHE’S AN ARMY!” (Yes, I am an ARMY.) But if you’re not into or have never heard of BTS, you might be thinking, “What is BTS and what is an ARMY?”

P-CHAT? What’s that?

P-CHAT, or pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory, refers to how the ISU Writing Program specifically teaches and explores writing. P-CHAT is “one way to investigate, break down, and describe what’s really happening when we’re participating in complex writing activity” (Literate activity terms, n.d.). Applying this framework involves looking at some or all of these seven components of an activity, genre, or text: representation, production, distribution, activity, ecology, socialization, and reception.

Interestingly, both of these responses relate to the ISU Writing Program **P-CHAT** term **socialization**, which “describes the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts” (Walker, 2010, p. 76). If you have been socialized into the BTS world, you would immediately guess that my choice to discuss BTS means that I’m part of the fandom group that calls itself **ARMY**, Adorable Representative MC of Youth (Moon, 2020). But for those of you not in the fandom, you may not know what being a true **ARMY** is. Being an **ARMY** is more than just being a fan, it’s a community that communicates

with one another and connects to the artists through social media and music. For me, being an **ARMY** is being someone who cares and thinks of **BTS** as if they were a family member—knowing them like a best friend, knowing their background and history, and keeping up-to-date on them—whether that’s following them on their Instagram page, YouTube channel, or Weverse page. This is different from the average music enthusiast who might stumble upon a few of their songs while scrolling through YouTube.

Because I’m an **ARMY**, I immediately wanted to do “**BE**” for my study of album covers. Who wouldn’t? Well, that’s **ARMY-me** speaking. And it also means that it might be time for me to introduce another Writing Program term, reception. **Reception**, another one of the P-CHAT terms, deals with the ways any text is taken up and used by others (Walker, 2010, p. 75). Selecting this album and expecting others to also be interested in it relates to my reception of it. Let me explain. My own understanding of **BTS** and what I value about their music has an impact on my choices and what I think you (my readers) might find interesting. I chose “**BE**” because it’s **BTS**’s most recent Korean album (as of February 2021), and it’s the one I think almost anyone would be able to relate to due to the fact that it focuses on the effects of **COVID-19**. I also wanted to do “**LOVE YOURSELF: ANSWER**” because that’s one of my favorite albums. I additionally chose “**DARK&WILD**”—this wasn’t my first choice, but when I was starting my research, that was one of the very first discussions I found. So, I decided to give it a shot because I thought it might be a challenge to research an album that I don’t know everything about. In a way, you could say that my choice of topic for this article is part of my own efforts to become even more socialized into a community I love, by learning more about the band.

OK, so you know how I was talking about how everyone can relate to the “BE” album? Well, that actually isn’t the case, again, because of reception. When texts (like album covers) go out into the world, different people will engage in different kinds of reception—that is, they might understand and use the texts in different ways and for different purposes. So, your reception of “BE” would be different from mine and might depend on whether you’re an ARMY or non-ARMY or how much information you know about the band. If a reader were a BTS ARMY, then they would likely know a little bit of the band’s backstory and what they stand for. For BTS, their main message is to love yourself and not let others bring you down, and this album fits that perfectly. “BE” is about struggles related to experiencing the COVID-19 global pandemic, which is something I think many listeners, ARMY or non-ARMY, can relate to.

Another aspect of the band that I want to discuss before moving on to a specific analysis of the three albums I’ve chosen is that BTS is a Korean band that participates in a diverse community of fans who are not exclusively Korean. This is related to another Writing Program concept, **translingualism**, which refers to the idea that languages, and language learning, cross borders and change over time through interactions with other languages (O’Leary, 2019, p. 62). Most BTS songs are in Korean except for some verses like the ones on the cover of the “BE” album; it reads, “Like an echo in the forest; Like an arrow in the blue sky” (Zach Sang Show, 2020).

There are challenges that can come with being a group with a global audience that includes speakers of many languages. These challenges can come from the fact that their songs are in a language that not all people around the world speak or understand. This means that people who listen to their songs may not be able to understand the words unless they look up translations of the lyrics. In addition to this, another language barrier faced by groups like BTS who are popular in English-speaking countries like the US, is difficulty with the promotional aspects of being musicians, like talk shows and interviews for American media, because not all of the members of BTS are fluent in English. But these challenges are also a part of the strength of BTS ARMY because fans engage in all kinds of activities that help other fans get access to the music. On a range of different social media sites, ARMY members provide translations of lyrics; explain aspects of the Korean alphabet, Hangeul; or share information about Korean culture that helps non-Korean ARMY understand the band better.

A person encountering BTS for the first time who isn’t fluent in Korean (both the language and the script) might feel pretty lost, especially because most of the lyrics are in Korean. But if that person looked deeper

and engaged in some translation, then their reception could change. When one who does not understand Korean looks at or hears the lyrics “봄은 기다림을 몰라서, 눈치 없이 와버렸어,” (Zach Sang Show, 2020), they would not understand what it’s saying and the meaning behind it. But if they took the time and looked at the translation, then they would get, “Spring didn’t know to wait; Showed up not even a minute late,” (BTS—Life Goes On, 2020). So, reception isn’t just about the immediate uptake of a new text. It can also involve research—like finding a translation—and collaboration, like engaging the help of the ARMY community.

Researching BTS Albums

OK, maybe that last bit wasn’t what you were waiting for, but here’s where the real fun begins. I started my research like anyone else, going to the internet and asking Google. Like I said before, I wanted to choose three albums, and essentially, I had two picked out, but I needed the final one. I looked up album concepts and meanings because I wanted an album that had a deep meaning to it, and that’s where I found “DARK&WILD.” Then I tried to find other articles on BTS and this specific album so I could convey the information accurately. But that’s kind of when the road ended. I could only find the surface answers, but I needed to go deeper, and that’s when I took the research into my own hands. I realized I had another handy-dandy tool at my fingertips: YouTube! I knew the band had done some interviews, so that’s where I looked, and I was in luck. Instead of reading about other

people’s discussions of what they thought the album covers and lyrics meant, I could try to find comments the band members themselves had made and use those in my analysis.

Genre Research

We don’t always call what we do genre research—even when we’re doing it.

“**Genre research** is the practice of investigating how we learn about and understand specific genres in use in the world, including the people, tools, and recurring situations that influence how texts get produced in a genre. When we do genre research, we participate in activity like finding our own examples in a genre and analyzing what people do—and how they do it—in those examples” (Genre research terms, n.d.).

After all the research, I thought I might need more from the internet. But then again, this project was about my own analysis, and I had a lot of antecedent knowledge that I could use to understand the visual design of the album covers. **Antecedent knowledge** is yet another ISU Writing Program term, one that refers to knowledge a person already has, which they’re using to interpret or interact with new information (Key terms & concepts, n.d.). I have knowledge about BTS and their album cover designs because I’ve listened to

their music and been a fan for so long. So, I just started putting my thoughts down, and this is what I came up with.

Genre Conventions of Album Covers

What are some common conventions of an album cover, you might ask, or, what in the world is a common convention? Well, common conventions are things you typically see in a specific genre, like the details you'd expect to find on an album cover. The ISU Writing Program refers to these as **genre conventions**—"the characteristics of any kind of text that make it recognizable as participating in a particular genre" (Genre research terms, n.d.). For example, if you look at business cards, some common genre conventions include the address of the place, the name of the business or businessperson, and a phone number, along with other ways to contact them. OK, so that's business cards, but what about album covers?

Well, one common convention that most people recognize first when it comes to album covers is the name of the album. Who doesn't go straight to the album title? It's usually smack-dab in the middle of everything.

As I've mentioned before, BTS is a Korean band, but they use English on many of their albums and songs. While it's true that many Koreans study English and use it in aspects of their daily lives, using English on an album might also attract more English speakers to listen and check out their music.

Some other common conventions that most album covers include are the artist or group's name; the artist or group's logo, if they have one; some kind of picture or artwork; and certain choices with respect to the color(s) of the album cover. But these next couple of conventions are some that you might not pay attention to, or at least, I didn't before I did this research. The artist or group's company name, the production company's name and/or logo, a copyright logo, a barcode, and, on some albums, a track list can be found. But really, the most interesting part of any album cover is the artwork and the way that the visual design of the cover connects to the content of the album (i.e., the song lyrics, musical themes, etc.). What follows is a short **genre analysis** of each of the album covers I've

“Genre analysis is the practice of breaking down what we see people doing in specific texts in a genre, and it is a part of doing genre research. When we do genre analysis, we describe the relationships between visible genre features (length, structure, formatting, different modes, language use) and the social goals of those features, including their cultural-historical contexts in specific times and places” (Genre research terms, n.d.).



Figure 1: Scan the QR code to see the cover of the BTS album “BE” (Big Hit Music, n.d.a).

chosen to study, including both the information I uncovered through research and my own interpretations of the images and words based on my antecedent knowledge.

BTS “BE”

First up, “BE” (see QR code in Figure 1 for an image of the album cover). BTS’s “BE” was a studio album that came out November 20, 2020 (Sudario, 2022). That’s the obvious part, but let’s dig deeper. I knew what the meaning behind the album was by their lead song, “Life Goes On,”

which is quoted on the album cover, and because I’ve been in the fandom for a while. When I started my research, I couldn’t really find anything about the album, so I decided to create my own interpretation. I already knew that the true meaning behind the album was that in any situation, especially the COVID-19 pandemic, life goes on. In a 2020 interview with Zach Sang, J-Hope (Jung Hoseok) backs this up by saying, “So I think as we were experiencing this COVID pandemic ... we experience these emotions: the depression, being sad, powerlessness ... We realize we can’t give up our work despite the happenings, what we do needs to go on; life goes on” (Zach Sang Show, 2020).

I had known that there were words below the album name, “BE,” but I didn’t pay close attention at first, especially because I don’t know how to read cursive. So how did I figure this out if I couldn’t read cursive? The answer is simpler than you may think. I did what any person would do and asked my sister, who also didn’t know cursive, yet could read cursive better than me.

With my sister’s help, I was able to take a closer look at the words to figure out the meaning and why the artists put them there. Below the English letters “B-E” (which is the album’s title), there are lines of text in cursive stating, “Life goes on; Like an echo in the forest; Like an arrow in the blue sky; On my pillow, on my table; Life goes on like this again” (Zach Sang Show, 2020). Now I’m going to go through this line by line:

- “Like an echo in the forest”—To me, this means you can hear an echo of what used to be normal, and one day that familiarity will come back.
- “Like an arrow in the blue sky”—The meaning behind this line is that time will go on. You can’t stop time, nor can you stop an arrow flying through the sky. COVID will pass, and this isn’t the end of the world.

- “On my pillow, on my table”—This line represents to me how we were stuck at home. When we first were shut down, we spent a lot of time indoors, in our rooms, on our beds. We spent a lot more time with our families eating at our tables.
- “Life goes on; life goes on like this again”—This sums up the whole album. Life will continue moving forward no matter what, like how it was before.

Before I move on, I also want to explain why BTS chose “BE” for the album’s title. RM (Kim Namjoon, the group’s leader) had stated in one of their interviews, “We were always putting our thoughts on perspectives in our music, but with “BE,” we really documented our present lives. ... It’s for this moment right now, it’s happening. That’s why we named this album as “BE”” (Zach Sang Show, 2020).

BTS “LOVE YOURSELF: ANSWER”

“LOVE YOURSELF: ANSWER,” which was released in August 2018 (Sudario, 2022), was BTS’s second compilation album containing previous tracks from their earlier “LOVE YOURSELF” albums. Like “BE,” I didn’t find a lot of information when I researched. The results contained “LOVE YOURSELF: TEAR,” but none of the other albums in the “LOVE YOURSELF” trilogy. This is odd because “LOVE YOURSELF: TEAR” isn’t even the first in the trilogy; “HER” is. However, this section of my article is about “LOVE YOURSELF: ANSWER,” not how the internet failed me. So, I want to take you along on the journey of my reception of this album.

“LOVE YOURSELF: ANSWER” is the last one in the “LOVE YOURSELF” trilogy (see QR code in Figure 2 for a compilation of the trilogy’s album covers). I think that because it’s the last one in the trilogy, and it’s called “ANSWER,” this title is about when you finally find the truth—you start to love yourself and don’t let others’ negative thoughts get to you.

The first album in the trilogy, “HER” has flowers on a white background, representing the purity of the beginning of love. This also represents a common misconception about love, that it is easy and straightforward with no barriers



Figure 2: Scan this QR code to see a compilation of the three album covers from the “LOVE YOURSELF” trilogy, including the artwork from “HER,” “TEAR,” and “ANSWER” (Love yourself cover art, n.d.).

or hardships. The color white represents simplicity and cleanliness, showing how people want love to be. In a similar manner, the artwork representing the second album, “TEAR,” emphasizes the hardships and reality of life and love. It shows falling petals on a dark background, acknowledging the feelings that one has when love goes awry. The flower symbolizes the cycle of love—when the petals fall, love is being lost and dying away, similar to how the negative thoughts that others can put on you can prevent you from seeing the good parts of yourself. Finally, we have “ANSWER,” a reflection on the journey you have taken to love yourself and accept yourself and your flaws. This final album is designed with a heart on a pink cover that fades in and out of shades of pink and blue to express the epiphany of what it’s like to love yourself. The colors pink and blue are used to show the beauty and happiness of life after you find the way to love yourself.

BTS “DARK&WILD”

Finally, the album “DARK&WILD” (see QR code in Figure 3 for an image of the album cover). “DARK&WILD” was considered BTS’s debut studio album that was released in August of 2014 (Sudario, 2022). Unlike the other two, I was able to find more information on this album. The quote under the title of the album is, “WARNING! LOVE HURTS, IT CAUSES ANGER, JEALOUSY, OBSESSION, WHY DON’T U LOVE ME BACK?”

At the beginning of their career, BTS was a hip-hop group with a bad boy persona. They often abbreviated words and phrases, along with purposely misspelled words such as “Luv,” “ORUL82!,” “Skool,” and “Boyz” (Big Hit Music, n.d.c). They did this to give a more youthful and edgy vibe to their albums.



Figure 3: Scan the QR code to see the cover of the BTS album “DARK&WILD” (Big Hit Music, n.d.b).

This album came out when they first started becoming the artists they are now, talking about love and how it can hurt and how it makes you feel when it goes wrong. The title “DARK&WILD” emphasizes the dark times that come when facing heartbreak. This was a time in their career when it was exhausting for them to figure out how to become a good group. The album is also about how the people that you used to love keep leading you on, only to dump you one day. Suga (Min Yoongi) commented in an interview, “We’re young, just in the second year of our career, and we take off our school uniforms and say to the

person we love ‘Stop playing around. Don’t lead me on.’ So yeah, it’s dark and wild,” (Nicole, 2020).

Conclusion

If you’ve made it to the end of this article, you might have noticed we’ve discussed not just the analysis of specific album covers, but also important terms related to studying different kinds of texts and how people use them; the history of album covers; and even some interpretations of BTS, BTS ARMY, and its goals, which include learning to love yourself and to resist the negative impressions you receive from others. Album covers have come a long way and have changed a lot from plain brown paper to now a whole variety of pictures and artwork. But albums aren’t the only things that have changed—BTS has changed, from who they are as people to their style of music, starting from their “NO MORE DREAM” album, to “BE,” to so much more. Whoa, that was long; now take a second and look back on your accomplishments, give yourself a pat on the back, be proud, and love yourself!

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Notes

