

THE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF BTS FANS ON WHATSAPP GROUP

Stara Asrita

Communication Science, Amikom University of Yogyakarta

Email: staraasrita@amikom.ac.id

Received: 4 September 2023; Revised: 28 October 2023; Accepted: 29 December 2023

Abstract

One of the phenomena of fandom fanaticism in Indonesia is the Korean boyband BTS, with fans known as Army. There are several BTS fan communities in Indonesia, one of which is BTS Army Indonesia Animo (BAIA), based in Jogja. This research aims to understand how the identity construction of the Army unfolds within the BAIA Jogja WhatsApp group. The theoretical framework employed is Peter L. Berger's social construction, involving three analytical stages: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Utilizing virtual ethnography, the study includes interviews with four community members as informants. The researcher also directly observed the WhatsApp group and documented data collection. The findings reveal that Army members began to admire BTS for their handsomeness, easily relatable songs, and captivating stage presence during the externalization process. Each Army member adapted to communicate effectively within the WhatsApp group in the objectivation stage. In the internalization stage, the sense of connection between Army and BTS members is powerful. This bond is so strong that Army members perceive BTS as their boyfriends or husbands.

Keywords: Army, BTS Fans, Identity Construction, Virtual Ethnography

Abstract

Salah satu fenomena tentang fanatisme fandom di Indonesia adalah boyband dari Korea yang bernama BTS yang memiliki penggemar bernama Army. Di Indonesia, ada beberapa komunitas fans BTS, salah satunya adalah BTS Army Indonesia Animo (BAIA) yang berbasis di Jogja. Penelitian ini ingin mengetahui bagaimana konstruksi identitas Army di WhatsApp grup BAIA Jogja. Teori yang digunakan adalah konstruksi sosial Peter L. Berger dengan tiga tahap analisis yaitu eksternalisasi, objektivasi dan internalisasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode etnografi virtual dengan melakukan wawancara kepada empat informan yang merupakan anggota komunitas. Peneliti juga melakukan pengamatan langsung di WhatsApp grup dan dokumentasi dalam pengumpulan data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dalam proses eksternalisasi, Army mulai menyukai BTS karena mereka tampan, lagu-lagu mereka mudah untuk didengarkan dan penampilan menarik ketika di panggung. Tahap objektivasi, masing-masing Army harus beradaptasi dengan anggota lain ketika berkomunikasi di WhatsApp grup. Tahap internalisasi, perasaan memiliki antara Army dan anggota BTS sangat kuat. Begitu kuatnya hubungan tersebut, para Army menganggap bahwa anggota BTS adalah pacar atau suami mereka.

Kata Kunci: Army, Fans BTS, Konstruksi Identitas, Etnografi Virtual

Introduction

Culture is something that evolves. Even though some elements can't be changed, the development of the times is one of the reasons why culture must adapt to increasingly advanced technology. A culture that is popular with many people is usually called popular culture. According to Burhan Bungin in Ri'aeni (2019), popular culture was created due to interactions with society and social structures over time. One of the most famous examples of popular culture is Korean Pop. It can be interpreted as a trending culture, popular with audiences but changing quickly. Korean Popular culture usually relates to things commonly enjoyed by some or all of society, such as Korean music, Korean drama, Korean fashion, and Korean cuisine.

Korean culture is most influenced by its music industry. Music from Korea is known to have its own characteristics, such as the presence of dance or choreography, elements of hip-hop in songs, and unusual styles of dress. Performances on stage are also energetic, making them easily likable by most people. The success of artists from South Korea has then spread throughout the world (Syahmar et al., 2022).

Hallyu, often called the Korean Wave, is becoming a significant cultural influence in Indonesia. The growth of Korean culture through drama, music, clothing styles, and ideology is highly popular among teenagers and adults. The phenomenon of Korean music, known as Korean Pop (K-Pop), is manifested through boy bands or girl bands that dance and sing attractively. Their performances are supported by an audio-visual display that keeps the audience interested in following the development of their idols (Cindoswari & Diana, 2019).

This cultural explosion occurred because of continuous reinforcement from social media, individuals, and society. Fanaticism then emerged due to the rapid development of South Korean culture, starting from culinary arts, cultural arts, music, and, of course, bands (Apriliani & Setiawan, 2019). The growth of pop culture in Korea cannot be separated from the government's role in advancing the country's economy. The Korean government supported Korean artists, musicians, and other creative individuals becoming famous outside the country (CNN Indonesia, 2022).

One of Indonesia's most famous Korean boy bands is Bangtan Boys (BTS) (CNN Indonesia, 2022; Hestianingsih, 2020). BTS holds the record for the boy band with the most followers on Instagram, reaching 47.6 million (Dihni, 2022). This figure indicates

that BTS is famous not only in their home country, South Korea but also worldwide. Comprising seven members—Jin, Suga, J-Hope, V, Jungkook, V, and RM—the boy band debuted in 2013.

The popularity of BTS is accompanied by the formation of an increasing number of fan communities. The fandom name of BTS is called ARMY, which stands for Adorable Representative M.C for Youth. BTS fans, or ARMY, show unwavering dedication to their idols, engaging in activities such as listening to all the songs, buying merchandise, attending concerts, and even traveling abroad (Riona & Krisdinanto, 2021). The loyalty of BTS fans cannot be doubted, especially when BTS faces criticism. The fans engage in cyber wars on social media to defend their idols.

As part of the interaction between musicians and fans, boy bands create unique nicknames for their fans, allowing them to distinguish their supporters from others. This phenomenon has evolved into fan groups known as fandoms. Fandoms play a crucial role for idols, particularly for boy bands, and each fandom carries a distinct identity (Fachrosi et al., 2020; Riona & Krisdinanto, 2021).

Fandom is a term that refers to a subculture related to the activities of one's fans or hobbies (Fachrosi et al., 2020). The intensity of the devotion displayed by fans towards idols is sometimes considered excessive and may not align with societal norms. Fans express their support in various ways, from shouting at concerts to performing fan chants, all driven by the desire to steadfastly defend their idols under any circumstances. Fandoms even express anger when their idols face insults or ridicule from others.

BTS fans exhibit a characteristic that serves as an identity marker, indicating their affiliation with the idol. A person's identity can manifest based on their interactions with others, both socially and individually. The environment significantly influences the construction of one's identity, with some being affected and others influencing one another within a group. Over time, continuous interactions may lead to commonalities in a person's identity (Mutmainnah et al., 2022).

During interactions, a person's identity can adapt to desired traits because identity is not permanent; it can change due to friendships, societal influences, musical tastes, or exposure to other cultures. Identity is a continuous self-formation process because it does not reach a fixed point. Individuals from a particular community, group, or society usually share commonalities with other members (Rahayu & Hero, 2021).

Identity construction is a process that occurs within a person by involving self-identity that is raised so that others can see it. Self-identity results from the feelings that individuals think about themselves and what others think of them. Identity is a construction that is not necessarily formed by itself but must be constructed so that others can see how the self-concept wants to appear (Garbner in Astiti et al., 2018).

The theory utilized in this study is based on Peter L. Berger's theory of social construction. In social construction, there are three processes to understand how identity construction occurs within a community, group, or society (Bungin in Rahayu & Hero, 2021). The first process is externalization, which involves adapting to the sociocultural context. This process is a continuous dialectic by individuals to change their point of view and create a new worldview. It is the primary stage that individuals go through when adapting and getting to know a new community, group, or society, along with its existing norms, value systems, or structures.

Second, objectivation involves social interaction with a sociocultural scope. This process entails an individual stepping out of their comfort zone. Social interactions with new communities, groups, or societies make them aware that there is a change from what they usually feel or do daily. This stage represents the awareness of the individual that something will alter within them, and they may not be the same as they were initially (Bungin in Rahayu & Hero, 2021).

Third, internalization is someone's self-definition with a sociocultural scope. After a person understands and realizes that he is starting to deviate from the existing self-concept, they enter the internalization stage. This process involves withdrawing from the social world and internalizing the objectivated aspects into oneself. Individuals undergo the process of self-identification because of the classification carried out in a particular community, group, or society. This stage occurs after understanding, awareness, and identification of a person with a community, group, or society.

The theory from Peter L. Berger will be used as an analytical tool for the research results on the identity construction of fans of the South Korean boy band BTS. This theory was chosen because the researcher aims to discover how the Army forms its self-identities as BTS fans. Through observation, researchers found that identity could change because of loyalty to their idols. The study will explore the extent to which the identity changes and affects the individual.

Research on K-pop fans shows that self-identity is formed due to the influence of the community or group, social environment, and idol figures. This self-formation occurred from exploring K-pop and commitment as a K-pop fan (Hakim et al., 2021). When entering a K-pop fandom, a subject will identify whether the group follows what he imagines or wants. Then, proceed with the identity crisis stage because new phenomena emerge about the ideal self-concept. If this process does not work, a diffusion stage occurs, which causes a person to become confused about his identity (Indriani & Kusuma, 2022).

Another research on the identity construction of K-pop fans is that they will form a self-image based on the role played. They represent the identity of K-pop idols with similarities, beliefs, feedback, and parasocial interactions with K-pop boy band members. This relationship will form interpersonal communication in which there is interaction as a friend or romantic partner (Lainsyamputti, 2021).

Research on the construction of Korean culture fans' self-concept shows they are pretty consumptive in purchasing food, make-up, clothes, and idol merchandise. In the self-concept (self), K-pop fans often act spontaneously during fan wars. Then, in society (society), K-pop fans continue interacting with fellow fans and the general public who are not fans of (Apriliani & Setiawan, 2019).

Based on the background provided, the researcher is interested in investigating the identity construction of BTS fans, specifically the Army, who are members of BAIA Jogja. BAIA Jogja is an active BTS fan community in Yogyakarta, boasting four million followers on Instagram. This study aims to uncover the ways in which identity construction is undertaken by BTS fans within the BAIA Jogja community on the WhatsApp Group.

Method

This research approach is qualitative, with a virtual ethnographic method. According to Hine in Prajarto (2018), virtual ethnography can be used to investigate the use of the internet, which influences people's social lives. Researchers can analyze the interactions that occur in virtual or physical space. This is because the boundary between the virtual and the natural world cannot just appear. Virtual ethnography allows researchers to be involved in the object of study at a predetermined time (Prajarto, 2018).

According to Bowler in Evelina (2019), virtual ethnography can be used to study the cybernetic space of a culture or society online. This method identifies terms, forms, and symbols that are not directly said by a community that exists in a virtual space. The researcher uses this method because he is interested in knowing how a BTS fan interacts with his idol, which can only sometimes be met in person.

Researchers entered the BAIA WhatsApp group to find out what activities BTS fans did in it. Researchers directly observed the dynamics of interaction within the group. How do fans construct identities with each other, and how do they interact with BTS members? Every activity was documented through screenshots and stored in the gallery folder. This method collected data through communication between researchers and research subjects in WhatsApp groups.

The researcher employed virtual ethnography in the WhatsApp group for the study because it was more present and considered more closed than Instagram. This choice aimed to foster greater openness during informant interviews. Data was collected using observation, interviews, and documentation.

Observations were conducted by joining the BAIA Jogja WhatsApp group. The researcher contacted the group's admin and asked permission to conduct research. The researcher decided to refrain from introducing themselves to ensure that the communication that occurred in the group ran naturally.

The chat in the group is about the daily life of BTS members. such as discussions on the release of a new album, updates on members enlisting in the military, and voting for BTS in competitions. Each fan expressed a bias toward a specific BTS member, selecting their favorite based on physical appearance, personality, talent, or perceived ability to represent the fan's sentiments. Each fan expressed a bias toward a specific BTS member, selecting their favorite based on physical appearance, personality, talent, or perceived ability to represent the fan's sentiments.

After observing for several months, the researcher interviewed four informants. The selection of informants was carried out with the following criteria: being a BTS fan, whether male or female; being a member of the BAIA Jogja Community; being part of the BAIA Jogja WhatsApp group; and having a WhatsApp profile name written in Korean letters.

Interviews were conducted offline and online due to distance and time limitations between researchers and informants. Everyone will give an initial question about whether they are willing to be research informants. After agreeing, the interview was conducted following the schedule of the informant because not all of them could meet in person.

Table 1. The Profile of Participants

No	Name	Age (Years)	Gender	Occupation
1	MLD	22	Female	Students
2	WNS	25	Female	Designer
3	TSY	26	Female	Nurse
4	NV	34	Female	Employee

Researchers also conduct documentation to ensure that the data that has been obtained can be stored for future reference. The documentation includes screenshots of conversations among BAIA Jogja members in the WhatsApp group, the storage of interview transcripts, and document archives that support research analysis.

In this research, the data source triangulation technique is used to enhance the validity of the data by incorporating various points of view from observation, interviews, and documentation. The results of the data taken in multiple ways provide a breadth of research knowledge in analyzing the results.

Results and Discussion

The BAIA Jogja community was established on 19 December 2017. BAIA Jogja is part of the large BAIA community in Jakarta and was based on 25 September 2016. The BTS market boy band covers all walks of life, so many fans exist. The BAIA community exists in several areas, such as Pontianak, Bali, Bandung, and Lombok. The community often holds meetings between members both offline and online. They also sell some merchandise and participate in expos at various K-pop-themed events. In addition, the BAIA Jogja community often holds events to watch BTS films together.

Externalization

Interviews conducted with several ARMYs described how they started to like BTS. This process is the basis of the identity construction of each individual as an Army. Only some people who hear BTS songs decide to become an Army because they are just connoisseurs of songs. However, some people will affirm after continuously interacting with everything related to BTS, such as songs, movies, or merchandise.

“Love BTS for their talent and personality.” (MLD, interview, 30 January 2023)

As a girl, it is natural to like idols because of their perceived good looks. It also reinforces the stereotype that South Korean artists must be handsome and beautiful. Apart from that, their physical shape is also excellent and ideal because South Korea applies specific standards to become a singer or actor. To conform to these standards, many people undergo plastic surgery to meet society's expectations (Annisa, 2023).

Besides having a perfect physical shape, an idol must have qualified talent. For example, they must be able to draw, sing, or play a role. Their training also takes a long time, even for years, because every boyband or girlband must perform optimally in front of the public. So it doesn't only rely on an attractive face but also good abilities (Yuliawan & Subakti, 2022).

“At first, I liked BTS because the song was ear-catching, and after seeing the translation of the lyrics, apart from being related to life, it also contains social satire. The song and lyrics are weighty. They try to show authentic values and interact more with their fans than other groups.” (WNS, interview, 26 January 2023)

The first impression determines whether you will continue to like BTS or not. The uniqueness of K-pop music can attract all people because the songs are easy to listen to. Even though the language is different, you can pronounce it when you listen to it repeatedly. After being able to sing according to the lyrics, someone tends to find out the song's meaning, as WNS did, who could conclude that BTS songs have specific themes that have something in common with what is felt and becomes social unrest.

BTS is a boy band that can hypnotize its fans with all their charm and appearance. Therefore, the Army will try to collect all the information about BTS down to the details. Geographically, South Korea is still on the Asian continent, so its fans feel close to their idol (Nuranisa, 2015).

“Motivation for me, I like the songs discussing romance and self-love.” (TSY, interview, 18 February 2023)

“At first, I fell in love with Mr. Park Jimin's charm; after understanding the songs, I liked the seven. They would definitely campaign to love themselves if they were live or at any event.” (NV, interview, 8 February 2023)

The similarity in TSY and NV's reasons indicates that BTS has effectively conveyed a message to their fans. Each individual is drawn to listening to BTS songs as casual listeners and searching for the meaning behind the lyrics. When a song resonates with their daily lives, it becomes easier for BTS to capture the hearts of their listeners, allowing them to stay engaged with their other songs.

Objectivation

Being a fan of a South Korean boy band often gets a nasty look from the public because sometimes the fans behave in an impolite way. For example, when their idols receive negative comments on social media, the fans will attack those accounts. An example is when one of the BTS members, Jungkook, was announced as the opening singer at the 2022 Qatar World Cup, and many people expressed their disapproval. Football fans dislike this decision because they believe Jungkook does not represent today's football world (Annisa, 2023). In response, BTS fans defended their idol, asserting that Jungkook deserved to be the opening artist due to his exceptional voice. Moreover, international boy bands have also covered BTS songs, showcasing the global impact of their music. Therefore, it is only natural for one of the BTS members to participate in such a significant event.

“I consider all members to be friends even though I don't really know them or even forget who it is (because at every event, I invite several acquaintances). Because I am one of the organizers, I am neutral with the members and unfamiliar with certain circles. Most interaction is done through groups with occasional responses to chats.” (WNS, interview, 26 January 2023)

Being in a community requires adapting to a new environment to be accepted by other members. This process may be uncomfortable for some people because they have to try to interact with other people who were previously unknown. However, because they belong to the same community, they must be connected to establish a connection.

“Usually, when I haven't met an Army with the same frequency as usual, I keep quiet; wanting to start a conversation is awkward. I interact by listening first to what they are discussing; then, I join the conversation. I also take part in BAIA Jogja events like watching movies together.” (TSY, interview, 18 February 2023)

Adaptation takes a long time. TSY is an introvert who is not used to starting interactions with people he doesn't know. This objectification stage requires a person to master the new environment. Introductory learning is needed before one can finally adjust to a community. In the BAIA Jogja group, there are 236 WhatsApp users. Not all of them know each other personally because the group members come from all walks of life. Some users only act as "silent readers" without replying to the topics discussed in the group. Many chats appear that sometimes some comments are ignored because other comments are piling up.

"The adaptation I did was by being brave enough to mingle, like chatting, etc. Then I will reply to the chat in the group if someone asks and the like." (MLD, interview, 30 January 2023)

MLD informants actively appear in groups and reply to chats and other members. As one of the admins, MLD also plays a role in the choice of someone who wants to join the BAIA Jogja WhatsApp group. He also sometimes gives notifications that there are new members and asks the latest members to introduce themselves to other members. The BAIA Jogja admin makes several rules for BTS fans who have just joined the group.

"Yes, I often join the WhatsApp group, or if there is free time, BAIA takes the time to join the offline event." (NV, interview, 8 February 2023)

BAIA Jogja organizes "meet and greet" activities involving all community members. For example, they watched a movie called "August D-Day Tour in Seoul" together. The event was held at a hotel, and participants had to apply for an entrance ticket. Therefore, those in the Army interested in attending had to purchase tickets in advance. Another event that was held offline was a self-healing seminar. The self-healing theme was chosen because it is part of the moral message that BTS always conveys.

Internalization

Someone who has stepped out of old thinking or comfort zone will discover something new at this stage—for example, a preference for new songs, new idol artists, and new points of view. The phenomenon faced by BTS fans is that they find a new paradigm about how to love yourself no matter what other people think. The Army feels the indirect support given by their idols. Therefore, the Army's "sense of belonging" with BTS is getting stronger (Ri'aeni, 2019).

"Jhope and Jungkook. The reason is that their chemistry is quite interesting in my eyes."
(MLD, interview, 30 January 2023)

The songs sung by BTS are often the main topic of conversation on social media. When performing, the Army will continuously be updated to find out when and where they are performing. The cohesiveness of the BTS members is a fun thing to watch. The song lyrics that are sung are also challenging to memorize, especially when they are often played on social media (Nuranisa, 2015).

"Because I love BTS; I like Mister Jimin because he is cute, adorable, and very gentle."
(NV, interview, 8 February 2023)

The presence of South Korean boy bands has become a magnet for women. Their pure white faces, well cared for, were a sight to behold. Looking at their performances, it's pretty easy to "fall in love" with BTS. Many are interested because there are elements similar to what some women do, such as skin care, make-up, and concern about the choice (Regita & Setyawan, 2022).

"Since the first time I liked BTS, I don't know why I like Jungkook, but I also like all the BTS members." (TSY, personal interview, 18 February 2023)

In the beginning, MLD, NV, and TSY liked BTS because their physical appearance was handsome, clean, and pleasing to the eye. Over time, they became more specific about just a few members. K-pop fans usually call the figure they idolize "biased." Bias is like a reflection of someone who is reflected in K-pop artists. So, they can represent a fan's feelings, personality, or character.

Most men don't care about appearances because of the stereotype that someone will consider a real man like him. Meanwhile, women must pay attention to appearance, from the face to the clothes worn. The Army does not care about this shift in stereotypes because men must be neat, clean, and well-groomed (Fauzi, 2021).

"When I first knew BTS, I followed almost all their updates and content. But it's getting here, especially since they started their solo career. I'm overwhelmed to keep up with all the activity updates. Now I feel too leaning towards one member only (RM). I consider RM my best friend, role model, and motivator because apart from being the most active on social media, I feel listened to (he is the one who most encourages his fans to be themselves)." (WNS, interview, 26 January 2023)

Army fans who love BTS already feel close to their idols. This is evident in fans who think their idols are their partners; some even call them husbands. Individually they strive to make their relationship with their idols as authentic as possible. It's as if the BTS

members are the ones who are always around the fans. So the Army does not feel the difference in distance and time.

Army loyalty is also proven by purchasing concert tickets that cost millions of rupiah, original merchandise, which is also not cheap, and other expenses that may not be counted, such as watching movies together, bazaar fees, or regular meetings. All of this was done as a form of Army fanaticism, which undoubtedly exists. Even though BTS members don't know what their fans are doing, the Army still supports their idols in various ways (Riona & Krisdinanto, 2021).

According to WNS, one of the BTS members, namely RM, can be called a figure who is highly idolized because he is considered able to provide feedback when there is a problem. Interest in RM as WNS feels a chemistry that can't be explained. The shared vision and mission then strengthen WNS to support RM in all activities.



Figure 1. Screenshot WhatsApp Group Chat of BAIA Jogja



Figure 2. Screenshot WhatsApp Group Chat of BAIA Jogja

The internalization process goes well when fans think their idol is part of their life. Someone who used to feel alone, when he finds his idol, the individual feels that he has a partner. It is shared between the Army and one of the BTS members. This phenomenon is a hallucination (Riona & Krisdinanto, 2021).

Army realized that they would not be able to interact with BTS members. However, this is not an obstacle with a BTS fan community because many do the same thing. The image of being a K-pop idol couple is believed to be together and not considered a problem. They internalize the role of being someone who pairs well with the BTS members.

WNS, TSY, NV, and MLD need to keep getting the latest information from their idols through the BAIA Jogja WhatsApp group. Some of the chats contain the affectionate words of fellow Army soldiers for their idols. They are followed by another Army who wants to be able to express their feelings for the idol. They try to find out the news of their "boyfriend" or "partner" obtained from the group conversation. Sometimes they think of their idols and forget about real life.

Table 2. Summary of Research Results

No	Name	Externalization	Objectivation	Internalization
1	MLD	BTS members are good looking	The adaptation I did was by being brave enough to mingle, like chatting, etc.	The reason is because their chemistry is quite interesting in my eye
2	WNS	The song is ear catching and represented the fans	Most interaction is done through groups with occasional responses to chats	I consider RM my best friend, role model, and motivator because apart from being the most active on social media
3	TSY	The songs discussing romance and self-love	when haven't met an Army with the same frequency as usual, I keep quiet; wanting to start a conversation is awkward	Since the first time I liked BTS, I don't know why I like Jungkook, but I also like all the BTS members
4	NV	Fell in love with Mr. Park Jimin's charm and all members	often join the WhatsApp group, or if there is free time	Because I love BTS; I like Mister Jimin because he is cute, adorable, and very gentle

This research found that each member of the BAIA Jogja community has one specific idol whom they like the most among the seven BTS members. They have had experiences in their lives such as externalization, objectification, and externalization, forming a self-construction, assuming that they are part of the BTS members. They started to position themselves as a couple and do what couples do, even on social media, as it is impossible for them to have real relationships with the BTS members.

The novelty of this study, compared to previous research, lies in its focus on the goals. This study analyzes the process of constructing identity as fans of BTS. From these

processes, there are results that impact each individual. The fans integrate BTS members into their daily lives, viewing them as partners or husbands, leading to intimate interactions among them.

Conclusion

The identity construction of BTS's fans, often called Army, goes through three processes: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. In the externalization stage, BTS fans like their idols for several reasons, such as cute faces, songs promoting self-love, and attractive appearances. During the objectivation process, the Army tries to be able to mingle, adapt, and adjust to other fans in the WhatsApp Group because the users in the community come from various regions in Jogjakarta. Finally, in the internalization stage, once the Army feels close to their idols, they no longer perceive differences in distance and time. Furthermore, because they have a strong sense of belonging, the Army perceives their idols as their lovers, almost like boyfriends or husbands.

This study has a limitation as it is only looking at external identities. For future studies, researchers could analyze this topic using the Psychoanalysis theory. The next researcher could find out the behavior of human psychology, examining why the Army loves BTS so much. Subsequent studies could add another paradigm regarding Korean pop.

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