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The Sea as a Liminal Space in BTS's "Swim"

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ABSTRACT

The use of song lyrics as a type of literary text is gaining recognition for their representation of human experience through symbols and figurative language. Previous studies on BTS have focused on fandom, identity, youth culture, and globalization; however, little attention has been given to the use of water imagery in the song "Swim" as a representation of liminality. The purpose of this study is to analyze how water-related imagery represents liminality in BTS's "Swim". The data consisted of the official lyrics of "Swim", which were analyzed using Victor Turner's theory of liminality. A theory-informed coding framework consisting of three categories—threshold, uncertainty, and transformation—guided the analysis. Deep water and high waves were interpreted as symbolic representations of uncertainty and ambiguity during periods of transition. Repeated references to diving were interpreted as symbolic acts of crossing boundaries and embracing change. Together, these images construct the sea as a liminal space associated with personal transformation and development. The study contributes to the application of liminality theory in the analysis of contemporary song lyrics and provides insight into how water imagery can represent human transformation.
Keywords: BTS, liminality, song lyrics, transformation, water imagery

INTRODUCTION

The lyrics of songs can be seen as another mode of expression that is common in literature. These serve as means of communicating human experiences, emotions, values, and social realities through language used artistically. Like poetry, these make use of figures of speech, symbols, imagery, and storytelling in order to communicate messages that go beyond their literal meanings (Abrams & Harpham, 2009; Leech & Short, 2007). Current research, on the other hand, has established that song lyrics serve as meaningful cultural texts and can thus be analyzed for insights into emotions, stories, identities, and social realities in today's world (Lee-Smith, 2024; Rosebaugh & Shamir, 2022). Hence, song lyrics have been seen as appropriate subjects of literary analysis because they allow researchers to explore linguistic constructions of human existence, identity, and transformation. In this regard, lyrics in modern popular culture not only entertain but also reflect emotional, cultural, and social identities (Ramadhana & Heriyati, 2025).

Water is an important symbol in literature and culture, often representing life, transformation, renewal, and human experience (García, 2024; Jung, 2014). Water bodies

such as oceans, seas, and rivers are common symbols used in several literary pieces as places where the protagonists face difficulties and go through development. Another important use of water in literature and symbolism is that it is often used to symbolize the unconscious and to represent transformation and self-discovery (Jung, 2014). In addition, García (2024) suggests that water frequently functions as a symbol of change and human experience in literature.

Alternatively, water's symbolism can be considered in light of the notion of liminality. Liminality is based on van Gennep's (1909/2019) theory of rites of passage that includes three stages – separation, transition (liminality), and reincorporation. A person undergoes a rite of passage by leaving his or her old state, going through a transitional phase, and entering a new state. Later, the concept of liminality was elaborated by Turner (1969/2011), who defined it as a state of being "betwixt and between" fixed identities and roles. In such circumstances, a person does not fully belong to the old status and has not yet entered a new state. Thus, liminality is often associated with ambiguity, uncertainty, and transitional processes through which change may occur (Stenner & De Luca Picione, 2023). This theoretical framework was used to identify analytical categories that included the notions of threshold that denoted symbolic boundaries between states, uncertainty that related to the ambivalence of the liminal period, and transformation that implied changing into a new state or status. Since liminal experiences are often represented through symbolic and spatial imagery, literary texts frequently employ metaphors to depict processes of transition and change (Stenner & De Luca Picione, 2023).

Several recent studies have used the concept of liminality to understand transitions, identity, and liminal spaces in literary and cultural texts. Such research can be observed in Banfield's (2022)) examination of the connection between liminal spaces and spatial experiences, and in Kirst's (2023) discussion of liminality as a psychological state of being in transition. In literary analysis, water imagery is often analyzed as a symbol of transformation and change (Manav, 2025; Sparano & Strizzolo, 2024). However, such studies tend to focus on the symbolic role of water or liminality in literature in general. In contrast, limited attention has been paid to the construction of liminal spaces through water imagery in contemporary popular song lyrics (Dabukke, 2025). This gap can be addressed by analyzing water imagery as a liminal space in BTS's “Swim”.

Research on song lyrics has substantially increased as a result of growing interest in using popular music as a site for literary analysis. The meanings conveyed within song lyrics represent cultural and social histories, and thus, many scholars now view song lyrics as cultural texts with multiple layers of meaning (Picone, 2024). Scholars have also become interested in exploring K-pop's (Korean popular music) global popularity and reach to explore its connections to the larger socio-cultural landscape. Researchers have examined BTS song lyrics to explore symbolic meanings and messages conveyed through music, including themes of self-acceptance and identity (Larasati et al., 2022).

BTS is a popular K-pop group that is known all over the world and has been the subject of many academic works since its impact on global culture is undeniable. Previous research has investigated BTS and K-pop fandom from the perspectives of fandom studies, cross-cultural audiences, identity construction, and transnational fan engagement (Jin, 2021; Saputri & Lammertz, 2024; Yoon & Labarta Garcia, 2024). All previous works contribute significantly

to our understanding of the culture surrounding BTS. Little attention, however, has been paid to the literary analysis of their music.

The song "Swim" merits further investigation to gain a better understanding of its lyrics. "Swim" is an English-language song performed by BTS and released in 2026. The lyrics analyzed in this study were obtained from AZLyrics.Com (n.d.). The song's lyrics make extensive use of water-based imagery related to swimming, diving into the waves, the sea, the shore, and ocean depths. While many of the recurring images in "Swim" describe physical environments, they are also used to create a symbolic landscape that demonstrates movement, uncertainty, anticipation, and transformation. The combination of images such as "Sittin' on the shore, now I'm ready for the whole sea," "Water so deep," and "I just wanna dive" suggests movement from familiarity toward uncertainty and engagement with change. This pattern of representation corresponds closely with the characteristics of liminality as defined by Turner (1969/2011).

Despite existing scholarship on BTS, liminality, and water imagery, very little work has explored their interconnections. Existing scholarship concerning BTS has mostly concentrated on the topics of fandom, globalization, identity construction, and transnational fan engagement (Jin, 2021; Saputri & Lammertz, 2024; Yoon & Labarta Garcia, 2024). In turn, the topic of water imagery has usually been explored in connection with such general notions as transformation, change, and uncertainty (García, 2024; Manav, 2025; Sparano & Strizzolo, 2024). Moreover, there have been attempts to apply liminality theory to analyze different issues connected with transition, ambiguity, and identity formation (Banfield, 2022; Kirst, 2023; Stenner & De Luca Picione, 2023). Nevertheless, very little attention has been paid to the use of water imagery as a means of representing liminality in modern song lyrics, in particular BTS's "Swim." Hence, a literary study connecting liminality theory with the use of symbolic imagery in contemporary songs seems to be necessary.

In this study, water imagery served as an effective way of representing liminality in the song "Swim" by BTS. Based on Turner's (1969/2011) theory of liminality and prior research on the symbolic meaning of water, this study analyzed how liminality is expressed through water imagery in the song. In this regard, the research question for the current study is: How is liminality depicted through water imagery in BTS's "Swim"? Finally, this study is expected to contribute to the emerging debate on the literary analysis of modern songs.

METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative literary research methodology was used in this study, involving the use of close reading grounded in theory. This is because close reading allows literary scholars to analyze language, imagery, and symbolism beyond their face value (Barry, 2017; Ohrvik, 2024). This study analyzed lyrics in a deductive manner based on the liminal theory developed by Turner (1969/2011), paying specific attention to the representation of liminal concepts through water imagery as portrayed in "Swim" by BTS.

Data Source

For this study, the lyrics of the song "Swim" by the popular South Korean boy group BTS served as the primary source of data. This song was purposely chosen for its abundance of water symbolism in terms of such imagery as swimming, deep water, shore, sea, waves, diving, among others. The use of the in-depth examination of one song was deemed appropriate in order to analyze the symbolic value of water imagery in a single text. The song lyrics utilized in this study were extracted from BTS's "Swim" (AZLyrics.Com, n.d.). While special emphasis was placed on water-related imagery, the whole lyric was examined in order not to make interpretations based only on certain phrases.

Other than being examples of textual evidence, these words, phrases, lines, and excerpts of lyrics were chosen due to their connection to water symbolism and analyzed using the larger context of the song. These symbols were analyzed with respect to how they could be considered in terms of liminality, as well as other possible interpretations based on the lyrics around them. These interpretations were guided by Turner's (1969/2011) liminal theory.

Instrument

As mentioned above, the researcher played an essential role in conducting the close reading and interpreting the literary text (Ohrvik, 2024). As a result, the researcher selected texts relevant to Turner's (1969/2011) theory of liminality. To maintain consistency in data analysis, a coding system based on the theory of liminality was applied. The category of "threshold" included concepts related to symbolically significant barriers, entry points, and indicators of transitions from one state to another. The category of "uncertainty" included terms associated with ambiguity and instability, representing elements that remain unclear during the liminal period. The category of "transformation" included indicators of active participation in the process of transition from one state to another, rather than its completion. The lyric texts were interpreted according to the primary symbolism conveyed in each text.

Table 1

Coding Categories and Descriptions of Liminality

Code	Category	Description
THR	Threshold	Boundaries, beginnings, entrance into new conditions
UNC	Uncertainty	Risk, instability, ambiguity or uncertainty
TRN	Transformation	Movement, change, development or transition into a new state

To categorize and analyse the textual evidence, the above methodology was employed.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection entailed document analysis. The lyrics for the song “Swim” were acquired through the website BTS's "Swim" (AZLyrics.Com, n.d.). The lyrical text was read repeatedly through a process of close reading (Ohrvik, 2024). Repeated readings helped the researcher understand the patterns, symbols, and imagery in the lyrics. In terms of analysis, excerpts were taken based on their position in the lyrics (verse, chorus, bridge, etc.).

Data collection took place through the following steps. Firstly, the lyrics of the song “Swim” were read several times, enabling the researcher to grasp the overall meaning and

context of the song and identify recurring symbols throughout the lyrics. Secondly, words, phrases, and lyric lines referring to water imagery were identified and marked. Chorus lines that appeared more than once were coded only once, but were taken into consideration when repetition was important for meaning. Thirdly, selected excerpts referring to water imagery were analyzed in the context of the entire lyrics. Fourthly, the excerpts were assigned to the predefined coding categories of "threshold," "uncertainty," and "transformation."

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using a theory-guided close reading approach. In line with the theoretical framework provided by Turner's (1969/2011) theory of liminality, the analysis centered on the identification of symbols indicating threshold, uncertainty, and transformation in the lyrics. The analysis included four main steps:

1. All of the selected extracts underwent multiple readings in order to identify recurring patterns of meaning in the lyrics.
2. Categorization of the extracted meanings was conducted based on the three categories of threshold, uncertainty, and transformation.
3. The categorized excerpts were organized in accordance with the predefined categories of threshold, uncertainty, and transformation.

The categorized excerpts were analyzed in light of Turner's (1969/2011) theory of liminality and supported by literature on the symbolism of water. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, clear connections were established between textual excerpts, analytical categories, and interpretive claims. Alternative interpretations were also considered in relation to the broader context of the lyrics.

RESULTS

BTS's "Swim" was analyzed using three analytical categories derived from liminality theory. These categories include the shoreline as a threshold, deep water and high waves as representations of uncertainty, and diving as a representation of transformation. In relation to the research question, the analysis examined how these forms of water imagery represent liminality within the song. The three categories illustrate the use of movement and water imagery in depicting transitional experiences.

Table 2
Liminality Coding Categories and Textual Evidence in BTS's "Swim"

Category	Textual Evidence	Location	Interpretation
Threshold	"This is how it all begins"	Chorus	Indicates the beginning of a transition and entry into a new experience.
	"Let it all begin"	Final Chorus	Reinforces the idea of entering a new phase or condition.
	"Sittin' on the shore, now I'm ready for the whole sea"	Verse 2	The shore functions as a boundary between the familiar and the unknown.
	"I just wanna take it across the line"	Bridge	Suggests crossing a symbolic boundary into a new phase of experience.

Uncertainty	"Water, water so deep"	Verse 2	Deep water suggests the unknown and the inability to fully predict what lies ahead.
	"I can feel the high waves comin'"	Verse 2	High waves represent instability and anticipated challenges.
	"Right here with the moon and the sharks"	Verse 1	The imagery suggests ambiguity and uncertainty within the surrounding environment.
	"Bad world, gone away and I still wake up in this mad world"	Verse 1	Reflects dissatisfaction with the current condition and a sense of discomfort with the existing situation.
Transformation	"I just wanna dive, I just wanna dive"	Chorus	Diving suggests an active willingness to engage in the process of change.
	"Turn my face from the land"	Bridge	Suggests movement away from a familiar condition toward a new experience.
	"Under here, we don't chase the time"	Bridge	Suggests a shift in perspective associated with entering a different state of experience.

The Shore as a Threshold Space

Firstly, the lyrics suggest the concept of threshold that could be analyzed with the help of the dichotomy of shore and sea. It can be stated with the help of such lyric line as “Sittin' on the shore, now I'm ready for the whole sea.” In turn, the opposition of shore and sea is very significant since shore symbolizes something solid and stable in contrast to the huge and unpredictable sea. Meanwhile, the line “now I'm ready” suggests a transition from a previous state to another one. This idea is supported by the repeated lines “This is how it all begins” and “Let it all begin.” Instead of stating the mere beginning of some experience, these lines emphasize the moment when a person passes some threshold between two different states. Thus, the chain of images such as “shore – sea” emphasizes the idea of crossing boundaries and entering a new phase of experience.

Deep Water and High Waves as Symbols of Uncertainty

Water images provide another interesting category that signifies uncertainty and unpredictability. For instance, “Water so deep” implies that what lies beneath the surface cannot be comprehended, hence making everything uncertain. Again, “I can feel the high waves comin’” denotes an awareness of the potential for problems arising from an unstable state. Yet another illustration is provided through the line, “Right here with the moon and the sharks.” This image is composed of elements that simultaneously evoke comfort and insecurity. Significantly, the lyric “I ain’t gotta think ’bout a thing” follows, suggesting an acceptance of this sense of insecurity.

Diving as an Act of Transformation

Each of the symbols used for transformation includes imagery that implies active involvement in change. The line “I just wanna dive” could be interpreted as a desire to engage with something new or unfamiliar. Likewise, the line “Turn my face from the land” suggests movement away from a familiar condition toward a new experience. Similarly, “Under here, we don't chase the time” implies a shift in perspective associated with entering a different state of experience. These expressions alone do not indicate that transformation has already taken

place. Instead, they depict an individual engaging in a process of transition and movement toward transformation through active participation. When considered together, these expressions show that the lyrical persona is actively involved with change rather than being a passive observer or waiting for the process of change or transformation to occur.

Throughout the lyrics, images that denote water are frequently used. There are repeated examples of motion away from certain circumstances or familiar situations toward experiences that involve the unknown. Taken together, the examples in each category depict a movement from a state of being "on the edge" to being involved in uncertainty and transition. Despite these representations, the lyrics are not clear as to whether or not transformation has occurred, but rather suggest that the transition remains ongoing.

DISCUSSION

The Shore as a Liminal Boundary

The study identified that the shore acts as a transitional boundary. The phrase “Sittin’ on the shore, now I'm ready for the whole sea” reveals the state of the lyrical persona between a known state and an unfamiliar situation. The shore does not only depict a physical boundary, but it also denotes the transition from the known to the unknown. The current result is consistent with the idea expressed by Turner (1969/2011), as it depicts the transition associated with experiences between one phase and another.

Turner (1969/2011) claims that someone who is in a liminal state is in the middle of an ambiguous situation because they are no longer completely part of who they were before and not yet part of who they will be. The line, "Sittin’ on the shore..." shows that the singer has a connection to land (representing something stable and known) while also being ready to enter the ocean (a representation of movement and uncertainty). Therefore, the shore exists as a boundary for allowing change to occur.

This is highlighted by the recurring use of lines like “This is how it all begins” and “Let it all begin.” From these lines, it can be inferred that the process is beginning rather than being completed. This is because van Gennep (1909/2019) claims that rites of passage consist of separation, liminality, and incorporation into a new state. The repeated mentions of “beginning” in the lyrics can be considered as an indication of a move away from an existing state and entering the liminal period. It does not indicate any incorporation into a new state.

These results are consistent with previous findings that have considered water an important symbol of transition and change in literary works (Manav, 2025; Sparano & Strizzolo, 2024). Just like these previous findings, the current study considers water to be the medium through which the process of transition is represented. Unlike previous studies, which have primarily examined water as a symbol of transformation, human experience, and broader cultural meanings, the current study emphasizes the role of the shore as a liminal space and the transition into the water as a means of entering a liminal phase (Kalieva et al., 2024).

The Sea as a Space of Ambiguity and Uncertainty

The second implication is that the sea can serve as a symbol for a realm of uncertainty as seen from phrases like “Water so deep”, “I can feel the high waves comin’” and “Right here

with the moon and the sharks." All these images contribute to an impression of something unpredictable and unstable. Despite the presence of other elements, including those connected with personal relations and emotions like "you", "girl", and physical intimacy, water imagery dominates and creates a symbolic space where one can speak about uncertainty and transformation (Janarthanan et al., 2024). In this context, the sea is a liminal space representing a move towards uncertainty and transformation.

According to Turner (1969/2011), liminal experiences are always uncertain since they occur when established social and personal structures are temporarily suspended. In discussing liminality, Stenner & De Luca Picione (2023) note that liminal experiences often involve a period of ambiguity during which individuals cannot predict the outcome of an event. "Swim" exhibits these characteristics, with its depth indicating unknown possibilities, while the approaching waves signify obstacles that are not yet present but are anticipated.

Numerous literary works have explored deep water not only as a tangible phenomenon but also as a symbol of uncertainty during periods of transition and transformation (Manav, 2025). Therefore, deep water is more than a mere physical phenomenon. It may also represent a state of mind associated with uncertainty and change.

High waves depicted in the lyrics also embody a sense of movement and instability. Indeed, waves tend to change their shape very quickly, which makes them a strong symbol of an unstable world. The word "coming" shows that the singer anticipates challenges ahead in his life journey. He recognizes that uncertainty has become a natural part of the journey.

One of the images featured in the line "Right here with the moon and the sharks" is particularly noteworthy because it combines contrasting elements within a single image. The coexistence of these elements may be interpreted as reflecting the complexity of liminal experiences, which are often characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, and the possibility of transformation (Brandshaug, 2024; Maksimović, 2023).

Diving as Active Engagement in Transition

A recurring image in the song is that of diving. The repeated appearance of the line "I just wanna dive" draws attention to diving as a significant motif within the song. It represents a shift from the previous images of waiting or watching and indicates movement toward active participation in the process of change (Muskat-Tabakowska, 2021).

From the perspective of van Gennep (1909/2019) rites of passage, an individual goes through a transition by moving from one stage to another, thus requiring them to cross symbolic borders. Finally, in "Swim", the act of diving works as this crossing. By doing so, the lyrical persona is portrayed as moving from observation toward participation.

The significance of diving is highlighted by how it complements the line, "I just wanna take it across the line". This implies moving from an existing boundary into uncharted territory. The same thing applies when crossing a line. As soon as the boundary is passed, the person starts going beyond their current status, thus creating liminality. Being liminal implies that undergoing transition requires losing what one once was and embracing a new reality (Zhao et al., 2024).

Going into the water implies an ongoing act of participation. The continuous mention of diving can be understood as an indication of a willingness to participate in the process of

transformation. As a result of this participation, "Swim" distinguishes itself from stories that portray the transition process as beyond an individual's control.

It is in line with Manav's (2025) discussion of water symbolism in literature. According to Manav, water can be associated with change and mystery as part of human existence. Therefore, the image of entering the water in the song "Swim" can be interpreted as movement toward a new state of being. Diving in various forms in "Swim" is the embodiment of the theme of transition as a conscious choice. It also suggests a readiness to accept change. The persona appears willing to engage with uncertainty and move beyond the boundaries established in the previous categories.

The Sea as a Liminal Space of Transformation

From an aggregate perspective, the results indicate that the ocean in the song represents an archetypal liminal space. From the shore to the ocean and from observation to participation through diving, the transitions experienced are symbolic in meaning. They are consistent with the liminal transition described by Turner (1969/2011). It refers to the process of transition that begins with departure from one known condition (separation stage), proceeds through a period of the unknown (liminal stage), and proceeds through a period of liminality.

The shore acts as a threshold (departure point), the ocean is the unknown, and jumping into the ocean becomes the beginning of a transitional experience. Together, these three elements form a symbolic unit that encapsulates the nature of liminal experience. Rather than viewing transformation as an endpoint, the process of transformation is emphasized throughout the song by the lyrical persona who continually moves ahead, explores, and evolves.

This study contributes to the existing academic discourse on the symbolism of water in literature by revealing how the use of aquatic imagery in a song creates a liminal environment that is conducive to personal transformation. Previous literature has focused on water as a symbol of purification, renewal, transformation, and existential rebirth (Kausar, 2025; Sparano & Strizzolo, 2024). By demonstrating how aquatic imagery in ″Swim″ helps create a liminal environment in which processes of transition and transformation are represented, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge on water symbolism in literature.

Moreover, the current study contributes to the scholarly literature on BTS by providing a literary analysis of their music rather than focusing on fandom, globalization, and fan identity, as previous studies have done (Jin, 2021; Saputri & Lammertz, 2024). Utilizing a liminal perspective on “Swim”, this study emphasizes the song as a symbolic narrative in which aquatic imagery constructs a liminal space through which uncertainty, transition, and transformation are negotiated.

In conclusion, water, as represented by the ocean, serves as a conceptual boundary in “Swim” that has no physical definition; rather, it has the opposite effect of dissolving into unpredictable and uncertain states while providing opportunities for change. By creating these environments, the song depicts the transitional experience not only as something that is terrifying, but also as something that is necessary for personal change.

CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that the use of water imagery in the song "Swim" transcends its literal meaning. In this context, the ocean signifies a boundary between stability and instability. In addition, the recurrent dives symbolize a readiness to engage in the process of change. Thus, the process of transition is depicted as continuous.

This study adds to the literature by applying liminality theory to popular song lyrics through an analysis of water symbolism. Although many studies have examined liminality in novels, rituals, and life experiences, this study highlights the significance of applying liminality theory to popular songs. Furthermore, it contributes to the existing literature on water symbolism by emphasizing the sea as a liminal space.

The study results indicate that today's song lyrics can be an important literary source for studying symbolic representations of human experiences. Thus, this study could encourage further literary studies on popular music from different theoretical perspectives. However, this study focuses on only one song, and its interpretation is purely textual. Further research could study liminality in multiple songs or songs by different artists to identify broader patterns in the symbolic construction of the topic. Comparative studies of other songs by BTS and songs by artists from other countries could provide further insight into the topic.

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