

Reaffirming the Critical Role of Transformative Research and Knowledge Production in the Age of Post-Truth



“Annyeong, Saranghae!!!”: A Phenomenological Study on the Effects of Parasocial Relationships between Adult Filipino K-pop Fans and their Idols

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Abstract: As a global sensation, K-pop, or Korean Popular Music, has cultivated fans from across the world. Fans exhibit their fandom diversely, which often culminates in parasocial relationships—a highly pervasive phenomenon involving one-sided relationships between a fan (the media consumer) and their idol (the media persona). This phenomenological study investigates these connections to see how parasocial relationships manifest in the behavior of Filipino K-pop fans, and if it facilitates unhealthy practices in their finances and academic/work life. The paper utilizes semi-structured interviews through Google Meet. Through convenience sampling, 12 participants were sourced, all adults aged 18 years and above whose fandom longevity ranges from two years or more. Data analysis showed that parasocial relationship manifestations in fans have both positive and negative effects. The former includes the majority’s perception of K-pop as their source of inspiration, motivation, and productivity in their academic/work life alongside recreational activities. Stress and burnout were reported to be relieved when consuming K-pop content. Conversely, some negative behaviors include sacrificing their sleep and academic focus when engaging as fans. Splurging on merchandise was also found to be a negative tendency, as well as the creation of *toxic* spaces on Stan Twitter, and obsessive, unhealthy behaviors such as stalking. As these behaviors were described only by the minority, the researchers conclude that there are more positive manifestations of parasocial relationships among the participants.

Keywords: K-pop; parasocial relationships; behavior; phenomenological study; Filipino K-pop fans

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

K-pop, or Korean Popular Music, is a musical genre that features themes such as hip-hop and electronic dance music, characterized by aesthetic-driven idols and their contemporary dance performances.

Laffan (2020) posits that an individual has high attachment levels when consuming their favorite content. It is through this that “enthusiastic and loyal” K-pop fans actively

consume idol content, and create recreational activities centered around the aforementioned content.

Fans predominantly engage in fandom through online interactions, seeking to bridge the gap between them and the celebrity (Herbrink, 2020). Despite understanding the unlikelihood of an actual relationship with their idols, fans still feel a sense of familiarity and closeness that is felt only by them (Gleason et al., 2017; Sagira & Kadewardana, 2018).

Horton and Wohl (1956, in Herbrink 2020) described these one-sided relationships as parasocial

Reaffirming the Critical Role of Transformative Research and Knowledge Production in the Age of Post-Truth



relationships, with this phenomenon being very present in K-pop culture (Herbrink, 2020).

1.2. Significance of the Study

This study analyzes parasocial relationships through fans' perceptions and imaginations of their idols, identifying these relationships' aspects and adverse effects not present in existing research. By analyzing fans' behavior, particularly the healthiness of their engagement, this study provides a deeper understanding of parasocial relationships and their impact on fans' daily lives.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

This study's foundations are built on two theories. Firstly, 'parasocial interaction' (PSI) was first coined by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956, in Herbrink, 2020), suggesting that fans form imagined intimate interactions with their idol despite knowing they are one-sided. This theory proposes that when celebrities address, and informally engage with their audience, they lead fans to eventually form a parasocial relationship.

The Social Identity Theory (SIT), on the other hand, states that individuals categorize themselves as parts of fan bases, which they view in a positive light (Loy & Trepte, 2017; Hardwood, 2020). They feel a sense of belongingness in these groups, often willing to sacrifice time and effort to feel superior to other members.

This study utilized a theoretical and conceptual framework to dissect the parasocial phenomenon. (See Figure 1).

Firstly, as Barak (2008) proposed, social structure and individual identity contribute to a media consumer's social identity. Upon a viewing episode of a media persona, the consumer may feel a desire to belong, thus joining a fandom with similar identities.

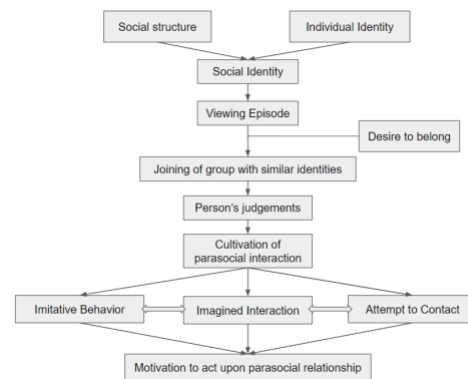


Fig.1. Conceptual Framework

Judgements of their idolized persona starts parasocial interactions, which may branch out into imitative behavior, imagined interaction, and an attempt to contact the persona (Giles, 2002). The activities that the media consumer may do are not strictly limited to solely one activity which is why a two-way arrow is placed in between each categorization to suggest interconnectivity. 'Motivation to act upon parasocial relationship' refers to what drives K-pop fans to continue their identified parasocial actions.

1.4 Research Questions

The researchers investigated K-pop fans' behavior in parasocial relationships, identifying what these are, and evaluating their healthiness through a literature analysis. They examined unhealthy practices; specifically behavior and financial habits. They explored fans' monthly purchases, thoughts, and spending habits alongside examining how they balance academic/work responsibilities with K-pop fandom.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

Phenomenology is the research design best suited to analyze the lived experiences of K-pop fans. Examining the overall view of a K-pop fan helps in identifying the effects of their parasocial relationship with their idol. Data was collected through online interviews via Google Meet with 12 convenience sampled participants aged 18 and above, who fit

Reaffirming the Critical Role of Transformative Research and Knowledge Production in the Age of Post-Truth



the criteria of being part of a K-pop fandom and have been a fan for two or more years.

2.2 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The researchers gathered data through semi-structured interviews consisting of two sections: assessment of the participant's fanship background and details of their life related to the aforementioned.

Following the interview, transcripts were created and sent to the respondents for approval. Line-by-line coding and thematic analyses were then employed with highlighted lines categorized under umbrella terms, like frequency of fan activities, introduction to K-pop, and manifestation of parasocial connections.

The researchers strictly abided by ethical considerations by obtaining consent, providing comprehensive information of the study, and keeping information confidential. All data was used solely for research and will be deleted one year after completion of the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Themes that emerged from data analysis are: 1) K-pop fanship history, 2) K-pop fans' feelings, 3) K-pop fans' engagement, 4) K-pop fanship manifestation, 5) K-pop fanship effects to K-pop fans, 6) K-pop fans' awareness of fanship.

Participants were K-pop fans whose fanship longevity ranged from two to ten years, allured by their idols' music, choreographies, appearances, and personalities. The respondents found K-pop entertaining and comforting, even using it as a form of escapism.

Idols' social media content and efforts in their reality shows also piqued their interest. Some attributed the friends whom they wanted to be close with to their fanship.

3.1 Manifestation of Parasocial Relationships

The majority of participants formed personal and intimate connections with their idol/s, spending almost whole nights consuming their social media content. As such, this unhealthy behavior manifested as losing sleep and time over K-pop. 10 respondents mentioned that the idols' sharing of

their feelings through VLives made them feel let into their personal lives. One participant expressed, *"You feel as if you've known them for a long time."*

Eight interviewees imagined being K-pop group members, friends with their idols, and comforted by their idols. A few respondents also enjoyed reading self-insert character fanfiction. Fantasizing romantic relationships with their idols was reported to be exciting yet a guilty pleasure. Some also imagined their idols complimenting them when engaging in recreational activities like singing and dancing.

Seven participants shared their experiences on Stan Twitter, most of them using it for buying and selling merchandise, trading photocards, and interacting with fellow fans. Several, however, labeled it as *'toxic'* because of fanwars where they would quarrel over the superiority of their idols. To avoid negativity, some interviewees avoided the app or deactivated their accounts.

It was found, however, the majority of the participants' behaviors positively affected their lives. Laffan (2020) mentioned that daily consumption of K-pop is linked to a happy lifestyle and psychological benefits. Using social media, particularly Stan Twitter, allowed for fans' free expression digitally and physically. (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Online interaction between fellow fans had both positive and negative results on their personal lives.

3.2 Manifestation of Parasocial Relationships in Finances

The participants expressed that they spend money on merchandise, such as albums and photocards in order to show their support for their idols. Several reported doing so in order to prove to others their genuineness as fans.

Respondents acknowledged splurging and its effect on their budget, three of them regretting purchases they deem unworthy of their price. Almost half adjusted their budget on food to allocate more for merchandise, while others employ buying and selling strategies.

Eight interviewees said buying merchandise positively affected their mental health by making them feel happy and accomplished. Merchandise is thought of as their inspiration and motivation for their daily endeavors. Two of them described buying to relieve stress, and academic burnout.

Reaffirming the Critical Role of Transformative Research and Knowledge Production in the Age of Post-Truth



Nine of the respondents also shared that their average spending on a monthly basis ranged from 150 pesos to 20,000 pesos. Meanwhile, a minority noted that they rarely spend money on merchandise for varying reasons like shifted priorities and attempts to control splurging.

The behavior the fans exhibited is mostly negative. Through the study of Jenol and Pazil (2020), fan activities such as cutting their budgets just to buy merchandise reflect an impairment in their academic, personal, and social life. However, the respondents that showed positive or healthy behaviors indicated a motivation to eliminate worries about their social circumstances, using idols as their main inspiration for their problems (Jenol & Pazil, 2020).

3.3 Manifestation of Parasocial Relationships in Academic/Work Life

The majority identified K-pop as a source of motivation and inspiration to improve in their academics and work. When stressed, engaging with K-pop content, such as streaming music videos, was reported to help them mentally, as well as help them stay awake to finish their tasks. Witnessing how hard their idols work convinces the participants to excel. One even said, “*I think it was the reason why I would do well in not only my academics but also extracurriculars.*”

Barely half of the participants reported K-pop to be distracting to their academics, though few acknowledged consuming K-pop content to be time-draining, affecting their school performance. One respondent admitted to skipping class to listen to V-lives. Despite this, most interviewees claimed to maintain a good balance between K-pop and their academics, feeling productive while listening to music. They cited no drops in grades and said that K-pop even motivated them to do better. In the case of the majority, there was no temptation to procrastinate.

This behavior has positive effects on their fanship, using it as inspiration for their work/study and an escape for fans (Jenol and Pazil, 2020). However, some peoples’ fanship had negative effects, finding it taxing to keep updated on their idols. In conclusion, a deep understanding of a fans’ situation is vital in identifying whether or not their behavior is positive or negative. A balance of the fan’s resources, may it be time, money, or attention, is one of the determinants of having a healthy lifestyle.

3.4 Relation to Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 is made relevant as the collected results all illustrate the stages, and processes proposed by the theory. The interviewees all had motivations that appealed to them to join communities surrounding K-pop. A prominent response is their proclivities towards the qualities of the idols themselves, such as their attractiveness and personalities.

These aspects of their *individual identity* are then paired with the current *social structures* that composed their circumstances, that is, the prominence of social media in which the algorithms enticed them to become fans, the current beauty standards of the status quo, the influence of peers whom they have expressed a desire to fit in with, and more.

This establishes a *social identity* which then serves as the gateway for the *viewing episode*—the stage at which they are first exposed to K-pop. The structural reasons listed above either influence or directly create a desire to belong to groups of similar identities, or K-pop fandoms, after they make judgment calls based on this initial exposure.

One particular participant exhibits the more nuanced phenomena of the *social identity theory aspect* of the conceptual framework. They admit that their dedication, and activity within their fandom were also incentivized by a need to feel superior over their fellow fans.

Further judgment of the idolized persona is then made, giving rise to the *cultivation of parasocial interaction*. The conceptual framework divides these manifestations into three categories, all of which are proven to be demonstrable according to the data accrued by the researchers.

Imitative behaviors are observed in some respondents going out of their way to buy brands advertised by the idols they are attached to in order to emulate them, as well as dressing in outfits and aesthetics that imitate the idols in question. A few participants also confessed that they would emulate their facial expressions when they are dancing, or their general manner in everyday life.

Imagined interactions, meanwhile, are prevalent. Fantasies of being friends, or even in a romantic relationship with the idol, getting their content noticed, and more, are

Reaffirming the Critical Role of Transformative Research and Knowledge Production in the Age of Post-Truth



occurrences that are very much emphasized with the onset of parasocial relationships.

Attempts to contact also exist, with the interviewees having already, or expressing great interest in, participating in platforms that allow them to interact with their idols directly. This is done typically through concerts, fan meets, and Vlives, including the creation of art and covers in hopes of it reaching the idol, and receiving their attention.

All in all, these activities generate these fans' *motivations to continue acting upon these parasocial relationships with their idols*, which in turn, maintains this connection with the media persona. This begets a cycle in which the fan is incentivized to continue maintaining their parasocial relationship as these positive effects reinforce their behaviors while they continue to act on this connection.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative study sought to identify the effects of parasocial relationships on Filipino K-pop fans. The participants perceive K-pop positively, finding inspiration and motivation in it. However, they also exhibit negative behaviors such as sacrificing sleep and academic focus. Moreover, splurging on merchandise and the toxic environment of Stan Twitter are identified as negative aspects. Finally, consuming K-pop content helps alleviate stress and burnout from academic and work life. Researchers found that parasocial relationships with idols can have both positive and negative effects on fans.

The results of this study are limited to De La Salle University Senior High School students, who lack income and financial independence. Future researchers can expand the sample to include a wider range of participants.

The internet's rapid rise weakens barriers between fans and idols, making it crucial to analyze its implications, particularly in the Philippines, where K-pop is prevalent. The study explores parasocial relationships and their growing prevalence, aiming to improve understanding of the phenomenon and guide future opinions and actions.

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Reaffirming the Critical Role of Transformative Research and Knowledge Production in the Age of Post-Truth



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