

PARASOCIAL INTIMACY AND FAN CULTURE WITH K-POP ARTISTS IN INDONESIAN DIGITAL MEDIA: A STUDY OF FAN-IDOL RELATIONSHIPS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

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ABSTRACT

This research explores parasocial intimacy within Indonesian K-pop fandom, examining how digital media shapes fan-idol relationships. Using a qualitative approach and literature study method, this research investigates the mechanisms that underlie parasocial phenomena, fan culture and digital media. This research finds that the significant role of social media in providing fans with glimpses into their idols' personal and professional lives, enhancing socio-emotional connections. While existing recognizes the impact of cultural context on fan dynamics, emphasizing the need for future research to explore factors like gender, age, and social background. This study contributes to the global conversation on parasocial intimacy and fan-idol relationships in the digital age.

Keywords: Parasocial Intimacy; Fan-Idol Relationship; Fan Culture; K-pop; Fandom; Digital Media

Introduction

K-pop, or Korean pop music, is becoming very popular worldwide, captivating audiences in global countries, including Indonesia. According to Twitter's internal data in 2021, Indonesia had the most K-pop-related tweets from 2020 to 2021. In fact, Indonesia was also the country with the most significant number of fans (analysed by unique authors), with Japan and the Philippines following close behind (#KpopTwitter Reaches New Heights with 7.8 Billion Global Tweets, 2022). This data emphasises the extraordinary resonance of K-pop in Indonesia.

While K-pop artists have big fanbases worldwide and often interact with their fans through social media like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, these interactions are often one-way, where fans feel close to the artist, but the artist doesn't know their fans personally. This interaction leaves fans feeling intimately connected while the artist remains distant. Moreover, the development of technology and social media has had a significant impact, where fans can easily interact with their favourite K-pop artists through social media platforms.

Joseph Walther, a researcher of social dynamics and interpersonal computer-mediated communication, also mentioned the fluidity and looseness of social interaction through digital media (Walther, 1996). Walther also found that what is called hyper-personal interaction can also be developed online. This notion may explain why some forms of interaction by digital media are sometimes characterised by higher levels of emotional intensity and self-disclosure than face-to-face interactions. Walther explained that people who communicate digitally – with fewer gestures than face-to-face communication – may succumb to relying too heavily on the information they have. In other words, computer-mediated communication seems able to make interaction impersonally or more (hyper-)personal, and maybe something in between (Lindgren, 2017).

The influence of digital media on the fans-idol relationship is a relatively new area of research. The concept of parasocial intimacy has been researched in the context of Western fans-idol relationships. However, it has yet to be researched widely in Indonesia, particularly in the context of K-pop fans-idol relationships in social media. It is worth noting that this research's references, while not specific to Indonesia, provide a valuable base for understanding the broader dynamics of fan-idol relationships in this digital era.

The development of social media popularity, like Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok, is an essential factor in forming a parasocial relationship between fans and K-pop idols. With that, this research must consider the impact of digital media on the parasocial intimacy phenomenon.

This research will discuss how Indonesian K-pop fans formed parasocial relationships with K-pop idols through social media and also what fan culture's role is in shaping parasocial intimacy between fans and K-pop idols. It is essential to note the interconnectedness of both parasocial intimacy and fan culture, as these influence each other in shaping the fan-idol dynamic. Parasocial intimacy and fan culture are closely related because they influence each other in forming a relationship between fans and idols. Fans often feel a strong emotional attachment to their idols through the consumption of digital content that was provided by the idols on social media or other platforms. This then formed a fan community that was known as fan culture. In fan culture, fans often engage in activities like making fan art, writing fan fiction, making fan-made videos, and others as a form of respect and support for their idols. These activities then strengthen the emotional bond between the fans and idols, forming a culture and strengthening the fans' identity.

On the other hand, parasocial intimacy also influenced fan culture in forming fans' expectations and hopes for their idols. Fans often have perceptions or expectations about their idols' traits and behaviours through the digital content that they consume. This can also influence how fans interact with their idols in the real world and also online. On

this note, parasocial intimacy and fan culture are two symbolic forces that significantly impact the fan-idol relationship within the digital media landscape.

Through research about parasocial intimacy and fan culture with K-pop artists in Indonesian digital media, it is expected to contribute to the development of communication science, especially in understanding the relationship between social media and psychological phenomena and human social behaviour.

Conceptual Literature Framework of the Study

Parasocial Interaction, Parasocial Relationship and Parasocial Intimacy

The parasocial phenomenon is now an area that is widely researched in the communication research field (Giles, 2002). For a long time, the alteration of the use of the terms Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Relationship (PSR) made it challenging to theorize and empirically test these concepts (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Because of the recent effort to classify the conceptual and operational definition, it is now accepted that PSI refers to audiences' illusion of direct interaction with media figures during media exposures. In contrast, PSR refers to affection and behaviour that may develop during media exposure and persist beyond media exposure (Dibble et al., 2016).

The term parasocial interaction refers to fake conversational behaviour from audiences to media actors (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). This interaction can happen in reactions to shows, gestures, or voices from media actors (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial interaction can be considered as media audiences' reaction to media actors so that the audience has an intimate relationship with that actor (Xu et al., 2022).

Parasocial relationship (PSR) (Horton & Wohl, 1956) refers to fantasies or intimate relationships that fans form with celebrities (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). The parasocial relationship is a socio-emotional bond that people develop with media figures like celebrities and fictional characters. PSR mirrors the social relationships offline in many ways, even though the intimacy that individuals feel with media figures is not reciprocated (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

Initially, Horton and Wohl (1956) stated that a parasocial relationship emerges when there is an illusory relationship which looks close, like a friendly or intimate relationship, between media users and media actors. PSR arises from one-way intimate interaction made by fans. This relationship is limited to media user who follows their favourite media actor by seeing their content. In other words, this relationship is considered parasocial because fans tend to know about the activities, anecdotes, and even the attitude of their favourite celebrities. In contrast, celebrities almost do not know anything about their fans (Xu et al., 2022). Because of that, the parasocial relationship is considered a fake, one-way relationship that was built by audiences (media users) to media actors but not mutually developed ((Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

There are some theoretical aspects of PSR, and some of them help reveal how “fiction takes precedence over actual” (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The first and most crucial characteristic is the unrequited commitment from fans to celebrities (Rubin & Step, 2000). The second characteristic of PSR is intertextuality (Wohlfeil et al., 2019). The third one is perceived as homophile. Fans are more likely to be interested in celebrities that they feel are alike and similar and with the one they can identify with, often as a result of projecting their own characteristics with celebrities (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Fourth, the initial conceptualization of PSR stated that they function as a substitute for “autonomous social participation” among individuals who are unable to maintain “real” relationships or feel unpopular or rejected by others (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For Horton and Wohl (1956), in the original formulation of PSR theory, celebrities’ figures were made “available as love objects” for the lonely. Lastly, the concept of love – no matter how one-sided – can function as an integral part of PSR (Jones et al., 2022).

The term parasocial intimacy refers to outcome construct rather than PSI or PSR. Parasocial intimacy is an audience feeling to be understood, validated, and noticed by media personae. Seeing the similarity between parasocial intimacy and interpersonal intimacy, this definition can also be considered as the one-sided, imaginative nature of parasocial relationships, distinguishing parasocial intimacy from interpersonal intimacy (Dai & Walther, 2018).

Recent research on the interaction between audiences and public figures through new media identifies messages and channel-related factors contributing to audiences’ intimate projection towards public figures. For example, Lee and Jang (2013) found that people with low affiliative tendencies felt greater intimacy towards public figures when viewing their Twitter page compared to reading news articles about their tweets (Lee & Jang, 2013).

In a parasocial relationship with mainstream celebrities, intimacy can develop when audiences feel an intimate emotion with celebrities when viewing their shows (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The experience of intimate emotion can be compared with when the audience feels they are having an intimate reaction with their close friends (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Horton and Wohl (1956) said that audiences form emotionally close relationships with media actors that they like, and perceptions of intimacy are essential for maintaining parasocial relationships. Social media platforms provide many opportunities for such intimate acts (Xu et al., 2022). Because the perceived intimacy is inherently intertwined with parasocial interaction, the perceived intimacy with media actors is the essence of parasocial relationships (Rojek, 2015).

Fan-Idol Relationship

Cited from Jones et al. (2022), celebrities, or what has been approached as people-brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019), human brands (Thomson, 2006), or celebrity brands (Kerrigan et al., 2011), can provide consumers with a source of entertainment, a catalyst

for inspiration, and the illusion of friendships (Wohlfeil et al., 2019). There is a general academic consensus that being a “fan” is more than buying or consuming a product associated with certain celebrities and describing people who show loyalty level, emotional bond, and a fantastic enthusiasm for those celebrities (Wohlfeil, 2018). Fans oftentimes can do many personal and financial matters to chase their fandom, using their loyalty to the celebrities as a resource to construct their identity and even celebrate and show their passion in a social context. In this matter, a celebrity functions as a brand for fans and, like other brands, develops their meaning through social construct and interaction between their fans (Fournier, 1998; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). A celebrity thus can be seen as a celebrity brand whose fans seek out transmedia products, performances, and endorsements associated with the celebrities, but also engaging in making meaning through social construct and interactions in a logic that resembles the cult appeal of branded content (Kerrigan et al., 2011).

Becoming a fan is not just a free-time activity but also to make a new form of culture that is called participatory culture. Participatory culture means fans are not only consuming media by listening and watching but also using selected media content to recreate their content (Jenol & Pazil, 2020).

Kozinets (2001) described fans as loyal consumers who invest much of themselves in their consumption. They are engaged in a form of deviant consumption from other consumers. For music fans, music is ingrained in their daily lives in a much more powerful way than the occasional music consumers (Derbaix & Korchia, 2019).

K-pop Fan Culture

The definition of fandom can be understood as casual but serious activities that are characterised by persistence, long-term personal effort, self-benefit, and unique ethos inherent in activities, and participants identify strongly with their chosen activities (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; S. Lee & Yoo, 2015). In particular, celebrity fandom is a stage of intense worship towards celebrities that are expressed in feelings, attitudes and behaviours. Since the development of the internet, online media platforms have created a much broader spectrum from fandom practices, and fans now are an essential part of celebrities’ promotion activities. Researcher Galzuka (2015) concluded that fans could play a new role in the online media era and globalisation: sponsors, co-creators of value, stakeholders, investors and filters (Jenol & Pazil, 2020).

Cited from Kang et al. (2022), fans usually identify themselves as a member of a fandom, and they usually join a fan community to get information or to communicate with other fans. Fandom like that usually tends to (i) consist of passionate fans, (ii) reveal strong cohesion (Blake, 2018), and (iii) share their own culture (Duffett, 2013).

Kang et al. (2022) also stated that for the success of K-pop bands, their fans usually made a collective attempt, usually called fan labour work, in some ways like massive

streaming or downloading their band songs to improve their ranking on online charts, continuous tweets with a relevant hashtag to make their band showed up on Twitter trending, and extensive voting in music awards.

Kim et al. (2014) found that international K-pop fan networks are abundant on Twitter, and they communicate with each other by sharing URLs about K-pop. The distribution of K-pop contents through social media contributes to K-pop popularity amongst Indonesian adolescents who are familiar with IT technology (Jung & Shim, 2013).

J. Kim (2017) uses the term “K-popping” to show Korean women fans’ active participation in music production as listeners, singers, producers, and promoters. K-pop fans even produce, distribute, and consume their own product to resolve their dissatisfaction with official productions and to show their investment in their fandoms (Sun, 2020).

K-pop fans not only learn Korean but also understand some exclusive and specific terms that are only understood within the K-pop fans’ community (Touhami & Al-Abed Al-Haq, 2017). Ryff (1989) also stated that being a part of the fans community helps one strive for personal growth and development (Jenol & Pazil, 2020).

Digital Media

Social Network Sites (SNS) can be defined as online platform that allows users to organize and maintain their social contacts (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Even though there are many functions for using social networking sites, the main feature to maintain (Grieve et al., 2013) and expanding social networks (Ellison et al., 2007) is still the basic for users. This online platform allows public figures (Abrams & Craig Lefebvre, 2009) and celebrities (Marshall, 2010) to expand their popularities and their influences (Ke Yen & Soon Li, 2021).

A relevant literature development discloses that parasocial interaction can happen in digital media, like online blogs (Thorson & Rodgers, 2013) and YouTube (Rasmussen, 2018). In this note, research shows that parasocial interaction and social network sites are intertwined because some specific user groups use this online platform to interact with a large group of followers (Frederick et al., 2012; Rasmussen, 2018; W. H. S. Tsai & Men, 2017). W.-H. S. Tsai et al. (2013) argue that social media facilitates a higher level of parasocial interaction between users and media actors (Xu et al., 2022).

Social media become the most popular platform for celebrities to interact with their audiences and fans. Based on Stever and Lawson (2013), “for passionate fans, Twitter can signify a direct connection to a favourite celebrity giving access to the information daily and also a way to contact and connect with that artist directly” (Reyes et al., 2021). Cited from Utami (2019), often, online interaction and social media postings in celebrities’ accounts or channels are geared towards image-making to cultivate the love, attention, and loyalty of their social media followers or fans (J. Kim & Song, 2016). As

such, the illusion of intimacy that arises from the constant forging of PSRs between celebrities and fans has become a common practice on online platforms, a necessary key to online marketing that contributes to celebrity success (Kehrberg, 2015). Although most PSR is one-way, media users often interact actively rather than passively in order to engage with media figures (Labrecque, 2014)

Research Method

This research uses a qualitative approach. The method that will be used in this research is the literature study method, where the research subjects will observe, collect materials, and understand how the phenomenon or object of research occurs (Alima & Ramadhanty, 2022).

In this study, the data taken is secondary data. Data is taken from the previous studies discussing parasocial intimacy in fan-idol relationships in digital media. Journals are taken from Scopus, Google Scholar, Sage Journals, and Taylor & Francis Online, with the main keywords of Parasocial Intimacy, Fan-Idol Relationship, Fan Culture, and Digital Media. Then, the data from the journals will be discussed, and the conclusions will be drawn following the focus of the research

Result and Discussion

Result

Based on research results, parasocial phenomena are now a widely researched area within the field of communication research (Giles, 2002). The term parasocial interaction refers to the fake conversational behaviour of audiences towards media actors (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). This interaction can occur in reaction to performances, gestures, or sounds from media actors (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial relationship (PSR) refers to the friendly imaginings or intimate relationships that fans form with celebrities (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSRs arise from intimate, one-way interactions by fans. Parasocial relationships are socio-emotional bonds that people develop with media figures such as celebrities and fictional characters. At the same time, parasocial intimacy is the audience's feeling of being understood, validated, and cared for by media personas in hypothetical encounters with them (Dai & Walther, 2018).

Discussion

Kozinets (2001) described fans as loyal consumers who invest much of themselves in their consumption. They are engaged in a form of deviant consumption from other consumers (Derbaix & Korchia, 2019). Cited from Jenol and Pazil (2020), becoming a fan is not just a free-time activity but also to make a new form of culture that is called participatory culture. Participatory culture means fans are not only consuming media by listening and watching but also using selected media content to recreate their content.

Since the development of the internet, online media platforms have created a broader spectrum of fandom practices and fans are now an essential part of celebrity promotional activities. Kang et al. (2022) stated that for the success of K-pop bands, their fans usually make collective efforts, commonly called fan labour work, in several ways.

This participatory culture and fandom culture is one factor in forming parasocial intimacy between fans and K-pop idols. Social media is also the most popular platform for celebrities to interact with their audiences and admirers. Cited from Xu et al. (2022), Tsai and Men (2013) argued that social media facilitates higher levels of parasocial interactions between users and media actors. And cited from Utami (2019), online interactions and social media posts on celebrities' social media accounts or channels are often geared towards image-making to cultivate love, attention, and loyalty from their social media followers or fans (J. Kim & Song, 2016). Therefore, the illusion of intimacy that arises from the constant forging of PSRs between celebrities and fans has become a common practice on online platforms, a necessary key to online marketing that contributes to the success of celebrities (Kehrberg, 2015).

A factor that has led to the strong parasocial relationship between fans and K-pop idols is social media. Social media platforms give fans a glimpse into the professional and personal backstage of their favourite media figures that would otherwise be unknown. The frequency and perceived authenticity of media figures' self-disclosure on social media enhances people's socio-emotional connections (J. Kim & Song, 2016; Kurtin et al., 2018). Parasocial relationships partly develop through observing media figures and imagining interactions with them (Dai & Walther, 2018). Moreover, parasocial relationships become stronger when fleeting episodes of computer-mediated interpersonal engagement occur directly between media figures and their fans (e.g., media figures retweeting fans' posts on Twitter or liking fans' comments on Instagram) (Bond, 2016).

Conclusion

Future research is expected to examine further the role of culture and social context in shaping parasocial relationships with K-pop artists. Research could explore the influence of factors such as gender, age and social background on this phenomenon, both in Indonesia and in diverse global contexts. A practical recommendation that can be drawn from this research is to develop social media apps and platforms that can facilitate interactions between fans and K-pop artists in a more healthy and constructive way, considering the global nature of K-pop fandom. For example, platforms that promote collaboration and interaction between fans. Finally, it can try to improve the understanding of the parasocial phenomenon in Indonesian society and the music industry as a whole.

As one of the largest music markets in the world, Indonesia can play an essential role in developing healthy practices in the relationship between fans and K-pop artists. Through this research, communication science can help open a space for discussion and a better understanding of the relationship between fans and idols in the growing digital era

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