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I Can Fix Him: A Mixed-Method Analysis of Psychological Effects of Parasocial Relationships in Adolescent K-Pop Fans

Lucie Huang

Abstract: Parasocial relationships (PSRs), defined as one-sided relationships with media personas have grown in prevalence within the K-pop fandom in recent years, particularly for adolescents. This study utilizes an explanatory sequential mixed methods model to investigate the psychological impact of PSRs on adolescent K-pop fans. Adapting existing frameworks of PSR measurement, quantitative data was collected through an online survey sent to high school students aged 14-18, while qualitative data was collected through narrative interviews. The key findings revealed that PSRs developed by adolescent K-pop fans often lead to unhealthy emotional attachment and unrealistic perceptions of beauty and interpersonal relationships, with social media acting as a mediator. Major psychological impacts identified include behavioral modifications, appearance insecurities, and emotional codependency, caused by extended exposure to misleading marketing techniques in K-pop. The study highlights the need for wider investigation of unhealthy standards perpetuated by the K-pop industry and the development of positive media consumption habits.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, K-pop, social media, media consumption, interpersonal relationships

1. Introduction

Coined by sociologists Horton and Wohl in 1956, *parasocial relationships* are defined as illusionary, non-reciprocal responses evoked from viewers through media characters. With a key emphasis on non-reciprocity, parasocial relationships are often utilized to project romantic desires and fantasies, a means to fulfill social needs and ameliorate loneliness (Bond, 2016; Erickson et al., 2018; Rosaen & Dibble, 2016; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018). With the

rise of digital media, parasocial interactions can occur through a variety of media, providing new interactive aspects such as live streams and live chats, mediating the growth of parasocial relationships between fans and celebrities (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Baek et al., 2013; Kim & Song, 2016).

In the specific context of K-pop, this popular sub-genre of music has grown to amass a large global fanbase with the rise of groups such as BTS¹, Seventeen² and BlackPink³ (Kim et al., 2023, n.p.). With a strong emphasis on idol-fan interactions through the prevalence of fan meetings, online fan videocalls, and

1 BTS: A South Korean boy band formed in 2010 under Big Hit Music Labels, consisting of seven members. Considered the most popular K-pop band, the band has amassed over 60 million fans on Instagram, with an estimated total of 90 million fans across the world.

2 Seventeen: A popular South Korean boy band formed in 2015 under Pledis Entertainment (now Hybe Entertainment), consisting of thirteen members.

3 BlackPink: One of the most popular K-pop girl bands, they are a popular South Korean girl group formed in 2016 under YG entertainment, consisting of 4 members.

personal messaging apps (Bubble⁴, Weverse⁵), parasocial relationships are particularly prevalent amongst fans of K-pop (Baek et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2023). Therefore, it is hypothesized that within the K-pop subculture, adolescent fans possess strong likelihoods of engaging in parasocial relationships, which subsequently impact their quality of interpersonal relationships and ideals of healthy relationships.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Psychological Frameworks

To understand the formation of parasocial relationships (PSR), previous research conceptualizes them as a multi-stage, dynamic process. Tukachinsky and Stever (2018) describe parasocial relationships as mirrors to real interpersonal relationships, identifying four stages of PSR development according to the Knapp model of interpersonal relationships. These four stages are Initiation, Experimentation, Intensification, and Integration. In the initiation stage, the viewer forms first impressions of media, mentally evaluating the physical attractiveness and degree of similarity to themselves; then, in the experimentation stage, the viewer increases the breadth of media exposure to further their curiosity. Tukachinsky's meta-analysis (2020) corroborates this argument as its findings point to attractiveness and homophily⁶ as the main drivers of PSRs. The PSR is cemented in the intensification stage, where viewers develop stronger feelings of intimacy with the media persona (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018). The final integration stage establishes the PSR as a socially recognized and fully solidified relationship (p. 16). This framework is supported by Rosaen and Dibble's (2016) cross-sectional survey, which stated that parasocial connections mirror real-life social connections in approach and outcome (n.p.).

Beyond this framework, Dibble et. al. (2016) used

Alan Rubin's Parasocial Interaction Scale (1985) to assess the intensity of parasocial interactions. However, Rubin's outdated model defines PSRs only as interactions spanning the duration of the viewing experience and has since been modified by Schramm and Hartmann (2008), as their survey study adapted the conceptualization of PSRs to include long-term bonds whilst refining Rubin's 20-item scale to 6 items in three aspects: Cognitive, the mental processes; Affective, the emotional response; and Behavioral, the non-verbal and verbal behaviors demonstrated in a PSR. Hartmann and Goldhoorn's Experience of Parasocial Interaction (ESPI) scale offers the most accurate and relevant measurement of PSRs, emphasizing perceived mutual awareness, adjustment, and connection. Dibble and Hartmann's (2015) independent groups experiment and Derrick et al.'s (2008) online survey validate the EPSI scale, finding a strong correlation between these psychological processes and the likelihood of engaging in a PSR.

2.2 Vulnerability of Adolescents

In approaching the cognitive and social effects of PSRs, research has illustrated that adolescents are particularly susceptible to the development of PSRs (Erickson et al., 2018; Gleason et al., 2017; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). As adolescents undergo stages of identity formation and emotional growth, the combination of neurological development, physical changes, and introduction to new social environments encourage adolescents to seek out new experiences and discover new facets of their identity (Erickson et al., 2018; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019). Erickson and her colleagues (2018) contend that "the combination of hyper-sociality and hypersensitivity to rejection that comes with puberty creates a fertile environment for celebrity attachment" (p. 5). Gleason et al.'s (2017) online survey study points out that due to a lack of real romantic experience and a desire for sexual socialization, adolescents are in-

4 Bubble: A paid subscription service created by South Korean entertainment company SM, where users can receive and reply to exclusive photos, messages, and content sent by K-pop artists themselves.

5 Weverse: A free messaging application created by South Korean entertainment company Hybe, specializing in multimedia fan-idol communication and interaction for K-pop artists.

6 Homophily: the tendency for people to seek out or form social connections to those who are perceived to be similar to themselves, through shared interests or traits.

clined to seek out parasocial relationships that emulate intimacy, stating that PSRs exist as an “imagined forum for simulating autonomy” (p. 8). An element of fantasy can also be observed in Erickson et al.’ (2018) and Tukachinsky and Dorros’ (2018) research; both highlighted that fantasy further engages adolescents in deeper emotional attachments as they begin to form highly idealized views of romantic relationships. As adolescents are particularly susceptible to targeted messaging and misinformation in the media, they are far more likely to be influenced by media and form unhealthy beliefs about romantic relationships (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018).

2.3 Social Media

Social media can act as a mediator in increasing the intensities and frequencies of PSRs, as platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Discord allow users to disclose more information and interact with fans in an intimate manner (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Baek et al., 2013; Kim & Song, 2016; Bond, 2016). As celebrities increase their social presence through posts and livestreams, fans can feel a stronger feeling of “imagined intimacy” and connectedness (Baek et al., 2013; Bond, 2016; Kim & Song, 2016). In Bond’s (2016) study of celebrity Twitter fanbases, he notes that a celebrity can “carefully craft an image and create a sense of closeness and familiarity between themselves and their followers”, thereby enhancing fans’ attachment and positive perceptions of them (p. 2; Kim & Song, 2016). Stever and Lawson’s (2013) grounded theory study further analyzes Twitter as a medium for parasocial interaction, supporting the conclusion that exposure through social media increases perceived reciprocity from viewers, though their data may be outdated. Social media’s capacity for celebrities to interact with fans encourages viewers to possess a false sense of hope and reciprocity through the possibility of the celebrity responding back or interacting, even if the chance is impossibly slim (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Baek et al., 2013; Leith, 2021; Stever & Lawson, 2013). In a content analysis of Twitch gaming servers conducted by Professor Alex Leith (2021), it found that platforms centered around live content allow for extended exposure to celebrities, fostering a stronger sense of codependency in PSRs. Aw and Chuah’s (2021) cross-sectional study confirms Leith’s (2021)

argument, indicating that celebrity self-disclosure on social media can sway consumers’ beliefs, fortifying “perceived authenticity while discounting the potential negative information” (pg. 153, 154).

2.4 Gap Analysis

Research on parasocial relationships typically focuses on the formation of parasocial attachment through parasocial interactions, with little research analyzing the impacts of parasocial relationships on romantic ideals, perceptions, and their reflection on real interpersonal relationships (Erickson et al., 2018; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Rubin et al., 1985). Limited research exists on the effect of parasocial interactions on adolescents’ psyches and how they shape their perspective on relationships and commitment. There is considerable quantitative research using PSI and EPSI scales, yet little qualitative research exists in the field, indicating a lack of in-depth, nuanced analysis of variations of parasocial relationships and their effect on different individuals. Current literature often centers on TV and film characters as objects of parasocial relationships, neglecting modern industries such as K-pop idols and social media influencers. This study aims to explain the psychological and emotional impacts of parasocial relationships in Ontario adolescents through answering the driving question: *What are the psychological impacts of parasocial relationships in adolescent K-pop fans?* It will examine the influence of various modern mediums and trends to provide a more comprehensive understanding of parasocial relationships in adolescents.

3. Methodology

The following section rationalizes (1) the design of the study, (2) the data collection methods, and considers (3) limitations and (4) possible ethical concerns and mitigation strategies.

3.1 Design

This study employed the Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design, which combines elements of quantitative and qualitative research, with the quantitative preceding the qualitative phase (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). According to John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, a mixed method design combines the strengths and reduces the limitations of quantitative and qualitative research, enabling a stronger understanding of the overall problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.298). Clark (2016) supports this by stating that a mixed method design achieves both breadth and depth, as quantitative data can indicate significant predictors and analyze the prevalence of a variable whilst qualitative data can provide subjective, detailed explanations to a mechanism or phenomenon (p.305).

Current literature exploring the impacts of PSRs largely rely on quantitative research, developing psychological frameworks such as the PSI and EPSI scale (Dibble et al., 2015). Though qualitative research methods are often marginalized in psychology, the use of qualitative methods can uniquely generate descriptive data and analysis of cultural and social processes, enabling a deeper understanding of how PSRs impact the human psyche (Karasz & Singelis, 2009). A mixed methods design can further contextualize findings and examine a social or psychological within a specific culture of interest (Bartholomew & Brown, 2012, pg. 178). The combination of quantitative and qualitative data not only assessed the psychological effects and predictors of PSR but provided an understanding of how these effects are expressed and understood within K-pop culture. This entailed the exploration of the Korean Idol industry and its oppressive beauty standards and fan-idol interactions. Furthermore, this design explained the impacts of “contextual mediators” such as social media, investigating the phenomena through a nuanced context rather than imposing a theoretical framework onto a culture (Bartholomew & Brown, 2012, pg. 185).

The placement of quantitative research before qualitative allows for an explanation of mechanisms alongside detailed insights and culturally significant meanings (Doucerain et al., 2016). Snelson (2016) contends that while quantitative data can identify significant predictors and uncover patterns of behavior and attitude, the addition of qualitative data following the initial phase can support these findings through the analysis of subjective experiences (Snelson, 2016). Contrary to an exploratory sequential mixed methods design, which seeks to create new instruments of design, this study examined the psychological impacts

of PSRs on adolescent K-pop stans, utilizing existing frameworks such as the EPSI and PSI scales assessed in the literature review (Dibble et al., 2015; Doucerain et al., 2016).

Other designs such as narrative inquiry and convergent design are not ideal for this research, as narrative inquiry largely centers on the lived experience and life stories of individuals, adding excessive confounding variables, whereas convergent design aims to validate a theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Ultimately, the mixed methods approach best provides an in-depth analysis and explanation of a phenomenon across a culture and community. Specifically, the psychological effects of parasocial relationships in K-pop idol interactions can be understood within the context of its young fan community and often obsessive and intense fandom culture.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Quantitative Data: Online Surveys

To analyze the impacts of PSRs on adolescent K-pop fans, a purposeful random sampling strategy was used, where participants were chosen based on a specific group characteristic. An online survey was sent to adolescents from age 14-18 across four Ontario high schools, specifically targeting those who self-identify as fans of K-pop. As K-pop remains relatively niche within westernized Canadian high school environments, the survey gathered 54 responses, which will make for a statistically significant finding, as the population size is relatively small and contained within a geographic region. In addition, past research on PSRs in specific genres/cultures often utilized a sample size of 50-100 responses (Baek et al., 2013; Stever & Lawson, 2013).

The survey entailed a series of Likert scales (Batterton and Hale, 2017) in accordance with the EPSI and PSI scales with a total of 20 items that measure a user's extent and intensity of parasocial interactions as well as their usage of social media (see Appendix B). (Dibble et al., 2015, p. 28) These scales measure perceived mutual awareness, connection, and liking and categorizes items into three aspects: Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral, which allow for a comprehensive understanding of PSRs (Schramm & Hartmann,

2008). As Likert scales are commonly used to measure the alignment of a user to a certain phenomenon by measuring the extent of their agreement to statements of behaviors (Taherdoost, 2019), they are ideal in evaluating the prevalence of parasocial relationships amongst adolescent K-pop fans.

The use of an online survey allows for ease of distribution and reach towards larger populations such as high schools (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). As participants can respond to the survey at their own pace and time, online surveys have a higher response rate than recruitment through in-person questionnaires (Ball, 2019).

3.2.2 Qualitative Data: Narrative Interviews

To explain the findings from the quantitative phase, participants were categorized into three groups based on their intensity of parasocial relationships: Mild, Moderate, and Intense. Five participants were then randomly selected in each group for a one-on-one narrative interview, where open ended questions were asked regarding their experience with the K-pop fandom and perception of self and interpersonal relationships. These interviews enabled an examination of the varied impacts of parasocial relationships on users' psyche and abilities to form healthy interpersonal relationships. Narrative interviews focus on subjectivity and situate the interviewees within the heart of the research, offering a unique window into the "complex relationships between narrative, time, and memory" (Riessman, 2015, p. 20). The use of open-ended questions allows subjects to elaborate on their unique life experiences and provide insight into their intentions, thoughts, and emotions (McCormack, 2012, p. 230). Utilizing a semi-structured format in narrative interviewing can cater each interview to each interviewee's preferred style of communication whilst remaining grounded in the context (Scheibelhofer, 2008, p. 409).

The interview method is ideal as it allows participants to express their viewpoints in private, in comparison to a focus group, where opinions imposed by others can influence one's response (Jamshed, 2014). As adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer influence and conformity bias, interviews provide the best pathway for participants to share honest answers. Furthermore, interviews offer flexibility, as the interviewer can ask for elaboration and clarification

of responses as well as rephrase questions if needed, adapting to the respondent's train of thought to provide thorough responses (Bolderston, 2012).

3.3 Limitations

One limitation to this method is the nature of self-reporting in online surveys during the quantitative phase (Bartholomew & Brown, pg. 187). Self reported data may possess inaccuracies as well as social desirability bias, which can impact the results of the study. To mitigate this, the survey emphasized anonymity and confidentiality, encouraging the respondents to respond openly and honestly. In addition, questions were phrased with clear and neutral language as to not incite bias or negative connotations to any statements.

Due to the niche nature of K-pop and survey fatigue, the online survey received fewer responses than other studies of similar design and topic, which may impart non-response bias, and impact the statistical significance of the quantitative findings. Scheduling conflicts for interviews also arose as students were occupied with their academic commitments and found it difficult to allocate time to commit to the study. Reminders were then sent out to encourage participation, and interviews were often scheduled on weekends as to avoid clashing with academic commitments. Interviews were also held in a semi-structured format, which allowed interviewees to feel more comfortable in answering the questions posed and provide alternate pathways, such as rephrasing questions, to acquire narrative data.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

As this study involved the discussion of personal relationships and mental health, prevention measures were implemented to ensure full confidentiality and anonymity. All participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix A) prior to completing the survey. All responses were kept anonymous in a passcode protected file, and all data collected were only shared with the research advisor. Participants were informed of their right to refuse answering any questions, and withdraw from the study at any time, whereupon all data collected from the participant will be deleted. This study was approved by my institution's Internal Ethics Review Board.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, key findings collected through quantitative and qualitative methods are analyzed and major patterns and conclusions are drawn that address the gap analysis and contribute to understandings of the psychological impacts of parasocial relationships (PSRs) on adolescent K-pop fans. The quantitative results served as a basis for the qualitative data to follow and provide further explanations; therefore, findings from both phases and their discussion are presented in conversation with one another and in four overarching themes: the development of K-pop PSRs, and their cognitive, behavioral, and affective impacts.

4.1 Formation of PSRS in the Context of the K-Pop Industry

Amongst the survey participants, most participants were shown to have developed a moderate or intense parasocial relationship with their preferred K-pop idols as 63% of participants agreed or strongly agreed

with at least 10 out of 20 items in the PSI scale while 13% of participants showed strong agreement to 15 or more items in the scale (Figure 1). Overall, a high prevalence of parasocial relationships exists among young K-pop fans, particularly for female-identifying fans, as 59.3% of survey participants identified as female while 26.6% of participants identified as male and 11.1% of participants identified as non-binary/other. Future studies should aim to utilize a larger sample size with a more equal gender distribution to achieve more generalizable and valid results.

The prevalence of parasocial relationships amongst K-pop consumers can be partly attributed to the unique marketing appeals of the K-pop industry, which purposefully formulates personas and images for idols and groups to attract their target audiences (Kim et al., 2022). By presenting their idols as an epitome of Korean beauty standards and assigning them stereotypical gender archetypes such as the responsible leader, the comedian, or the introvert, the industry more easily attracts fans to their idealized image, which intensifies the “Initiation” stage of PSR development (Kim et al., 2022; Tukachinsky & Stever,

Figure 1. Overall Participant Scores on the PSI Scale

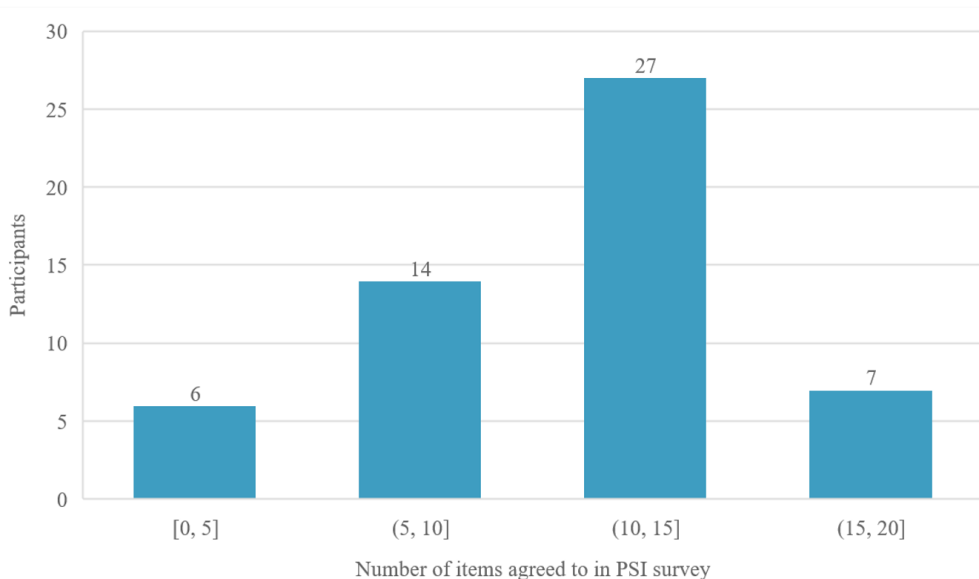
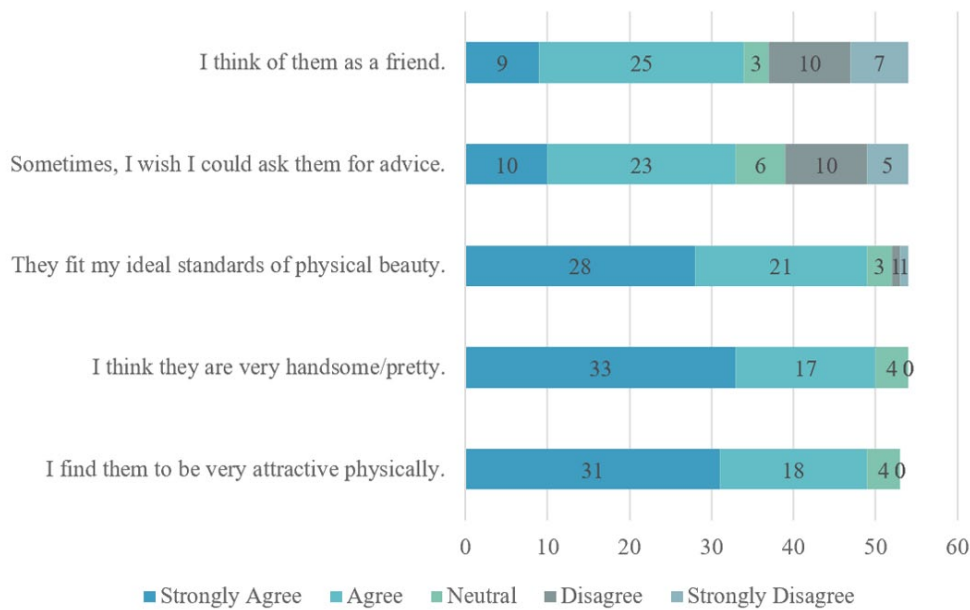


Figure 2. Responses Evaluating Beauty Standards and PSR Types



2018). The findings of the quantitative survey validate this idea as all but two participants reported that they not only find their favorite idols to be highly attractive, but that they embody their ideal standards of beauty.

The industry’s marketing approach further aims to attract fans through the promotion of messaging apps such as Bubble and Weverse, which deepens the “Intensification” stage of PSR development, as such applications simulate parasocial interactions by allowing users to message idols on a one-on-one texting platform (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Kim & Song, 2016; Bond, 2016). As a result, fans develop stronger emotional attachments to the idols as they feel like they can communicate with them as a close friend. This is reflected in the qualitative data as all interview participants who used such messaging apps strongly agreed that the apps increased their sense of connection and understanding towards the idols they messaged, noting specifically that “It (Weverse) makes me feel like I’m talking to one of my best friends”.

An important aspect to recognize is the difference in types of PSRs formed by adolescent K-pop fans.

Though PSRs are commonly associated with romantic bonds (Erickson et al., 2018), I found that for adolescents, platonic and mentor PSRs were equally prevalent amongst the population, particularly for those who have remained a fan for multiple years. As many second and third generation K-pop groups often have members aged 25-35, adolescents aged 14-18 find it difficult to imagine them as romantic interests, but rather as platonic, sibling, or mentor figures. Exemplified in the quantitative data, 63% of participants considered their favorite idols as friends while 61.1% of participants reported that they wished they could seek advice from them in a sibling-like or mentor-mentee relationship (Figure 2).

4.2 Behavioral Impacts of PSRs

One notable behavioral impact of PSRs on adolescent K-pop fans is a shift of self-perception, as fans begin to modify facets of themselves to imitate or feel closer to their favorite idols. Around 54% of participants answered that they were often influenced by the preferences of their favorite idols, while 26% purchase

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items they see their favorite idols use or promote on social media (Figure 3). This behavior can be explained through interview data, where one participant stated that “It feels nice to have something that your favorite idol has too, it makes me feel a sense of similarity, like a shared interest between friends.” By altering aspects such as music taste, fashion, and appearance, fans aim to bridge the disconnection between them and their idol through surface-level similarities. As supported by Baek et al. (2013), this behavior is frequently exhibited in parasocial relationships, and can cause users to lose authenticity in the pursuit of parasocial connection, which can be particularly damaging to adolescents, whose self perceptions have yet to cement fully.

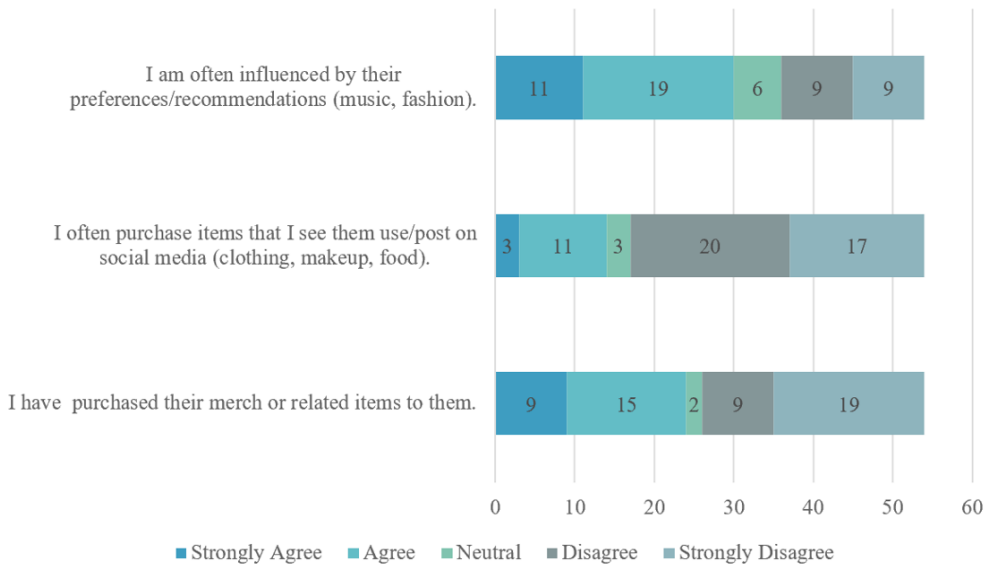
In addition, PSRs formed amongst K-pop fans are mediated by the presence of social media and serve as a source of escapism for adolescents. A slight majority (52%) of participants reported that they spent more than 2 hours every day consuming content of their favorite idols (Figure 4), while select participants stated in the interview that they used K-pop as a source of distraction, often neglecting schoolwork and family obligations to consume K-pop content. One partici-

pant stated that “When I get home from school, I just watch hours of YouTube and TikToks of Seventeen and pretend I don’t have to go interact with people or hand in my assignments.” This is consistent with the findings in Erickson et al.’s (2018) survey, which found a correlation between a desire for fantasy and escapism with PSR development. In qualitative interviews, many detailed a desire to escape from school or social burdens, turning to K-pop as a remedy for social anxiety and academic pressures. Participants also felt that social media humanized idols’ images and made them appear more “down to earth”, in turn sparking stronger emotional connections and similarity formations between fans and idols. This extends the understanding found in Professor Aw & Chuah’s (2021) cross-sectional design study, which found that social media can establish “perceived authenticity” and humanizing celebrity images (p.154).

4.3 Cognitive Impacts of PSRs

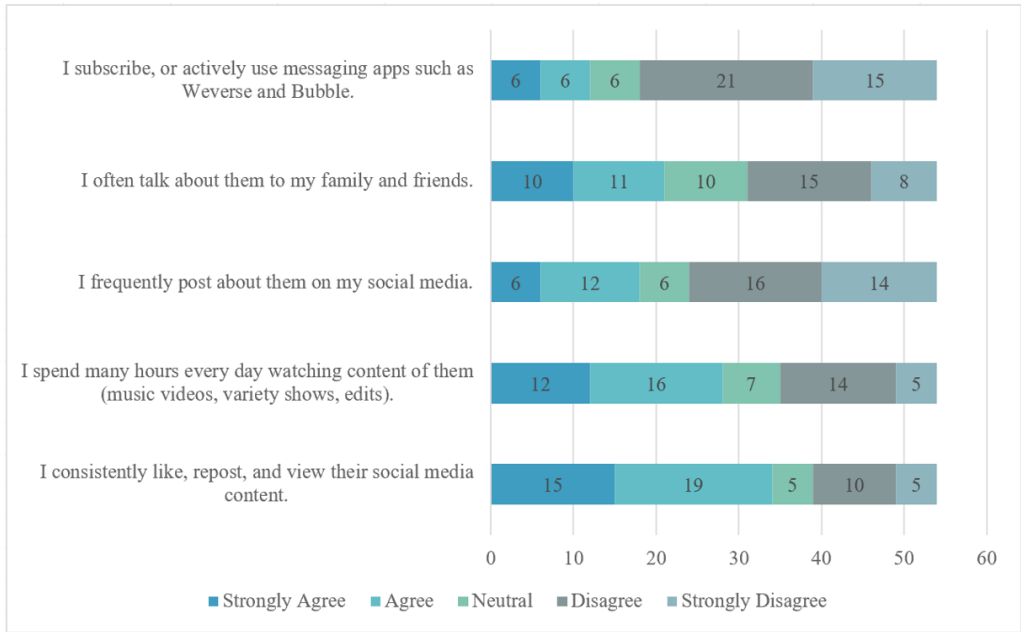
Forming unrealistic ideals and images of K-pop idols, PSR development in adolescent K-pop fans can lead to a warped sense of internal morals as fans go to

Figure 3. Responses Showing Tendency to be Influenced by PSR Figures



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Figure 4. Responses Showing Frequency of Social Media Consumption of PSR Figures



extreme means to defend and support their favorite idol's actions. When presented with a scenario where one's favorite idol was involved in a scandal such as illegal drug use, dating, or bullying, many participants reacted with extreme defensiveness and overprotectiveness, claiming that they would still defend the idol's action, even if the acts did not agree with their personal set of morals and beliefs. One participant stated that "It's (idol), he would never do something like that. And even if he did, I would defend him since he's my bias⁷ and all." In contrast, a portion of participants showed a wildly different attitude, feeling a strong sense of betrayal by the idol followed by immediate detachment and hatred, with one participant claiming when their favorite idol was found in a scandal, they were so upset and disappointed that they "could not even look at him in group contents anymore". Both responses indicate a problematic and false perception of idols, one of perfect innocence that shatters in the face of a scandal

and encourages unhealthy and extreme coping mechanisms such as defensiveness or detachment. Such results provide new insight into a possible withdrawal response caused by PSRs, in contrast to Lueck's (2012) case study, which only offers the previously mentioned defensive response as a cognitive impact in PSRs.

Beyond contradicting one's attitudes and values, PSRs in adolescent K-pop fans were found to hold overly idealized romantic beliefs, leading to a disinterest in forming real life connections and relationships. In the quantitative survey, 53.7% of participants reported that they often picture interacting with their favorite idols and 37% can even envision them as romantic partners (Figure 5). In the qualitative phase, participants described their favorite idols as their "ideal type", with qualities such as attractiveness, wealth, extensive affection, and empathy, which they deemed difficult to find in real life relationships. Seeking to resort to imaginary interactions, one participant answered, "Being a fan of (idol) just set my bar for

⁷ Bias: A favorite member within a K-pop group.

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men higher”, while another said “I don’t really have romantic interest in anyone at the moment. I mean, no one’s going to be as fine as (idol), so I don’t really see a point.” Consequently, those engaged in PSRs begin to socially withdraw from friend groups and close relationships due to unrealistic high standards in romantic or platonic partners. Rosaen and Dibble’s (2017) survey study supports this conclusion as their findings present PSRs as a method of projecting social and relationship desires onto distant figures, regarded often as “better replacements for real life friendships and relationships” (p.18).

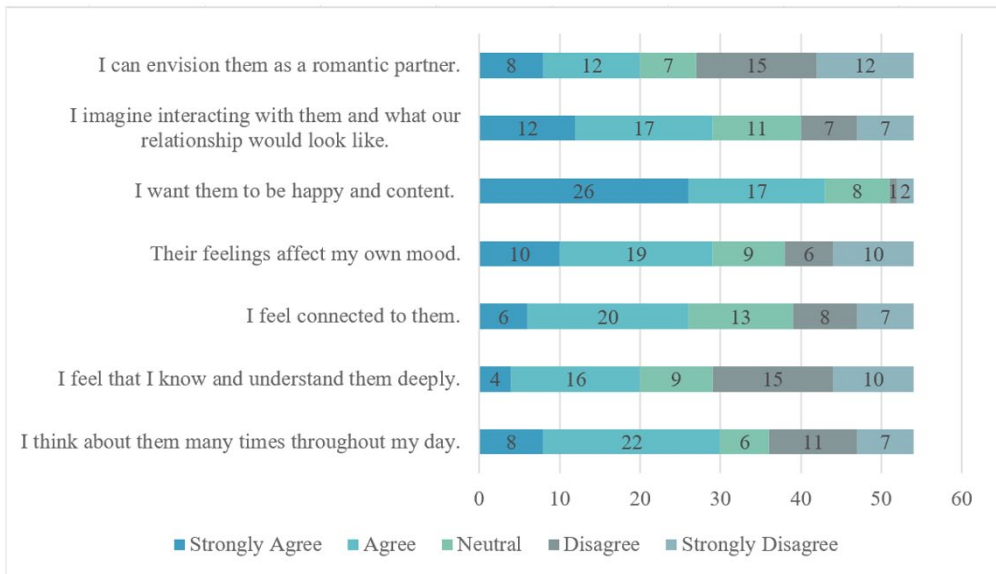
Furthermore, the perpetuation of toxic beauty standards in the K-pop industry may play a role in instilling overly idealized beauty standards, as the majority of interviewees answered that the continued exposure to K-pop content elevated their standards of physical beauty both towards themselves and others. These participants noted an increased harshness towards others’ and one’s own appearance alongside a desire to put more effort into appearances (makeup, clothing, hairstyles, etc.). Common phrases used by interviewees to describe this effect were “Every time I watch their videos, I think I don’t look pretty enough”,

“I’d pay to look as good as them”, and “Guys I know could never look as good as any of the TXT members”. This suggests a formation of appearance insecurities through excessive comparisons with unrealistic idols, which contradicts Derrick et al.’s (2008) questionnaire study that suggested an increase of self esteem in PSRs due to perceived closeness and minimized self-discrepancies (p. 23). Opposing Derrick’s argument that PSRs with celebrities better connect users with their ideal self and affirm one’s identity, this study showed that forming parasocial bonds with K-pop idols can strongly contribute to a false perception of beauty and intensify self-discrepancies.

4. 3 Affective Impacts of PSRs

Analyzing the affective and emotional impacts of PSRs on adolescent K-pop fans, most participants demonstrated a strong emotional attachment towards their favorite idols and groups, with 53.7 % of participants reporting that the idol’s mood impacted their own mood, 48.1% answered that they felt connected to their idol and understood them deeply, while 79.6% answered that they had a strong desire

Figure 5. Responses Showing Emotional Attachment and Projection in PSRs



for their idol to feel happy and content (Figure 5). Such emotional attachment can be attributed, again, to messaging applications, as most participants who utilized such applications remarked that they were able to know the idol on “a deeper, more intimate level than other fans, like knowing their personality quirks and parts of their lives off camera”. However, excessive attachment can lead to an unhealthy emotional dependency, where fans may care for the idol’s happiness and health more than their own. In cases where one’s idol figure becomes unavailable due to reasons such as mandatory Korean enlistment, hiatus, or disbandment, users with strong emotional attachments to their idols are likely to experience a strong sense of disillusionment, depression, and loneliness. The qualitative results showed that participants experienced periods of sadness because of an idol’s hiatus, with one participant describing that “I didn’t know what to do with myself anymore”, as if they were losing a close friend. This furthers theories from Bond’s (2016) online survey and Leith’s (2021) content analysis study, which both suggest a risk of emotional dependency and unhealthy attachment between idols and fans that may lead to feelings of isolation and depression, exacerbated in adolescents due to their emotional vulnerability and lack of maturity (p. 27, p. 34).

experience several cognitive, behavioral, and affective responses, including (1) a change in self-perception in pursuit of assimilation with their favorite idols, (2) a warped sense of internal values, (3) overly idealized romantic beliefs leading to social withdrawal, (4) unhealthy perception of beauty standards and development of appearance insecurities, and (5) excessive emotional dependency. As the study consisted of largely female participants, future research should seek to include a wider range and distribution of gender identities to further analyze possible differences in PSR experiences in fans of different genders. In addition, future research should seek to employ a larger and more geographically diverse sample size beyond Ontario to investigate the wider impact of culture on parasocial experiences. The findings of this study can be highly useful in examining the influence of modern media and culture on adolescents’ perception of themselves as well as relationships, illustrating possibly harmful impacts in excessive media consumption and obsession with K-pop culture. This can inform young adults and K-pop fans to develop healthy relationships with media figures and establish positive habits in K-pop consumption.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to explain the psychological effects of parasocial relationships (PSRs) on adolescent K-pop fans and the role of social media as a mediator. While past research focused on extracting quantitative data using PSI scales (Rubin et al., 1985), this study put in conversation a mix of quantitative and qualitative results, addressing the gap discussed in the literature review and providing a broader explanation to the multifaceted nature of parasocial interactions. The findings of this study expanded on past theories, concluding that parasocial relationships are highly prevalent within adolescent K-pop fans largely due to the exposure and accessibility provided through social media applications. In the context of the K-Pop industry, marketing tactics and specifically designed messaging applications greatly magnified the likelihood and intensity of forming PSRs with idols. While engaging in PSRs with idols, results show that users

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Appendix A.

Recruitment Communications and Informed Consent Documents

Recruitment Emails sent to Students at an Ontario High School

Hi All,

Are you a fan of **K-Pop**? Come join my Capstone study and earn a service hour just by talking about your favorite idols!

Hey guys, I am conducting a study on the development of parasocial relationships in adolescent K-pop stans. If you don't know what that means, I'm basically studying the different ways in which we interact with our favorite K-pop idols!

My study will entail a short 10-minute survey and an optional 30 minute follow up interview. Further details are outlined in the informed consent form, attached above.

If you self-identify as a K-pop fan, and would like to participate in my study, please fill out this very short survey!

You will be rewarded with a wonderful **service hour** for your participation in completing all stages of the study. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact me via email, or my faculty advisor.

Thank you so much for your consideration!

Kind Regards,

Informed Consent Document

Informed Consent Form

Effects of Parasocial Relationships in Adolescent K-pop Fans

Date: November 28, 2023

You are invited to participate in a research study that aims to investigate the psychological impacts of parasocial relationships amongst adolescent K-Pop fans. The researcher asks that only those who self-identify as a K-pop fan take part in the study. The results of the study will be included in a research paper

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN K-POP FANS

that will be submitted as a part of the AP capstone course and/or published in a scholarly journal. The anticipated duration of the study will begin in December 2023 and conclude in January 2024.

Study Procedures:

Online Survey (estimated 10 minutes)

You will be asked to complete a brief online survey that includes questions about your engagement with K-pop, your favorite idols, and your interactions with them through social media platforms.

Optional Follow-up Interview

After the completion of the survey, participants will have the option to partake in a follow-up 30-minute one-on-one interview with the researcher.

The interview aims to delve deeper into the subjective experience of being a K-pop fan, and therefore may also inquire about your mental wellbeing and interpersonal relationships.

The interview will be recorded for ease of transcription.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. You may choose to skip answering any questions if you are uncomfortable. Your decision to withdraw will not result in any adverse consequences and will not affect your relationship with the researchers involved, or any other groups/institutions associated with the study. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately deleted wherever possible.

All information you supply during the duration of the research will be held in confidence and your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Your data will be stored safely through a passport protected file and only accessed by the researcher and the faculty advisor. At the end of the 2023-2024 academic year, all research data will be deleted.

There are no foreseeable risks, discomfort, or expenses to your participation. Participants will not receive any payment but may earn up to one service hour for their participation in the survey as well as the interview. While there is no direct benefit to the study,

participants may develop a stronger understanding of the impact of K-pop on wellbeing and reflect meaningfully on their own interactions with social media.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, you can contact the researcher or the faculty advisor.

Indicate **Yes** or **No**:

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.

Yes No

I consent to participate in this research study and have read and understood all the information outlined above regarding my participation in the study.

Signature _____ **Parent/Guardian Signature (if under 16)** _____ **Date**

Appendix B

Survey Items

For the following statements, please indicate how true these statements are to your own experiences with your favorite K-Pop idol, using indicators of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree.

Items:

I find them to be very attractive physically.

I think they are very handsome/pretty.

They fit my ideal standards of physical beauty.

I consistently like, repost, and view their social media content.

I spend many hours every day watching content of them (music videos, variety shows, edits).

I frequently post about them on my social media.

I often talk about them to my family and friends.

I have purchased their merch or related items to them.

I often purchase items that I see them use/post on social media (clothing, makeup, food).

I am often influenced by their preferences/recommendations (music, fashion).

I subscribe, or actively use messaging apps such as Weverse and Bubble to interact with them.

I think about them many times throughout my day.

I feel that I know and understand them deeply.

I feel connected to them.

Their feelings affect my own mood.

I want them to be happy and content.

I imagine interacting with them and what our relationship would look like.

Sometimes, I wish I could ask them for advice.

I think of them as a friend.

I can envision them as a romantic partner.