

Oppa didn't mean it:
Examining parasocial interaction and social
responsibility in K-pop fandom

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2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Social media has proven to be one the strongest marketing tools of the recent era. If there is a product, it is bound to participate in the online social sphere through approachable social network accounts.¹ Brands and companies are closer than ever to our daily lives, because not only do they decorate the environment of our routine, they are now actively participating in our daily discourse. Fast food restaurants are sporting twitter accounts that spend multiple tweets engaging with each other in playful banter, celebrities show off their breakfasts on Instagram accounts in front of millions of adoring followers. Advertisements are packed and framed as interaction, rather than a one-sided affair. Brands have personalities and opinions one can engage with. Celebrities have lives that we can invest in on levels deeper than ever before.

In a changing world where we are increasingly dividing our social interactions between the online and offline spheres, who we interact with has become less dependent on distance, class and occupations. In the last 10 years, with the increase in quality of the web 2.0 social media and the increase in its usage, the gap between celebrities and fans has become as small as possible. Fans are now able to 'follow' their objects of affection alongside their friends and family in the same newsfeeds, engaging with what is presented as personal content in the same manner as they would with their peers'.²

To be able to integrate into a consumer's life this seamlessly, seems like the ideal dream to companies. For brands, which exist to promote a product with no sentience, the closing of the gap between consumer and product seems only beneficial. By facilitating the interaction between consumer and the product,

¹ Kyewski, Elias, Jessica M. Szczuka, and Nicole C. Krämer. 2018. The protagonist, my facebook friend: How cross-media extensions are changing the concept of parasocial interaction. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 7 (1): 2-17.

² Lueck, Jennifer Anette. 2015. Friend-zone with benefits: The parasocial advertising of Kim Kardashian. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 21 (2): 91-109.

It is when the brand becomes a person, and the person's craft becomes the product, as is the case with celebrities, that we start to see the limits and risks of the cultivation of a close relationship between consumer, or fan, and celebrity.

This relationship, however, has always been key for the success of entertainers and often, the larger the artist, the more dedicated the fanbase seems to be. It is therefore no surprise that one of the largest factors in the rise in popularity of South Korean pop music, also known as K-pop, was the relentless dedication of the fans of the genre. Dedication made possible and made stronger, by the closeness cultivated between entertainer and fandom.

Now with a foot on the world stage, K-pop has gained global recognition on a previously unknown level. In a way, it has transcended its national roots, forming a separate genre with distinct sounds and visuals on the level of acknowledged genres such as metal or RnB. K-pop artists are flying out to locations on every continent for events and concerts and are met with legions of adoring fans.³ Despite the language barrier and culture-difference, these fans feel nothing but understanding and excitement upon interaction with their favourite band. K-pop is global now, it is as much theirs as it has always belonged to the Korean people.⁴

But the rise to the global stage has not been without obstacles. When the eyes of the world are on you, that means one is subjected to a myriad of cultural perspectives, many of which will inevitably clash with your own. In this scenario, cultural faux passes, or worse, are inevitable. The list of Korean pop idols being recorded doing or saying culturally insensitive things is long, and even during this era of global recognition continues to grow, as some Korean idols continue to make mistakes out of ignorance and miseducation.

Global fans, confronted with these instances, have reacted in various ways, ranging from witch-hunts to blind defence. Knowing they have global fans should have made them more aware, is one of the sentiments, whereas another vocal group points out that perhaps cultural differences are to blame.

³ Pak, Yöng-ung. 2015. K-pop üro ponün taejung munhwa t'ürendü, 2016, ed. Hüi-yun Im. 초판.; Ch'op'an. ed.Söul-si : Mari Puksü; 서울시 : 마리 북스.

⁴ Jung, Sun. 2011. K-pop, Indonesian fandom, and social media. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 8.

2.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

In this thesis I take a look at K-pop's rise to the global stage and the influence of the relationship between celebrity and fan in the way global fans deal with the cultural mishaps of their favourite idols. This interaction between fan and idol can be characterized as parasocial, meaning a one-way relationship marked by a feeling of protectiveness and dependency facilitated by media.

For this, I will be primarily working with the following research questions:

- 1. Does parasocial interaction influence the opinions of international fans of K-pop, regarding the problematic behaviour of their idols?*
- 2. Are fans who feel extremely close to their idols more likely to forgive their mishaps, even if they are blatant insults towards their own culture?*

In order to shed light on these questions, a quantitative survey was conducted among 328 respondents in the period of April 2020 to May 2020. Along with the survey, a list of 15 open-ended questions was distributed in June 2020 among 26 respondents to gain more qualitative commentary to function as contrast and illustration to the survey's results.

3 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

3.1 PARASOCIAL INTERACTION AND RELATIONSHIPS

In 1956, Horton and Wohl defined one of the characteristics of the changing mass media as the illusion of face-to-face relationships with the performer. The term coined in their essay “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction”, was the one of *parasocial interaction*.⁵

Parasocial interaction, also referred to as PSI, pertains to the social exchange between often a performer and a spectator. They require little to no effort of responsibility from the spectator and are typically controlled by the performer in a one-sided dynamic without any possibility of mutual development. Whereas one could argue that this would be applicable to all forms of entertainment in which a spectator perceives a persona, mass-media differentiates itself by using the dynamic as a continuous supporting factor in its appeal. In other words, on TV, the persona never stops. North American and European audiences had been used to media such as radio and movies being consumed passively, with the information being broadcasted with the spectator as a faceless and rarely acknowledged factor in the social exchange. Whilst this would continue for at least half a century, around the 1950s, there was a change in the way hosts of shows would go about their business. The viewer was beginning to be acknowledged by the programs, and hosts would try to address the spectators, applying personal anecdotes and attributes. What this did was utilizing the humanisation of the hosts to make them relatable. Starting in the 1940s, people were becoming increasingly aware of the way media was used to manipulate them, and so the audience desired a certain personal sincerity from the media personas they sought to consume.⁶ By treating the audience member as a human being rather than a concept, this sincerity was achieved and parasocial interaction was created.

⁵ Horton, Donald, and R. Richard Wohl. 1956. Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry* 19 (3) (08/01): 215-29.

⁶ Merton, Robert K. 1946. *Mass persuasion: The social psychology of a war bond drive* New York etc.]: Harper.

3.1.1 PSI and PSR

In research on parasocial relationships, the concepts of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships have become blurred. Schramm (2008) states that “*PSI is bound to the interpersonal processes between persona and use that take place during media exposure. In contrast, PSR stands for the cross-situational relationship a viewer or user holds with a persona.*”⁷

Although technically, PSI could occur between any media-icon and a spectator, we are most used to PSI and PSR being referred to in context of celebrities. We are all familiar with the sentiment "I love this singer because I feel they understand me, and I understand them.". It is become the basis for how fandom operates around a (human) media-icon.

In a 2015 study, Lueck shows that communication between celebrities and fans on social media is simply PSI in action.⁸ Analysing a fan page for the American celebrity Kim Kardashian, they manage to show that simple online activity by the celebrity generates immense engagement in the form of comments not only about but even mostly aimed at the celebrity herself. However, by choosing not to engage with these comments, the interaction remains one-sided, leading Lueck to consider it a prime example of parasocial interaction.

In response to this, Kyewski et al. (2018) rightfully points out that in their study, Lueck (2015) fails to address the same situation in the context of a smaller scale celebrity with an ability to reach back out to the spectators.⁹ Any interaction that is reciprocated becomes two-sided, adding a different dimension to how PSI is traditionally defined. Indeed, once the celebrity chooses to engage in communication with the spectator-base, the stark definition of the relationship being one-sided based on solely communication becomes muddled. Rather, the concept of familiarity becomes more important. When spectators feel like they *know* the media-icon, is when the true parasocial relationship starts to blossom, with complicated results

⁷ Schramm, H., and T. Hartmann. 2008. The PSI-process scales: A new measure to assess the intensity and breadth of parasocial processes. *Communications* 33 (4): 385-401.

⁸ Lueck, Jennifer Anette. 2015. Friend-zone with benefits: The parasocial advertising of kim kardashian. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 21 (2): 91-109.

⁹ Kyewski, Elias, Jessica M. Szcuka, and Nicole C. Krämer. 2018. The protagonist, my facebook friend: How cross-media extensions are changing the concept of parasocial interaction. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 7 (1): 2-17.

for the dynamics of not only the individual and source material, but also the dynamics of a fandom.

PSI influences the way we perceive ethical issues, has influence on our mental states and the way we go about relationships and plays in on our need to belong. This explains why especially teenagers are prone to cultivating strong parasocial relationships with media-icons. It is a time for them where they seek validation and a place to belong, and if their peers cannot provide this, PSR's provide this, in a sense.

Hypothesis 1: Respondents who show a higher attachment level also show a more negative self-image

Hypothesis 2: An attachment and fondness of a media-icon will make fans more likely to defend the icon

3.2 FANDOM AND INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE

3.2.1 K-pop's use of PSR

In previous sections we have examined how parasocial interaction has become integral to the functioning of marketing in the entertainment industry. Now, how is this interesting, specifically in the context of Korea's pop-music industry?

To find our answer, we need to look a bit more at how K-pop developed over the past 20 years. Although the true origin point of the genre is debated, the immediate history starts in the 1990s. For South Korea, the 1990s were a time coloured by the emerge of a civilian government and an economic dip, which among other changes contributed to laying the foundation for a shift in the cultural paradigm.¹⁰

With this shift, the country saw a change in its globalisation policy. This eventually led to the release of the ban on Japanese popular culture, which lasted until the late '90s. At that point, Japan especially, had a tight lock on the concept of the "produced idol" with notably Johnny's

¹⁰

Entertainment churning out bands such as Hikari Genji, and much later groups such as Arashi who were trained in companies to then be chosen to form entertainment groups. As opposed to Western groups such as Backstreet Boys or Spice Girls where the emphasis was heavily placed on the artists and the image that these were simply friends making music together, the concept of this training era and the link to the label were actually emphasized instead of muffled away.¹¹

This led to the formation of groups such as H.O.T., Sechskies and Shinhwa. These groups, with their catchy concepts and music managed to grasp the hearts of many South Korean teens.

Domestically, these groups gathered large, if not huge, fandoms which were strictly organised. Fans had fan clubs, which in turn had structures, assigned colours, even "uniforms". The collectivist nature of these fandoms had one goal: To support the idol. However, the interaction between fan and idol remained limited. Idols made public appearances, gave concerts, and appeared on TV from time to time. Most fan-discourse was kept to forums and the beginnings of the early internet. Although this did not stop fans from projecting on their idols and cultivating a parasocial relationship with them, the concept of a parasocial relationship as a marketing tool was not one capitalized on. Idols had clear public personas, and private lives shrouded in the appropriate amounts of mystery and privacy.¹²

Around the mid-2000s, something changed in the way fans began to go about fandom. K-pop was starting to branch out to especially Japan, riding the popularity of South Korea's tv-shows in what would be named the first "Hallyu" (Wave) (Jung 2012). Artists such as soloist BoA and boy group DBSK were received well and quickly grew to become immensely popular.¹³

Artists were becoming more visible. The internet had started to grow into itself and was now host to more advanced websites providing the first prototypes of social media in the forms of

¹¹ de la Torre García, Ida; Guarné Cabello, Blai, dir. 2017. L'impacte del moviment "idol" en la societat japonesa. 842 Grau en Estudis de l'Àsia Oriental

¹² Shin, Layoung. 2018. Queer eye for K-pop fandom. Korea Journal 58 (4): 87-113.

¹³ Pak, Yöng-ung. 2015. K-pop ũro ponŭn taejung munhwa t'ürendŭ, 2016, ed. Hŭi-yun Im. 초판.; Ch'op'an. ed.Söul-si : Mari Puksŭ; 서울시 : 마리 북스.

more elaborate forums and sites such as online profile-page Cyworld. Fans were able to communicate and gather remotely, quicker than ever, and idols were able to communicate with them using these tools. Alongside this online shift, broadcasting companies began to air programs and gameshows, casting idols in regular line-ups or featuring them as guests. Cameras were now aimed on the idols during moments where their music persona would fall short and fans would be confronted with what would be perceived as the idol's "spontaneous personalities".

The first generation of idols had used mystery as a marketing tools, hiding their personalities and private lives, but this new, second generation started to appear everywhere under the guise of accessibility.¹⁴ The exhibition of more of the idol's personality, the easier access to contacting their idol of choice all brought the celebrity closer to the fan. Content shared on the newly created YouTube began to spread this content beyond South Korea's borders, with handfuls of fans popping up all over the globe.

South Korea, however, was dead set on directing its "hallyu wave" towards China, Taiwan, Japan, and parts of South East Asia; regions they knew were profitable from past endeavours.¹⁵ Small endeavours towards the US, with e.g. the wonder girls touring with the Jonas brothers and SNSD on David letterman were not remarkably successful in a longer-term interest.

Most content that could be consumed by International fans had no translations, and social media posts by idols were kept to the official fan cafe's and Korean social media such as Cyworld, both of which were largely inaccessible by international fans. Fans filled the gaps by creating their own translation projects and teams, providing subtitles for the reality shows and livestreams for the music programs the idols would feature on. Some idols took to twitter, but ultimately the engagement with international fans remained low as the language barrier remained.

¹⁴ Shin, Layoung. 2018. Queer eye for K-pop fandom. *Korea Journal* 58 (4): 87-113.

¹⁵ Lee, Sangjoon, editor., and Markus Nornes editor. 2015. *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean wave in the age of social media*, eds. Sangjoon Lee, Markus Nornes Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

The 2010s took this situation to a new level. Social Media was becoming The Thing to interact with, and music labels knew that to not engage in this new wave was a death sentence. K-pop was starting to take off in the West, through K-pop-idols going on small world tours (especially to the US). Despite still not quite catering to a Western audience, K-pop was starting to notice the economic potential of western fans, and its potential to become a vehicle for Korean culture to improve South Korean tourism. In their 2011 article on the rise of K-pop in Indonesia, Jung describes the business ventures of K-pop-related music labels as “cultural hybridization”, needed to meet the complex desires of an increase in variety in its consumer groups.¹⁶

South Korean tourism was incredibly fond of K-pop and K-dramas and such because the interest in South Korea was skyrocketing. South Korea had found its "anime", so to speak, and was racing Japan in a first place in cultural soft power.

Then came the online service V-live. Although some idols had previously taken to social media such as twitter and Instagram, and international fans were starting to be able to enter fan cafe's, V-live changed the game in terms of the cultivation of parasocial interaction.

V-live is a streaming service where artists can stream small livestreams to anyone who subscribes. Artists can also provide exclusive content in the form of pre-recorded documentaries or videos to subscribers willing to pay a fee. A quick, real-time way of communicating with fans, V-live soared in popularity and became a staple for promotions for any band wanting to be noticed. South Korea had always been a fan of livestream services, utilising sites such as Afreeca.tv for livestreams of games and eating long before V-live entered the game. Then why was V-live so important?

Subtitles.

Instantly, or quickly provided after the initial broadcast, the subtitles of V-live changed the game forever. Now international fans were noticed and provided with a direct line of communication to their idols. An article featured on Seoulbeats, one of the most prominent

¹⁶ Jung, Sun. 2011. K-pop, indonesian fandom, and social media. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 8.

international news sites regarding K-pop, goes as far as to entice fans with the promise of this acknowledgement:

“The feature of the live chat/commenting is a good option since if a star is live on the app and checks the comments, there’s a high possibility it will be read. Also, the application calls for interaction between fan and idols. There will be times when they’ll ask for feedback and users are able to reply.”¹⁷

Streams on Vlive do not fall under solely formal interviews or announcements, but rather took the form of cooking streams, gaming streams, even just idols relaxing at home wanting to talk to fans. Idols were closer and more personal than ever. Fans knew them "better" than ever.

The time of mystery as a marketing tool was long gone, now, the closer you felt to your idol, the better it was. Even though your idols spoke a different language, a different culture, you were all united in your love for their craft and your love for them as a person.

3.2.2 K-pop Fandom and behaviour

With the increase of idol groups and thus the increase of choice, fans changed from followers, who often focused on one group and tied their identity to this concept of a follower, to customers, who were in a position to demand satisfaction as a customer.

Parallel to this, a large group of fans developed themselves to become what I call manager-type fans, who were primarily concerned with the development of the stars so they might continue to provide this satisfaction. Jung (2012) mentions how the term *fancom* was coined, a portmanteau of the words fan and company. Fans now consider their idols subjects to be managed and guided, rather than adored. This concept of fan-labour was not new or exclusive to K-pop fan culture, though it expressed itself in ways unique to its context.¹⁸ Stanfill (2019) refers to the concept of fan labour and fan-recruitment as “efangelism”, arguing that the free

¹⁷ Seoulbeats. Linking You to Hallyu: The V Live Broadcasting App. seoulbeats.com/2015/09/linking-you-and-hallyu-v-live-broadcasting-app/

¹⁸ Jung, Sun. 2012. Fan activism, cybervigilantism, and othering mechanisms in K-pop fandom. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10

PR-work that fans are providing to the companies creating the media is a form of free creative labour that can go as far as to substitute for real labour.¹⁹ In K-pop, this “efangelism” expressed itself in the way fans began to circulate press releases as well as take up what could essentially be considered free PR activities in place of the artist’s official managing label. These free PR activities often took the form of spamming social media with videos starring their favourite artists or making a point out of bringing their artists up in any given context to redirect attention and capture new fans.

These *fancom*, fuelled by the PSI that the increase in exposure from idols provided, generally feel compelled to police a fandom on top of the object of their own desire. Examples of this include reactions to dating scandals, with fans insisting that an idol openly being in a relationship is damaging for their career, or the process of “cleaning out searches” by spam-posting good keywords along with the name of their idol, to trick the algorithm of search engines into pushing the preferable word combinations to the top, rather than ones that would imply scandals or slander.

This emergence of *fancom* and other behavioural traits were already noticeable among Korean fans of K-pop. For most English-speaking, international fans, the late 2000s is about the time most were starting to get exposed to the music-scene. In the emerge of social media, sites like YouTube proved to be invaluable in the unintentional spread of the Korean music genre to the rest of the world.

Korea, however, was dead set on directing its hallyuwave towards China and Japan, and a bit of South East Asia, regions they knew were profitable. Larger music labels such as JYP Entertainment and SM Entertainment embarked on small endeavours towards the US in the late 2000s, through projects including JYP’s Wonder Girls touring with the Jonas Brothers and SM Entertainment’s girl group SNSD making an appearance on American late-night talk

¹⁹ Stanfill, Mel. 2019. *Exploiting fandom: How the media industry seeks to manipulate fans* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

show David Letterman. However, at the time, these small dips into the American media-scape did not prove to be remarkably successful in a longer-term interest.

Most content that could be consumed by International fans had no translations, and social media posts by idols were kept to the official fan cafe's and Korean social media such as Cyworld, both of which were largely inaccessible by international fans. Lee (2018), describes this phenomenon when he mentions that mainstream media failed in providing especially North American fans with quick and good translations of Korean content. K-pop became a social-media-driven self-produced fan-culture. Fans filled the gaps by creating their own translation projects and teams, providing subtitles for the reality shows and livestreams for the music programs the idols would feature on.²⁰ News sites such as Allkpop and Seoulbeats were established to translate and provide domestic K-pop news for English fans. These teams were often created by foreign fans, with a combination of Korean speaking fans as well as English speaking editors and simply people who desired to contribute. The monopoly on translations proved to be a coveted thing within fandom as most fans were reliant on the translations in order to consume content. Unable to check their own sources, and unfamiliar with the reputations of the original Korean news sources, fans were eager to take the translations and news of said platforms as gospel. During these early 2010s, some idols took to twitter, but ultimately the engagement with international fans remained low as the language barrier remained, until the emerge of the previously mentioned service V-live and the soaring of social media as a marketing tool circa 2014.

3.2.3 Outlining Fan-types

With the increased eyes on these idols and everything they did on and offline, there now also came increased cultural perspectives. These perspectives coloured not only the fans' own

²⁰ Lee, Jamie Shinhee. 2018. *The Korean wave, K-pop fandom, and multilingual microblogging*, ed. Jamie Shinhee Lee Cambridge University Press.

experience but were also present in translation-choices as well as the choices in content made by platforms.

In the context of fandom, Mark Duffet (2013) defines discourse as a socially shared way of talking about a certain subject.²¹ Different fan-cultures share different types of discourse, because fan-culture is experienced in different ways. Fandom at its core is the forming of a community around the consumption of a certain subject. In his observation, Duffet divides the concept of fandom into two types of consumption: Economic and Cultural. Economic consumption referring to the process of participating in financial transaction as a buyer, whereas cultural consumption refers to what Duffet calls *meaningfully examining* the subject at hand. So, when idols would be "exposed" for cultural mishaps, things like blackface, saying the n-word, sexist remarks etc., there now was a whole other group of fans responding to this to their own cultural lenses, creating new forms of discourse.

The responses of international fans towards incidents like this seem to be largely divided into 4 different types: Resolute rejection, Cultural Mediation, The Cultural Apologist and the Uncritical Defence.

The fans who resort to resolute rejection are often the fans most deeply personally hurt or offended by the incident. These fans are the first to bring up the situation as problematic and either demand apologies or use the situation as an example of the offensive party's bad nature.

Fans who resort to cultural mediation often overlap with this first category, but the distinct difference is in their disagreement over the offensive party's cultural background, with the former being of opinion that this is irrelevant to the wrongdoing, and the latter being determined that viewing the wrongdoing through a solely, often US-centric lens is the wrong way to go about this situation. Despite being on the same side, the disagreements between these two parties are prone to sow discord.

²¹ Duffett, Mark. 2013. *Understanding fandom: An introduction to the study of media fan culture* New York; London; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury.

Further on the spectrum we find what I will refer to as the cultural apologists. These fans are aware of the wrongdoing, and like the cultural mediators, insist that the cultural background of the offensive party is to be considered. However, in the case of cultural apologist, this background absolves the offensive party of any accountability. Like the cultural mediators, they seem to be caught in the grey area, but have chosen to pursue an often-misunderstood idea of the offensive party's cultural background to protect their object of affection.

Lastly, we find the uncritical defenders. These fans are often highly protective of the offensive party for various reasons. These are the fans that most strongly tend to take on the previously mentioned Manager Role, feeling they must come to the defence of their idols and setting records straight.

Research Question 1: Does parasocial interaction influence the opinions of international fans of K-pop, regarding the problematic behaviour of their idols?

Research Question 2: Are fans who feel extremely close to their idols more likely to forgive their mishaps, even if they are blatant insults towards their own culture?

The way these four types of fan interact with each other creates a discourse around the incident that is inconsistent and often confusing. What is clear from the different categories is that whilst one would assume that there would be varying levels of attachment to the idol per category of fan-reaction, with the resolute rejection displaying the least attachment and uncritical defence the most, it seems that this is not necessarily the case.

In fact, a lot people whose reaction falls under resolute rejection seem to react strongly exactly because of their strong sense of attachment to the idol. The wrongdoing of the idol feels personal, as all interaction has felt personal. The uncritical defenders however view criticism on the idol as personal attacks because of their attachments, and the other two categories seem to view mediating as the way to appease and protect both fans and the object of attachment.

Hypothesis 3: Respondents in general will demand action and involvement from idols, but respondents with higher attachment levels will in turn demand less action from idols

4 HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

4.1 FANDOM AND PSR

Considering parasocial relationships mimic real-life relationships without the risk of rejection, one of my first hypotheses focuses on the self-image of respondents with regards to their level of attachment. Knowles (2007) argues that people tend to respond to their parasocial relationship partners in the same way they respond to a real person close to them.²² This can take the form of interacting with the media-icon in ways such as talking to the screen or trying to gain their attention through more direct means. In previous research, participants with high parasocial attachments showed that these attachments had similar effects on their functioning in several tasks as the presence of a human audience would (Gardner & Knowles, 2008).²³ This has led to a hypothesis that because these interactions seem to feel as meaningful and real as face-to-face human connection, the lack of rejection that the parasocial relationship provides would be more attractive to people with a negative self-image, who would be more willing to make their attachment to the media-icon a part of their own identity.

H1: Respondents who show a higher attachment level also show a more negative self-image

4.2 PSR AND DEPENDENCY

To measure the influence of the interactions of these celebrities on the fan's own ethics and opinions, the Celebrity-Persona Identification Scale by Brown and colleagues (Brown et al., 2003; Brown & de Matviuk, 2010; Brown & Fraser, 2008), offers a good theory.²⁴ The model identifies 4 hypotheses in its attempt to map the effects:

1. Exposure to the celebrity cultivates a parasocial relationship
2. This parasocial relationship instills a need for identification with the celebrity

²² Knowles, Megan L. "The Nature of Parasocial Relationships." 2007.

²³ Gardner, Wendi L, and Knowles, Megan L. "Love Makes You Real: Favorite Television Characters Are Perceived as "Real" in a Social Facilitation Paradigm." *Social Cognition* 26, no. 2 (2008): 156-68..

²⁴ Brown, William, and Mihai Bocarnea. 2006. Celebrity-persona identification scale. In , 302-305.

3. This identification motivates the fan to align their choices and opinions with the celebrity
4. Continuing identification leads to continuing adoption of the beliefs of the celebrity.

I believe there are strong arguments in the way fandom moves collectively, to extend this 4-step process when exploring the process in the perspective of group dynamics in fandom:

5. Adoption of the beliefs of the celebrity becomes a sign of a “better” parasocial relationship, affecting group participants’ legitimacy.
6. Fandoms move to assimilate to the celebrity’s beliefs in order to be a “good audience”.

As individuals attempt to find connection in a bigger group through a shared interest, their heightened need for the parasocial relationship would affect their navigation through the requirements of being a legitimate member of the social group, which in the case of K-pop would mean an unconditional devotion to the idol at hand. As fandoms move to assimilate to the celebrity’s beliefs to be a good audience, the only way to do so is to be a hundred percent in support of the celebrity no matter what they do. Therefore, to secure the individual’s place in the community they have found attachment in, an individual will be more likely to defend the celebrity.

H2: An attachment and fondness of a media-icon will make fans more likely to defend the icon

4.3 K-POP AND SOCIAL ISSUES

As mentioned earlier, the relationship between K-pop idol and fan involves labour from both sides of the connection. Fans are inclined to provide a form of free fan labour in terms of public relations management or simply content creation online. Social issues such as racism or sexism are things that affect fans’ personal lives. By showing an interest and awareness of these issues, idols will be able to return the sense of acknowledgement that fans give them. Fans who already feel acknowledged due to their perceived deeper connection to the idols will however be less likely to require personal recognition of their struggles. They do not see any social transgressions as personal attacks because they will be confident in knowing personally that an idol is “good at heart”, engaging in cultural apologism as defence or simply outright defence

of their character. On the other hand, fans who are less attached to idols are more likely to feel any possible mistakes made by the idols as being negligent of them as fans, being less inclined to believe an idol is merely ignorant. These fans will expect more and better from idols who have committed social transgressions and will be less easily placated.

H3: Respondents in general will demand action and involvement from idols, but respondents with higher attachment levels will in turn demand less action from idols.

5 METHOD

5.1 PARTICIPANTS

Quantitative Survey

The quantitative survey was conducted over the span of roughly a month, spanning April 13th to May 17th, with a final count of 328 recorded responses, there were 327 participants, of which 258 could be marked as complete. As mentioned, initial distribution was done through personal accounts on Facebook and Twitter, gathering 308 respondents, with the remaining 20 brought in through individually distributed links. In order to expand the reach of the initial tweet, I reached out to several twitter accounts dedicated to functioning as amateur fan sites for the South Korean boy groups BTS and EXO. With their large follower-base, their cooperation with the distribution of the survey proved invaluable and formed the factor behind the collection of the largest number of responses.

The survey was conducted in English and aimed at fans of Korean pop outside South Korea. The aimed demographic was fans who do not count South Korean culture as their primary culture and who ideally do not speak Korean fluently. This would ensure that their experience with South Korean culture and Korean idols would be primarily second-hand and reliant on both translations and fandom interactions.

Qualitative survey

The qualitative survey was conducted over the span of several days, ending with a final count of 26 responses. After omitting the responses that were incomplete or faulty due to technical input problems, the final count of full responses was 12. It was conducted entirely in English and the choice was made to distribute a list of 15 open questions, instead of conducting separate interviews due to time constraint and interviewees having trouble aligning their schedules with

regards to the large time-difference. As with the quantitative survey, distribution was done through social media, with a focus on Twitter.

5.2 PROCEDURE

Quantitative survey

The quantitative survey itself consisted of 32 questions and functioned with a randomised path structure. This structure ensured the creation of 3 groups of respondents, making it possible to compare the collected data. The structure of the survey was inspired by the research of Ten Velde (2016), who conducted a similar study in 2016. In her graduate study at the University of Amsterdam, she aimed to look at whether the endorsements of members of the boyband One Direction regarding feminist issues influenced their fans' opinion on the feminist movement. Considering my research is similar, albeit approaching it from a different angle, the structure she had created with this randomized path structure proved to be perfect for this research's data collection as well.

The Survey structure is set up as follows:

1. Personal information (5 questions)

After this section, the survey would randomly assign every participant to one of 3 tracks:

Condition A

1. Questions regarding Boy group BTS
2. Questions regarding an internet post discussing BTS in a bad light
3. Questions regarding K-pop and social issues
4. Questions regarding personal qualities

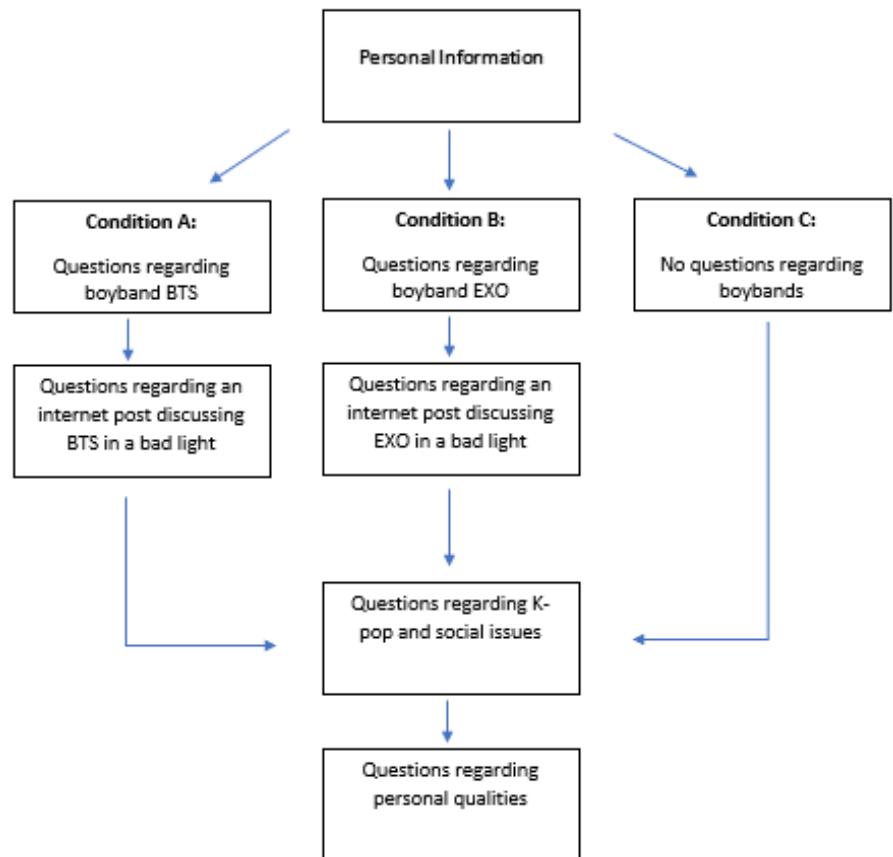
Condition B

1. Questions regarding Boy group EXO
2. Questions regarding an internet post discussing EXO in a bad light
3. Questions regarding K-pop and social issues
4. Questions regarding personal qualities

Condition C

1. Questions regarding K-pop and social issues
2. Questions regarding personal qualities

Participants going through **Condition A** would first answer questions pertaining to the boy group BTS and their relationship to the band. After these they would then be shown a post from an amateur news site, discussing a cultural faux pas by one of the members. In this instance, the post pertained to a rumour that



one of the members would have called another member the Korean equivalent of a racial slur used towards people with a darker skin colour. Participants were then asked to describe how they felt when reading the post. Next, they would be asked questions about Korean pop and its

relation to social issues such as racism in general. Finally, they were asked to describe their own personal qualities.

Participants going through **Condition B** would be asked questions pertaining to the boy group EXO and their relationship to the band. Afterwards, they would then also be shown a post from an amateur news site, discussing a cultural faux pas by one of the members. This time, the post pertained to the discourse surrounding a moment where one of the members called himself "Kunta Kinte", referring to the well-known character from the 1976 novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by American author Alex Haley. This character is a slave from African descent, and the mention of the name in combination with the application of copious amounts of lipstick to simulate a wide mouth, evoked images of blackface.

Participants going through **Condition C** would not be exposed to any questions pertaining a specific boyband or any news articles. They would only answer the general questions about social issues and describe their personal qualities.

One of the reasons the bands BTS and EXO were chosen as the focus of their respective tracks, is because there is frequent discord between the two fanbases. Fans from one band were not likely to engage positively with the other fanbase and band. Therefore, one of the hypotheses of this experiment is that fans who were put in a track that did not discuss their personal idol, would react less negatively to the posts containing upsetting discourse.

The choice of the specific *scandals* was intentional, in so far that the response to both instances had been similar. Both times were potentially racially offensive moments that relied on an understanding of the Korean language to make a good critical assessment of the situation. The discourse following both events focused heavily on whether a racially charged term had been used, or whether international fans had misheard it. Furthermore, both events inspired discourse regarding the attitudes of South Korean people and idols towards black people. This

made both events subject to cultural apologism as well as the anger response I discussed earlier in Chapter 3.2.

Qualitative Survey

Respondents assigned to the qualitative survey were asked 12 questions regarding their personal experiences with K-pop and its fandom, focusing on personal responses to scandals and opinions on the responsibility of idols among social issues. This survey was conducted in the first half of June 2020, amidst the American Black Lives Matter movement which formed a catalyst for discourse in the K-pop fandom as well. For this reason, participants were also asked for their opinions on the behaviour of idols and the K-pop fandom amidst this particular social event.

6 INSTRUMENTS

Demographics

The survey began with a set of standard questions asking the participant about personal traits pertaining to their place within certain demographics. These included questions regarding the participants' age, gender expression as well as level of employment and education. In the case of gender there was a deliberate decision to limit the answers to only include male, female, and non-binary for the sake of simplicity. Participants were thus asked to choose the option that corresponded with the way they identified in their daily lives.

No questions were implemented regarding the respondents' race and/or ethnicities. Were this study to be conducted again, this would most likely be included to give more depth to the results considering the context. However, because the study had not been aimed at specifically racism as the central issue of celebrity scandals, this question was omitted.

Parasocial Interaction and Identification

Participants set to conditions A and B, were first exposed to a set of 11 questions. Questions were presented using a 3-point Likert Scale, favouring simplicity instead of elaborate questions in order to secure completion of the survey. Questions that could be considered dichotomous, such as Q.2.1 "Do you consider yourself a fan of South Korean Boy group BTS?" were still provided with a 3-point scale to include a point of neutrality and highlight possible differences between people who consider themselves indifferent towards the stimuli, and people who actively dislike the subject of the stimuli. The questions were considered acceptable after a reliability analysis, Cronbach's Alpha = .98.

Following, participants were asked to assign traits to their condition's respective boy group, receiving 28 separate traits separated into paired antonyms such as "skilled" and "unskilled". Participants were able to pick multiple traits. The choice for multiple choices was made with

eye on simplicity and improved chances of survey completion, as a Likert scale for every pair of traits was assumed to be deterring participants from answering. Traits were based around the concepts of attractiveness, trustworthiness and level of skill, following Ohanian's Scale of Source Credibility (1990)²⁵. The scale was deemed to be sufficiently reliable, Cronbach's Alpha = .92.

Stimuli

As explained earlier, participants set to conditions A and B were exposed to internet-posts. These posts had been taken from amateur news-sites and pertained to 2 similar instances of alleged problematic behaviour by a K-pop idol. Participants in condition A, who had been answering questions regarding boy group BTS would be faced with a story about a BTS-member and the allegation that this person would have called another member the Korean equivalent of a racial slur used towards people with a darker skin colour. Participants assigned to condition B, after answering questions regarding boy group EXO, would be receiving an amateur news article regarding the the discourse surrounding another racially charged scandal involving a member of the group.

Questions were based on the four fan-personality types discussed earlier, outlining the 7 most common responses to scandal discourse observed in practice. Unfortunately, the questions posed in response to the stimuli generated low Cronbach values (.41 and .52), and therefore cannot be considered reliable enough. However, the decision was made to focus on the overlap of choice between people indicating themselves as fans and the choice for defensiveness.

Social awareness

Participants regardless of assigned condition, were asked 3 questions regarding social issues and the behaviour of idols. The first question discussed the role of someone's cultural background in their perception of social problems. Following were 4 statements on the responsibility of idols with regards to social issues. Lastly, participants were asked to indicate

²⁵ Ohanian, Roobina. 1990. Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. *Journal of Advertising* 19 (3) (2020/07): 39-52.

if they agreed to 5 statements regarding their own response to problematic behaviour by idols in general, as opposed to the specific stimuli offered earlier in the survey. All questions were asked using the same 3-point Likert scale as the questions regarding parasocial attachment. These questions were deemed reliable by its high Cronbach value (= .95).

Personality

The survey concluded with a set of 9 personality traits. Participants were asked to choose which they considered applicable to themselves. However, after conducting a reliability analysis, the Cronbach's Alpha value appeared to be only .58, thus deeming the portion of the survey unreliable, making it in turn not possible to give a definite answer to H1: Respondents who show a higher attachment level also show a more negative self-image.

6.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

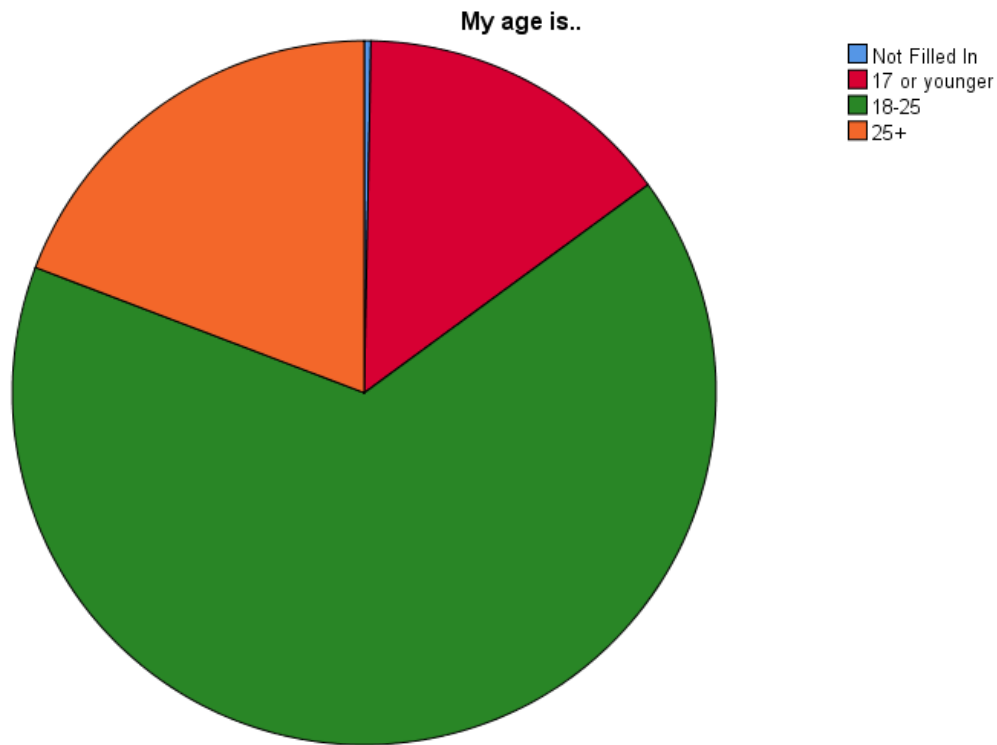
Quantitative survey

The sample was analysed to determine demographics. Of the 328 responses, 14 (4.28%) were male, (88.07%) were female and 25 (7.65%) identified as non-binary.

Ages ranged from 17 and under to 25+. Though it was expected that perhaps this range would be too low to encompass the possible demographic, a full 66.06% fell in the 18-25 range, with 19.27% being 25+ and a 14.68% being 17 and under. (Figure 1)

In terms of education, most respondents seemed to be pursuing a college undergraduate degree (62.33%) or had most recently finished either an undergraduate (38.14%) or graduate degree at college level (42.27%).

Figure 1 – Age demographic quantitative survey



Qualitative Survey

Of the 12 full responses, 83% of the respondents were in the 25-35 age range, with the remaining 2 respondents being in the 18-25 range. In the qualitative survey, the choice was made to omit the question of gender and instead inquire into the race of the respondents, with regards to later questions pertaining to race. Out of all respondents, 58.33% of respondents were Black, with 25% being Asian and the remaining 16.66% identifying as Latina.

7. RESULTS

Parasocial Attachment and Stimuli

One of the most interesting outcomes of the qualitative survey is found immediately in one of the first key questions “How would you describe the relationship K-pop fans have with their idols?”. In the result, nearly single answer mentions the word *obsessive* to describe the relationship shared by these two parties. Answers that do not use the word *obsessive* outright, instead paint a similar picture by emphasizing the unhealthy dependency of the fan on the idol:

“Some are extremely unhealthy and intrusive. Sasaeng²⁶ stans²⁷ literally stalk idols and it’s scary. Children on the internet completely define themselves by their idols and charts and wins on competition stages. When first got into it around 2008, it was much more relaxed.”- Kara Grimes, 26

“Idols aren't seen as people, by both Korean and international fans. Idols have to pretend everything they do is "for the fans". So, it's a lot of make believe.” – Daisy, 25

The fact that all answers paint a similar picture of an obsessive fan reliant on the relationship with their idol, suggests that it is a widespread phenomenon and thus would most likely have effects on the way people engage with bad publicity or behaviour coming from their objects of interest.

However, following a correlation analysis of the data gathered through the quantitative survey, we could not conclude a true correlation between people simply identifying as fans and their response to the stimuli. It seems that the factor of identifying as a fan of a group is not significant of a factor enough to warrant a certain response to the scandals. However, this does not seem to disprove H3 (An attachment and fondness of a media-icon will make fans more

²⁶ A sasaeng fan (사생팬) is an obsessive fan who exhibits behaviour that forms a breach of privacy regarding their subject of affection.

²⁷ Stan: Derivative from song Stan by rapper Eminem regarding an obsessive fan. Indicates a type of fan participating in a fandom for a certain media-figure with a lot of passion and borderline obsession.

likely to defend the icon) outright. We did see that respondents who showed lower levels of emotional attachment through negative choices in response to the parasocial attachment questions such as “EXO/BTS make me feel like I know them” and were more likely to pick options such as “I feel annoyed by this post” and “I agree with the post”, indicating either a dislike for the content of the stimuli or the behaviour discussed in the indicating. Alongside these numbers, there seemed to be no respondents who’d previously chosen negative responses to the parasocial attachment questions who’d chosen the option “I feel hurt by the post”, which was primarily chosen by people who answered positively to the parasocial attachment questions.

Regarding the question “When an idol exhibits problematic behaviour, what is your personal reaction?”, most respondents of the qualitative survey seemed to be eager to engage in the discourse first. Some responded that this was in order to find out more about the issue before allowing themselves to respond, no matter if they are a fan or not.

As we can see in table 1 and table 2, this is the most common response among the respondents of the quantitative survey as well.

Despite their level of emotional involvement, people seem inclined first to find out more about the situation themselves. One of the respondents of the qualitative survey, SL, 30, describes the process following this personal investigation as a “*mini-period of mourning*”, emphasizing the breach in trust between fan and idol and the tipping of the figurative scales. “*I gave you all this support and then you do this?*”, they stress, showing that for some the feeling of betrayal seems very real, and a definite dealbreaker. It lines up with another observation coming from the previous tables, which is that the second most chosen answer to this question is “I feel hurt by the idol”. This response differs from “I feel hurt by the post”, as it indicates a hurt caused by the idol mentioned in the stimuli post, rather than a hurt caused by the existence or format of the post itself.

Table 1 – Stimuli Results Condition A

3.9 Stimuli Condition 1: BTS - Frequencies

| | | Responses | | Percent of Cases |
|------------------|--|-----------|---------|------------------|
| | | N | Percent | |
| 2.9 ^a | When I see posts like this I.. Feel hurt by the idol | 24 | 17.4% | 25.5% |
| | When I see posts like this I.. Feel defensive | 6 | 4.3% | 6.4% |
| | When I see posts like this I.. Am indifferent | 20 | 14.5% | 21.3% |
| | When I see posts like this I.. Agree with the post | 14 | 10.1% | 14.9% |
| | When I see posts like this I.. Feel annoyed | 24 | 17.4% | 25.5% |
| | When I see posts like this I.. Feel inclined to look up more discourse | 46 | 33.3% | 48.9% |
| | When I see posts like this I.. Feel hurt by the post | 4 | 2.9% | 4.3% |
| Total | | 138 | 100.0% | 146.8% |

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Table 2 – Stimuli results Condition B

3.9 Stimuli Condition 2: Exo - Frequencies

| | | Responses | | Percent of Cases |
|------------------|--|-----------|---------|------------------|
| | | N | Percent | |
| 3.9 ^a | When I read a post like this I.. Feel hurt by the idol | 31 | 25.6% | 40.3% |
| | When I read a post like this I.. Feel defensive | 3 | 2.5% | 3.9% |
| | When I read a post like this I.. Am indifferent | 16 | 13.2% | 20.8% |
| | When I read a post like this I.. Agree with the post | 11 | 9.1% | 14.3% |
| | When I read a post like this I.. Feel annoyed | 23 | 19.0% | 29.9% |
| | When I read a post like this I.. Feel inclined to look up more discourse | 33 | 27.3% | 42.9% |
| | When I read a post like this I.. Feel hurt by the post | 4 | 3.3% | 5.2% |
| Total | | 121 | 100.0% | 157.1% |

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Idols and Social Action

An interesting result is one that seems to partially correspond with one of our Hypothesis (H4): Respondents in general will demand action and involvement from idols, but respondents with higher attachment levels will in turn demand less action from idols.

One of the most remarkable things that stood out in both surveys was the near unanimous opinion on the responsibility of the K-pop idols amidst social issues.

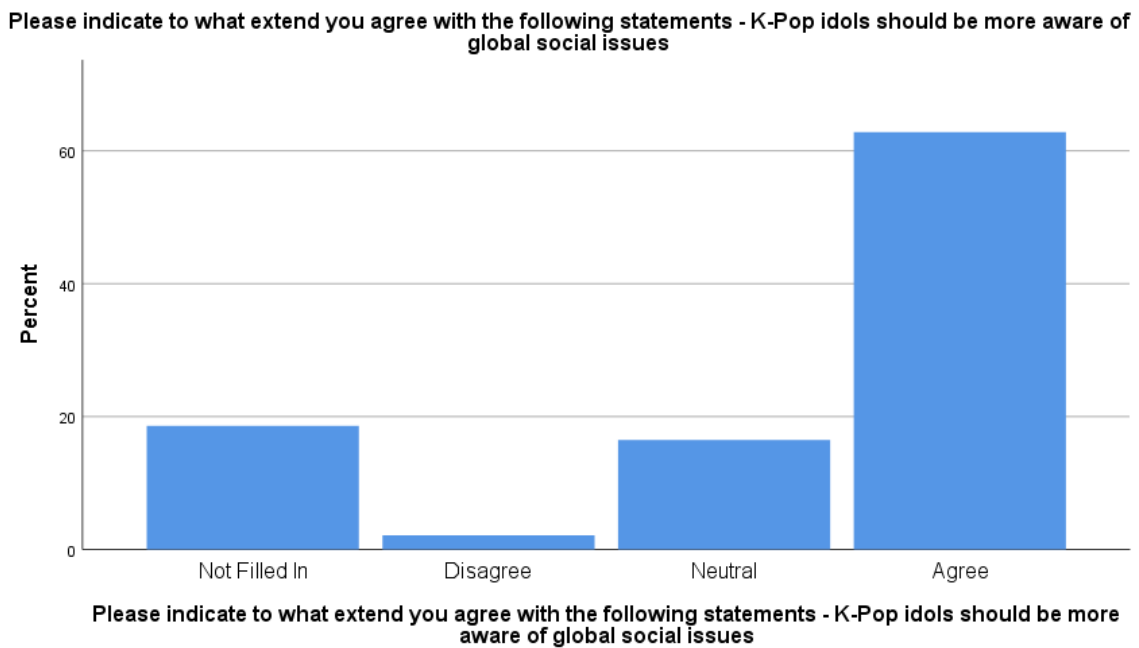
Table 3 shows the percentages in choices when asked specifically about K-pop idols' behaviours regarding these issues.

Table 3 – Results Question 4.3 - Global Awareness

Please indicate to what extend you agree with the following statements - K-pop idols should be more aware of global social issues

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | 0 Not Filled In | 61 | 18.6% | 18.6% | 18.6% |
| | 1 Disagree | 7 | 2.1% | 2.1% | 20.7% |
| | 2 Neutral | 54 | 16.5% | 16.5% | 37.2% |
| | 3 Agree | 206 | 62.8% | 62.8% | 100.0% |
| | Total | 328 | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.00% |

Figure 2 – Results Question 4.3 – Global Awareness



We can see that there is an overwhelming party seemingly of the opinion that idols should be more aware, as well as a majority disagreeing with the notion that K-pop idols have no responsibility to educate themselves on issues that are not Korean. The qualitative surveys show similar results, with nearly every answer to the question “Do you feel like idols should speak up about social issues outside of Korea that might affect their fans?” involving agreement with the statement. Among the respondents to the qualitative survey, a fan using the name SL, who is in her 30’s, is not the only one when she states that involvement and care should be a prerequisite in order to be allowed to capitalise on foreign fanbases. “Why essentially be asking for our money and support, but don’t support our human rights?”, she mentions, relating the issue to the Black Lives Matter movement and the way idols have been behaving among the online discourse. She brings up an interesting point: Idols rely on the attachment of their fans to secure their income but seem to be hesitant to return the favour of affection, despite this being feasible to do. Fans are not asking their idols to acknowledge them individually, but as a group.

Another respondent, Toozdae, 30, is one of the few respondents who does not seem to agree a 100% with the statement. She mentions:

“[...] I think people have pressured idols way too much to talk about social issues outside of Korea. I think it’s because fans put so much of their identity into being a fan and project a lot onto these idols. It feels like a personal attack when they don’t speak up about a subject, they feel is important. [...] However, how many of these fans spoke when South Korea was going through its corruption scandal or any of their social issues. K-pop is becoming global and they will be asked about global issues. However, they are Korean groups. Asking them to address complex social issues in a foreign country, likely the USA, is rather unfair. I promise if you ask any of these fans to name the top 3 social issues in South Korea right now, maybe 1/10 could answer. Yet they expect more from their idols.”

Toozdae has a strong argument, which subjects of both the quantitative and qualitative survey were subjected to. The frequencies, however, show a majority of the respondents directly disagreeing with her statement. However, table 4 suggests there is room for nuance in considering someone’s own cultural background in their process of navigating social issues.

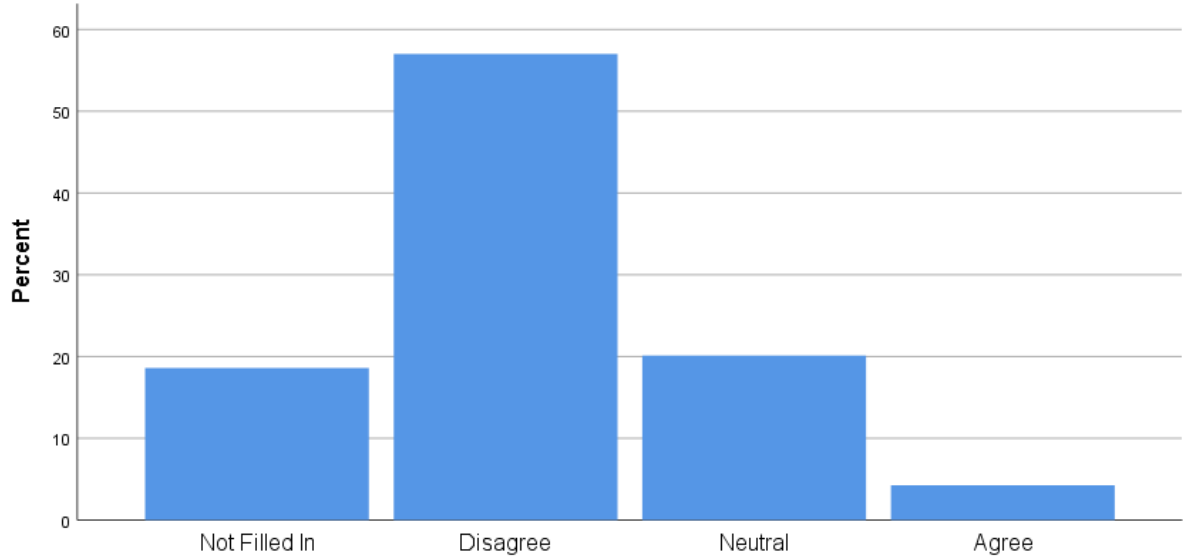
Table 4 – Results Question 4.3 - Idol Responsibility

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements - K-pop idols have no responsibility to educate themselves on social issues that are not Korean

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | 0 Not Filled In | 61 | 18.6% | 18.6% | 18.6% |
| | 1 Disagree | 187 | 57.0% | 57.0% | 75.6% |
| | 2 Neutral | 66 | 20.1% | 20.1% | 95.7% |
| | 3 Agree | 14 | 4.3% | 4.3% | 100.0% |
| | Total | 328 | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.00% |

Figure 3 - Results Question 4.3 - Idol Responsibility

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements - K-Pop idols have no responsibility to educate themselves on social issues that are not Korean



Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements - K-Pop idols have no responsibility to educate themselves on social issues that are not Korean

Table 5 – Results Question 4.2 – Cultural Bias

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements -
Someone's culture plays a role in how they perceive social issues

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | 0 Not Filled In | 61 | 18.6% | 18.6% | 18.6% |
| | 1 Disagree | 5 | 1.5% | 1.5% | 20.1% |
| | 2 Neutral | 29 | 8.8% | 8.8% | 29.0% |
| | 3 Agree | 233 | 71.0% | 71.0% | 100.0% |
| | Total | 328 | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.00% |

Qualitative respondents were asked whether the cultural background of most idols (South-Korean) plays a role in the motivations behind their problematic behaviour, as well as whether this background could be considered an excuse. Responses were mixed, with most people mentioning the role of one’s cultural background in creating one’s values, but a lot of answers seemed focused on the accessibility of education nowadays, with social media and the internet being quoted as easy tools to acquire information. Respondents of the quantitative survey seem to largely agree with this notion, as seen in table 6:

Table 6 – Results Question 4.2 – Internet Access and Ignorance

**Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements -
Because we have the internet, there is no excuse to be ignorant of social issues**

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | 0 Not Filled In | 61 | 18.6% | 18.6% | 18.6% |
| | 1 Disagree | 31 | 9.5% | 9.5% | 28.0% |
| | 2 Neutral | 84 | 25.6% | 25.6% | 53.7% |
| | 3 Agree | 152 | 46.3% | 46.3% | 100.0% |
| | Total | 328 | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.00% |

8. DISCUSSION

8.1 IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

As discussed in the previous sections there appeared to be some differences between the quantitative survey and the qualitative survey. The most important take-aways from the results, however, are not focused on the confirmation of the role of parasocial interaction on the way fans deal with problematic behaviour, but actually point towards a common sentiment in both the quantitative survey and the qualitative surveys. This is the idea that South Korean idol groups must be expected to invest more time and energy into awareness and acknowledgement of global issues.

The fact that this seems a common sentiment among the majority of the respondents in both surveys is interesting when compared to answers given in the qualitative surveys regarding personal experiences within the fandom. Returning to the idea of hybridization, Jin (2016) reminds us that it is essential to place local cultural formation in global structures, as it allows us to carefully investigate the historical faces of the interacting sociocultural facets.²⁸ With this hybridization, comes the need for the understanding of the other factor (as opposed to solely the “local cultural facet”). Therefore, the investment of idols paying attention to the cultures they try to appeal to seems like a natural thing to do. However, the extent to which they do seems to be a point of discord among fans.

While there are fans who feel that they are owed basic acknowledgement in return for their labour as fans, the acknowledgement itself seems to be a concept that is then also weaponized by the larger fandom to use as proof of their particular idol’s social awareness, which then may be used in cases where the idols exhibit problematic behaviour (e.g. “He can’t be racist, he donated to a charity). This contradiction seems to be most apparent in recent events regarding the June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests where a dual image of fans of K-pop has been perpetuated.

²⁸ Jin, Dal Yong. 2016. *Critical discourse of K-pop within globalization*. University of Illinois Press.

Amidst the protests against police brutality and institutionalised racism following the death of American citizen George Floyd, K-pop fans stood out as a surprising factor in the protests by utilising their organisational abilities as a fandom. By disrupting police surveillance with the use of videos of their favourite idols, as well as quickly shutting down any racist discourse on social media sites, self-proclaimed K-pop fans reached headlines and gained acknowledgement for their online guerrilla tactics among the protest efforts.

During this time, fans looked towards their idols as a source of support but again, also for acknowledgement in return for the labour they had performed for the idols in terms of free PR and advertisement. When a lot of groups did not live up to the expectations, discord ensued in the inner circles, with support of the Black Lives Matter movement moving from a human thing to do to a badge of honour for the specific fandom and idol.

When asked about the behaviour of K-pop fans during this time, Alpaca, a 34-year-old black fan from the United States mentions the apparent need for this badge of honour:

“It seems like fans are focusing on their idols behaviour as a reason to fight other fandoms. If their idols said anything, they’re suddenly worth stanning²⁹, and I think we shouldn’t be focusing on that.”

Respondent Toozdae, quoted earlier, also mentions this phenomenon:

“While I do overall praise the support, it got out of hand at times. I’m more disappointed with the fan’s behaviour than in the idols. A lot turned it into a competition and a fan war over who’s idol was the most “woke”. There was a lot of fandom tantrums and infighting about who deserves credit for supporting and who was fake woke. Very exhausting. A lot also harassed their idols to speak and support which is also unnecessary.”

The mention of the tantrums in particular is interesting considering the hypothesis formed regarding the impact that parasocial relationships would have on this sense of ethics

²⁹ Stanning: Verb derivative of the word stan, indicating the act of engaging in fandom with passion.

regarding issues exactly such as the Black Lives Matter movement, i.e. social issues that are important to especially international fans' personal lives.

Coming back to our initial research questions, ("Does parasocial interaction influence the opinions of international fans of K-pop, regarding the problematic behaviour of their idols?"), and ("Are fans who feel extremely close to their idols more likely to forgive their mishaps, even if they are blatant insults towards their own culture?") we can say that whilst the research data did not show a definite answer to either of these questions, real life accounts presented in the qualitative survey suggest that with different methods there might be a better way to shed light on this issue.

In the case of this research, a prior assumption was made that fans would react more defensively to the stimuli presented, as the discourse surrounding the incidents used as stimuli at the time of occurring had been heated. There was also the expectation for fans to be more extreme in their answers. A possible personal hypothesis regarding the why and how behind this outcome, is that perhaps the people who would give provide the answers that more accurately reflect the repeating discourse are the ones who wouldn't participate in a survey like this and answer honestly regarding their feelings.

This survey might not have been successful in shedding a light on the effects of PSI to the most accurate degree because it is harder than priorly assumed to have people admit to being susceptible to PSI. However, I believe that the fact that most respondents want their idols to be vocal about issues accurately reflects repeating discourse. The desire for idols to be socially involved is there, and respondents have shown they are inclined to criticize idols where necessary. The division here just seems to be dependent on the fans' individual definition of what requires this criticism.

8.2 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As a quantitative survey, this experiment has its limitations. It does not allow for nuance in its answers and individual context behind respondents' choices. A more extensive qualitative research would be helpful and provide more information on the dual nature of the news that is released currently, which paints a very dual picture of K-pop fandom as being heralds of social justice, and perpetrators of the same problematic behaviour.

Furthermore, an extensive analysis of the online discourse, beyond the scope of what was attempted in this research, would be able to shed light on the way these groups of fans mobilize during the emergence of scandals such as the ones mentioned in this work. Due to the fleeting nature of discourse on social media such as Twitter, where many remarks are influential but easily deleted, this would have to happen in real time during the emergence of such an incident. The gathering of a coherent overview of the responses to past incidents have proven to be difficult, with many comments deleted or lost. However, it is hard to predict when such an incident occurs, as at the time of writing a total of 7 controversial topics have passed the revue in the span of only 2 months. Due to its recent nature and large cultural impact, it was possible to preserve some data regarding the reaction of the K-pop fandom to the June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. However, only days later a large amount of empirical data was again lost as large parts of discourse dissipated or were removed entirely off social media.

Comparisons between contemporary Korean and International fandoms would also be a possible addition to this discourse but would also prove to be a very large-scale endeavour. Nevertheless, I believe a comparison would be useful in order to see in what ways the awareness of idols can be improved in the practical sense, and whether it is absolutely necessary on a marketing level for idols to display any level of awareness.

9. CONCLUSION

This thesis and its experiment have attempted to shed the first light on K-pop's treatment of social issues within its fandom dynamics as influenced by the parasocial relationship between idol and fan. With this, I have attempted to open the conversation regarding the way international fans mobilise in the face of criticism regarding the cultural mishaps of their objects of affection.

Whilst this is only a start of a possibly larger research, it showed us above all that when faced with problematic behaviour of their idols, fans seem to feel inclined to look up further discourse on the topic. Unlike our initial hypothesis, which assumed the strong role of parasocial interaction in the forming of defensive behaviour towards the artist, the quantitative research did not give enough reason to believe this to be true on a wider scale. Interestingly, in the results of the qualitative research, the image of K-pop fans as being easily influenced and as a result defensive remains prominent and is cited as a factor behind problematic events within the fandom.

We have also seen that fans are almost unanimous in their conviction that their idols should show awareness of global social issues. Large amounts of fans feel that this is the proper response to the fan labour fans are providing their idols. However, the way this awareness is then further utilised as a symbol of heightened closeness between fan and idol as well as a badge of good behaviour shows that the genre's relation to politics is perhaps more complicated than initially expected.

What this does tell us is that in order to ethically progress with and capitalise on the cultivation of a parasocial relationship between idol and fan, record labels must start making conscious efforts to educate their idols on global issues outside the South Korean borders.

Not only will this improve the PSR they are cultivating, it will make fans feel more respected and seen. It will simultaneously eliminate or at the very least reduce the possibility of idols engaging in problematic behaviour, which in turn will improve a group's image and minimize the chances of hurting fans personally, thereby creating a more equal playing field.

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Appendix I

Quantitative Survey

Parasocial Relations - Quantitative

Start of Block: Introduction

Q2

Dear respondent,

Thank you for participating in a survey that is part of my research for my graduate thesis. This thesis is part of the East Asian Studies master program at Leiden University. By participating, you are contributing in an immensely valuable way and I am very grateful for your time.

All answers and data will be kept anonymous and will only be used for this specific project. You will not be traceable through the data provided in this survey, so please do not worry and answer as honestly as possible.

Completion of the survey will take about *5 to 10 minutes*. There are no right or wrong answers, so please answer truthfully.

Thank you for your participation.

Kai H.

Q3 By confirming the following captcha, I confirm I have read and agree with the previous text.

[Captcha Confirmation]

End of Block: Introduction

Start of Block: Personal Info

Q1.1 My age is..

- 17 or younger
 - 18-25
 - 25+
-

Q1.2 My gender is..

For the sake of data statistics, please pick the option you identify with the most in your daily life/expression.

- Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary
-

Q1.3 I am currently a..

- Student
 - Full time/part-time employee
 - Unemployed
-

Q1.4.1 What level of education are you currently pursuing?

- Middle school
 - Highschool
 - University/College - Undergraduate
 - University/College - Graduate
 - Other
-

Q1.4.2 What level of education have you most recently completed?

- Middle school
- Highschool
- University/College - Undergraduate
- University/College - Graduate
- Other

End of Block: Personal Info

Participants were divided into random routes. Following is Condition A, which exposed the participant to stimuli regarding South Korean Boy group BTS.

Start of Block: Condition A - BTS Questions

Q2.1

Following are questions pertaining to South Korean boy group BTS.

BTS, when mentioned in statements, refers to the members of the boy group.

Q2.2 I consider myself a fan of South Korean group BTS

- Absolutely
 - I don't have an opinion on them
 - Not at all
-

Q2.3 Please indicate if the following statements are applicable to you

| | Disagree | Neutral | Agree |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| BTS make me feel like I know them | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| If I saw BTS featured in a magazine, I'd read it | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I often think about BTS | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Sometimes I wish I could contact BTS personally | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Sometimes I make comments addressing BTS when I'm watching them in videos | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q 2.4 Please indicate if the following statements are applicable to you

| | Disagree | Neutral | Agree |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| What is important to BTS is important to me | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| BTS are rolemodels to me | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I would like to be more like BTS | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| For me, BTS is an example of how to act or think | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Sometimes I mimic BTS | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q2.5 Please select the words that best apply to the following statement

I think BTS members are..

- Attractive
- Unattractive
- Stylish
- Plain
- Pretty
- Ugly
- Elegant
- Common
- Sexy
- Boring
- Trustworthy
- Deceitful
- Honest
- Dishonest
- Credible
- Unlikely
- Sincere

- Fake
- Expert
- Novice
- Experienced
- Inexperienced
- Smart
- Brash
- Skilled
- Unskilled
- Capable
- Incapable

End of Block: BTS Questions

Start of Block: Stimuli - BTS Tweets

Q2.6 Following are several tweets regarding a member of BTS: Jimin. Please view it and try to answer the questions.

Source: <https://omonatheydidnt.livejournal.com/22711131.html>

Q2.7

10:04 am - 07/21/2018

DID JIMIN CALL JUNGKOOK THE KOREAN EQUIVALENT OF THE N-WORD?

f t e Vind ik leuk



An old video from the 2015 Summer Package has become the topic of discussion recently because in the beginning of the video, Jimin called Jungkook a "Kkamdoongie(깜둥이)". "Kkamdoongie" can have two meanings, but it is a racist insult when used against a black person.

Q.2.8

Twitter user vlissful defends Jimin here:

Now, I'd like to give you my input with some attachments that I found on the internet to guide you.

As explained above, the term 'Kkamdoongie' has 2 meanings:
with one being a derogatory term, and the other defining a noun that is black or dark.

— 블리스 (@vlissful) July 19, 2018

Source: [Bangtan Subs](#), [hanchul@twitter](#), [vlissful@twitter](#)

There's more explanation in the links to both threads. Given that his comment was about Jungkook's tan and BTS has made other colorist comments during this time period, it's more likely that it's a negative connotation. A lot of Black fans are hurt by his comment. I hope they address this like they did with the 'naega' censorship issue.

Tags: [bts](#), [cultural insensitivity / racism](#),

[137 COMMENTS](#), [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Q2.9 When I see posts like this I..

- Feel hurt by the idol
- Feel defensive
- Am indifferent
- Agree with the post
- Feel annoyed
- Feel inclined to look up more discourse
- Feel hurt by the post

End of Block: BTS Tweets

Participants who were randomly assigned to Condition B were exposed to the following questions and stimuli regarding the South Korean boyband EXO

Start of Block: Condition B - EXO Questions

Q3.1 Following are questions pertaining to South Korean boy group EXO.

EXO, when mentioned in statements, refers to the members of the boy group.

Q3.2 I consider myself a fan of the South Korean group EXO

- Absolutely
 - I don't have an opinion on them
 - Not at all
-

Q3.3 Please indicate if the following statements are applicable to you

| | Disagree | Neutral | Agree |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| EXO make me feel like I know them | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| If I saw EXO featured in a magazine, I'd read it | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I often think about EXO | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Sometimes I wish I could contact EXO personally | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Sometimes I make comments addressing BTS when I'm watching them in videos | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q3.4 Please indicate if the following statements are applicable to you

| | Disagree | Neutral | Agree |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| What is important to EXO is important to me | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| EXO are rolemodels to me | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I would like to be more like EXO | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| For me, EXO is an example of how to act or think | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Sometimes I mimic EXO | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q3.5 Please select the words that best apply to the following statement

I think EXO members are..

- Attractive
- Unattractive
- Stylish
- Plain
- Pretty
- Ugly
- Elegant
- Common
- Sexy
- Boring
- Trustworthy
- Deceitful
- Honest
- Dishonest
- Credible
- Unlikely
- Sincere

- Fake
- Expert
- Novice
- Experienced
- Inexperienced
- Smart
- Brash
- Skilled
- Unskilled
- Capable
- Incapable

End of Block: EXO Questions

Start of Block: Stimuli - EXO Tweets

Q3.6 Following is a post regarding a member of EXO: Chen. Please view it and try to answer the questions.

Source: <https://www.asianjunkie.com/2018/04/15/exos-chen-compares-having-overdrawn-thick-lips-to-kunta-kinte-michol-on-V-live/>

Q3.7

EXO's Chen compares having overdrawn thick lips to Kunta Kinte & Michol on V Live

IATFB 04/15/2018 K-Entertainment Leave A Comment

Facebook Twitter Google +



On a recent V Live broadcast, **Chen** of **EXO** was having his lips overdrawn to make them appear thicker, presumably for comedic effect. During that process, he laughed while comparing the look to **Kunta Kinte** from **'Roots'** and also **Michol** from **'Dooly The Dinosaur'**, which has understandably drawn anger and criticism for playing into stereotypes and mocking those features.

Q3.8



There's shielding and debate going on right now because the V Live subtitles clearly wanted to avoid mess and translated it as "my lips look too plump", but if you listen to what he actually says it's quite clear he makes the reference to Kunta Kinte, and the Korean subtitles reference Kunta Kinte as well. If that isn't enough, then there's the fact that he then immediately references Michol, who is essentially a blackface character anyway. It's as if he purposefully made the extra effort to make his intention crystal clear.

It's, uh ... a bad look.

Q3.9 When I read a post like this I..

- Feel hurt by the idol
- Feel defensive
- Am indifferent
- Agree with the post
- Feel annoyed
- Feel inclined to look up more discourse
- Feel hurt by the post

End of Block: EXO Tweets

Participants assigned to Condition C were not shown any stimuli but were sent straight to the following question-blocks. Regardless of the random condition assigned, all participants were eventually asked to answer questions pertaining to social issues and their personal qualities.

Start of Block: Questions K-pop and Social Issues

Q4.1 The following questions pertain K-Pop and its relationship to social issues.

Social issues can be interpreted as racism, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia etc.

Q4.2 Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements

| | Disagree | Neutral | Agree |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Because we have the internet, there is no excuse to be ignorant of social issues | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Someone's culture plays a role in how they perceive social issues | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Discourse surrounding social issues is US-centric | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q4.3 Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements

| | Disagree | Neutral | Agree |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| K-Pop idols should be more aware of global social issues | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| K-Pop idols have no responsibility to educate themselves on social issues that are not Korean | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| If a K-Pop idol speaks English well, they cannot be excused under the guise of ignorance about social issues | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| K-Pop idols should never involve themselves in social issues. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q4.4 Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements

| | Disagree | Neutral | Agree |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| I am inclined to stick up for my idols | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I am inclined to criticise my idols | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I am inclined to convince others of my viewpoints when it pertains to my idols | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I have stopped liking an idol because what they did hurt me personally | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I have stopped liking an idol because what they did went against my own convictions | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

End of Block: Questions K-pop and Social Issues

Start of Block: Questions Personal Qualities

Q5.1 These questions pertain to your personal qualities

Q5.2 I consider myself a person who..

- is confident and outgoing
- has a strong sense of justice
- is relaxed and easygoing
- is quick to disagree or criticise
- is good at making friends offline
- gets nervous easily
- trusts people easily
- gets lonely quickly
- has a strong need to connect

End of Block: Questions Personal Qualities

Start of Block: End

Q6.1 You've reached the end of the survey!

Please do not forget to press the "Submit" button.

Thank you so much for your participation.

This research is focused on the parasocial relationships fans of Korean pop have formed with their idols, and how this may affect their view on criticism when social issues are involved.

Through the survey, you may have followed a different path than other respondents. Analysis will eventually show whether there is a difference between the different groups, and whether being a fan of someone influences the way people respond to online discourse.

This survey has no intention of defaming any mentioned individuals and has been created with an entirely neutral stance.

Again, by participating, you have been invaluable to my research.
Thank you so much.

Please click Submit to send your answers.

End of Block: End

Appendix II

Qualitative Survey

Parasocial - Qualitative

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 Do you consent to the use of this interview for academic purposes? By choosing 'yes', you confirm that you are over 18 years of age and answers given can be used as data for research.

Yes

No

Q2 What is your name? (This can be a pseudonym and will be used to refer to your answers)

Q3 What is your age?

Q4 What is your race/ethnicity?

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Personal Experiences

Q5 What was the reason you got involved with K-pop?

Q6 How would you describe the relationship K-pop fans have with their idols?

Q7 Do you feel your race has impacted your personal experience within K-pop?

Q8 When an idol exhibits problematic behavior, what is your personal reaction?

End of Block: Personal Experiences

Start of Block: Social Issues

Q9 Do you feel like idols should speak up about social issues outside of Korea that might affect their fans?

Q10 Do you think the fact that idols are often South-Korean is a factor in why they exhibit problematic behavior?

Q11 Would you consider the fact that they are South-Korean to be an excuse for their behaviour?

Q12 What is your opinion on the take that discourse surrounding idols' problematic behaviour is US-centric?

Q13 What is your opinion on the way *idols* are behaving amidst the current situation with regards to Black Lives Matter?

Q14 What is your opinion on the way *k-pop fans* are behaving amidst the current situation with regards to Black Lives Matter?

Q15 Do you have anything else you would like to share with me?

End of Block: Social Issues
