

Impact of K-Pop Idol Dating Scandals on Fans' Parasocial Relationships with Idols: Comparing Indonesian and South Korean Fans

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Abstract. The rapid growth of the K-Pop industry has intensified the negative impact of dating scandals on parasocial relationships between fans and idols. This study examines cultural differences in how Indonesian and South Korean K-Pop fans respond to such scandals, which may lead to parasocial breakups. Based on parasocial relationship theory and employing a qualitative comparative design, six participants, three from each country, were recruited through convenience sampling. Findings reveal that fans experienced both positive and negative emotions, including acceptance and endorsement. South Korean fans tended to respond more negatively, whereas Indonesian fans displayed greater positivity and support toward their idols. By highlighting significant cultural differences, these findings provide insights into the dynamics of fan-idol relationships and emphasize the importance of fostering supportive and healthy fan cultures to mitigate the psychological impact of dating scandals on idols.

Keywords: K-Pop, Dating Scandal, Parasocial Relationship

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Introduction

K-Pop is a music subculture that started to become popular in South Korea in the 1990s and has begun transforming into a global cultural phenomenon (Huber, 2023). The music industry with the K-Pop genre has developed rapidly since the 20th century. This is evidenced by the increase in profits generated by the South Korean music industry, reaching 11 trillion Won or approximately 8.5 billion US dollars. There has been a profit increase of 238% from 2014 to 2022 (Statista Search Department, 2024). Not to mention, the number of K-Pop fans worldwide reached 200 million in the survey conducted by The Korea Foundation (KF) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 2024 (Park, 2024).

One marketing strategy used by the K-Pop industry to attract and retain loyal fans is fostering a one-way relationship. Social media plays a crucial role in this process, serving as a catalyst where fans invest their emotions in idols through platforms like Bubble, V Live, and Weverse. These applications offer fans the experience of interacting directly with idols, creating the illusion that idols are "romantically available." This dynamic quickly cultivates a type of fan who becomes deeply obsessed with their idol (Lee et al., 2024). On platforms like Weverse and Bubble, fans can interact with idols through text and private chats, while V Live

offers live streaming, further enhancing the sense of intimacy between fans and K-Pop idols.

This intimate illusion creates the one-sided relationship between K-Pop fans and idols, coined as parasocial relationship. Horton and Wohl (1956) define a parasocial relationship as a connection formed between television viewers and the characters they watch, encompassing the viewers' feelings and reactions toward those characters. Building on this, Tukachinsky (2023) describes it as a meaningful attachment to media figures that persists despite the impenetrable boundary separating them from the audience. Similarly, Hoffner and Bond (2022) characterize parasocial relationships as social-emotional connections individuals form with media figures, including celebrities or fictional characters. In K-pop industry itself, parasocial relationships are regarded intense, especially with the excessive usage of social media among fans (Fitri et al., 2024). The relationship dynamics in K-pop differ from those in Western pop or other fandoms and often result in negative consequences.

Parasocial relationships formed between K-Pop idols and their fans have behavioral, cognitive, affective, and psychological implications for both the idols and their fans. Behaviorally, K-Pop fans reportedly change aspects of themselves to resemble or

feel more connected to their favorite idols. In addition, several K-Pop fans also use K-Pop to distract themselves, frequently ignoring their school assignments and family responsibilities to engage with K-Pop content (Hwang, 2024). This further led to procrastination in fulfilling responsibilities, as fans chose to prioritize fan activities over studying or working (Sajan et al., 2024). Cognitively, parasocial relationships can result in distorted internal moral values, as fans form unrealistic ideals and perceptions influenced by their idols, reflected by their extreme defensiveness toward their favorite idol when involved in a scandal. An intense attachment to an idol can cause unhealthy emotional dependence, potentially resulting in feelings of disillusionment, depression, and loneliness when the idol is absent due to events like scandals or military service (Hwang, 2024). Psychologically, parasocial relationships on social media may also harm mental health by fostering negative self-comparisons (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

For K-Pop idols, extreme parasocial relationships with their fans have unfortunately taken many tolls. Missteps, even minor ones, often result in harsh criticism from their fans and the public. The extreme end of criticism often involves cyberbullying and doxing. Idols who do not live up to these expectations often endure severe abuse, which can cause serious psychological harm (Siddiqui, 2024). One of the largest cases of extreme parasocial relationships in K-Pop was the death of the late Sulli. She was outspoken and defied the idea that idols must fit into a specific image expected by fans. She openly shared her opinions, mental health issues, and even her romantic relationships. This was seen as controversial by her fans and the public, leading to severe bullying on social media, resulting in major depression and suicide (Tan & Kim, 2019). Sulli's case was only one of many suicides due to extreme parasocial relationships that create tremendous pressure for K-Pop idols.

Not only does it impact the idols, but parasocial relationships also affect the profits of the companies or agencies that manage these idols. According to research conducted by Kim in 2017, a tight bond between K-Pop fans and their idol has a negative impact on the short-term stock prices of their entertainment agencies. The stock value of the agency can only be maintained if the idols meet the expectations anticipated by the fans (Lee et al., 2024). This was also proven during the negative rumor between idol Karina from the group AESPA and actor Lee Jae Wook. The stock of Karina's agency, SM Entertainment, opened at 80,700 won and began to drop dramatically after 10:20 AM, following an exclusive report on their romantic relationship by local media. The stock fell as low as 76,700 won around 1:30

PM, showing a decline of up to 4% (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2024).

The parasocial relationships cultivated within the K-pop industry are inherently vulnerable to transgression processes. Transgression refers to the incidents committed by artists that violate the observer's expectation of how the actors should behave (Tukachinsky, 2023). K-pop idols face numerous potential transgressions, including bullying, DUIs, or drug offenses. However, dating scandals represent one of the most frequent and impactful transgressions, primarily due to the widespread inclusion of strict "no-dating clauses" in idol contracts (Kwan, 2018). Dating scandals violate the carefully constructed sense of intimacy between fans and K-Pop idols. Consequently, dating scandals often trigger a severe rupture in the parasocial relationship, potentially escalating into a parasocial breakup, an involuntary, psychologically impactful termination of the perceived relationship (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). This reaction stems from the core industry logic: the no-dating clause is designed to preserve the idol's marketable image of exclusivity; violating it directly challenges the foundation of the fan's emotional investment.

However, fan reactions to dating scandals can vary significantly across cultures, particularly between domestic and international audiences. Research by Yoon (2022) suggests that Asian fans often feel a stronger cultural and racial connection to K-pop idols and their content, whereas white fans typically exhibit a more cosmopolitan and flexible attachment. These differing perspectives may lead to distinct responses to dating scandals.

In some extreme cases, particularly among domestic fans, expressions of hatred toward idols following dating scandal news are common. The phenomenon of hate comments is widespread when K-Pop idols are involved in such scandals (Rika et al., 2024). In addition to negative comments, idols frequently experience a significant drop in their social media following. For instance, when HyunA announced her relationship with artist Yong Jun-Hyung from the group HIGHLIGHT, she lost 200,000 Instagram followers within just 10 days (Yeo, 2024).

The intense backlash generated by dating scandals often compels idols to issue public apologies to their fans. For example, after fans sent a protest truck to Karina from the group AESPA, who had revealed her relationship with actor Lee Jae-Wook, Karina posted an apology letter on her personal Instagram. The protest truck's message read: "Is the love given by Karina's fans not enough for you? Why did you choose to betray the fans? Please apologize directly. If not, you will see a decline in album sales and empty concert seats." In response, Karina apologized for surprising her fans and

promised to show a more mature side of herself and to work harder (Ng, 2024).

On the other hand, many people, particularly in Indonesia, express support for Karina's romantic relationship with Lee Jae Wook. During Karina Aespa and Lee Jae Wook dating scandals, comments on Indonesia's domestic media reflect a positive response, including translated remarks such as: "I really didn't expect Karina would date an actor, but it's probably better that she's with an actor—there's less criticism.", "It seems like they're still in the getting-to-know-each-other stage, since they met in Milan last month and have been hanging out and eating together since then. Good luck with the courtship!", and "If they were already dating during Milan Fashion Week, their acting was really impressive, sitting next to each other as if nothing was going on." (Kirana, 2024).

In large numbers, Indonesian fans show high loyalty to their favorite idol. Other than purchasing merchandise related to their idols, interacting with other fans within the same fandom, and engaging in K-Pop fandom activities (Perbawani & Nuralin 2021), Indonesia's K-Pop fans high loyalty is also often channeled in positive forms. There are many cohesive fandom activities carried out by members of these fandoms. The ARMY fandom is a group of fans from the idol group BTS who have been researched and found to actively participate as initiators, volunteers, and contributors in social activities (Wahyuningtyas & Kusuma, 2021). According to Utami and Winduwati (2020), activities such as blood donation, donating to those in need, tree planting, and animal adoption are carried out in the name of their idols by the ARMY fandom.

In addition of high loyalty, Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest number of K-Pop fans in the world. According to Blip, a private data research organization that released a data study in 2021, Indonesia is the country with the highest number of K-Pop viewers on YouTube (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2021). Indonesia also became the country with the largest number of K-Pop fans in the world in 2021 (GoodStats, 2022).

While significant differences in K-pop fan reactions to parasocial breakups across cultures have been observed (e.g., Yoon, 2022), a critical gap persists in understanding how these cultural dynamics specifically shape responses to *dating scandals*. Existing research provides a strong foundation on the formation of parasocial relationships between K-Pop idols and their fans (Ascue et al., 2023), including their psychological effects (Hwang, 2024), communication patterns (Gucci et al., 2024), social media usage (Fitri et al., 2024), attachment styles (Firsta & Ambarwati, 2023), and several news has highlighted the general

effect of dating scandals in the K-Pop industry (Gu, 2020; Lee et al., 2024), systematic research investigating how cultural background influences the experience of parasocial breakup triggered by dating scandals is notably absent. This gap is compounded by the methodological landscape: the overwhelming majority (85.4%) of parasocial relationship research from 2016-2020 relied on quantitative methods (Schramm et al., 2024), limiting the depth of exploration into the complex phenomenon.

This study is based on the parasocial relationship theory by Horton and Wohl (1956) and Sprecher's (1994) theory on the breakup of dating relationships, which suggests that parasocial relationships gives the audience the illusion of direct, personal interaction with the performer, even though the interaction is one-sided and lacks true reciprocity. The theory examines the parasocial relationship between performers and audience, with questions and themes derived from two dimensions mentioned in the study by Sprecher (1994): post-breakup feelings and post-breakup behavior. Therefore, a qualitative method is used in this research to explore subjects' answers.

This study aims to deepen the understanding of the relationship dynamics between K-Pop idols and their fans, providing valuable insights for the public, particularly K-pop enthusiasts, about differences in fan behavior and encouraging more supportive interactions. Additionally, the findings may assist the K-Pop industry in promoting healthier, less intense fan relationships and in mitigating the negative effects of fan reactions to dating scandals, with particular attention to the psychological well-being of idols.

Methods

The study employs a qualitative comparative design. Given that parasocial relationships are deeply complex and subjective experiences, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is utilized to capture their nuances and cultural implications. This design also enables a systematic comparison between two cultures, South Korean and Indonesian K-Pop fans, providing information-rich data to explore similarities and differences across cultural contexts.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to meet the required criteria. As the study compares South Korean and Indonesian K-Pop fans, the target participants were individuals of Indonesian or South Korean nationality who have been active K-Pop fans and have at least one favourite member in a K-Pop group. The participants details shown in Table 1.

To ensure equal representation, an equal number of participants from each country were recruited. While recruiting Indonesian K-Pop fans was relatively straight-

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants at Baseline

Nama	Age	Gender	Country	Employment	Favorite K-Pop Idol
R	21	F	Indonesia	Student	Heesung (ENHYPEN)
H	19	F	Indonesia	Student	Siwon (Super Junior)
A	19	M	Indonesia	Student	Hanni (New Jeans)
O	23	F	South Korea	Student	DoHoon (TWS)
C	22	F	South Korea	Student	Jinyoung (GOT7)
L	33	M	South Korea	Employed	IU

Table 2

Interview Questions

	Question
1	Before we begin, please introduce yourself, starting with your name, age, and current education.
2	How long have you been liking and being a fan of K-Pop? Mention one idol who is your bias at the moment.
3	What activities do you do when you're a fan of your bias?
4	How does your bias influence your life?
5	Imagine that your bias is actually dating another idol with the involvement of serious emotion. Your idol has been dating for four months, but Dispatch revealed it today. The news becomes the headline across all media outlets. What is your reaction?
6	Who do you think your bias most potentially dates? What do you feel?
7	Will you continue to be a fan of your bias? Why? and will there be any changes?
8	How do you feel about K-Pop after finding out that your bias is dating another idol?
9	Will you still listen to your bias's music and watch their old videos?
10	Will you try to do something to change the situation?
11	Will you try to become a fan of another bias or idol?

Table 3

Subject experience on their idol's dating scandal

Discourse and Dimensions	Example Quote (Indonesian Sample)	Example Quote (South Korean Sample)
Post-breakup feelings		
Negative Emotion	"So, it's like, my heart will be in pain, i will be angry." (R, 21, F)	"It is not professional for idol. My emotion with disappointment is bigger than sadness." (O, 23, F)
Positive Emotion	"I'm happy because she finally has someone, that's all" (A, 19, M)	"If he date with a girl who is known for her good personality, has never issued in negative way, and is loved by the public, that would be great and I would be happy for him." (C, 22, F)
Post-breakup behavior		
Acceptance	"It's fine. That's how it is. I'll just support him, follow along, that's what I mean." (R, 21, F)	"I probably still support her and I still love her, so I won't be like saying, like, 'I won't be like what I like,' so things are not going to change." (L, 33, M)
Endorsement	"Yes, of course, I will continue to be a fan of his. And I think I will support them even more" (H, 19, F)	

htforward, recruiting native South Korean fans proved more challenging due to limited connections. Consequently, a total of six participants were enrolled: three Indonesian fans (two female, one male) and three South Korean fans (two female, one male), aged between 19 and 33 years ($M = 23$, $SD = 5.10$). As the primary aim was to gain depth of insight, efforts were focused on obtaining information-rich responses through rigorous exploration with a minimum number of participants.

All subjects had been K-pop fans for at least 4 years, with most having been fans for more than 6 years. Participants have various favorite idol groups or soloists, including ENHYPEN, Super Junior, TWS,

GOT7, NewJeans, and IU. Some of Idol mentioned by respondents have been involved in dating scandal before, such as singer IU with actor Lee Jong Suk (Palat, 2025), Jungwon ENHYPEN with Winter AESPA (Seung-Jin, 2024), also Siwon Super Junior with actress Liu Wen (Melsa, 2020), reported by local and international news on K-pop.

Semi-structured online interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data. The interviews consisted of 11 main questions, along with several follow-up questions to elicit more in-depth responses. All questions were reviewed by an expert in psychology. The questions were designed to gain insights into the subjects' K-pop fan activities and their emotional and

behavioral reactions to their idol's dating scandal. Questions are based on the parasocial relationship theory by Horton and Wohl (1956). The questions assess two dimensions of dating scandals as transgressions in parasocial relationships: post-breakup feelings and post-breakup behaviors. The question details shown in Table 2.

Each interview was conducted once per subject with an average duration of 45 minutes per subject. Interviews were conducted by one researcher to ensure consistency. Indonesian subjects were interviewed in Bahasa Indonesia, while South Korean subjects were interviewed in English. Before data collection, participants were asked to fill out an online informed consent form.

Initially, subjects were asked about their favorite K-pop idol or bias, and their involvement in fandom activities to establish rapport. Following this, they were presented with a vignette in Figure 1, a fictional scenario for them to imagine as if it were real, that has been reviewed by an expert in psychology. The vignette described a situation in which their idol becomes a major media headline due to a serious romantic relationship. In this case, the major media outlet in Korea mentioned is Dispatch, a news platform that frequently reports on K-pop idols' romantic relationships. Subsequently, subjects were asked about their reactions to this news. Throughout the interview process, the researcher employs bracketing to mitigate data subjectivity and paraphrases based on the responses given. A vignette-based interview was used to help participants immerse themselves in real cases of dating scandals.

Imagine that your bias is actually dating another idol with the involvement of serious emotion. Your idol has been dating for four months, but Dispatch revealed it today. The news becomes the headline across all media outlets.

What is your reaction?

Figure 1. Picture of Vignette Presented To The Subject

The interviews were analyzed using deductive thematic analysis using Indonesian for Indonesian Interview Result and English for English Interview Result. First, interviews were conducted. Next, the coding process was carried out to extract the main points from the interview responses. Third, these main points were categorized into several major themes based on their similarity, cohesiveness, and relevance. The researcher employed bracketing to minimize bias. To ensure validity and reliability, the codes and themes derived from the Indonesian analysis were translated

into English and subjected to a cultural review to verify their appropriateness and coherence. The coding process was facilitated using ATLAS.ti software, which helped organize the codes into predetermined themes according to the theoretical framework. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subjects' responses, all analyses were conducted by the same researcher who performed the interviews.

Results and Discussion

Results

Analysis and findings from interviews then reflected and categorized based on parasocial relationship theory by Horton and Wohl (1956). Table 3 provides examples of participant responses. The main themes include: Post-breakup feelings and post-breakup behavior.

Theme 1: Post-breakup feelings

A spectrum of emotions was found throughout the analysis of interview data, ranging from positive to negative emotions, with neutral emotions also included. South Korean K-pop fans were more likely to experience negative emotions, while Indonesian K-pop fans tended to feel positive emotions.

Negative Emotions are evident in the form of feelings of anger, sadness, and betrayal. According to one subject,

Uh emotionally i'll probably feel so sad because IU is girl and i'm a guy and it's kind of like an obvious reaction as a guy when you're having a crush is dating another person (L, M, 33).

Another subject shared how complex their negative emotion will be upon receiving their idol's dating news:

First, I am so sad. But maybe I don't feel like I will hate it, but I will be sad. He hasn't been long since they debuted, so I think they can grow more and more, but the dating issue is very badly. So, it's like, my heart will be in pain, i will be angry. In korea, idol who is dating is, wait a second. There will be many many bad comments, so there will be a lot a bad image for the idol (O, F, 23).

The negative emotions in response to dating scandals may stem from the perceived expectation of intimacy between K-pop fans and their idols. Fans anticipate that idols will prioritize their supporters' interests over their personal desires (Lee et al., 2024). This expectation arises from the transaction between fan loyalty, manifested through activities such as voting, online streaming, and purchasing albums, and the idols' music and fan service (Choi, 2020).

Fans' loyalty is demonstrated through enormous support for their idols, including buying albums,

purchasing merchandise, and attending music events such as concerts. A subject shared that,

I buy albums and I go to music broadcasts and I like to go to music broadcasts or I like go the concerts? (O, F, 23).

One subject elaborated on the activities they are involved in as a fan of their idol:

Obviously aku dengerin lagunya Terus Ini jatuhnya kayak grupnya ya Dengerin lagu, Terus nonton music video Abis itu aku juga beli Merchandise Dari merekanya dan juga Jatuhnya ya second hand merchandise juga Ada, Habis itu ya I try to support them as much as I can aja sih. Obviously, I listen to their songs. I listen to the music, watch the music videos, and I also buy merchandise from them. Additionally, I sometimes get second-hand merchandise as well. Overall, I try to support them as much as I can (H, F, 19).

Today, fans purchase items to demonstrate social status, reflect price value, and fulfill personal desires. South Korean entertainment agencies use marketing strategies to sell different versions of albums, making fans willing to spend a fortune to collect them, further exploiting K-pop fans' loyalty. Purchasing merchandise and albums not only supports their idols but also gives fans a sense of satisfaction. Attending concerts is also an important activity for fans, as it provides an opportunity to interact with their idols and create strong emotional bonds, which can lead to excessive love and fanatical behavior (Ardhiyansyah et al., 2021).

As a result, K-pop idols adhere to unwritten rules that position them as service providers, whose primary role is to satisfy their fans. Idols achieve their wealth largely due to fan support and are therefore expected to show appreciation by demonstrating humility, respect, and compliance through fan service. Consequently, fan service has evolved from a supplementary task to a core component of their profession (Choi, 2020).

Therefore, if a K-pop idol's dating information is publicized and consumed by the public, negative emotions such as sadness, disappointment, and betrayal are bound to emerge. One subject expressed that,

It is not professional for idol. My emotion with disappointment is bigger than sadness (O, F, 23).

In a detailed response, one subject shared how dating scandal by idol or actor could change the fan's perspective:

So dating in like a Korean industry like not just the K-pop idols but also called the actress and actors it's almost like an end of their job and end of money because people stop like caring about

them because they feel like even though i buy these expensive merchandise or everything um and they they think like oh she's not gonna think about us anymore because her boyfriend is caring about them so. "I don't really care anymore" so they sort of quit their order buying stuff but the sad thing is the way the K-pop artists make money is like by the fans buying them like albums and merchandise and fans loving them and stuff so once that stops it's kind of like really really bad for the company as well (L, M, 33).

Perhaps, another mechanism underlying negative emotions is because the fans also consider their idol as an inspiration. Idol is seen as someone who gives motivations and helps their fans' lives better by influencing their lifestyle. Because Idols are seen as a hardworking person who is good at everything, their fans feel that they learn from their idols. As one subject described,

It really influenced me to keep living on. It's like a motivation to live on (L, M, 33).

Another subject elaborated on why they became a fan of their idol:

Stage presence nya itu bagus dan nyanyinya juga bagus dia emang terkenal cukup apa ya dia tuh punya perfect pitch jadi iya nyanyinya nggak usah diraguin lagi lah bakal bagus dan kayak gimana dia ngedance, gimana dia ngasih stage presence tuh bisa bagus banget gitu loh jadi kayak ya aku amaze dari situanya gitu mungkin.

His stage presence is really good, and he sings well too. He's quite famous, you know, because he has perfect pitch. So there's no doubt his singing is going to be great. And the way he dances, the way he presents himself on stage, it's really impressive. That's what amazes me, I guess (R, F, 21).

This aligns with the research that is conducted by (Sembiring, 2023) with 10 university students, the reason they become fans is because of their idol's work, personality, and motivating songs. Fans experience positive effects, such as happiness, learning new languages and cultures, and being inspired by their idols' efforts and determination to achieve their dreams.

These positive attitudes and perspectives toward their idol can be destroyed by disappointment if dating is believed as a form of betrayal. Betrayal is a feeling of being wronged by the deliberate actions of someone who was believed to be trusted and loyal (Rachman, 2010). If dating is believed by fans as an action to deliberately damage fans, it can be translated as a form of betrayal by their fans. This belief of dating can differ along culture. Based on interview results, South Korean K-pop fans perceived dating more negatively than Indonesian K-pop fans, where South Korean K-

pop fans believe that dating will cause bad images for their idol. O, F, 23 expressed that by dating, an idol will receive enormous negative comments, which will harm the idol's image. In contrast, another subject stated:

Apa jeleknya kalau misalnya dia pacaran sama siapapun itu enggak itu bukan hal yang buruk gitu loh Jadi kenapa aku harus marah-marah?

What's so bad about him dating anyone? It's not a bad thing, so why should I be angry? (R, F, 21).

A more negative belief towards dating can result in a negative attitude. According to theories of reasoned action, attitudes can influence behavioral intentions, which in turn influence actual behavior (Dillard & Pfau, 2002). Negative beliefs can lead to negative behaviors, such as aggressive forms of protesting against idols. One example is the dating rumors surrounding Joshua, a member of the group SEVENTEEN. These rumors resulted in a project called "China Porsche A," initiated by SEVENTEEN's Chinese fans. The project involved a series of Porsches and protest trucks driving around Seoul, from SEVENTEEN's agency, HYBE Entertainment, to other major entertainment agency buildings, before returning to HYBE. Fans used the Porsche as a protest symbol because of rumors that Joshua had purchased one for his alleged girlfriend (Lin, 2023). A subject elaborated on the backlash related to dating scandals in the earlier days of K-pop:

I think that that thing got better than the past K-pop industry. Because I remember my friend's sister who's like much older than me, and she's uh she used to stand um the first-generation K-pop idol and when she found out she was uh when she found out he was dating someone, um one of our fans like uh send the girl's house over like a bunch of dead pigeons, like a cursing, and someone like writing a letter of using their blood, to like just "please please break up" and stuff. So um things used to be really intense but at the moment, right now, just sending a truck is like uh kind of like really mild at the moment. (L, M, 33).

Moreover, many betrayals are unexpected events that come as a surprising shock (Rachman, 2010). Aligned with this research, both South Korean and Indonesian K-Pop fans stated that they would initially be shocked upon hearing that their idols are involved in a romantic relationship. One subject stated,

Firstly, I will feel a little bit shocked and a little bit betrayed (O, F, 23).

Another subject, Lee, stated that he would be surprised at first, but then he would feel fine (L, M, 33). One subject stated that he might not hate his idol, but

he will feel negative toward his idol's couple, stated that,

Um I'll be really sad too but also I'll be really like uh um angry at the guy as well .Yeah, just the main point is uh I won't be hating my artist I'll be hating the guy (L, M, 33).

Positive emotions have also prevailed in the form of happiness, so as neutral emotions. In this research, positive emotions are predominantly felt by Indonesian K-pop fans. One subject stated that she would be very happy if her idol, Siwon, were dating (H, F, 19). Another subject mentioned,

Sebenarnya lebih ke seneng dan biasa aja gitu. Karena gini, senengnya karena dia udah punya someone ya gitu.

Actually, it's more like I'm happy but also just kind of indifferent. It's like this: I'm happy because she finally has someone, that's all (A, M, 19).

One subject from South Korea indicated that if her idol were dating a girl known for her good personality, who has never been involved in any negative issues and is loved by the public, she would be happy for her idol (C, F, 22).

Responses from South Korean K-pop fans also indicate that even though they feel negative as their first reaction to dating scandal news, they will feel happy for their K-pop idol after several days. This reaction might be because in parasocial relationships, even though they often lack the behavioral elements that characterize typical social relationships, yet they appear to share many of the same emotional components (Cohen, 2003). It aligns with research by Hoffner and Bond (2022), which states that parasocial relationships could deeply affect a person emotionally and provide a coping process for real-life challenges. Parasocial relationship influence on emotion can be seen in the form of empathy, where research by Derrick et al. (2008) revealed that the more fans liked their idol, favorite idol, the greater the ability to empathize with them. This result was elaborated by Scherer et al. (2021), where it was found that a stronger level of empathy, positively correlated with a stronger parasocial relationship, reflected in higher satisfaction and parasocial interaction. The emotional connection and empathy that forms between K-pop idols and their fans might influence how fans perceive dating scandal information. Seeing their idol happy because they are in a healthy relationship and empathizing with them could decrease negative feelings and attitudes toward the dating scandal. One subject elaborated on his emotions after learning that his idol, IU, had been dating actor Lee Jong Suk for two years:

It's been almost, I'd say, about two years, one year after her dating news, and, um, I kind of forgot she was even dating now. Yeah, I don't really care anymore about whether she's dating or not. I just love her as IU herself (L, M, 33).

However, many K-pop fans do not require a buffering period to view dating as acceptable. From the start, some fans see dating as a natural, humanizing act, recognizing that their idol is also human. This perspective leads to their support of the idol's dating life. One subject conveyed that,

Idol juga manusia gitu dan wajar-wajar aja bagi seseorang untuk punya perasaan bahkan sampai dating gitu jadi enggak selama enggak menimbulkan masalah di Idol nya aku ya udah santai-santai aja gitu.

After all, idols are human too. It's completely normal for someone to have feelings and even to date. So as long as it doesn't cause any issues for the idol, I'm totally okay with it (A, M, 19).

Neutral emotion is also mentioned, such as the reaction of not feeling anything. There has been an ongoing demand about whether neutral emotions exist or not. However, research by [Gasper et al., \(2019\)](#) stated that neutral affect or emotion should not be considered as the absence of affect, but as the presence of neutral affect. Neutral states are also capable to co-occur with negative or positive states. One subject expressed their neutral feelings:

Yang tadi pun setelah baca ini bener-bener yang cuman kayak Oh oh yaudah lah Kayak, yaudah, maksudnya Ya itu kan hidupnya mereka Mereka juga punya.

Yeah, even after reading this, it's really just like, 'Oh, oh well, whatever.' I mean, that's their life, after all. They have their own choices (R, F, 21).

Theme 2: Post-breakup Behavior

In [Cohen \(2003\)](#), post-breakup behaviors are manifested in various forms, such as watching other programs featuring the character, re-watching reruns, engaging with other programs, attempting to change the situation, finding a different character to love, seeking information about the character from other sources, trying to meet the character in another way, or continuing to watch the program. In this research, these behaviors are used as interview questions and form the basis of the analysis to determine whether subjects are experiencing an ongoing parasocial breakup after the dating scandal news of their idol. Surprisingly, through this interview, it was found that none of the participants exhibited post-breakup behaviors as described in the parasocial relationship scale by [Cohen \(2003\)](#). None of the participants tried to find a different idol to like, attempted to change the situation, stopped liking their

idol, changed their view toward K-pop, or stopped watching their idol's latest content. Therefore, behaviorally, the participants did not experience a parasocial breakup. Instead, in this research, several cognitive and mental processes were identified as reactions to their idol's dating scandal. These processes have the potential to impact how the participants behave as a result of their idol's dating scandals. Based on the participants' answers, these processes were categorized into two sub-themes based on their similar characteristics: acceptance and endorsement.

Acceptance is described by the subjects in this research when they found out that their idol is dating someone. Although there are various definitions of acceptance, this research uses acceptance in a psychological context to maintain relevance with the phenomenon being studied. Acceptance means embracing without unnecessary attempts to change ([Hayes et al., 2006](#)). This acceptance is reflected in their loyalty, as they continue to support their idol, watch their performances, refrain from becoming fans of others, maintain unchanged feelings toward K-pop, and do nothing to alter the situation. These unchanged attitudes toward their idol, the lack of attempts to alter the situation, and the acceptance of their idol's romantic relationship can be referred to as acceptance. Both South Korean and Indonesian K-pop fans reported similar reactions. As described by a subject:

Mengubah keadaan ini keadaan Heesung pacaran sama seorang. Enggak sih. Enggak sih, lebih tetap kayak yaudah. Kalau dia mau pacaran, yaudah. Yaudah. Gitu sih. Aku dukung-dukung aja ikut-ikut aja maksudnya.

Changing this situation, like Heesung dating someone? No, not really. It's more like, okay, if he wants to date, then fine. It's fine. That's how it is. I'll just support him, follow along, that's what I mean (R, F, 21).

Another subject elaborated on their thoughts regarding their behavior if their idol were dating:

But recently, I find out that even though she's dating or even though she's in some trouble or anything, I probably still support her and I still love her, so I won't be like saying, like, "I won't be like what I like," so things are not going to change (L, M, 33).

This is consistent with [Hu \(2016, as cited in Tukachinsky, 2023\)](#), which found that despite a celebrity's involvement in a scandal, it does not affect parasocial interactions, as participants continue to watch movies featuring the celebrity.

The process of acceptance in dating scandal conditions might be influenced by Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE). According to [Tukachinsky](#)

(2019), FAE refers to the tendency of individuals to make broad assumptions about someone's personality based on their actions, while overlooking other possible explanations for that behavior. People were more inclined to attribute the liked celebrities' transgression to situational factors (Tukachinsky, 2023). Therefore, fans might attribute the dating scandal to the situation. This hypothesis is backed up by Research by Hu et al. (2019, as cited in Tukachinsky, 2023), which examined the role of apologies in audience reactions to a celebrity's transgression, found no significant difference in negative emotional reactions or forgiveness between subjects who read the apology statement and those who did not. Therefore, forgiveness in a parasocial relationship, might not be affected by the behavior of the idol after the dating scandal arises because fans attributed the scandal to situational factors.

Another reason for this acceptance may be that subjects recognize media figures as human beings. Research by Sanderson (2010, as cited in Tukachinsky, 2023), which analyzed the golf star Tiger Woods' extramarital affair, revealed that most fans viewed it as a private matter and a manifestation of human nature. This aligns with our research, where subjects feel a significant boundary exists between them and their idols, making them believe they cannot influence the outcome of a dating scandal. Additionally, all subjects acknowledged that their idols are human beings who should be treated as such. Therefore, they believe that an idol's dating scandal is a personal decision that fans should try to respect. According to one subject,

Enggak. Ya karena it's his personal life dan aku disini sebatas fan yang jauh banget, geographically and age-wise jauh. Yah, it's his own life, terserah, gitu.

Umm... No. It's because it's his personal life, and I'm just a fan who's really far away, both geographically and in terms of age. Yeah, it's his own life, so it's up to him (H, F, 19).

Another subject stated that she knows idols are human and that fans can't do anything about the dating issue (O, F, 23).

However, despite projecting acceptance about the dating scandal, several South Korean K-pop fans expressed their hopes for their idol to date secretly or their idol breaking up. One subject mentioned that she wants her idol to date secretly, allowing her to maintain a unicorn-like fantasy (C, F, 22). Another subject shared their thoughts:

Yeah, and probably still hoping for a breakup, but yeah. But also at the same time, I don't want her to be sad, so I don't know (L, M, 33).

This might be because in a parasocial relationship, the audience has a certain expectation of their favorite characters. In the context of K-pop idols, they are expected to not develop any romantic relationships with their company and fans (Choi, 2020). Therefore, several fans might want their idol to date privately because they want to preserve the image of their idol as someone who is loyal to their fans.

Endorsement is also a sub-theme that emerges from the subject's answers, profoundly by Indonesian K-pop fans in the act of supporting their idol's romantic relationship. According to Cambridge dictionary, endorsement is the act of approving or supporting someone. In this research context, several answers indicated that the subject supported the idol's romantic relationship. Endorsement can be resulted from positive affect and valence in reaction to dating scandals, where positive emotion usually leads to positive behavior. One subject explained that she would support her idol regardless:

Perasaanku lebih ke yaudah sih, dukung-dukung aja ya... Sama kayak, aku ngedukung apapun yang akan dia lakukan.

My feelings are more like, 'It's fine, just support them...' It's similar to me supporting whatever he chooses to do (R, F, 21).

This feeling of endorsement might arise from the feeling of empathy. Means, the subject feels if their idol is happy, then the subject will be happy too. The feeling of empathy is very common in parasocial relationships. Empathy that is seen in personal relationships is also seen in parasocial relationships, where people who are higher in empathy will have a stronger parasocial relationship (Scherer et al., 2021). The following statement from a subject outlines their support for their idol's romantic relationship:

Kalau misalnya mereka beneran pacaran, dan bahkan sampai nikah, aku bakal jauh lebih senang lagi. Karena aku senang kalau ada aku senang.

Yes, of course, I will continue to be a fan of his. And I think I will support them even more. Because I'm getting happier. If they were really dating and even got married, I would be even happier. I'm happy when they are happy (H, F, 19).

Positive attitude toward idols' romantic relationships might also be a factor of endorsement. According to theories of reasoned action, attitude is an affective response toward specific behavior. Attitude could further influence behavior intention that influences actual behavior (Dillard & Pfau, 2002). Having a positive attitude toward idols' dating scandal might influence positive behavior, such as

endorsement. Rafadity, a subject from Indonesia, stated:

Lebih kayak ke apa jeleknya kalau misalnya dia pacaran sama siapapun itu enggak itu bukan hal yang buruk gitu loh. Jadi kenapa aku harus marah-marah atau apa?

It's more like, what's so bad about him dating anyone? It's not a bad thing, you know. So why should I get angry or anything? (R, F, 21).

Discussion

This research aims to qualitatively explore the complexity of parasocial relationships between K-Pop idols and their fans, particularly in the context of dating scandals. Parasocial relationships significantly influence the psychological, emotional, affective, and behavioral aspects of both fans (Hwang, 2024) and K-Pop idols (Siddiqui, 2024). However, they are highly vulnerable to transgression processes triggered by negative scandals, such as dating scandals. It involves an incident where idols violate fans' expectations, particularly the expectation that idols prioritize fans over personal desires. If an idol's personal desires, such as a romantic relationship, are perceived negatively, suggesting that the idol is unable to fulfill fans' desires, it could negatively impact their parasocial relationships. Dating scandals can lead to a parasocial breakup, a process in which a fan's connection with an idol is abruptly severed. According to Cohen (2003), reactions to parasocial breakups can be classified into two themes: post-breakup emotions and post-breakup behaviors. These same themes are used in this research to analyze interview responses.

Post-breakup emotions range from negative to positive, with neutral emotions also present. Negative emotions often manifest as anger, sadness, and betrayal. These feelings may arise due to the perceived expectation of intimacy between K-pop fans and their idols, where idols are expected to prioritize fans over their personal desires (Lee et al., 2024). This expectation stems from an implicit transactional relationship between fan loyalty and the idol's music and fan service, positioning K-pop idols as service providers whose primary role is to satisfy their fans (Choi, 2020). Negative emotions may also result from fans' perceptions of idols as trusted individuals who excel in all aspects and serve as sources of inspiration. In this context, dating is seen as a betrayal by fans' trusted person, their idol.

On the other hand, positive emotions, such as happiness, may also emerge. These positive emotions often arise from feelings of empathy, which, much like in typical social relationships, can develop within parasocial relationships (Derrick et al., 2008). Seeing their idols happy in a healthy relationship may reduce fans' negative emotions toward dating scandals. Some

subjects expressed that they never viewed dating negatively and instead regarded their idols as human beings, whose decisions should be respected.

Negative emotions were more prevalent among South Korean subjects compared to Indonesian subjects. However, South Korean participants also indicated that, after a few days, they would begin to feel happy for their K-pop idol. In contrast, Indonesian subjects were generally more likely to have positive feelings toward their idol's romantic relationship from the outset. Both Indonesian and South Korean subjects expressed that they would initially feel shocked upon hearing the news of their idol's dating.

Both South Korean and Indonesian subjects did not experience a parasocial breakup, as they exhibited unchanged attitudes toward their idols, made no attempts to alter the situation, and accepted their idols' romantic relationships. Instead, all subjects underwent similar cognitive and mental processes in response to their idol's dating scandal, which could potentially influence their behavior. One process that emerged from the participants' responses is acceptance. Acceptance, in this context, means allowing their idols to engage in romantic relationships without attempting to interfere (Hayes et al., 2006), despite the range of emotions experienced. This acceptance was reflected in their continued loyalty, as they supported their idol's work, refrained from becoming fans of others, maintained unchanged feelings toward K-pop, and did nothing to alter the situation. This response may be explained by the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE), where fans attribute their idol's scandal to situational factors rather than personal flaws (Tukachinsky, 2023). Another possible explanation is the recognition of idols as human beings, with fans acknowledging a boundary between themselves and their idols, leading them to believe they cannot influence the idol's personal decisions (Sanderson, 2010 as cited in Tukachinsky, 2023).

In addition, another process called endorsement also derived from participants' answers and was prominently displayed by Indonesian subjects. Endorsement, in this context, refers to the active support of an idol's romantic relationship. This reaction likely stems from empathy and a positive attitude toward the idol's relationship. According to the theory of reasoned action, a positive attitude can influence behavioral intention, which in turn affects actual behavior (Ajzen, 2020).

These findings provide important insights into the dynamics of parasocial relationships between K-Pop idols and their fans, emphasizing the significant influence of cultural background. By employing qualitative exploration, this study addresses key gap in literatures, offering a more subjective and nuanced understanding of parasocial relationships while

capturing cultural nuances from two distinct perspectives. It also sheds light on fans' emotional responses, attitudes, and behaviors toward an idol's dating scandal.

Practically, the results hold valuable implications for various stakeholders in the K-Pop industry, including fans, agencies, collaborating industries, and idols themselves. Notably, the study found that South Korean fans tend to perceive dating scandals more negatively than Indonesian fans. While this may reflect the harsher aspects of South Korea's fan culture, it also offers an opportunity for cross-cultural learning, fostering self-reflection and empathy among fans. Such understanding could help create more humanized interactions between idols and their fans, reducing psychological pressure and cyberbullying, thereby improving idols' well-being.

For K-Pop agencies, these insights can inform more effective public relations (PR) strategies when responding to dating scandals, helping the public better understand and respect idols' personal lives. They also offer guidance for brands and industries collaborating with idols, particularly in navigating public relations when an idol is in a romantic relationship.

Finally, by comparing two cultural contexts, this research promotes mutual understanding between fanbases in South Korea and Indonesia, potentially minimizing cross-country conflicts arising from dating scandals. This, in turn, could strengthen the positive cultural, social, and economic impact of K-Pop in both countries.

While this study has several strengths, including conducting direct interviews with native Indonesian and South Korean participants to provide a holistic, in-depth exploration of culturally relevant views on K-pop dating scandals, it also has several limitations. First, in addition to purposive sampling, convenience sampling was used, as subjects were gathered through the researcher's connections. This resulted in a small sample size of only six participants, limiting the range of perspectives. Future research should involve a larger sample to draw more robust conclusions. Secondly, language barriers were encountered during interviews with South Korean participants conducted in English. As many South Korean participants had limited proficiency in English, and the researcher lacked fluency in Korean, the responses may have been less expressive. Future research should collaborate with South Korean researchers fluent in both Korean and English to minimize miscommunication.

Third, the research team consisted of only one student, meaning all research processes were conducted from a single perspective, which may have introduced bias. To address this, future research should include more researchers, particularly during the

interview analysis phase, to reduce bias and enhance consideration of multiple viewpoints. Fourth, participants were asked to imagine a fictional scenario to elicit their responses, which may not reflect real or neutral reactions. Future studies should consider interviewing fans of idols currently or recently involved in real-life dating scandals to capture more authentic responses. Lastly, the theoretical framework used, [Horton and Wohl \(1956\)](#) parasocial relationship theory and [Cohen's \(2003\)](#) parasocial breakup scale, has limited variability. Future research should explore alternative theoretical frameworks with greater variability to enhance the depth of analysis.

Conclusion

In sum, Indonesian and South Korean K-pop fans experience parasocial relationships and react to dating scandals in distinct ways. South Korean fans tend to exhibit more negative emotions initially, while both groups ultimately show empathy and happiness for their idols' romantic relationships. Negative emotions may stem from a perceived violation of fan expectations and feelings of betrayal, whereas positive emotions often arise from empathy. Behaviorally, both South Korean and Indonesian fans did not experience a parasocial breakup but displayed a process of acceptance, accepting their idols' dating scandal without attempting to change the situation. This acceptance may be explained by the Fundamental attribution error and the tendency to humanize idols. Indonesian fans demonstrated endorsement of their idols' romantic relationships, likely driven by a positive attitude toward the idols involved in romantic relationships. Overall, this research sheds light on the complexity of parasocial relationships in the K-pop industry and the influence of cultural context on fan behavior.

Declaration

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: NMPD; Methodology: NMPD
Data collection and investigation: NMPD; Data analysis: NMPD; Writing—Original Draft Preparation: NMPD; Writing—Review & Editing: NMPD; Supervision: BGS.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Portions of this manuscript were assisted by the use of ChatGPT for language refinement and clarity. The author(s) reviewed, edited, and approved the final

content, and take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript.

Ethical Clearance

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because the research posed no more than minimal risk participants. The topic (K-pop fandom) was non-sensitive, data were pseudonymized, and no personally identifiable information can be traced back to individuals. Thus confidentiality was preserved and the study design aligned with common minimal-risk guidelines.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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