



Parasocial Interaction with K-pop Idols Among Indian Youth

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Abstract: The phenomenon of parasocial interaction (PSI), commonly understood as the illusion of an intimate, face-to-face relationship between a media audience and a media persona, has gained renewed scholarly attention in the context of digital fandoms. This study investigated parasocial interaction with K-pop idols among Indian youth, focusing on three antecedent variables: social media consumption frequency, duration of K-pop fandom, and idol identification. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was used with a purposive sample of $N = 150$ Indian participants aged 18–25 years. PSI was measured using the Parasocial Interaction Scale (Rubin et al., 1985). Hierarchical multiple regression indicated that the full model accounted for 41.3% of the variance in PSI scores ($R^2 = .413$, $F(3, 146) = 34.18$, $p < .001$). Idol identification was the strongest unique predictor ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$), followed by social media consumption frequency ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$) and fandom duration ($\beta = .22$, $p = .004$). Female participants reported significantly higher PSI than male participants ($t(140) = 2.44$, $p = .016$, $d = 0.45$), and a one-way ANOVA revealed a linear rise in PSI across social media usage groups ($F(4, 145) = 12.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .26$). All five hypotheses were supported. These findings extend the cross-cultural generalisability of PSI research to the Indian K-pop fandom and carry implications for media psychology, counselling, and media literacy education.

Keywords: *Parasocial Interaction, K-Pop, Idol Identification, Social Media, Indian Youth, Fandom*

1. Introduction

The expansion of the digital medium in the past couple of decades has changed the relationship that the audience develops with their celebrities and stars. While previously the television audience used to be a passive consumer of the medium, the social media, live streaming, and curated streams now create a feeling of connection and familiarity with the media personality who has never been physically met by the viewer before, something that Horton and Wohl (1956) called 'parasocial interaction' (PSI). In the current entertainment industry, the K-pop industry of South Korea has succeeded greatly in creating such connections by arranging fan meetings, behind-the-scenes access, and personalized platforms like Weverse (Jin, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2020; Oh, 2013).

The Indian fandom for K-pop has been growing significantly from around 2015 due to greater access to social media and YouTube as well as prior existing interest in East Asian pop culture (Kapoor & Bhatt, 2021). The rapid increase has come amidst overall growth in access to mobile internet due to the availability of cheap data plans since 2016 (Bhattacharya, 2019). However, despite the growth, studies regarding PSI have mainly focused on Western and East Asian fandoms, while Indian K-pop fans remain understudied (Panda & Jain, 2022).

There are several theories that explain the formation of parasocial relationships. Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) views parasocial interaction as a conscious choice that fulfils the need for companionship and identity validation. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) sees fans' identification with a community of fans and individual celebrities within the community. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) claims that the difference between one's real self and ideal self leads to wishful identification with an individual celebrity, which is the core principle of the PSI Scale developed by Rubin et al. (1985) and which explains the difference between momentary PSI and parasocial relationships.

From the review of the literature, three important gaps that needed to be covered by the current research were identified: the lack of studies which utilize the complete version of the PSI Scale in the Indian K-pop environment, the absence of hierarchic analysis, and limited research on the impact of gender on the issue. The following hypotheses were formulated:

H₁: Social media consumption frequency will be significantly and positively correlated with PSI scores.

H₂: Duration of K-pop fandom will be significantly and positively correlated with PSI scores.

H₃: Idol identification will be significantly and positively correlated with PSI scores, and will be the strongest predictor in the regression model.

H₄: Female participants will report significantly higher PSI scores than male participants.

H₅: Participants with higher social media usage frequency will report significantly higher PSI scores than those with lower usage.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The target population included Indian young adults between 18-25 years old and self-declared K-pop enthusiast. The sample was obtained using purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling from among K-pop enthusiast groups present on social medial platforms such as Instagram, Twitter/X, Reddit, and WhatsApp. In total, a sample of N= 150 respondents provided complete and valid data (69.3% females, 27.3% males, 3.3% non-binary/third gender; mean age M = 21.3 years, SD = 1.84). According to the a priori power analysis performed in G*Power 3.1, at least n = 119 respondents should have been included in the sample for the detection of the medium effect size ($f^2 = .15$) with 80% power (Green, 1991).

2.2 Measures

The parasocial interaction was assessed through the use of the Parasocial Interaction Scale, which consists of 20 items (Rubin et al., 1985) using a five-point Likert scale rating ($\alpha = .91$ in the present sample). The idol identification was evaluated by means of an eight-item scale based on the scale used in Cohen (2001) and Tukachinsky (2010) ($\alpha = .81$). The frequency of social media consumption was assessed using one item on a five-point ordinal scale, ranging from “<1 hour/day” to “>5 hours/day

2.3 Procedure

The survey was done using Google Forms on the Internet, which was distributed through K-pop fan forums. Each participant was presented with an informed consent sheet before answering questions on demographics and the following three scales: PSI Scale, Idol Identification Scale, and Social Media Frequency/Duration of Fandom ship Scale. The survey was tested on five eligible respondents.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26.0. The descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha were calculated for all the major variables. The Pearson correlation was used to measure bivariate associations between study variables. In order to test for the difference between the PSI based on gender, an independent-samples t-test was carried out (effect size – Cohen's d), while one-way ANOVA and Tukey HSD post hoc tests were applied to investigate the differences between the five social media usage groups in relation to the PSI (effect size - η^2).

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Mean PSI scores ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.71$, on a 1–5 rescaled metric) fell in the moderate-to-high range. Idol identification scores ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.84$) and social media consumption frequency ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.02$, corresponding to roughly 3–4 hours/day) were in the moderate range. The Shapiro-Wilk test for PSI was non-significant ($W = .984$, $p = .082$), indicating an approximately normal distribution. The PSI Scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$) and the idol identification scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .81$), both exceeding recommended thresholds (Nunnally, 1978).

Variable	N	M	SD	α
PSI Score (composite)	150	3.42	0.71	.91
Idol Identification	150	3.18	0.84	.81
Social Media Frequency	150	3.09	1.02	—
Fandom Duration (years)	150	3.82	1.74	—

Note. PSI Score = mean item score on the 20-item PSI Scale (range 1–5). Idol Identification = mean of 8-item scale (range 1–5). Social Media Frequency = ordinal scale (1 = <1 hr/day, 5 = >5 hrs/day). Fandom Duration = years.

3.2 Correlations Among Study Variables

All three predictor variables were significantly and positively correlated with PSI (all $ps < .001$), supporting H1, H2, and H3. Idol identification showed the strongest correlation with PSI ($r = .58$), followed by social media frequency ($r = .51$) and fandom duration ($r = .44$). VIF values ranged from 1.09 to 1.76, indicating no multicollinearity concerns.

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. PSI Score	—			
2. Social Media Frequency	.51**	—		
3. Fandom Duration	.44**	.41**	—	
4. Idol Identification	.58**	.35**	.29**	—

Note. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

3.3 Gender Differences in PSI (H4)

An independent-samples t-test (Levene's test non-significant, $F = 2.14$, $p = .147$) showed that female participants ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.68$, $n = 104$) reported significantly higher PSI than male participants ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.73$, $n = 41$), $t(140) = 2.44$, $p = .016$, $d = 0.45$ (small-to-medium effect). Non-binary participants ($n = 5$) were excluded from this analysis. H4 was supported.

Group	n	M	SD
Female	104	3.51	0.68
Male	41	3.19	0.73

Note. $t(140) = 2.44$, $p = .016$, $d = 0.45$. Non-binary participants ($n = 5$) were excluded from this analysis.

3.4 Social Media Usage Groups and PSI (H5)

A one-way ANOVA (Levene's test non-significant, $F(4, 145) = 1.89$, $p = .114$) revealed a significant effect of social media usage group on PSI, $F(4, 145) = 12.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .26$ (large effect). PSI increased monotonically from $M = 2.71$ (<1 hour/day) to $M = 3.97$ (>5 hours/day). Tukey HSD post hoc tests indicated the <1 hour group differed significantly from the 3–4 hour group ($p = .008$) and the >5 hour group ($p < .001$), and the 1–2 hour group differed significantly from the >5 hour group ($p = .032$). H5 was supported.

3.5 Hierarchical Multiple Regression (H1, H2, H3)

Regression assumptions were verified (normally distributed residuals, homoscedasticity, VIF < 2, all Cook's distance values < 0.10). Block 1 (demographics: gender, age) accounted for 4.9% of PSI variance, $F(2, 147) = 3.78$, $p = .025$. Block 2 (adding social media frequency and fandom duration) produced a significant increment ($\Delta R^2 = .267$, $p < .001$), raising explained variance to 31.6%. Block 3 (adding idol identification) produced a further significant increment ($\Delta R^2 = .097$, $p < .001$), bringing total explained variance to 41.3%, $F(5, 144) = 20.55$, $p < .001$.

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	0.97	0.31	—	3.13	.002
Gender	0.18	0.09	.13	1.90	.059
Age	0.02	0.03	.04	0.58	.564
Social Media Frequency	0.21	0.05	.30	4.04	< .001
Fandom Duration	0.09	0.03	.22	2.94	.004
Idol Identification	0.32	0.06	.38	5.29	< .001

Note. Final model (Block 3): $R^2 = .413$, Adj. $R^2 = .393$, $F(5, 144) = 20.55$, $p < .001$. Gender coded 0 = male, 1 = female. Fandom duration was square-root transformed prior to analysis.

In the final model, idol identification emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$), followed by social media frequency ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$) and fandom duration ($\beta = .22$, $p = .004$). H1, H2, and H3 were all supported. All five hypotheses were supported by the data.

4. Discussion

This research explored the predictors of parasocial interaction among Indian fans of K-pop artists. All five hypotheses proved to be valid. The mean PSI score achieved by our participants ($M = 3.42$) is close to what we can see among fans of other pop music stars (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019), which proves the validity of the concept of PSI among Indian K-pop fans.

The frequency of social media usage was found to be related to PSI ($r = .51$, $\beta = .30$), as has been reported previously in studies that have shown how intense use of social media correlates with parasocial interaction (Chouhan & Singh, 2020; Chung & Cho, 2017; De Vries & Kuhne, 2015; Labrecque, 2014). This finding is supported by the Uses and Gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973) which suggests that more time spent on social media leads to parasocial interaction.

Duration of fandom too had a positive correlation with PSI ($r = .44$, $\beta = .22$), which shows that parasocial interactions tend to increase over time and this is supported by the continuum model of parasocial interactions put forward by Schramm and Hartmann (2008) and by studies on television fandom (Madison & Porter, 2016). This lower beta value indicates that duration of fandom does not explain all aspects of PSI by itself.

Idol identification emerged as the most significant predictor of PSI not only through correlation ($r = .58$), but also through regression ($\beta = .38$), in line with previous research (Cohen, 2001; Tukachinsky, 2010; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). It fits in well with Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), which states that the wish to identify with the idealized idol is what leads

to PSI. Similarly, according to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), adding the idol to one's self-concept is what motivates the maintenance of the parasocial relationship.

The participants who were females had significantly higher PSI than those who were males ($d = 0.45$), which confirmed the findings of Rubin et al. (1985) study as well as its replication in different media environments (Dibble et al., 2016; Madison & Porter, 2016), and was in agreement with socialisation theory (Knapp, 1984), and the traditional marketing of K-pop to women. Importantly, gender was not found to be a significant unique predictor in the regression analysis ($\beta = .13$, $p = .059$), meaning that at least some part of gender difference in PSI could be explained through the gender differences in the other predictors. Additionally, PSI monotonically increased across different social media use groups ($\eta^2 = .26$, a large effect).

Taken together, these findings are consistent with Uses and Gratifications Theory, Social Identity Theory, and self-discrepancy theory, and support the view that K-pop idols can function as aspirational identity templates during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

4.1 Practical Implications

The connection between high levels of K-pop social media consumption, idol identification, and PSI implies for mental health practitioners the need to pay attention to the role that fan activities play in the lives of young patients when faced with difficulties such as time investments, distress after receiving negative news about their idols (“parasocial breakup”; Dibble et al., 2016), or inappropriate social comparisons. The results are highly relevant for media education and policy-making in that they confirm the importance of media literacy initiatives aimed at helping young viewers understand the intentional use of parasocial intimacy by the K-pop industry (Kim & Kim, 2020; Oh, 2020).

4.2 Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of the cross-sectional nature of the study are that no causal relationships can be determined, and the use of purposive and snowball sampling may affect the generalizability of the results beyond active Indian K-pop fans. All measures in the study were based on self-reporting, which means that there is the chance for recall bias. The idol identification scale was not validated independently and was used only as an adaptation from existing literature. Non-binary gender identity was not taken into account in the t-test.

4.3 Conclusion

In the current study, it has been shown that consumption frequency on social media, duration of being a fan, and, more importantly, idol identification each have unique prediction value with respect to parasocial interaction with K-pop stars by Indian adolescents, accounting for 41.3% of variance in PSI. Female participants have shown higher PSI compared to their male counterparts, and there is an increase in PSI as the intensity of social media consumption increases. This study contributes to the body of knowledge in PSI, which has been extensively studied in Western and East Asian settings, but not in the South Asian context.

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