

Examining Parasocial Interactions within BTS ARMY: A Netnographic Approach through NVivo and MAXQDA Software

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Abstract

Parasocial interaction between fans and public figures has become a significant phenomenon in digital culture. This study focuses on the dynamics of parasocial interactions within the BTS ARMY community in virtual spaces. Using a netnography approach, qualitative data from social media were analyzed using NVivo and MAXQDA software. Thematic analysis reveals that parasocial interactions not only establish one-sided emotional connections but also enhance perceptions of intimacy, emotional bonds, and collective connectedness among fans. The findings indicate that social media plays a pivotal role in mediating these relationships, enabling fans to shape both individual and collective identities within online communities. This study contributes theoretically to the field of digital social interaction by highlighting the complexity of parasocial interactions and their implications for social dynamics in the digital media era.

Keywords: BTS ARMY, MAXQDA, NVivo, Parasocial interaction

Introduction

In late July 2024, this article was presented at the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) 13. With approximately 1,500 presenters from various academic disciplines, I focused on the dynamics of K-pop fandom in Indonesia. The evolution of media technology and media consumption behaviors has reshaped social interactions in contemporary society. These behaviors often manifest as parasocial interactions between fans and their idols (Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Ma et al., 2022). Parasocial interaction emerges as an illusion of face-to-face relationships with media performers and becomes more intense when connected through live-streaming platforms (Kim et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2020).

The idol-fan relationship, such as that seen in the BTS ARMY community, illustrates not only parasocial interactions but also the emergence of trans-parasocial interactions (Dibble et al., 2016; Lou, 2021). This article aims to explore how trans-parasocial interactions between idols and fans, primarily facilitated online, have shifted fans from being passive observers to becoming creative and participatory members. The Cypher ARMY Malang fanbase within the BTS fandom serves as a prime example of this transformation and is the focus of this study.

The idol-fan relationship represents a complex interaction characterized by emotional labor, parasocial engagement, and community dynamics. Previous studies highlight that idols engage in emotional labor to foster connections with fans, which in turn influences fan satisfaction and economic behavior within the idol economy (X. Huang, 2023). Moreover, the journey of following idols demonstrates how fan attachment to idols strengthens their emotional connection to specific goals, thereby enhancing loyalty (Z. Zhang, 2023). Participatory culture, exemplified by groups like BTS, cultivates fan loyalty (Bury, 2017). However, the reliance on idols and the challenges of emotional investment underscore the need for further research to fully comprehend these dynamics. The idol-fan relationship is

marked by emotional engagement and community building, both significantly shaped by digital media.

The unique approach BTS employs to connect with their fans through various social media platforms and the content they produce has fostered a form of trans-parasocial interaction (Kim et al., 2022). Recent studies reveal that the use of social media by K-pop idols, including BTS, has transformed parasocial interactions into more interactive and personalized engagements (Lee & Kao, 2021; Q. Zhang & Negus, 2020). These studies highlight that this phenomenon not only strengthens fan loyalty but also blurs the boundaries between real and virtual interactions.

Unlike previous research, which has often focused on the psychological effects of parasocial interactions on individual fans (Giles, 2018; Lou, 2021) or the strategies idols employ to build parasocial relationships (X. Huang, 2023; Z. Zhang, 2023), this study adopts a sociological perspective to explore how parasocial interactions contribute to the social construction of fan communities. Using the social constructionist paradigm in sociology (Burr, 2015; Dreher & Vera, 2016), this research seeks to explain how parasocial interactions between fans and K-pop idols, particularly BTS, inspire more creative and participatory real-world interactions. This approach provides a holistic understanding of the social dynamics within K-pop fan communities.

In several studies on parasocial interaction, researchers predominantly employ quantitative approaches. For instance, Ma et al. (2022) utilized quantitative strategies to examine live broadcasts by K-pop artists. Similarly, other studies have explored relationships on YouTube using quantitative methods (Kurtin et al., 2018) or analyzed parasocial interactions in relation to social media and well-being (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). However, this study adopts a qualitative approach, supported by NVivo and MAXQDA software. A key question addressed is whether the same dataset analyzed using these two software tools produces identical data visualizations. This is one of the primary focuses of this research.

Thus, this study fills a gap in methodological approaches by utilizing social media data to examine the relationship between idols and fans, facilitated through data analysis software. While most prior studies analyze social or parasocial interactions using quantitative methods, parasocial interactions mediated through social media involve complex data. This complexity necessitates the use of specialized software to untangle the patterns and connections in idol-fan relationships. To guide this research, the primary question is: *How do parasocial interactions manifest within the BTS ARMY fandom in digital spaces?* Addressing this question provides insight into the individual and collective dimensions of parasocial interactions as mediated by social media.

Literature Review

Parasocial Interaction

The advancement of social media technology has transformed the nature of parasocial interactions. Cardoso and Castanho (2021) analyzed how platforms like Twitter facilitate parasocial interactions within the K-pop industry. They found that features such as retweets, likes, and comments strengthen the emotional bonds between fans and celebrities. Similarly, McLaren and Jin (2020) demonstrated that the intensity of parasocial interactions positively correlates with fans' identification with celebrities.

The emotional aspect of parasocial interactions has garnered significant attention from researchers. Giles (2002) emphasized the importance of emotional engagement in parasocial interactions, noting that this model of interaction fulfills emotional needs such as the desire for attention and recognition. Dibble et al. (2016) further observed that parasocial interactions can gauge short-term or long-term affinity.

In the context of parasocial interactions within digital spaces, studies have shown that these relationships can be strengthened through the self-disclosure of public figures on digital platforms (Kowert & Daniel, 2021; Lu et al., 2023). On the other hand, the impact of parasocial relationships also extends to individual emotional well-being (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). However, much of the existing research focuses on the one-way relationship between public figures and their audiences without exploring how these connections evolve into collective social interactions within online communities.

Other studies highlight how social media facilitates social interactions that enable the formation of online communities. For instance, they illustrate how fans use social media to merge their identities with broader social interests (Malik & Haidar, 2023; Wellman, 2021; Yang et al., 2024). However, much of this research does not delve into how online communities serve as spaces where fans collectively construct social realities, particularly through parasocial interactions.

Regarding fanbases and social activism, research shows that fanbases function not only as appreciation groups but also as agents of social change. Their activism includes donations, awareness campaigns, and collective actions (Jeffreys & XU, 2017; Tan, 2024). These studies primarily focus on social actions and the values cultivated within fan communities.

Research by Xu et al. (2023) and Yuk-ming (2023) explores the dynamics of parasocial relationships in the context of global idols. Their findings reveal that parasocial relationships are not merely emotional but also shape how fans perceive themselves within social and national contexts.

In the transformation of digital culture, studies on the BTS fandom have highlighted its ability to mobilize global solidarity in support of social issues, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these studies have not explored the cultural mechanisms that organically enable such activism to emerge within online communities (V. G. Huang & Xie, 2021; Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021). On the other hand, virtual spaces can serve as arenas for building solidarity and fostering new collective values (Nardi, 2024; Parc & Kim, 2020). Nevertheless, these studies often lack an in-depth explanation of the processes through which social realities are constructed within fan communities.

After reviewing the relevant literature, several gaps emerge that require further attention to understand the phenomenon of parasocial interactions within fandoms, particularly the BTS ARMY. Most prior research has focused on individual connectivity through parasocial relationships with public figures, but it has not adequately addressed supporting elements such as collective identity, emotional bonding, one-sided relationships, and perceived intimacy.

Research Methods

This study adopts a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002; Pink et al., 2016) to interpret informants' perspectives on parasocial interactions between BTS and their fanbase, ARMY. Using Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) tools, including NVivo and MAXQDA (Evers, 2018; O'neill et al., 2018; Wolski, 2018), the research aims to explore the engagement of the BTS fan community, specifically Cypher Army Malang. These tools facilitate coding, which serves as the foundation for thematic analysis. The coding process began with the organization of data, collected and categorized through social media observation and focus group discussions (FGDs).

Data collection spanned six months, beginning with observations on the Instagram account @cypherarmy_mlg. Features such as highlights, Instagram Stories, and direct messages were analyzed, focusing on posts like BTS Idol Anniversary celebrations, donation events inspired by the anniversary, and Q&A sessions gathering ARMY feedback on events like movie screenings or BTS concerts. The bio section of the @cypherarmy_mlg profile

provided a link to a website that housed an archive of activities, event information, WhatsApp group invitations, and an anonymous forum.

Additionally, the study observed fanbase interactions on Weverse, a South Korean platform where the fanbase maintains an account "[Weverse - BTS Weverse](#)." Interactions within the WhatsApp group "Cypher Army Malang 아포방포 ♥" were also analyzed, focusing on member discussions, shared content, and their connections with fellow ARMY members.

To verify the fanbase's presence, we reached out through their Instagram account, @cypherarmy_mlg. During this engagement, we observed their organization of events such as movie screenings at CGV Cinemas Malang City Point for the Yet To Come (YTC) concert and at Mopic Cinemas Malang for SUGA's D-DAY Tour. Through these interactions, we connected with seven key members of the Cypher Army Malang fanbase.

The Cypher Army Malang community consists of members from diverse backgrounds, spanning various ages, occupations, and BTS member preferences, referred to as "biases." Among the members, RNW (21 years old) and ACM (20 years old) are students, with ACM and NS (30 years old, a housewife) favoring Min Yoongi and Kim Seokjin, respectively. BS (30 years old), MJ (28 years old), and FP (32 years old) are self-employed, with FP also working as a freelance event organizer. Alongside RNW, these members identify as OT7 fans, expressing equal admiration for all BTS members. Lastly, AAMAF (29 years old, a housewife) also identifies as an OT7 fan.

Using the focus group discussion (FGD) method, we conducted interviews with these fanbase members, starting the conversation with questions such as, "*What has been your experience organizing events?*" This evolved into discussions about the relationships formed within the community, their interactions with the idols, and the emotions they have experienced as fans. The FGDs lasted approximately 40–60 minutes.

Through this process, we discovered that the members were humble, eager to learn, and made a conscious effort to avoid conflicts with other fan communities. This finding dispelled our initial perception that their community was insular and reluctant to engage with non-ARMY members. Moreover, the FGDs provided insights into many unique terms fans use to refer to their idols.

We processed several data types using NVivo and MAXQDA software. These included: (1) interview transcripts and (2) NCapture data from the fanbase's Instagram platform and website. Alongside this, we discussed the theory of parasocial interaction as reflected in the interview transcripts and developed codes based on key themes. Once we identified significant themes derived from parasocial interaction theory, we grouped codes with similar meanings into categories. In NVivo and MAXQDA, this process is referred to as the *parent-child* concept.

Using this framework, we identified sub-concepts of parasocial interaction, including collective identity, emotional bonding, one-sided relationships, and perceived intimacy. Both transcripts and NCapture data were coded with relevant themes. This coding process enabled the creation of data visualizations, which were then used to provide insights and analysis (Given, 2008; Hine, 2000; Neuman, 2014).

Limitations

This study has successfully highlighted gaps in previous research, but it does have some limitations. One significant drawback is that it focuses on a single fanbase with its own unique traits. To make the analysis and findings more widely applicable, further exploration of similar studies is needed. As a result, we have not been able to capture comparable or contrasting perspectives from the evolution of fanbase communities in different locations. Ultimately, the distinctive identity of this fanbase reflects the dynamic nature of fandom.

Results and Discussion

The Background of Cypher Army Malang

In early 2017, a group of dedicated BTS fans in Malang City established Cypher Army Malang as a platform to express their enthusiasm for the group. Since BTS debuted in 2013, their admiration and interest in the group had grown steadily, eventually reaching a point where they felt the need to form a closer-knit community.

Initially, interactions among fans were limited to online platforms, primarily Twitter, which at the time served as the central hub for BTS-related information. Although communication remained largely individual, many fans began to realize that they were based in Malang and expressed interest in fostering closer connections. Over time, these interactions became more frequent, prompting the fans to form a group on Line, a messaging platform popular among BTS fans at the time. The Line group served as a virtual space where fans could share information, engage in discussions, and strengthen their social bonds.

As their interactions grew in intensity, the Army members sought a name that would represent their unity and shared spirit. After extensive discussions, they agreed on the name "Cypher Army Malang." This name held deep significance for the fans, encapsulating their identity as BTS fans (known as Army) and reflecting their admiration for the group. "Cypher" was chosen as a nod to a key element of BTS's music and culture—rap and artistry—while "Malang" signified their city or regional origin.

Data Visualization Using NVivo

After collecting and organizing the data, we conducted the coding process to identify key parts of the dataset. This process involved assigning codes to interview excerpts, concepts derived from field notes, and ideas gathered from secondary sources. Using the *parent-child* principle, primary themes were categorized as "parent nodes," while sub-themes or specific insights from field notes were placed as "child" and "grandchild nodes."

Additionally, files containing data on parasocial interactions—gathered through observations, interviews, NCapture, and file classifications imported from Mendeley in (.ris) format—were processed. By examining these files and file classifications, relevant codes and nodes were determined. The input data included:

1. Documentation: Photos and images capturing fanbase activities with Army members, as well as Q&A sessions through Instagram's Insta Story feature.
2. Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with fanbase admins after BTS movie screenings at local cinemas.
3. Literature Review: Focused on parasocial interactions, particularly within K-pop fandoms.
4. NCapture and Social Media: Data from platforms like the fanbase's website (<https://cypherarmymalang.carrd.co/>) and Instagram profile (https://www.instagram.com/cypherarmy_mlg/).

A unique aspect of this research was the meticulous data archiving by the Cypher Army Malang fanbase admins. For every event, they maintained backups of their data using Instagram Highlights, the website, and Google Drive. This careful data management allowed us to efficiently assign codes to nodes, ultimately resulting in several key concepts, as summarized in the following table.

Table 1: Nodes of Parasocial Interaction

Parent	Children	Grandchildren
Parasocial Interaction	1. Collective Identity	a. Group Cohesion b. Shared Fandom Culture c. Social Solidarity d. Transnational Networks
	2. Emotional Bonding	a. Affective Responses b. Attachment to Media Figures c. Identity Construction
	3. One-sided Relationships	a. Fan-Idol Dynamics b. Illusory Companionship c. Imagined Relationships
	4. Perceived Intimacy	a. Celebrity Familiarity b. Psychological Closeness c. Symbolic Interactionism

Source: Processed codes and nodes for NVivo analysis.

This framework is based on the principles of thematic taxonomy, which allows for mapping the conceptual relationships between primary themes (parent nodes) and subthemes (children and grandchildren nodes). Parasocial interaction was selected as the central theme, as it provides the conceptual foundation for analyzing the fan-idol relationship. This theme encompasses various dimensions that shape the emotional, psychological, and social engagement between individuals and media figures.

The first element, Collective Identity, is identified as a key dimension because parasocial relationships often evolve into collective experiences through fandom or fan communities. Its sub-concepts include:

1. **Group Cohesion:** Refers to the level of unity within the fan community, highlighting the extent to which individuals feel connected to fellow members.
2. **Shared Fandom Culture:** Reflects the shared practices, norms, and values that develop within a fandom group.
3. **Social Solidarity:** Represents the emotional and social solidarity among community members, often strengthened by parasocial relationships.
4. **Transnational Networks:** Emphasizes the global nature of modern fandoms, where fans from diverse countries form cross-cultural networks.

The second element, Emotional Bonding, was chosen because parasocial relationships are not merely cognitive but also involve emotional attachment. Emotional bonding lies at the heart of the parasocial experience, enhancing the sense of closeness between fans and idols. The aspects supporting emotional bonding include:

1. **Affective Responses:** Denotes fans' emotional reactions to idols, including admiration, empathy, or love.
2. **Attachment to Media Figures:** Refers to a personal attachment to media figures, which can influence individual behavior and identity.
3. **Identity Construction:** Highlights how fans use parasocial relationships to build or reinforce their sense of self.

The third element, One-Sided Relationships, represents the asymmetric nature of parasocial interactions, where fans engage emotionally while idols do not reciprocate directly. This theme underscores the unique characteristics of such interactions, with supporting aspects that include:

1. **Fan-Idol Dynamics:** Refers to how fans perceive and interpret their relationship with the idol.

2. Illusory Companionship: Highlights the sense of friendship fans feel, despite the absence of a real relationship with the idol.
3. Imagined Relationships: Describes the mental constructs fans create about the relationship they believe exists with the idol.

The fourth element, Perceived Intimacy, illustrates how fans feel a close emotional bond with their idols. This perceived connection highlights key aspects, such as:

1. Celebrity Familiarity: Refers to the sense of familiarity fans develop with idols due to extensive media exposure.
2. Psychological Closeness: Denotes the psychological proximity fans feel toward their idols.
3. Symbolic Interactionism: Explains how fans use symbols and meanings associated with idols to establish an emotional connection.

The structured nodes, organized following the *parent-children* principles after coding, display relevant *files* and *references*. The files represent the number of documents linked to a particular node, while *references* indicate the occurrences of relevant content across multiple documents within the *files*. The resulting visualization appears as follows:

Nodes				
Name	Files	References	Created On	
Parasocial Interaction		9	160	29/08/2024 9:09
One-sided Relationships		8	44	29/08/2024 9:11
Imagined Relationships		5	9	29/08/2024 9:14
Illusory Companionship		5	10	29/08/2024 9:16
Fan-Idol Dynamics		7	12	29/08/2024 9:35
Perceived Intimacy		8	45	29/08/2024 9:13
Psychological Closeness		6	12	29/08/2024 9:16
Celebrity Familiarity		8	14	29/08/2024 9:16
Symbolic Interactionism		3	5	29/08/2024 9:35
Emotional Bonding		8	32	29/08/2024 9:13
Attachment to Media Figures		6	11	29/08/2024 9:17
Affective Responses		4	7	29/08/2024 9:17
Identity Construction		3	4	29/08/2024 9:36
Collective Identity		6	27	29/08/2024 9:37
Shared Fandom Culture		5	8	29/08/2024 9:37
Social Solidarity		2	2	29/08/2024 9:38
Group Cohesion		4	8	29/08/2024 9:38
Transnational Networks		2	2	29/08/2024 9:39

Fig 1. Parasocial Interaction Nodes in NVivo

Source: Codes on Nodes in NVivo

The hierarchical structure of concepts derived from field data analysis using NVivo reveals the multidimensional nature of parasocial interactions in fan-idol relationships. The findings highlight four key dimensions: One-Sided Relationships, Perceived Intimacy, Emotional Bonding, and Collective Identity, each comprising specific, interrelated subcategories. These dimensions demonstrate that fan engagement is not only individual, as seen in the construction of imagined relationships and psychological closeness, but also has broader social implications through the formation of communities and transnational networks.

By integrating theoretical frameworks with empirical findings, this study contributes significantly to understanding the role of digital technology in reshaping social relationships in the era of social media dependency, particularly within the context of the global BTS ARMY fandom culture. Through a systematic approach, the research underscores that parasocial

interactions are not merely individual psychological phenomena but also dynamic social processes.

Data Visualization with MAXQDA

Using MAXQDA software, the research data was consolidated into document files. These files included in-depth interviews with the Cypher Army Malang fanbase administrators, literature reviews, documentation in the form of photos and images of fanbase activities with fellow ARMY members, and interactions on Instagram and WhatsApp groups. Each data set was categorized and coded according to themes that emerged during the research.

The coding process involved thoroughly reading each document and assigning labels or codes to relevant text sections. These codes were then grouped into broader categories to identify patterns and key themes. The structured code system is presented in the following table:

Table 2. Code System in MAXQDA

Code System
People
Parents
Siblings
Grandparents
Friends
Partner
Parasocial Interaction
One-sided Relationships
Perceived Intimacy
Emotional Bonding
Collective Identity
FOCUS GROUP - Thematic codes
Fan-Idol Dynamics
Celebrity Familiarity
Identity Construction
Social Solidarity
Instagram - Coded Respond
Intensity Respond
0 replies
1 replies
2 replies
3 replies
4 replies
5 replies
Reply to comment
Whatsapp Group
Inter -closeness
life
satisfaction
plan
objectives
motivation
goals

Source: Code system data processing with MAXQDA (1)

Through interview documents collected from informants and analyzed using MAXQDA software, the following data trends were identified:

Table 3. Coded Segments from Interview Documents Using MAXQDA

Color	Document Group	Document name	Code	Beginning	End	Coverage %
●	Interviews	Renata	Parasocial Interaction\One-sided Relationships	4	4	7,31
●	Interviews	Renata	Parasocial Interaction\Perceived Intimacy	6	6	2,10
●	Interviews	Renata	Parasocial Interaction\Emotional Bonding	8	8	4,58
●	Interviews	Renata	Parasocial Interaction\Collective Identity	10	10	10,05
●	Interviews	Baby	Parasocial Interaction\One-sided Relationships	4	4	3,00
●	Interviews	Baby	Parasocial Interaction\Perceived Intimacy	6	6	2,35
●	Interviews	Baby	Parasocial Interaction\Emotional Bonding	8	8	2,86
●	Interviews	Baby	Parasocial Interaction\Collective Identity	10	10	2,54
●	Interviews	Fitria	Parasocial Interaction\One-sided Relationships	4	4	11,82
●	Interviews	Fitria	Parasocial Interaction\Perceived Intimacy	6	6	7,88
●	Interviews	Fitria	Parasocial Interaction\Emotional Bonding	8	8	10,06
●	Interviews	Fitria	Parasocial Interaction\Collective Identity	10	10	10,58
●	Interviews	Fitria	Parasocial Interaction\Perceived Intimacy	10	10	4,61
●	Interviews	Novelia	Parasocial Interaction\One-sided Relationships	4	4	10,51
●	Interviews	Novelia	Parasocial Interaction\Perceived Intimacy	6	6	5,43
●	Interviews	Novelia	Parasocial Interaction\Emotional Bonding	8	8	3,79
●	Interviews	Novelia	Parasocial Interaction\Collective Identity	10	10	3,34
●	Interviews	Azella	Parasocial Interaction\One-sided Relationships	4	4	10,38
●	Interviews	Azella	Parasocial Interaction\Perceived Intimacy	6	6	2,30
●	Interviews	Azella	Parasocial Interaction\Emotional Bonding	8	8	5,31
●	Interviews	Azella	Parasocial Interaction\Collective Identity	10	10	3,34
●	Interviews	Azella	Parasocial Interaction\Overall satisfaction	24	24	1,89
●	Interviews	Baby	FOCUS GROUP - Thematic codes\Fan-Idol Dynamics	8	8	0,49
●	Interviews	Baby	FOCUS GROUP - Thematic codes\Celebrity Familiarity	8	8	0,49
●	Interviews	Baby	FOCUS GROUP - Thematic codes\Identity Construction	8	8	0,49
●	Interviews	Baby	FOCUS GROUP - Thematic codes\Social Solidarity	8	8	0,49
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction	2	2	1,93
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction\Perceived Intimacy	4	4	2,48
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction\Emotional Bonding	4	4	2,48
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction	4	4	2,48
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction\Relationships	6	6	1,67
●	Interviews	Mifta	FOCUS GROUP - Thematic codes\Fan-Idol Dynamics	8	8	2,05
●	Interviews	Mifta	FOCUS GROUP - Thematic codes\Celebrity Familiarity	8	8	2,05

●	Interviews	Mifta	FOCUS GROUP - Thematic codes\Identity Construction	8	8	2,05
●	Interviews	Mifta	FOCUS GROUP - Thematic codes\Social Solidarity	8	8	2,05
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction\One-sided Relationships	10	10	2,15
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction\Emotional Bonding	10	10	2,15
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction\One-sided Relationships	12	12	2,49
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction\Emotional Bonding	12	12	2,49
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction\One-sided Relationships	16	16	2,79
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction	16	16	2,79
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction\Perceived Intimacy	16	16	2,79
●	Interviews	Mifta	Parasocial Interaction\Collective Identity	16	16	2,79

Source: Coded Segments from Interview Documents Using MAXQDA

During discussions with members of the Cypher Army Malang fanbase, I observed the cultivation of parasocial interactions nurtured by fans with the seven members of BTS as their idols. Among the interviews coded, a statement from MF, a member of the Cypher Army Malang (CAM), during a focus group discussion stood out:

"We, as fans, feel admiration for BTS—seven men who bring inspiration into our lives. Every time they share content or do live streams, it feels as if we are communicating directly with them, even though we are physically far apart. This connection gives us a sense of togetherness and closeness that is difficult to put into words. Over time, our love has expanded beyond a single idol to all seven of them. They serve as our encouragement, motivation, and source of inspiration."

When I asked, "Among the seven BTS members, is there one you idolize the most?" they collectively responded:

"The more we get to know them, the more all seven become captivating. Why settle for one when we can admire all seven?"

It's not without reason that fans express admiration for their idols. As highlighted by FP and NS, *"We admire them for their attitude and personality, both on and off stage. They never judge other idols."*

BS, another active member of the fanbase, chimed in, expressing that BTS is more than just idols—they are a source of motivation in her life:

"For everyone, it might be different. Some see them as role models, others as guides. For me, they're a source of motivation to better ourselves, strive for self-improvement, and do greater things."

One notable aspect is the anticipation surrounding an idol's live-streaming sessions. When discussing these activities, RNW and AAMAF emphasized:

"For example, when a BTS idol like Jungkook goes live on social media, direct interactions with fans occur through the comment section. Although it's impossible for the BTS idol to read every comment due to the sheer number of fans, this highlights the immense enthusiasm of ARMY. Many live streams are often held at unconventional hours, such as early in the morning, to accommodate different international time zones."

The motivation and enthusiasm among fans are closely tied to BTS's consistent acknowledgment of ARMY as their fanbase in every activity. This practice fosters and strengthens the emotional bond between BTS and their fans, ARMY.

Parasocial interaction is deeply connected to the dynamics of the fan-idol relationship. Data reveals that higher levels of "Celebrity Familiarity" lead to stronger "One-sided Relationships." This may stem from fans' perception that they "know" their idols through the media content they consume. "Perceived Intimacy" frequently aligns with "Fan-Idol Dynamics," indicating that fans often feel close to their idols despite the absence of direct interaction.

"Identity Construction" often coexists with "Collective Identity," highlighting that fans shape their identities within the collective identity of the fandom. "Social Solidarity" further reinforces these connections, creating a sense of unity among fans through shared interests.

There is a positive correlation between "Intensity of Response" on Instagram and the level of "Emotional Bonding." As indicated by the number of replies, fans who interact more frequently on social media tend to exhibit stronger emotional attachments to their idols.

The data also indicates that posts receiving "4 replies" or "5 replies" are often associated with more intense expressions of emotion. The following table describes the "codes system" and "frequency":

Table 2. Code System and Frequency in MAXQDA

Code System	Frequency
Code System	471
People	0
Parents	14
Siblings	8
Grandparents	6
Friends	24
Partner	10
Parasocial Interaction	3
One-sided Relationships	11
Perceived Intimacy	11
Emotional Bonding	11
Collective Identity	8
FOCUS GROUP - Thematic codes	1
Fan-Idol Dynamics	2
Celebrity Familiarity	2
Identity Construction	2
Social Solidarity	2
Instagram - Coded Respond	0
Intensity Respond	0
0 replies	87
1 replies	13
2 replies	3
3 replies	2
4 replies	3
5 replies	1
Reply to comment	42
Whatsapp Group	0
Inter-closeness	0
life	6
satisfaction	4
plan	4
objectives	4
motivation	4
goals	4

Source: Data processing of code system and frequency with MAXQDA (2)

There is an intriguing relationship between "Parasocial Interaction," "Life Satisfaction," and "Motivation." Fans who report strong parasocial interactions tend to exhibit higher levels of life satisfaction and stronger motivation to achieve personal goals. Communication within "WhatsApp Groups" appears positively correlated with "Inter-Closeness" among fanbase members. This suggests that group communication platforms facilitate the formation of stronger bonds of friendship among fans.

Data indicates that members who are active in WhatsApp groups often report a higher sense of closeness with fellow fans, frequently describing them as "friends" rather than mere acquaintances. Interestingly, there is a connection between the codes "Parents," "Siblings," and "Grandparents" and the intensity of engagement in "Fan-Idol Dynamics."

By examining the dynamics of parasocial idol-fan relationships, the data collected through the code system reveals frequency values. These values are derived from input data, including interviews, focus groups, Instagram posts, and WhatsApp group discussions, into the code system. Below are the components of each code system along with their respective frequency values.

This highlights that parasocial interactions within the BTS ARMY fanbase encompass various aspects of fans' lives. From identity construction to social dynamics, from social media engagement to personal motivation, parasocial interactions play a central role in shaping fans' experiences and well-being. These findings emphasize that fanbases are not merely sources of entertainment but also significant social spaces where identities, relationships, and personal meanings are formed and negotiated.

A Comparison of NVivo and MAXQDA Software

The use of NVivo and MAXQDA serves similar functions, but their approaches to creating codes and visualizing data exhibit notable differences. This can be observed in the data and visualizations generated through their coding processes. In NVivo 12, data visualization is presented through cluster analysis in the form of a circle graph. This involves selecting data using nodes, clustering by coding similarity, and applying Jaccard's coefficient as the similarity metric.

On the other hand, MAXQDA utilizes a codes map for data visualization, focusing on parasocial interaction codes (e.g., one-sided relationships, perceived intimacy, emotional bonding, and collective identity). It also incorporates thematic codes from focus groups (e.g., fan-idol dynamics, celebrity familiarity, identity construction, and social solidarity) and WhatsApp group data (e.g., satisfaction, objectives, and motivation). Relationships between codes are analyzed based on their proximity within the same document, with a maximum distance threshold of 3.

Each interconnected code reveals the following outcomes:

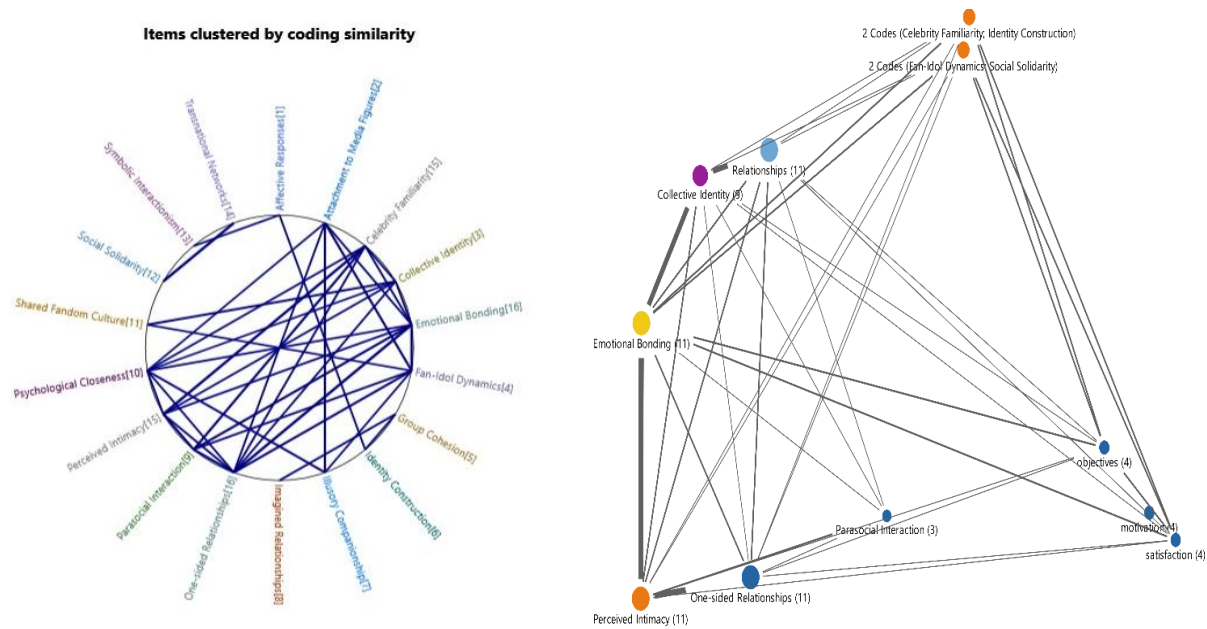


Figure 2: Data Visualization with Nvivo (left) and MAXQDA (right)

Source: Data visualization by the researcher

How Are the Codes Interconnected?

Qualitative data analysis based on coding inputs from NVivo and MAXQDA reveals four thematic clusters characterizing the patterns of parasocial interactions in fan-idol relationships.

One-sided relationships emerge as a significant theme with substantial coding density (44 references in NVivo), encompassing subthemes such as imagined relationships and illusory companionship. This highlights the predominantly one-way nature of fan-idol interactions, despite the emotional investment made by fans.

Perceived Intimacy demonstrates a strong presence in both coding systems (45 references in NVivo, 11 frequencies in MAXQDA), characterized by psychological closeness and celebrity familiarity. This indicates that fans develop a profound sense of closeness with idols, facilitated through digital platforms.

Emotional Bonding surfaces as a core construct (32 references in NVivo, 11 frequencies in MAXQDA), embodied through attachment to media figures and affective responses. The consistency across both coding systems underscores the significance of emotional connections in parasocial relationships.

Collective Identity emerges as a complex theme (27 references in NVivo, 11 frequencies in MAXQDA), including shared fandom culture and social solidarity. This demonstrates that parasocial interactions extend beyond individual fan-idol relationships to foster broader community structures.

Cross-validation between the NVivo and MAXQDA coding systems strengthens the reliability of these thematic patterns. The temporal sequence of the coding process (dated August 29, 2024) reflects systematic and concurrent coding efforts, enhancing the methodological rigor of the analysis.

This thematic structure provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of parasocial interactions in fan-idol relationships, particularly highlighting the interplay between individual psychological processes and collective social dynamics.

The Dynamics of Parasocial Interactions

A thematic analysis of the data reveals several key insights into the dynamics of parasocial interactions within fan-idol relationships. These findings emphasize the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon, encompassing individual psychological aspects and collective social dynamics.

First, one-sided relationships emerge as a dominant theme, with a total of 44 references. This indicates that while fan-idol relationships are inherently asymmetrical, fans can establish deep emotional engagement. This pattern is reflected through the construction of imagined relationships and illusory companionships, which are defining characteristics of parasocial relationships. These findings align with Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial relationships, which posits that media creates an illusion of personal closeness that feels tangible to fans.

Second, perceived intimacy stands out with 45 references, highlighting consistent patterns in fan-idol relationships. This theme is characterized by feelings of psychological closeness and celebrity familiarity, cultivated through intensive media exposure. Digital platforms, particularly social media, play a crucial role in facilitating these emotional connections, which feel real despite the absence of direct interaction (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2018). These findings underscore the importance of media exposure and sustained fan engagement in fostering profound symbolic closeness.

Third, emotional bonding emerged as one of the primary themes, with a total of 32 references. This bond manifests through a strong attachment to media figures and affective responses. Fans not only exhibit intense emotional attachment but also leverage these parasocial relationships as a means of shaping their personal identities. This underscores the significant psychological and social influence that idol figures have on their fans.

Fourth, collective identity surfaced as a complex theme, with 27 references. This theme encompasses elements of shared fandom culture, social solidarity, and group cohesion. The findings highlight that parasocial relationships impact not only individuals but also contribute to forming broader community structures. Transnational networks forged through fandom illustrate how parasocial relationships can strengthen global solidarity and foster inclusive transnational communities (Jaworowicz-Zimny, 2023; McLaren & Jin, 2020).

Moreover, cross-platform analysis using NVivo and MAXQDA confirms the consistency of these findings. The similar coding frequencies across key themes indicate high data validity, while the temporal patterns in the coding process (dated 08/29/2024) suggest a systematic and structured approach to analysis.

In summary, this study's findings indicate that parasocial interactions within fan-idol relationships represent a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing individual psychological aspects, collective social dynamics, and the influence of digital media. This research makes a significant contribution to understanding how digital technologies and social media transform the ways individuals and communities engage with public figures in contemporary times. These findings also pave the way for further studies on the impact of parasocial relationships on social solidarity and the formation of collective identity within the context of digital culture.

Conclusion

Fan interactions with idols can lead to the formation of global fandom communities (fan – fanbase – fandom). As seen with our informants, through intensive interaction via social media, they have formed communities to stay connected with their idols, even virtually. Our findings reveal that parasocial interaction between fans and idols is a complex phenomenon and a significant marker for the evolution of social interactions. This demonstrates how digital media and social media platforms facilitate the creation of emotional bonds between public

figures and their fans. The activities they engage in within fanbase communities highlight the collective power of fan-idol relationships.

This phenomenon can be further explored within the context of identity construction and how individuals define themselves about public figures or specific groups. Therefore, we recommend that interactions between idols and fans consider factors such as online comments, differing opinions between idols, fans projecting idealized views, or fans with obsessive admiration for idols. However, it appears that expressions connecting idols and fans may transcend such boundaries. We observed that recurring expressions of fan-idol connections may foster trust and commitment to maintaining the relationship.

We were also impressed by the activities of fans within their communities. Despite having never met their idols in person, the actions taken by idols toward their fans can motivate corresponding fan behaviors. This reaches a point where fans begin to adopt terms like “bias” to refer to and view their idols as role models.

Implications

The research presented as a form of parasocial interaction through social media not only builds emotional bonds between fans and idols but also strengthens collective identity within the global fandom community. Social media facilitates solidarity and collective participation, even without direct interaction, while idols are often viewed as role models through community-driven narratives. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of strategically managing idol-fan relationships to promote positive outcomes, while also highlighting the need for awareness regarding the potential psychosocial impact of intense emotional involvement in parasocial relationships.

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