

Difference of Parasocial Relationships Between China and Korea under Various Social and Cultural Backgrounds

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Abstract: The entertainment industry has reached a high level of maturity worldwide, with each country boasting its unique system and approach. Consequently, the nature of parasocial relationships between celebrities and fans varies significantly due to diverse cultural and social backgrounds. Notably, in Asia, both China and Korea experienced a similar period of development in the entertainment industry, yet they have diverged into distinct paths. Understanding the intricacies of parasocial relationships within these cultural and social contexts is significant as it provides valuable insights into the dynamics of celebrity-fan interactions. This paper aims to explore and compare the dynamics of parasocial relationships in the Chinese and Korean entertainment industries, with a particular focus on the influence of cultural and societal factors. To identify and examine the key factors that shape the behaviors in parasocial relationships, this paper compares in two influential factors: companionship and social gratification. There is a more thorough system of the entertainment industry, and the Korean government supports the development of entertainment rather than control a lot in China. It is within the realm of these factors that the behaviors of individuals engaged in parasocial relationships, both on the side of celebrities and fans, are significantly impacted. By delving into the disparities between Chinese and Korean entertainment industries, this paper aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the factors that shape parasocial relationships and shed light on the cultural nuances that influence these phenomena.

Keywords: parasocial relationship, Asian entertainment industry, companionship, social gratification

1. Introduction

The concept of parasocial relationship originated from the relationship between the public and some political characters, gods and spirits because the absence of a developed internet from the 1950s to 1960s. However, with the advent of radio, television, and film, parasocial relationships began to emerge between famous actors, singers, and their audiences. Audiences of TV shows are captivated by the characters in the show and became curious about their other works. In the beginning, most of the audiences attracted by the external beauty of those public characters such as Marilyn Monroe.

The Korean entertainment industry witnessed a rapid rise after the 1990s, particularly after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. To revive the economy, Korea turned to the entertainment industry, including pop music and TV series. Since 1997, Korea has placed a stronger emphasis on the star-

making industry, leading to the rise of companies like SM Entertainment and YG Entertainment. All of those companies dispatch some star scouts out of the street in Korea and find out some teenagers or adults who had outstanding looks, talent, or potential. After both companies and the person got in contact, they changed from an ordinary person to a trainee of the company. The duration of the training period varied depending on individual preferences and the requirements of the industry. Through rigorous training, the aspiring stars would refine their skills in singing, dancing, acting, and overall stage presence. This arduous process aimed to mold them into well-rounded performers ready to take the stage. Moreover, these entertainment companies continuously actively seeking trainees from different parts of the world. As a result, generations of talented teams, known as “idol groups,” emerged, captivating not only domestic audiences but also amassing a global fan base.

On the other hand, the Chinese entertainment industry developed earlier in the 1980s, after the implementation of reform and open policies. This era marked a significant departure from the state-controlled model of the past, as artists from mainland China and Hong Kong region gained recognition for their talent and contributions. Singers and actors like Guorong Zhang and Runfa Zhou became famous, this group of artists lead the development of traditional entertainment industry outside of film in China. As more and more famous artists emerged, some influential entertainment companies like Huayi Brothers Media Group grew up, which played a crucial role in fostering the growth and development of Chinese talent. In the 2000s, the internet started to develop, and some talent shows appeared. Thus, those shows produced lots of singers and idols, giving rise to a new generation of stars.

In the recent era of the internet and big data, people get more and more information from social media and the internet rather than physical books and newspapers. It means that the transportation speed of information and data is faster, so people have more time to spend in their leisure time paying attention to others' life. This is one of the reasons for the development of the entertainment industry. In addition, public characters such as those singers and idols usually have a higher income and social status, so it motivates some people to work hard and try to become a star. The parasocial relationship between the public characters and fans depends on money and social circumstance. In general, fans who spend more money can get more attention and touch with their idols. Social circumstance means that under the different situation of China and Korea, the difficulties of fans interacting is different. This paper will mainly discuss and focus on the Chinese and Korean entertainment industries and their parasocial relationship in modern times.

2. China

2.1. The Most Popular Way in Parasocial Relationships: Online Social Media

In Chinese recent society, many individuals find themselves lacking companionship and emotional support from their families and teachers. Many parents and educators often prioritize academic performance and ignore the importance of companionship and psychological health. People cannot be expected to study or work relentlessly without respite. Everyone needs time to relax and unwind, which leads them to seek solace in the lives of others. Watching TV shows and following beloved idols becomes a way for people to get accompanied and reduce loneliness. The most popular way in China parasocial relationships is through online social media where fans seek insights into their idols' daily lives [1]. For example, on platforms like Weibo, millions of fans follow one single star, but only a small fraction of fans have opportunities to meet with celebrities in some offline activities. Ticket scalping is rampant in China, making it challenging for many people to get tickets because of scalpers. For instance, a concert ticket for VIP is about 980, but some ticket scalpers raise its price to about 8000. Therefore, most people who cannot get accompanied by the people around them and lack social connections prefer to support their idols for accompany and belong online to compensate for what

they lack offline [2].

2.2. Reasons That Make the Distance

In the realm of Chinese politics and culture, the entertainment industry operates under the control of associations such as the National Radio and Television Administration and the China Television Actor Association. Depending on governmental regulations, the Chinese entertainment industry lacks the freedom experienced by its counterparts in other countries and regions [3]. Described in the official website of National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA): first, all television programs need to support the socialism and lead the public to positively developmental direction; second, it is not allow violence such as harsh battles and criminal activities (the definition of violence in Chinese NRTA is narrower than others); third, it is not allow “young-age” romantic relationship shown in films and television programs in China; final, it is not allow any “nationalism” and “religionist policy” [3]. Additionally, public figures in China often enjoy high incomes, resulting in an elevated status and admiration from the public. Both of these two reasons make the distance between public characters and their fans far, despite the average strength of the parasocial relationship in China is strong.

While many celebrities are aware that their fans find it difficult to meet them in person, they seldom engage in interactions with their fans online. Chinese celebrities and idols barely reply to their fans’ comments and interact with their fans on social media. They may receive numerous comments and likes from their fans, but fail to reciprocate the interaction, even with fan clubs. When some celebrities record some TV shows or interviews, they sometimes talk a little to reply to some comments from lucky fans. Thus, almost all celebrities keep a parasocial relationship with their fans which mainly maintain by their fans; celebrities’ responsibility in this relationship, just needs to show out in some shows and public places.

Moreover, some celebrities develop an air of arrogance due to their wealth and elevated social status. Society as a whole tends to place celebrities on a pedestal, creating a dynamic where celebrities distance themselves from the general public. Consequently, many celebrities always arrange a lot of bodyguards to “protect” them and there is no interaction between them and their fans. The parasocial relationship between these celebrities and their fans is not very steady because the relationship only holds together online or at a far distance.

2.3. A Growing Trend

Under the situation of a far distance of most Chinese their family and most people prefer to follow beloved idols, so people spend tons of time on their idols. However, excessive devotion to idols can lead to a diminished focus on one’s own reality. This diversion of time and attention can adversely impact individuals’ daily lives, potentially posing dangers as fans may isolate themselves from real-world experiences, disrupting their rest and routines. It also can affect their interpersonal skills because they speak less with people around them which is replaced by their routine of chasing their idols [4].

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of individuals opting to avoid real-life interactions and seeking alternative forms of connection. Some people do not satisfy with traditional parasocial relationships with celebrities and feel disliked to some man in real life. As a result, a significant number of women have turned to female-oriented dating games like Love and Producer. These kinds of games are popular and satisfied the demand of many females because people naturally gravitate towards those who share similar qualities and traits. Also, the male characters in the game fit most women’s mating criteria which satisfied the female players and allowing players to immerse themselves in a virtual world that fulfills their desires. Consequently, this is also a popular kind of parasocial relationship in China raises up in recent years [5].

3. Korea

3.1. Situation

In Korean society, the government has been a staunch supporter of the entertainment industry since 1997, granting both celebrities and entertainment companies large freedom to engage in various beneficial activities. Thus, the Korean government allocates substantial funds to the entertainment industry every year and actively promotes various TV shows and artists. As a result, the Korean entertainment industry has experienced tremendous growth, with a huge revenue which reach approximately 0.6 billion dollars in 2022. However, this financial success comes at a cost, as some entertainment companies exert immense pressure on their artists, leading to incidents where performers faint during concerts or fan meetings. Some entertainment companies arrange back-to-back activities schedule for celebrities, leaving them with little time to rest as they travel extensively across multiple countries.

Furthermore, due to the government's support and the well-organized management of prominent entertainment companies such as SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment, the overall entertainment industry in Korea operates in a systematic manner. Talent scouts actively search outstanding people and establish contact, transforming them into new trainees who undergo rigorous training programs. At the same time, entertainment companies hold auditions in different countries, and those who succeed in 1st place or perform exceptionally well will also join into training programs. Given the deeply ingrained concept of social hierarchy in Korean society and the allure of high income and social status associated with celebrities and idols, millions of teenagers aspire to become an idol, recognizing that it can elevate their social standing and offer a more prosperous life. However, the harsh truth reveals that only a small fraction of trainees ultimately makes it to the stage and become part of a new team. The other fact is that only a few teams achieve popularity each year, so almost all idols and celebrities cherish their job and fans.

3.2. Reason to the Strong Parasocial Relationship

The parasocial relationship in Korea is very strong and approachable, primarily due to this social circumstance surrounding them. Fans have opportunities to purchase albums of their beloved celebrities and attend offline activities. Many celebrities will have a signing and interaction with fans meeting during their promotional period for a new song or TV series. These fan meetings provide orderly access for fans to obtain autographs, take photos, and exchange a few words with their idols on stage. Tickets for offline music festivals or fan meeting activities are generally affordable, usually ranging between about 100 yuan and a few hundred yuan. For highly popular teams, VIP concert tickets may cost approximately 1-2 thousand yuan, but they often come with additional perks such as opportunities to watch rehearsal, special cards and peripheral gifts. Furthermore, there is a subscription-based application called Bubble (Lysn) where celebrities can share glimpses of their daily lives. This is a subscription-based app, so fans need to subscribe and pay for it to interact with their beloved celebrities. There is a group chat for a single celebrity or a single team with their fans; celebrities can see all the comments and communication from fans, but fans only can see the comments and replies from other fans that their beloved idol(s) say. Hence, even if celebrities are busy with practice or shooting TV series, they still can interact with their fans to maintain and strengthen the parasocial relationship by exposing their private lives [6].

3.3. Problems

However, the closely intertwined parasocial relationship has also given rise to issues, as many fans even civilians begin to imitate the clothing and physical appearance of idols. The control over

celebrities' bodies and appearances is stringent, and as more people strive to emulate these icons, it leads to body anxieties as individuals seek to attain the same physical attributes [4]. Therefore, this is also one of the reasons the plastic surgery industry in Korea developed. Many people attempt to do some surgeries to be like their beloved celebrities even loan money to do it. This phenomenon also influences the market for products endorsed by celebrities, as fans aspire to purchase the same items. Referred to as the "celebrity effect," celebrities serve as role models who inspire individuals to adopt certain self-images and influence their decision-making and purchasing behaviors [7]. Fans usually believe that using the same products as their beloved idols the brands that celebrities endorsed will raise their social position and social identity because usually those products are expensive and it shows by celebrities who have high social status [8]. In addition, most fans who buy those products think this is also a way for them to enhance their parasocial relationship and get closer to their idols.

4. Comparison

4.1. Similarities

Both China and Korea are Asian countries with similar developmental periods, leading many similarities between their entertainment industries. One common aspect is the emergence of parasocial relationships, which serve as motivational drivers, impacting individuals' behavior in terms of companionship and social gratification [9]. In Chinese society, people often experience a lack of companionship from their families, during their education, and even in their work environments. Consequently, they seek out companionship by watching TV shows. In Korean society, a strict social hierarchy is prevalent, making it challenging for individuals to break through the indifference and fear they experience when interacting with people from different social classes. Accordingly, most Korean have fewer opportunities to feel relaxed when they are in schools or companies. Despite the various reasons for lacking companionship in Korea and China, both countries share a common solution: paying more attention to beloved celebrities to find happiness and live positively. Celebrities, when they appear on stage or TV shows, exude positivity and energy, inspiring their audiences. This positive influence is particularly impactful for individuals dealing with depression, as adored celebrities become role models who inspire them to live more positively, providing psychological healing, even without direct interaction [10]. As a result, people follow celebrities both online and offline, with more online time spent on watching TV series and shows to compensate for the lack of real connections with others [2].

Both China and Korea grapple with significant social stress across various age groups, resulting in limited social gratification in both countries. Students suffer from academic stress, while adults and workers facing the stress of inflation and workplace pressures. Another shared similarity is the lack of recognition by parents in both countries regarding the importance of their children's psychological well-being. Thus, parents often push their children harder in their pursuit of education. This phenomenon contributes to a sense of "involution" which means over-competition in a society, conflicts and internal friction among individuals. In this challenging environment, individuals need a place or objects for them to distract attention and relax, with following celebrities being one of the preferred and popular methods. Celebrities, in both China and Korea, lead lives far removed from those of ordinary citizens, often associated with high income and social status. Fans can thus set celebrities as a source of inspiration, driving them to work hard without perceiving them as competitors. Moreover, in both China and Korea, entertainment companies frequently orchestrate captivating personas for their artists, idols and celebrities will show some interesting things and behaviors in the shows or during offline activities. The human tendency to find happiness and relaxation when exposed to intriguing content further contributes to the appeal of parasocial relationships.

4.2. Differences

There are some differences between the companionship aspect of parasocial relationships between China and Korea. In China, the amount of companionship between celebrities and fans is often determined by the amount of money fans spend or whether they have connections with television stations or work in social media. Hence, the majority of fans in China can only maintain the relationship with celebrities through the screen, and meeting their adored celebrities in person may be an elusive dream in their lifetime. Additionally, Chinese vast geographical expanse makes it challenging for fans to randomly encounter celebrities on the streets. In contrast, it is comparatively easier to spot celebrities in Korea, as the ratio of celebrities to fans is smaller than in China. Also, Korean national territorial area is not as extensive consisting of one to two megacities where celebrities typically appear. Consequently, the opportunities for fans in Korea to meet their beloved celebrities are much easier than in China.

The different influence of governmental perspectives on parasocial relationship between China and Korea mainly stems from political situation. In China, government maintains a sharp separation between politics and entertainment industry [3]. Conversely, in Korea, the government intertwines certain aspects of politics with the entertainment industry. For instance, in public occasions and meetings, the Chinese government seldom mentioned the entertainment industry. However, the Korean president repeatedly highlighted K-pop and the Korean entertainment industry in various international meetings, considering it as an essential part of Korean culture and society.

5. Discussion

Although the entertainment industry develops in both China and Korea over 20 years, there are still some serious issues in it. The parasocial relationship is as healthy as people imagine. There is a group of fans called “sasaeng fan” who stalks or engages in other behavior constituting an invasion of the privacy of celebrities and poses significant threats to the well-being of celebrities because some celebrities need to speed up in cars to get rid of chasing Sasaeng fans which is very dangerous behavior. Some sasaeng fans also send packages or letters to harass celebrities which provides enormous psychological pressure on celebrities.

The entertainment industry is not imprisoned as before, but a new “prison” is created by those sasaeng fans and becomes just as strong a means of surveillance [11]. Due to the influence of sasaeng fans, celebrities need to put more effort on break away from both the physical and psychological effects of sasaeng fans. The phenomenon of sasaeng fans has touched level 3 of celebrity worship which is also similar to the parasocial relationship. Totally, there are 3 levels of celebrity worship: 1st level is the entertainment-social dimension which is motivated to watch the works of celebrities; 2nd level is the intense-personal dimension which means fans have strong emotions toward their beloved celebrities; 3rd level is the borderline-pathological dimension which means some uncontrollable emotions and behavior towards to adored celebrities. Referred to level 3, sasaeng fans are one of the types of it because it is related to some neuroticism, psychoticism, and tendencies toward crime [10].

6. Conclusion

In summation, the difference between China and Korea in terms of their entertainment industries and the dynamics of the parasocial relationship can be attributed to their distinct societal and cultural contexts. In order human behavior motivates the parasocial relationship, so people’s behavior in their daily life in society affects the parasocial relationship between celebrities and fans a lot.

In China, the sheer population size and political factors contribute a challenging environment for fans to connect and interact with their beloved celebrities. Additionally, the behavior of certain celebrities, characterized by arrogance, further impedes the establishment of a favorable parasocial

relationship. The ticket scalpers also create thick barriers for fans to build and maintain a favorable parasocial relationship with adored celebrities. Conversely, in Korea, following adored stars and celebrities seems like an easier thing because the entertainment industry in Korea integrates into their society and culture. Unlike in China, where idols and celebrities are often perceived as distant figures with exalted social status, Korean society views them more as relatable individuals.

One of the motivations for the parasocial relationship of both countries is similar. People endure huge pressure from academics, the workplace, and the economy, so they need a pattern that can blend into their daily life and not continuously transfer negative emotions to their lives. Parents from both countries often give their children a high goal in education and the ratio of students to get into universities is low in both countries, so the pressure on students is very huge. In addition, in both countries, there is an obvious involution phenomenon and inflation phenomenon. As a result, adults and workers endure huge living pressure.

The other motivation for parasocial relationships in both China and Korea is companionship. With the huge pressure on adults, they do not have enough time to spend with their families, so everyone is relatively independent in society. As human nature, individuals need interaction with society rather than only boring studying and working. Therefore, chasing celebrities can enrich people's both daily and spiritual life. When people pay attention to their adored celebrities, they feel interaction whether the parasocial relationship is maintained by the online or offline way. Even if there is a special parasocial relationship with virtual game characters dating game applications also can help females to get companionship and feel happiness. Additionally, there is something different about the companionship of parasocial relationships between these two countries. In China, most of the companionship from celebrities is through online TV shows and social media updates. But in Korea, there is a complete entertainment industry system which means individuals can have more channels to know more about their beloved celebrities and celebrities are able to have more different kinds of offline such as fans signature meeting to interact and accompany their fans.

In conclusion, it is crucial for society to recognize the importance of maintaining a healthy parasocial relationship between celebrities and fans, regardless of the cultural and social contexts in which they operate. It is essential to address the challenges and concerns associated with the parasocial relationship. By promoting respectful boundaries, privacy protection, and the well-being of both celebrities and fans, the entertainment industry can foster a more positive and sustainable environment for parasocial relationships to thrive.

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