

“They’re My Friends!”

How Pathos is Used to Create and Maintain Parasocial Relationships, as Well as Lead to their Destruction Through Cancel Culture

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Introduction

The different ways in which we write can make a reader feel a variety of emotions. From happiness to sadness to anger, pathos is often used as a tool for making an audience feel these strong emotions. Pathos is the way in which writing uses language to make us feel a particular emotion. Rhetoric that uses pathos is not limited to just traditional writing in novels and movies, however. It also exists in advertisements, newspapers, as well as public statements made by companies. Pathos and specific language choices are also commonly utilized in the South Korean entertainment industry. Korean pop (K-pop) companies use pathos and language to expertly craft public statements, music videos, and various other appearances in order to create parasocial relationships between the K-pop idols and their fans. These bonds make fans feel close to their idols, and more willing to purchase their merchandise and music.

With the rise of popularity of K-pop, there has been an increase in curiosity among the general public, including scholars, as to why K-pop was able to become so popular

outside of South Korea. There have been numerous articles and essays popping up discussing the rise in popularity of this genre of music, and analyses of the genre and the entertainment system it stems from. Many have questions regarding how people become so invested, and wonder how these parasocial relationships come to be. Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships that individuals develop with characters they encounter in the mass media. (Kurtin et al.) This is a common occurrence within K-pop as all relationships with musicians, and celebrities in general, are parasocial ones.

Although there is an increase in research and interest in the subject of K-pop, there seems to be a lack of research on the use of pathos within the K-pop industry. Between editing and public statements, companies often use persuasive language and pathos to change the way the fans feel about the messages they are putting out. These companies want to ensure that fans or potential fans feel connected to their artists from their statements, and they use specific language to achieve that goal. For example, they may use phrases such as, “We deeply regret,” or “Our sincerest apologies,” not only to express those feelings of regret, but also to ensure the audience is aware of their feelings and are more likely to forgive. The same goes for the editing of shows that the K-pop idols appear on, and how they want the idols to be perceived. Idols thrive and benefit from these parasocial relationships, so they will go to great lengths to create and maintain them.

Cancel culture is a prevalent reoccurrence in entertainment, and the K-pop industry is no exception. Despite all the hard work that companies and idols put into making fans fall in love with their artists, one small scandal can completely destroy an idol’s career.

Companies put a lot of effort into the public's view of these idols, curating content and editing appearances, but all of this can be shattered quickly by what might be considered small scandals. For example, there was a period of time in 2021 when there were many idols accused of bullying in their earlier school years. Quite a few of these cases even ended up with the idols being removed from their groups and even the company, with no hope of continuing a career in entertainment. There are a few rare cases, such as with Hwang Hyunjin of Stray Kids, in which the way the company and the idol handled the situation was different, and the idol was able to resume group activities after a few months of hiatus.

Considering how little that this topic has been researched and written about, two main questions remain to be answered. First, how do K-pop companies use pathos to make fans love and feel connected to idols, while making these idols seem both relatable and untouchably perfect? Second, despite the hard work of these companies to make fans love these K-pop idols, why is this connection also so fragile, leading to the destruction of careers through cancel culture? This essay examines the ways in which different companies reacted to similar situations, how fans reacted to the different statements, and what the overall outcome of each situation was.

The primary research done for this essay includes observing fan reactions to statements from different companies about the same type of scandal. Different articles were selected from the specific scandals of Seo Soojin and Hwang Hyunjin. Comments that were left on these posts will be analyzed, thinking about for how effective the original statements were at using pathos to make fans feel forgiving, and the attempt and

mending the bond between artist and fan. Although these statements were made with the intention of persuading the readers to feel a certain way, whether they are successful at this or not is something to analyze based on the different reactions that fans had to their words.

Along with the primary research, there were also secondary sources used to gather additional research and analyses from the already established conversation. This includes a study from an article by Mu Hu from West Virginia Wesleyan College on parasocial relationships and how scandals can cause what is known as parasocial break up. While the initial research question suggests that parasocial breakup occurs because of a weak bond, Hu's study suggests that this might actually be due to a strong parasocial bond. The breaking of this bond can, "cause serious emotional reactions that motivate people to seek psychological assistance." (Hu) This essay explores this and applies it to the comments and fan reactions to various public statements.

Methodology

As I began to dive into researching and answering these questions, I wanted to start with reading about how these parasocial relationships between K-pop idols and fans are formed, and then to move to what happens to these bonds when scandal occurs. I searched for research involving K-pop, and I found a Master's Thesis by Courtney McLaren titled, "'They Make Me Very Happy': Practices, Perceptions, And Affective Connections of K-pop Fans in Canada." In this thesis, McLaren discusses many different aspects of K-pop culture, including the connections between fans and idols. She

discusses both the parasocial relationships that form from parasocial interaction and how participants perceive there to be a sense of “knowing” that is understood by both idol and fan that appears to be reciprocal, even though this perceived two-way interaction is often an illusion.

After finding research about K-pop, I also sought out sources that were about parasocial relationships, how they develop with musicians, and how scandal impacts these bonds. I found previously mentioned research done by Mu Hu titled “The Influence of a Scandal on Parasocial Relationship, Parasocial Interaction, and Parasocial Breakup.” I was interested in reading about the research and studies done regarding parasocial breakup, and how scandal affects parasocial relationships. Another article I found was by Kate Szer Kurtin, Nina O’Brien, Deya Roy, and Linda Dam titled, “Parasocial Relationships with Musicians.” This research discusses how musicians form parasocial relationships with their fans, and why they occur in the first place.

The primary research method that I used in this essay was observation of fan comments and reactions in response to articles containing public statements from companies regarding idol scandals. I chose observation as a primary research method due to it being an effective method for analyzing the responses and feelings that fans involved in these parasocial relationships experienced. I found three different situations revolving around the school bullying accusations many idols faced, and I chose to analyze the comments based on the K-pop idols Seo Soojin and Hwang Hyunjin. Both were accused of school bullying, but they had very different outcomes. Seo Soojin was removed from her group, yet fans were devastated and miss her dearly. Hwang Hyunjin

was not removed from his group, and fans were happy about this decision, and appreciated the ways in which his company handled the situation overall, although there were some parts of their statements that did not sit well with fans.

Results/Findings

In McLaren's thesis, I found information on parasocial relationships and how they begin to form from the very start of an idol's career. There are a few standard ways in which an idol is introduced, through teaser videos, competition shows, or pre-debut activities such as busking. From the very first time we see these hopeful idols, all of the content surrounding them is purposeful and edited. A big part of the first step is showing their hard work and dedication, as well as their experience in training and their process of becoming an idol. We see clips of them practicing as trainees, as well as them talking about how tough it was, and they often are emotional in these clips. These clips are meant to create the feeling of authenticity that is relatable to fans and begins to create a parasocial bond with the idol due to their shared experiences of difficulty and struggle (McLaren).

Companies often craft an illusion that makes fans feel as though the interactions they are having goes both ways. Social media is used as a way to make fans feel as though they are responding directly to the idol when they post; however, the likelihood of the idol seeing these comments is very low. A recent example of this is the development of an app called Bubble. In Bubble, users can pay a monthly subscription price to have text messages to and from their favorite idols. They can message these idols a certain number of times, and the idols send back a message to their subscribers. The chat room

looks very much like a text message conversation, which adds to the illusion that users are having a conversation with their idols. These conversations make idols feel relatable, like everyday people. This connection further deepens the parasocial bond between idols and fans, as it is a mediated interaction; however, it feels genuine to fans (McLaren).

Parasocial relationships are formed with musicians for a multitude of reasons. Kurtin et al. discuss the top reasons why someone may feel compelled to form these one-sided relationships. The first reason that was given was that of task attraction, the idea that fans like the celebrity because they see that the celebrity is the best at what they do. The second possibility is romantic attraction, the idea of liking the celebrity due to romantic or sexual attraction to them. The final response was favoring the celebrity due to identification or social attraction, meaning the fan feels similar to the celebrity or wants to be more like them. The first two concepts apply particularly well in the world of K-pop. Fans often defend their favorite groups saying they have the best music, while supporting them by buying their albums and streaming their music. Appearance is a huge contributor in K-pop as well, and a lot of work goes into the appearance of an idol in order to foster romantic or sexual attraction for the idols and have fans support them more (Kurtin et al.).

My original research question asks why these parasocial bonds are so weak and able to be broken; however, Hu suggests that this is likely not the case. The heightened feeling of betrayal and the “cancelling” of an idol or celebrity is likely due to the strong parasocial bond that has formed, rather than a weak one. The closer fans feel to their favorite groups and idols, the more personally they will take the news of scandal. When

these scandals occur, there is a chance of parasocial breakups, or “people’s negative emotional reactions to termination of PSR [Parasocial Relationships] with their liked personae” (Hu). The breaking down of the parasocial relationship due to parasocial breakups “can cause serious emotional reactions that motivate people to seek psychological assistance” (Hu). Even the smallest of scandals can lead to the feeling of betrayal, which is common not only in parasocial relationships but also in friendships, which can often lead to the ending of friendships. (Hu, 2016)

Seo Soojin was removed from the K-pop group (G) I-DLE in 2021 due to the accusations against her that she bullied other students during her middle school years. There was an outcry of devastation from many fans at this decision, as she was a beloved K-pop idol. Many did not agree with the decision to remove her, stating that she was innocent and the rumors were defamation. Comments included messages of support for Soojin and frustration at her company, Cube Entertainment. Commenter immortalyellow writes, “So this is how cube deals with their problems? Making them leave in every controversy” (See Appendix A). The commenter goes on to discuss the company viewing their idols purely as investments, and as soon as their reputation is damaged in any way, the company does not want anything to do with them. This is a common theme amongst K-pop companies, as they often view these scandals as career ruining and not worth the time repairing. They try to appease the fans with convincing public statements; however, this is no easy task. Another comment appeared on an article that had a more content feeling towards Soojin’s removal from the group. The comment begins, “Now this is what I was expecting. She did admit that she smoked and

used swears while arguing something like that. Looking back at the artists who got kicked out of Cube, they all faced that because they were found guilty” (See Appendix A). This commenter compares Seo Soojin’s scandal to previous scandals within Cube Entertainment and how they handled it. The commenter seemed to expect this result, based on how Cube had reacted in the past. The final comment that I collected states, “I am kinda happy just because we can get a g idle comeback again and how much I love soojin its better that she left because Korean fans othe wise [sic] would hav boycott [sic] g idle” (See Appendix A). Although this fan was not against Soojin as an idol, they were happy a decision was made so (G) I-DLE could make a comeback. They also point out that if she had stayed in the group, there’s a good chance that Korean fans would have boycotted their group.

Hwang Hyunjin had a similar school bullying scandal to Seo Soojin, but he was not removed from his group following the controversy. On an article from the initial statement from the company, one comment began, “Before JYPE and Hyunjin’s classmates debunked the rumors, the fandom jumped to his defense as if their life depended on it. I hate it when you guys act like you are Hyunjin’s close friends. I don’t know him, neither do you” (See Appendix B). This commenter calls out the defensiveness that his fans have of him, due to their parasocial relationship. They go on to talk about a member who left the group previously and about feeling that they judged too soon, and they urge others to wait for more information. Hyunjin’s company, JYP Entertainment, released another statement along with a handwritten letter of apology from Hyunjin. This is a common way to apologize in Korean Media, and is meant to show the sincerity and dedication since

they took the time to hand write an apology, instead of typing it out. A fan of Hyunjin left a comment on this article, relieved at the way the company was handling the situation, and that they let him write an apology himself which isn't common in scandals (See Appendix B). Although fans seemed to be happy with the response from the company and Hyunjin in the previous article, the tides turned in the following article announcing his hiatus from idol activities, as fans were unhappy about the response from the company. The general feeling of fans was discontent due to the way it seemed as though JYP Entertainment was throwing Hyunjin under the bus rather than defending him. They halted his activities for months, but Hyunjin did eventually make his return to the group, and the fans welcomed him with open arms.

Discussion

Korean Pop Entertainment companies use pathos in many ways to encourage fans to feel certain ways about their idols. They want to promote positive feelings and parasocial relationships with these artists. As we have seen in the comments left on various company statements, sometimes the companies are successful, and other times they are not. They also encourage these feelings through editing and making the idols feel relatable from their struggles to their successes. Parasocial relationships are the result of these uses of pathos, and they grow to be so strong that a scandal feels personal to the fans, often leading to parasocial breakup. There is a lot of discussion involving the parasocial relationships between idols and fans; however, the research in this essay moves this conversation forward by discussing the use of pathos in public

statements as well as parasocial breakup due to scandal. We see examples of positive and negative reactions in the cases of Seo Soojin and Hwang Hyunjin. Although companies craft statements in order to have a positive impact on fans, this is not always achieved.

My initial thought was that the parasocial bonds between fan and idol were strong yet weak, leading to the destruction of their careers through scandal and cancel culture. Through my research, I have found that these bonds are actually quite strong, which is a big reason that they end up shattering through scandal. These types of scandals are psychologically difficult on fans, and they can feel betrayed and lead to parasocial breakup (Hu). Using this research on parasocial relationships and breakup, I was able to apply it to the Korean Entertainment Industry and discuss the reasons that these situations occurred. Entertainment companies have spent years improving their use of pathos in order to create bonds between their idols and fans, however, it seems they still have a long way to go in terms of perfecting these statements.

Works Cited

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Appendix A

Seo Soojin

Immortalyellow, Comment on “Breaking: Soojin Announced To Be Leaving (G)I-DLE.”

Soompi, Aug 14, 2021,

<https://www.soompi.com/article/1483756wpp/breaking-soojin-announced-to-be-leaving-gi-dle>.

“So this is how cube deals with their problems? Making them leave in every controversy. To be fair with cube I’m sure they did what they could but this didn’t look good for her because it’s like they’re saying the accusations were true. G-idle is very popular and cube will put the group ahead of a member. It’s not just Cube but every other company that does the same. To all of them idols are an investment, both money and appearance/image wise. As such, the moment an idol is boycotted by the public, creates more loss then gains or affects the company’s image (beyond repair or what can’t be covered), they will be dropped without a second thought. It doesn’t matter if the accusations are real or not. In the end whatever image a company has about ‘tight as family’, ‘brotherhood / sisterhood’ etc is merely media play and what makes the ending call is the income and public opinion, be it for good or bad.”

Avantiharidas_02, Comment on “Breaking: Soojin Announced To Be Leaving

(G)I-DLE.” Soompi, Aug 14, 2021,

<https://www.soompi.com/article/1483756wpp/breaking-soojin-announced-to-be-leaving-gi-dle>.

“Now this is what I was expecting. She did admit that she smoked and used swears while arguing something like that. Looking back at the artists who got kicked out of Cube, they all faced that because they were found guilty. May be she was given an option like "Do you want us to release a statement saying the claims made are true that would tarnish the career of other members or would you like to leave the group quietly and let the others go ahead". Till how long will they keep silent. The group’s career is on stake and she decided to leave.”

88dn75hq5p_718, Comment on “Breaking: Soojin Announced To Be Leaving

(G)I-DLE.” Soompi, Aug 14, 2021,

<https://www.soompi.com/article/1483756wpp/breaking-soojin-announced-to-be-leaving-gi-dle>.

“I am kinda happy just because we can get a g idle comeback again and how much I love soojin its better that she left because Korean fans othe wise would hav boycott g idle”

Appendix B

Hwang Hyunjin

RaeRey, Comment on “JYP Entertainment Issues Statement Regarding School Violence Allegations Against Stray Kids’ Hyunjin.” Soompi, February 22, 2021, <https://www.soompi.com/article/1455808wpp/jyp-entertainment-issues-statement-regarding-school-violence-allegations-against-stray-kids-hyunjin>.

“Before JYPE and Hyunjin’s classmates debunked the rumors, the fandom jumped to his defense as if their life depended on it. I hate it when you guys act like you are Hyunjin’s close friends. I don’t know him, neither do you. I can’t claim that he wouldn’t hurt anyone. I don’t know what he is capable of and what he is not. My position is neutral. I made the mistake of judging Woojin before properly investigating. I locked myself in hatred. Woojin is innocent, yet he is still being harassed. I will not fall into the same game again. Lies have the potential to destroy a career. It is not funny.”

11186_210, Comment on “JYP Releases New Statement Regarding Allegations About Stray Kids’ Hyunjin + Hyunjin Writes Letter Of Apology.” Soompi, February 25, 2021, <https://www.soompi.com/article/1456569wpp/jyp-releases-new-statement-regarding-allegations-about-stray-kids-hyunjin-hyunjin-writes-letter-of-apology>.

“This time jyp properly took time and cleared out everything. That’s good to see. And even though they didn’t specify, some of Hyunjin’s actions might have hurt some people considering how jyp addressed it. It’s good to see that they let Hyunjin write for himself. And remember, People change and it is wrong to keep accusing a changed man over his past actions , especially when he regrets it and repented for it.”

lolchan167_369, Comment on “JYP Entertainment Releases Statement About Stray Kids’ Hyunjin’s Future Activities.” Soompi, February 27, 2021, <https://www.soompi.com/article/1456712wpp/jyp-entertainment-releases-statement-about-stray-kids-hyunjins-future-activities>.

“Jyp did hyunjin so dirty. They kind of throw him under the bus. Hyunjin does not deserve it. If he really bullied somebody. He apologized and it in the past. I expired bulling myself and I think they are going to far. Jyp should care more about his idols/trainees.

Hyunjins parents home Adresse was also leaked. Some people are taking this to far. I hope he is doing okay”

Author Bio

Kira is a computer science major with many aspirations including writing fantasy novels and traveling to new places. They are known to have an ever-growing list of hobbies and special interests, a few examples of this being learning new art skills as well as playing games. They also have two cats that they will gladly talk about endlessly.