

#OPPANOTICEME: THE INFLUENCE OF AN IDOL INSTAGRAM

ACCOUNT ON SASAENG BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

This research discusses the developments of South Korean idol worship and its effect on the psychological state of fans. Specifically, this research will target how an idol's use of Instagram influences these particular behaviors and whether location and time play a significant role. It will discuss what types of Instagram posts lead to what type of fan and sasaeng behavior. The research will conclude a breakdown of the positive and negative behaviors that came about through the most interactive and followed Instagram accounts of idols from the three biggest labels in South Korea; SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment and JYP Entertainment.

KEYWORDS: *Celebrity Worship, South Korea, Instagram, Media Dependency & Sasaeng*

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INTRODUCTION

Problem

South Korean idol fans, ages 16-24, are becoming very dependent on the statements, ideas and visuals presented on their favorite idols' SNS accounts. This ever-growing dependency contributes to the development of *sasaeng*¹ behavior predominantly in South Korea but with a significant amount of cases in China, Malaysia, Japan and other territories as well. Aside from Instagram, geography may also be a determining factor in terms of sasaeng behavior. While there are fans who exhibit this behavior in the United States, it is much less reported than in South Korea. Given South Korea is significantly smaller than the United States, the travel time to reach their idols is much shorter. To put that into perspective, the time that it would take to get from the northern tip of South Korea to the bottom, is around the time it would take to get from Plano, Texas, to a few kilometers outside of southern San Antonio, Texas as Texas is nearly seven times larger than South Korea. South Korea is also known for having numerous forms of accommodating transportation, making access even easier for sasaengs.

The consequences of sasaeng behavior are exhibited in the form of crowding airports and causing security issues, stalking idols, causing traffic violations, and increasing number of lawsuits and restraining orders being dealt by the idols.

Though the idols are indeed, whether intentionally or not, feeding the sasaengs via social media, there are also other influence that cater to this sasaeng behavior. For example, taxi drivers and private chauffeurs find that sasaengs are their highest paying customers, paying hundreds of dollars to the driver just to follow their respective idols vehicle. These sasaeng are expanding their horizon in order to get closer to their beloved idols by even

¹Sasaeng Fan (사생팬): is a "fan" that stalks and/or invades a celebrity's privacy using extreme and often illegal methods.

getting jobs in the entertainment industry.

Research Question

- How will the dependency of constant need for idol-given information affect social behaviors and norms?

Social behaviors and norms, in terms of this research, will be considered as what is generally accepted versus the violations due to unaccepted sasaeng behavior. For example, this includes any laws that are being violated due to sasaengs.

The dependency factor will stem from what the selected Korean idols put out via their social media accounts for the fans. Sasaengs tend to look for any form of social media update from their idols for need-satisfaction purposes as well as informational material. Informational material gives the audience hints at where the idol was, is, and will be location and activity wise.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The theoretical foundation for this study will be based on the media dependency theory (*S.J. Ball-Rokeach & M.L. DeFleur*). The media dependency theory was one of the earlier studies that first researched how the audience communicated with the media. The audience looks to mass media in order to satisfy certain needs. This can be in the form of television, radio, social networking services as well as many other media outlets.

According to the media dependency theory, the word *dependency* is defined as being the satisfaction of an individual's needs or goals being achieved contingent upon the actions and resources of another party. For this particular study, the second party resource where needs are being satisfied is Instagram. There are three types of dependency within this theory that define why an individual may have such a high reliance on media. The first type of dependency is the need to understand an individual's social world while the second is the need to be able to effectively act within that social world. The third, and most relevant to this study, is defined as the need to escape the problems and concerns of the real world by delving into a fantasy or fictional world.

Overtime, the media dependency theory has been applied to many cases including issues related to the environment, consumer patterns, and more. For the most part, the media dependency theory studies the overall need to gain information about the world around. For example, the media dependency theory has been used to study green-buying (Ho, Liao, & Rosenthal, 2014) in Singapore. The study tested whether the media was able to change attitudes and influence people to use more environmentally friendly products. In this case, the media provided substantial attention to a topic - environmental safety - to inform the public in an attempt to alter certain behaviors because of the need to take care of the environment they are in.

Considering the topic of sasaeng behavior in correlation to idol and fandom is not a commonly researched topic, the literature review for this research mostly pertains to information regarding the media dependency theory, fans as a product consumer, and celebrity influence.

In a study conducted by Boon & Lomore (2001) with 72 males and 141 females, results showed that males dominated as their main idol. Though conducted in 2001 and prior in Canada, the result for this study holds true for the current status of Korea. Boy bands in South Korea tend to garner more attention than their female counterpart. A hypothesis for this theory may be the stigma of the average heartthrob boy band concept done in many countries around the world; The Beatles, N'sync, The Backstreets and One Direction to name a few. Another key finding in Boon and Lomore's

study was that the more time, money respondents invested into their idols, the more likely they were to feel emotionally connected with them. Boon and Lomore's research was most relevant in terms of the study at hand and looking at the fan-to-idol intimacy.

While time and money invested were found to be a link to intimacy, this alone could be potential like to South Korean fandom donation culture (Kim, 2015). Quite often, fandoms will gather in order to plan a large project which may be donating a few tons of rice to less fortunate villages, donating to build school, and sending food packages to the production staffs under the name of their respective idol. Kim's study also touched on the concept of fandom gift giving and *chogong*. *Chogong* is a Korean term used to describe fans giving significantly expensive gifts to their idols costing sometimes thousands of dollars.

In order for fandoms to pull off these massive donations and lavish gifts, a certain degree of organization is needed. There are numerous forums and social networks where these fandoms gather to plan these events and gifts. Twitter has become a major global network for fandoms to come together through a single hashtag or campaign. South Korea aside, Indonesia, Japan, The United States, France, and Mexico were the top locations to use Twitter for #Kpop in late 2011 and early 2012 (Kim, Heo, Choi, & Park, 2013) for many events. Fans have been shown to utilize these platforms not only for tasks listed above but for personal identification (Soukup, 2006) and a sense of community as well. It provides an outlet for fans and netizens alike to exchange information and engage in conversation about their respective idols. However, sasaengs have also been known to use these portals to exchange information that would be considered an invasion of privacy (Kim, 2015) about these idols. There have also been cases in which sasaengs compete to see who can get their hands on the most valuable item of the idol.

It is important to note that sasaeng behavior is typically born from fandom in most cases until proven to be a psychological affair. Earlier mentions of intimacy with idols (Boon & Lomore, 2001) may lead one to question whether the idol can somehow feel that same intimacy as well. One survey used the Celebrity Attitude Scale (Maltby, Houran, Lange, Ashe, & McCutcheon, 2002) to push boundaries and ask questions that typically apply to a high percentage of sasaeng fans. The survey questions aimed to decipher just how far participants were willing to go for their celebrity. Questions in the survey pertained to drug consumption, crime, and idol/celebrity acknowledgment of fandom intimacy.

The Celebrity Attitude Scale sometimes referred to as The Celebrity Worship Scale has been used in multiple studies in relation to fan culture. The fans and sasaengs that engage in this idol worship experience have been said to exhibit certain personality traits (Sansone & Sansone, 2014). Sheridan, Maltby, and Gillet found (as cited by Sansone & Sansone, 2014, p. 3) that some of these celebrity worship traits include addiction, anxiety, depression, compulsive buying (Reeves, Baker, & Truluck, 2012) and more. Celebrity worship has been broken down into three levels; entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological (Reeves et al., 2012). While many fans tend to fall in the first two levels, sasaengs fit more into the borderline-pathological level. This level is defined as having higher levels of obsessive-compulsivity, anxiety, criminality, and the utter belief that their respective idol is truly in love with them, otherwise known as *erotomania*.

When you put it into perspective, one must really consider the true influence idols have in society. Idols dominate the media both new and traditional. Nowadays, it is far more common for adolescents to know more about the Kardashians than important political issues. Because of these common idol worship tendencies, media dependency is an ever growing theory. Media dependency is not used for only idols; however, media dependency is used, and often is, to bring light to

these societal concerns. One study conducted in China (Lyu, 2012) found that the media dependency theory plays a key role during crises and that the higher the threat, the more media dependency comes into play.

According to Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), the Dependency Model of Mass Media Effects, also called Media Dependency Theory, is “the dependency of audiences on media information sources, which can lead to modifications in both personal and social processes” (p. 5). This theory is mainly used in the mass communication field. Therefore, in mass communication there are many different complex relationships between huge sets of correlating variables, which include terms like “media,” “audiences,” and “society” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 5). These variables are important because when studied independently, interactively and systematically, they can then provide a more adequate understanding of how mass communications affects others (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 5).

In earlier research, the main area for this theory/model was done in urban-industrial societies (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 5). This was the main focus because there needed to be a connection between the degree of audience dependence on media information and the understanding of when and why media messages alter audience beliefs, feelings or behavior (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 5). Another main focus of this theory/model is the actual definition of dependency. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) defined dependency as “a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party” (p. 6). It’s important to note that there are many different ways on how people are dependent on the media and how it can satisfy their needs (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 5).

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In today’s society, the media dependency theory can be widely connected to the public’s use of the Internet and the constant need for information. The amount of the public who uses the Internet only goes up as the years go by. According to Hoffman, Kalsbeek and Novak (1996), in 1996, in the United States, there about 28 million adults who had access to the Internet, about 16 million who were actually using the Internet, and about 11 million using the web (as cited by Riffe, Lacy & Varouhakis, 2008). Nearly ten years later in 2006, Madden (2006) explain that there was now about 147 million adults in the United States who were using the Internet (as cited by Riffe, Lacy & Varouhakis, 2008). It’s now 2016 and it would be no surprise if that number would have doubled or maybe even tripled as well by now. Hirschbug et al. (1986) explained how the public will rely on media dependency even more when there is a crisis because they want to get information from the media about the situation rather than get the information from another person (as cited by Lee, 2011, p. 459).

With the Internet, there is a constant flow of information being presented and the public is able to easily access it with their smartphones, tablets and computers. As Traxler (2010) explained, not only do these devices support people by letting them connect with other people, but they are able to “produce, consume and store content and conversation” (as

cited by Melhuish & Falloon, 2010, p. 2). As supported by Maxian (2014), these devices that keep the public connected is encouraged by society (p. 276). According to Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu & Sey (2004), it's because of this encouragement, that these devices have become a necessity to be able to participate in topics like politics, family and work systems (as cited by Maxian, 2014, p. 275). The time and how fast information can be accessed with the Internet has made all this information accessible in an instant and has made people stop waiting for this information from traditional media (Maxian, 2014, 275). For example, with this constant flow of information, in terms of how these Korean idols are posting on Instagram, fans and sasaengs are able to intake this information quicker than watching a segment on the news about their favorite Korean idols. In most situations, their mobile devices are essentially their main connection to their Korean idols. Social media is one of the main ways these fans and sasaengs are satisfying their needs for their Korean idols. Similar to how media dependency works in the subject of politics when searching for information, the public will turn to mass media for reassurance (Loveless, 2008, p. 164). In terms of Korean idols, whenever a scandal is revealed involving their favorite idols, fans and sasaengs will turn to social media for reassurance and see if their idol has actually responded in some type of way.

Between the Internet and the amount of users online, there is bound to be some online interpersonal deceptions. This is supported by Lu (2008), who explained that the Internet may have an influence on online deceptions, similar to how personality traits can have an effect on deceptions (p. 227). A study by Caspi and Gorsky (2006) further supported this sentiment and found that the more someone used the Internet, the more it's connected with online interpersonal deceptions (as cited by Lu, 2008, p. 227). In relation to Korean idols' fans and sasaengs because they are behind a computer screen, whatever content they are posting these idols' Instagram accounts could be deceptions. It's hard to distinguish who is a real fan or someone just posting mean things to get other fans riled up.

Justification

There have been many studies that attempt to find correlations between celebrities and their fans. However, most of the previous research conducted has been on a consumer basis. This particular research does not study celebrity branding, rather it studies an emotional connection between the idol and the respective fandom. There is plenty of room for this sasaeng area to be studied, as the sasaeng culture is constantly growing with the ever-presence of popular South Korean idols.

Specific Research Questions

- How do idol SNS updates effect fandom interactivity dependency?
- How do other fans/sasaengs react to one another under the influence of idols?

Question one will study how the fans are seen utilizing social media to convey their emotions and actions to the idol. This is dependent on the content of the idol update and the information contained in the update.

Question two will test how fellow fans interact with one another in both positive and negative aspect. This is important to note as there are many different types of interactions. Considering sasaengs tend to stake a territorial claim on their idol, their social skills with others needs to be analyzed to see if they exhibit more of the traits linked to Level 3 celebrity worship behavior (Reeves et al., 2012).

Significance

The intended impact of this research is to find out how and why sasaengs behave the way they do and where the key influence lies. Because sasaengs are such a major problem in South Korea, this research may provide a foundation from where the obsession stems. Studying these factors may help even contribute to the field of psychology in terms of behavioral aspects.

Since the Hallyu Wave ²is continuing to expand, this topic has plenty of room to be focused on by future researchers. This preliminary research provides a foundation for other research who wishes to study more in-depth about what leads to sasaeng behavior. Additionally, future research may include the study of how the domestic and foreign media perceive sasaengs. Media aside, another angle from which this research could be approach is how people who do not classify as sasaeng view this behavior in their society.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for our research consists of a content analysis of six major idols Instagram accounts within the Korean music industry who carry vast influence over their target audience. Two idols from the top three South Korean music labels were selected; one male and one female who both have the largest interactivity amongst their followers. This includes statistics from their personal Instagram accounts where their posts have a considerable reach. When it comes to idols, Instagram has the most follower activity between the idol and the fan. Idols are also able to provide better visuals for the fans to express their opinions and emotions to. The selected idols are as follows:

SM Entertainment

- **Male:** Chanyeol Park of EXO (@real__pcy)
- **Female:** Taeyeon Kim of Girls' Generation(@taeyeon_ss)

JYP Entertainment

- **Male:** Jackson Wang of GOT7(@jacksonwang352g7)
- **Female:** Suji Bae (Suzy) of miss A(@skuukzky)

YG Entertainment

- **Male:** Jiyong Kwon (G-Dragon) of Big Bang (@xxibgdrgn)
- **Female:** Chaelin Lee (CL) of 2NE1(@chaelincl)

The six idols not only have some of most followed accounts of idols in Korea, but also the most interactivity in their comments and feeds. Among the six idols, Jackson Wang and his group GOT7 were the most recent to debut. His follower count and interactivity are constantly rising as the group's popularity steadily increases. GOT7 made their debut years after some of the hottest bands in South Korea yet were able to become a dominate force on social media hence why he was chosen. All six of these idols have different claims to fame aside from music that have secured their popularity in both South Korea and overseas. Lee and Kwon have been very active in promoting with internationally renowned producers to attract American audiences. Kim has become quite popular from her Korean drama soundtracks while Bae is

² Hallyu Wave (한류): A phenomenon used to describe the expansion of Korean pop culture into foreign nations.

known for her acting abilities in these dramas. Park has recently garnered more popularity in China for his lead role in the Chinese film *So I Married an Anti-Fan* (2016).

Content Analysis Coding Structure

In order to gauge the variables in questions, this content analysis calls for specific codes to better understand the data and content on each of the idol's Instagram account. The coding was based on these factors:

- Number of Likes
- Number of Comments
- Content of Comments

The time frame for the analysis was six months. The post with the highest number of likes and the post with the most comments were selected as the top content. On each of these posts, were taken from the most recent 50 Instagram users to comment on each of these photos.

The content of the comments was divided into four different categories of content:

- Appearance (comments regarding the physical appearance of the idol)
- Requests (comments requesting the idol to do something specific)
- Support (comments of encouragement and/or affection)
- Fan-to-Fan Interaction (conversations between fans in the comment section)

Findings

Between the six idols, the number of likes averaged at about 458,818.18 and the number of comments averaged at about 12,893. A majority of this average was courtesy of Chanyeol Park and Jiyoung Kwon who were found to have the highest interactivity rates. The photos that garnered the most comments were selfie photos and the comments focused a lot on the appearance of these idols.

Most Common Comments

- "I love you, Oppa/Unni"
- "You are so handsome/cute/beautiful!"
- Emojis
- Arguing between other fans
- Rarely commented in relation to the caption

Requests

- "Please do V App!" (A livestream service for idols)
- To wish the fan Happy Birthday / Good luck for exams
- Come to (country)!

Most Common Comments under the Sehun Effect

- Arguments & Hostility
- Requesting that fellow bandmates take more photos or get their own account
- Asking for whereabouts of other members
- Comparison of appearances

Additionally, many of the most popular photos were ones that included other bandmates. These types of photos exhibited what this research calls *The Sehun Effect*. The Sehun Effect is where an idol will take a photo with another idol, either from the same band or a different band, and the comments will see a drastic increase in either the comments, likes or both.

The Sehun Effect (tentatively) is based off of idol star Sehun Oh of the band EXO. Throughout the content analysis, it was noticed whenever Oh made an appearance in another idol accounts photo(s), the other idol's photo like and comment count would nearly double and sometimes triple than what they normally average at.

One important concept to note about *arguments and hostility* listed under The Sehun Effect is that the negativity of the arguments is dealt toward the other party in the photos. For example, say Sehun posted a photo with Suji on his personal Instagram, there is a high possibility of backlash from Sehun fans against Suji as even the idea of the two being friendly repulses some fans and sasaengs; and they are likely to be very vocal about their distaste. Russell (2008) argued that the woman who enters a relationship with one of these male idols will garner the most intense loathing (as cited by Williams & Ho, 2015), hence The Sehun Effect is a very effective yet dangerous technique for idols to use.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this research was not being able to pinpoint whether all the interactivity was between Korean fans or not. As many fans comment in both Korean and English it was difficult to figure out which ones were actually from Korea. It was also hard to distinguish which ones were actually sasaengs or just overzealous fans. This limitation was the effect of time zone difference between West and East. During the time that data was being collected was the time that mostly international fans were commenting. Otherwise, during night hours in the United States is primarily when Korean and other fans in Asia are likely to be more active. This is especially true for Jackson and Chanyeol who both have a substantial amount of Chinese fans and interactivity. Another limitation would be that access to sasaengs from the United States is harder because these sasaengs mostly reside in Asia.

CONCLUSIONS

There were a few conclusions that were able to be drawn from this research. For one, the content of the comment is a very important thing to analyze as it can convey certain feelings and behaviors. This was particularly true in photos that showcased The Sehun Effect. These comments displayed the need for interaction showcasing the effects of media dependency. The results and comments also show how idols unintentionally have a tight grasp on sasaengs and fans that invest their emotions into them. These emotions can manifest into actions when an idol post a picture of their whereabouts leading the individual to go search for them.

Since there is little prior research on the topic of sasaengs to compare the results of this study to, it is difficult to infer how this study relates to past experiments. Sasaeng behavior has been widely talked about on certain fan sites and media stories, but there is an immense lack of actual testing of sasaengs. The results found in this study could be used as a stepping stone for future researchers. More specifically, the coding system used for the content analysis is a clear-cut way to categorize the interactions for not only Instagram but many other social platforms such as Twitter, Weibo, Facebook and other social platforms.

By researching and testing the topic of sasaengs, this study is already to a topic that barely has any background. Researchers in the fields of mass communication, psychology, and sociology could all benefit from this study as it contains many elements from each of these specializations. The more understood sasaeng culture becomes, the better the situations and concerns regarding the culture can be approached and handled.

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 21. Note: Full appendix of detailed graphs and charts available upon request to the authors.