More Than a Music Artist?

A qualitative study on consumer archetypes through the dynamics of fan-artist parasocial relationships

by

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Abstract

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Thesis Purpose:
This study examines how parasocial relationships between music artists and fans foster a plethora of different consumer attitudinal outcomes, with the purpose to provide clarity through the shaping of distinct consumer archetypes, while offering in this way practical insights for marketers and industry professionals. The context of K-pop is used to delve deeper into the understanding of the use of the parasocial sphere in the music industry scenario.

Methodology:
The thesis is based on a relativistic ontology and social constructivism epistemology, which led to the use of an abductive and qualitative approach. The data collection was made through the use of three focus groups with a total of 22 participants. Subsequently, the data was analysed with the use of thematic analysis.

Theoretical perspective:
This thesis offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for studying parasocial relationships and consumer archetypes in the music industry. It explores the impact of digitalisation and social media on content creation and emphasises the significance of personal branding. The role of fan-artist engagement, informed by reciprocity theory and the communication involvement theory, is examined. The concept of parasocial relationships is discussed as a key factor in strengthening the artist-fan bond. The K-pop industry serves as an exemplar, showcasing strategic choices and the expansion of the Parasocial Interaction theory to understand diverse consumer archetypes.

Main Findings & Theoretical Implications:
The study findings have identified different archetypes ("The Enjoyer," "The Top Fan," "The Hero Friend," and "The Dreamer") that reveal diverse consumer attitudinal patterns. The theoretical implications first present parasocial nuances through consumer archetypes, a theory that highlights that the strength of parasocial relationships does not always align with monetary contributions. Second, reasoned support theory emerges as fans justify consumption based on friendship or escapism. Lastly, conspicuous exploitation theory illustrates how fans' self-awareness of emotional manipulation in content impacts consumption decisions and thus, monetary support.

Managerial Contributions:
From the extrapolation of the consumer archetypes, the study provides artists and their companies in the music industry with valuable insights on how to use parasocial relationships through their paid and free content in a way that can effectively have positive benefits for their work. The suggestions rely on having a broad variety and diversity of content, not forgetting about the physical products behind but fostering the parasocial sphere through them as well, all while always taking the right precautions regarding the risk of the perception of exploitation from the fans.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this introductory part of the paper is to let the readers familiarise themselves with the research topic. This chapter will start with a background presentation of the music industry in the digital age and the changes brought by the new technologies. The overview will then lead to the problematization, followed by a narrowed section regarding the research question and purpose of the study. Furthermore, the chapter will present the intended contributions to the current panorama. Lastly, the readers will find an outline of the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Background

Digital technologies have revolutionised the world and changed consumption patterns in different sectors, including the music industry. According to Dolata (2020), within the entertainment and media realms, the sector of the music industry was not only one of the first to have experienced digitalization, but it was also the one that was mostly affected by it because of the constant succession of rapid changes. Constant changes that, as mentioned by the same author, are still ongoing, not withholding the continuous development and transformation of the industry with their business model, and the music consumption sphere poses no exception in this respect. Specifically, the relationship between music and technology has been present since the formation of the music industry itself back in the 1930s with the emergence of the radio system, as well as coding practices for sound recording purposes and music reproduction (ed. Tofalvy & Barna, 2020). Nonetheless, it was only in the late 1990s that technologies started to permeate every angle of the music industry (production, distribution, marketing, and therefore, consumption attitudes and behaviours), and exponentially growing in importance with the advent of the digital world (Hull, Hutchison & Strasser, 2011).

During the digital era, the music industry went through some critical disruptive innovations that affected the demand coming from the listeners and the consumption dynamics (Koh, Hann & Raghunathan, 2019). In this regard, one of the main characteristics that has already been glimpsed since the last decade and has become even more evident in recent years is the

shrink in physical album sales, which is particularly drastic when compared to the peaking increase in popularity of digital music consumption (Green & Sinclair, 2022; Janssens, Vandaele & Vander Beken, 2009; Lee, Choi, Cho & Lee, 2020; Statista 2021a). As such, in the worldwide panorama, CDs had their spike of success in 2000 with 2441 million units sold and started to decline after that to only reach 569 million units in 2015 (Statista, 2016). Meanwhile, music streaming revenues speedily grew from 2.8 billion U.S. dollars in 2015 to 16.9 billion in 2021 (Statista, 2023a) and are forecasted to reach 29 billion by 2025 (Statista, 2021b). Although this shows that the Internet altered the preferences of today's music consumption (Koh et al., 2019), an overview of the major changes during the digital era is imperative to understand the new requirements that artists are facing nowadays and the overgrowing complexity of the environment that the online world fomented.

The first major transformation was the launch in the market of the compact disc (CD) in 1983 (Dolata, 2011), which led to significant success in the industry sales and revenues during the following years, with worldwide sales going from $12.3 billion in 1985 to $39.7 billion in 1995 (Hertz 1999 & IFPI 1999 cited in Dolata, 2011). Lam and Tan (2001) attributed the cause of this success to the shrinking production costs for the companies–specifically in terms of consumption, to the versatility, quality, and portability of this new music distribution system. As explained by the same authors, all features that got even more emphasised when the ban that targeted the online distribution of songs and albums was lifted, the selling of digital copies via the Internet had finally started in the late 1990s.

Despite the fast achievements, the music industry has precisely entered an intense phase of crisis in the late 1990s for not being able to adjust to this shift of selling vinyls and cassettes to new forms of distribution (Dolata, 2011; Patokos, 2008). In particular, the major issue of concern was the piracy and the ease of reproduction of the original work (Lam and Tan, 2001; Patokos, 2008; Janssens et al., 2009). Patokos (2008) explained that while the duplication of cassettes was a reality, this did not cause considerable harm to the music industry as these were portrayed to be less profitable and inferior when compared to vinyls. The CDs, instead, while having boosted the sales in the first period, have accentuated this issue as people got more technologically savvy and it was easier to replicate them in substantially large quantities while preserving the original quality (Janssens et al., 2009). Subsequently, the piracy problem was brought to a heftier level with the advent of MP3 and the general digital encoding of music–since electronic files did not make it difficult for

people to freely share them not only within their acquaintances with tools as simple as the email, but also with everyone on the Internet via shared folders on the peer-to-peer website for downloads Napster (Patokos, 2008; Dolata, 2020; Lam and Tan, 2001; Janssens et al., 2009; ed. Tofalvy & Barna, 2020) .

The different challenges arising with the Internet sparked worry around artists and their companies, and despite the legal actions that attempted to seize the illegitimate sharing of music content, profit continued to decline until 2014–which was partly due to the late response in terms of adapting to this new form of consumption (Green & Sinclair, 2022). Aside from the various lawsuits and court cases, the real trial to re-establish control was first made with the launch of the iTunes Music Store by Apple in 2003, and later on was adapted by the rise of other streaming platforms (Wikström, 2014; Dolata, 2020; Richardson, 2014; Warr & Goode, 2011). Richardson (2014) pointed out that Steve Jobs was the first one to successfully capitalise on music online by creating a service that digitally delivered songs and albums after purchasing them for a price that was lower than of physical CDs. Even though companies were reluctant to join this online store because of the downturn in prices, they reached a compromise under the guise of making a change in the commercialization of music (Wikström, 2014). iTunes started to be promptly successful after its launch as the brick-and-mortar distribution has not drastically changed but rather has expanded to the online world (Dolata, 2020).

Aside from online music stores (such as iTunes), the digital era gradually modified the panorama of the music industry with other different inventions, one of these being the concept introduced by Spotify and then followed by the development of other similar streaming platforms (Richardson, 2014). Spotify was another attempt to deal with the illegal music distribution digitally, presenting a completely different way of delivering content by being a freemium access-based service–offering music for free to the users while also keeping the option to purchase a subscription to avoid advertising and have other in-app benefits (Barr, 2013). Compared to iTunes, Spotify and other streaming platforms staggered to be instantly profitable as a large users-base was needed to surpass the licensing costs, yet in a span of few years, they gained success among customers allowing them to become one of the main sources of revenues for the companies (IFPI 2020 cited in Dolata, 2020; Richardson, 2014; Barr, 2013; Statista, 2023a).

Tofalvy & Barna (ed. 2020) argue that the deep relationship with digital technologies is not only the reason behind the diffusion of the popular music that people listen to today, but it is also the basis for the independent distribution of music from in-real-life physical performances. Moreover, the authors previously mentioned, and Hull et al. (2011), accede to the fact that music has always been connected to the visual sphere with tv broadcasting, but that this bond started to be more relevant in the past two decades with the consolidation of the online world. Specifically, with the introduction of YouTube in 2005, music videos rampantly increased their popularity from the MTV (Music Television) era, becoming one of the main kinds of content consumed on the video-sharing platform (Edmond, 2014; Korsgaard, 2019). The musicalization of reality and moving images brought into the digital world is not only present with music videos but, in the past few years, has also appeared in the form of online streaming concerts–previously mainly distributed through cinemas and television, and now pullulating the Internet as an additional form of revenue and connection with people during the hard times given by the pandemic (Holt, 2011; Rendell, 2021).

1.2 Problematization

As mentioned in the introductory background on the music industry in the digital age, the new technologies brought many opportunities for development and improvement, as well as different challenges to be addressed. Although, nowadays, the preference for music consumption relies on digital purchases and streaming rather than CDs, this does not cover the fact that physical albums are generally more profitable both for producers and sellers (Lee et al., 2020). In particular, Wikström (2014) discussed the criticism that Spotify, as well as other streaming platforms, are receiving from artists and the general value chain on the distribution of revenues and the transparency of the process. In detail, the majority of these platforms do not rely on a fair system to pay the artists, which is mainly advantageous for the service distributors themselves (Wikström, 2014). Taking Spotify as an example, instead of paying a fixed amount per stream to the artists, it distributes 70% of the net revenues in royalties based on consumption stream-share (popularity of a song, the way people stream, duration of reproduction) to the owners of the rights of a specific song or album, which are usually the record labels that have to remunerate the artists based on their internal agreements (Wikström, 2014; Swanson, 2013; Spotify for Artists, n.d.). This system does not only spark controversies because of the low remuneration that the individual artists get from the platforms to the point that singers of the calibre of Taylor Swift revoked their songs from

these streaming services, but it also favourites big music companies rather than small independent ones (Swanson, 2013; Green & Sinclair, 2022; Wikström, 2014).

Digital technologies have made it possible for artists to easily reach a big audience and have also given the opportunity even for smaller ones to share and promote their work, yet there are still different problems that make it difficult for singers to survive in the music industry and even the big names cannot escape the struggles–such as the previously mentioned low revenues from the online world, as well as the piracy and file sharing issue that, even tho lessened, is still persistent (Leenders, Farrell, Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2015; Green & Sinclair, 2022). Moreover, in the past few years with the advent of new platforms to share music content, the music industry became one of the fastest-growing artist-community rates, meaning that it is reaching a saturation point, and it is hard for talented individuals to live by their music and even to stand out (Grome, 2021). Therefore, it is essential for singers to find alternative ways and sources of income even by stepping out of the traditional music outlets, especially by emphasizing the branding assets of the artists and thinking strategically not only in terms of awareness but also of engagement with the listeners–something that the Internet encouraged by offering different channels and tools (Hull et al., 2011; Green & Sinclair, 2022; Grome, 2021).

The relationship between singers and their audiences has always been present in the music industry since music was always considered a social activity to transmit something to the public and evoke emotions emphasised by the vocal print of the artists and their personalities (Baym, 2018). Yet, today this is expedited even further and "musicians relentlessly seek relationships with audiences, following listeners from platform to platform, trying to establish a presence for themselves and build connections" (Baym, 2018, p. 1). In this new panorama, artists are confused regarding how they can live out of their art since, as previously mentioned, a lot of work has to be done to get revenues wherein having a base of support coming from the listeners themselves is implied (ed. Tofalvy & Barna, 2020). Specifically, it is essential to create, sustain and consolidate a strong bond with people on the long-term perspective, since it enables casual listeners to evolve into fans that are willing to show constant support (ed. Tofalvy & Barna, 2020; Baym, 2018).

Tofalvy and Barna (ed. 2020) argue that the best way to have a strong bond with the fans and gain popularity is by nurturing the interactions with the fans. The same authors state that in a

digital society, many doubts arise among consumers about what is true and what is fake especially when it comes to these relationships, and therefore artists need to be careful regarding the perceived authenticity of their intention by constantly delivering a sense of closeness and deep personal connection. The social media platforms made it easier for artists to interact with their listeners and create a network with them while at the same time raising people's expectations regarding how these artists should approach them and the frequency of this contact (Ansari, Stahl, Heitmann, Bremer, 2018; Baym, 2018; ed. Tofalvy & Barna, 2020). Moreover, Bond (2021) stated that the pandemic played a major role in the general perception of relationships due to the reduced face-to-face interactions, and that the parasocial relationships with celebrities became more relevant because of the implicit coping mechanism for the lack of social contacts in the outside world. In particular, he added that what reinforced this, is the fact that the connection with singers (and other celebrities) did not shift drastically as it is accessibly mediated by a screen in the same way it was before the pandemic (with just a few adaptations), while the every-day friendships, work colleagues relationships and family bonds suffered the adaptation from the physical world to the online one.

In the past few years, the term "parasocial relationship" started to be used more frequently by different authors, describing a peculiar bond between fans and a celebrity that they have never met (singers in this case), where the first party generally has deeper feelings involved when compared to the other–known to be a relationship that is defined for being unequal in terms of feelings-involvement and, in extreme cases, unilateral (Chung & Cho, 2017; Ma, Song, Zhou, Chong & Xiong, 2022; Bond, 2021; Kim, Ko & Kim, 2015). As mentioned in this chapter, fans are fundamental for big and small artists to go through the difficulties of the digitalized music industry, but the relationship with the listeners has also changed and more is required to gather fans with the prospect of keeping them in the long term; a complexity of handling the particular relationship that is reflected in the fragmented and disparate consumer attitudes and behaviours (ed. Tofalvy & Barna, 2020; Baym, 2018).

The parasocial relationships put celebrities at the same level of friends, and sometimes it relates to a sensation of attachment mediated by a feeling that resembles enamourment (Stever, 2011; Chung & Cho, 2017; Ma et al., 2022). Regarding this topic, there is a sector in the music industry that is heavily relying on the parasocial relationship level: the K-pop (South Korean Pop) industry (Elfving-Hwang, 2018). An evidence of this is the number of

invested interactions that K-pop artists have with their fans on various social media platforms (King-O'Riain, 2021). Elfving-Hwang (2018), in her paper, explained how within K-pop, the singers have the appellative of idols and are referred to as such (K-pop idols), underlining since the beginning the relationship of admiration and attachment that people have with them. Moreover, the same author gave an overview regarding how idols are trained for years before making their official debut because the idea of perfection is instilled in the industry not only when it comes to performance-related abilities, but also regarding the way they behave and interact with the public on different platforms online and during events in-person (fan meetings, concerts), to facilitate the creation of deep connections.

Only recently, K-pop started to gain relevance outside its origin country. Specifically, after a first successful trial with the hit "Gangnam Style" by PSY that in 2012 accomplished record after record, the band BTS was the one that made it possible for K-pop to break through and establish a solid base for this genre outside of South Korea (McLaren & Jin, 2020). Today K-pop is getting worldwide recognition by continuously showing a steep exponential growth in its general awareness, familiarity, and profit (Statista, 2023b; Statista, 2023c). The success of many artists (such as the aforementioned BTS, Seventeen, Blackpink, Twice, and TxT, to name a few) was extremely rapid on an international scale despite the language barrier, and within the many reasons for this accomplishment, different authors agree with the fact that the K-pop culture and the solid relationship with the fans was an attractive and captivating feature (Elfving-Hwang, 2018; Li, 2022). Therefore, by being deeply embedded in the parasocial relationship level, the fruitful field of K-pop enables researchers to delve deeper into the complexity of this reality and gather relevant insights on the related faceted sphere of consumer attitudes.

1.3 Research Purpose and Question

The background and the problematization sections highlighted the fact that the changes in music consumption are putting in the front line the close relationships with the audience. The *excursus* illustrated the increasing importance for artists of having strong connections with their fans in the challenging scenario of the music industry of today, precisely in terms of the engagement of the consumers in parasocial relationships, and distinguishing the casual audience from a supportive fanbase. As previously mentioned, the term "parasocial relationship" started to gain more popularity among scholars in recent years, underlining the

shift in the relationship encouraged by digital technologies and fostering the complexity of consumer-related attitudinal outcomes. In this regard, the following research question was developed:

RQ: *How do the parasocial relationships between artists and their fans shape different types of consumer archetypes?*

The purpose of the study is to gather a better understanding of this complex sphere focusing on the responses in terms of attitudes towards consumption (related to paid and free content). The reason behind the frame of the research relies on the fact that while there is a sufficiently good overview of the parasocial relationships per se, the categorization of the faceted attitudinal outcomes is still blurry and not discussed enough. Therefore clarity is needed, and this paper aims to provide that by presenting the classification of consumers into specific archetypes. Indicatively, the successful context of K-pop was examined as it is a representative field in the music industry for being deeply involved in the parasocial relationships, and will be further discussed in the next chapter. Thus, K-pop allowed the researchers to concretely delve into the reality of this complex aspect, by analysing the completeness of the spectrum of consumer outcomes.

1.4 Intended Contributions

This thesis aims to contribute to the theoretical academic field while also presenting useful results that can give guidance regarding practical strategies to apply in the context of today's music industry. The previous sections of the introduction illustrated how music consumption was subject to a significant transformation in the digital era and illustrated the challenges and opportunities in this scenario. A specific aspect that was highlighted is the relevant shift that appeared in the connection between artists and their listeners, with scholars now putting more emphasis on the concept of parasocial relationships. Although nowadays there is an overgrowing relevance of this peculiar bond, there is a distinguishable gap that needs to be fulfilled regarding the classification of consumer outcomes. As it will be further developed in chapter 2.4 on "Parasocial Relationships", this connection between artists and their fans is not new and, even though it became more crucial in the present time, it had previous research that investigates the multiplicity of this sphere coming from different fields. Nonetheless, while this is well-explained, what is not as present in the literature is a clear structure of the faceted

outcomes that this relationship has on music consumers. Accordingly, this thesis mainly aims to contribute to the research streams of *parasocial relationships* and *fan engagement* by identifying distinct consumer archetypes based on different categories of outcomes in terms of attitudes towards the support (monetary and non) of the artist and, hence their engagement into the said support. Moreover, this study focuses on the perspectives of the consumers regarding the parasocial relationship level, following a bottom-up approach and covering the scarcity of this angle. Further, the contribution with the categorization of consumer archetypes can also help enlightening the artists and companies on specific insights that can be useful for designing better strategies to foster parasocial relationships (such as *personal branding* and appealing *content*) while tailoring them accordingly for the desired outcomes in the complex reality of the today's music industry. Lastly, the research will probe into the K-pop music field that is deemed a global phenomenon for currently generating a lot of money while also deeply entangled in the fostering of parasocial relationships–this helps supplementing the thesis by making it possible for researchers to analyse and unearth the plethora of the consumer-related attitudinal outcomes and subsequently make a more efficient and effective classification.

1.5 Thesis Outline

The inclusion of this section in the introduction is to outline the structure of the thesis so that it can be easy to follow for the readers. Specifically, the paper consists of six main parts. The first chapter is the introduction that presents the background of the relationship between the music industry and digital technologies, followed by the problematization and the purpose of the study with its research question to keep the readers engaged, to conclude with the aimed theoretical and practical contributions of the work. The second chapter is the one reserved to the literature review and theoretical framework, which provides a defined *excursus* on the relevant concepts and theories useful to understand the development of the thesis. The focus of the third chapter is on the methodology used, with a detailed research design and a plan for the data analysis. Consequently, the fourth chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the empirical data collected, while the fifth is the one for the overall discussion with the presentation of the archetypes. The final chapter presents the conclusions of the study, highlighting the theoretical and practical implications, as well as the limitations and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter serves as an introductory guide to the essential concepts that underpin the study. The first section provides an in-depth overview of the impact of digitalisation and social media platforms on the music industry, highlighting how the rise of these technologies has transformed content creation. The subsequent focus is on the concept of personal branding and its significance in the music industry. The following section encompasses the crucial role of fan engagement through social media, drawing upon the reciprocity theory and the communication involvement theory to unravel its dynamics. Furthermore, the concept of parasocial relationships between fans and celebrities is discussed, given its longstanding prominence in fan-celebrity behavioural studies. This subchapter explores how these relationships can expedite the bond between artists and their fans. Lastly, the concluding section provides an in-depth introduction to the K-pop music industry. It begins by elucidating the relevance of K-pop in contemporary society, offering a general overview of their strategic choices and their reliance on the expansion of the Parasocial Interaction theory within the industry. This serves as an exemplar that consolidates the aforementioned literature and theories, bringing forth a diverse range of consumer archetypes.

2.1 Content Creation

The surge of a digitalized era that conjured a plethora of social media platforms has paved the way for a novel way of self-marketing (Ansari et al., 2018). Content creation has surfaced as a medium pathway for artists to not only adapt to the technological reformation that is quite exogenous in its nature, but to also assert their online presence to attract potential fans and supporters (Achen, 2016). With the steep rise of music artists brimming the digital platforms, the latter now have more favourable circumstances than ever to seize the chance to grow digitally and bring about eventual fame (Ansari et al., 2018).

Consequently, music artists are pushed to be technologically adept and employ their creativity as well as personalise the content that they bring forth (Whitmer, 2019). It is with no doubt that personalization is deemed as an imperative aspect to generate when it comes to content creation (Gordon, McKeage, & Fox, 1998). Gordon et al. (1998) also indicate that personalization is at the crux of relationship marketing and is essential to build long lasting

bonds with the audience that would in return induce attitudinal patterns towards the artist. Tailoring the content to the segment of people you are targeting can serve as a shortcut to evoke the emotions of the audience and thus engender a fanbase that resonates with the artist's values (Gordon et al., 1998; Abid, Harrigan & Roy, 2020). Additionally, artists can resort to establishing content that reflects their own mores and showcases their personalities—to which findings have backed up the correlation between content genuineness and fans loyalty in the long-run (Steinhoff, Arli, Weaven, & Kozlenkova, 2019).

When peering at content creation from a social-exchange theory angle—which is the backbone of relationship marketing—Steinhoff et al. (2019) have explained that a B2C relationship could be further fortified by presenting a content that is valuable in the eye of the customer. Yet, correspondingly, Clark, Fine and Scheuer (2017) also assert that both parties are tangled into an enactment that is based on reciprocal obligations. This ongoing connection is undeniably founded upon reciprocal interest as Clark et al. (2017) stated; for instance, music artists can document their behind-the-scenes footage, vlogs that capture their personal moments and other content that give fans a sneak-peek to their favourite artist off-stage mundane life, whilst fans engage with this content. This exchange is known to be following the decree of reciprocity which is a paramount aspect for the smooth sailing of artist to fans relationship (Clark et al., 2017).

Another crucial element of content personalisation is data extraction and analytics, and nowadays platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter can enable artists to not only share their content but to also tailor it accordingly by dint of analysing the selected data (Appel, Grewal, Hadi, & Stephen, 2020). The embedded analytics available within the platforms can serve as a bypass to investigate relevant data that cover the demographics, preferences, listening habits and any valuable comment that tick the feedback box (Clark et al., 2017; Abid et al., 2020). An example of this could be wrought up in the way an artist's audience being predominantly made up of young adults that belong the respective generations of Millennials and Gen Z and who primarily listen to upbeat RnB music genre, musicians can therefore compose music that mirror those found preferences.

Going back to our focal point, content creation ought to succeed in strengthening the artist to fans relationship when certain prerequisites are fulfilled, and relationship trust is one important component that helps with the webbing of long-term customer loyalty (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). It is defined as "confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and

integrity" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). In order to achieve this so-called trust, genuineness and reliability must be first present to abet to the former (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Genuineness and reliability are also to be actualized once the quality of the content is consistent and truthful to its purpose, subsequently, increasing and tweaking the quality of content is imperative to fostering a higher relationship quality (Clark et al., 2017). Clark et al. (2017) has also elucidated on how students who followed their universities' social media account, have reported to possess a high relationship quality that later on moulded into trust and eventual loyalty (Schmitt, Skiera, & Van den Bulte, 2011; Van den Bulte & Wuyts, 2007). Undoubtedly, creating content on social media is one task that should unravel the key drivers to maintaining a relationship quality that not only caters to the audience's preferences, but also seeks to assemble long-lasting connections that are built on trust and reciprocity (Verma, Sharma & Sheth, 2016).

In conclusion, the paradigm shift brought about by the advent of digitalization and the proliferation of social media platforms has rendered content creation a vital facet of the music industry (Steinhoff et al., 2019). By understanding the different types of consumers and their attitudes towards the artists, musicians, by adhering to the technologically savvy standard, can capitalise on their creativity to personalise their content and assert their online presence to attract potential fans and supporters (Achen, 2016). Personalization of content is essential for building lasting bonds with the audience and can be achieved by tailoring the content to the targeted audience segment (Gordon et al., 1998; Abid et al., 2020). The social-exchange theory suggests that reciprocal interest is paramount for the smooth sailing of the artist-to-fan relationship (Clark et al., 2017). Data extraction and analytics can enable artists to tweak their content based on consumers' attitudes and their archetypes that relate to relevant data covering demographics, preferences, and listening habits (Anchen, 2016). Trust, built on the pillars of genuineness and reliability, is an important component that helps to establish long-term customer loyalty–hence, maintaining a high relationship quality through consistent and truthful content is imperative in this regard (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999).

2.2 Personal Branding

The vast expansion of social media platforms and their extensive daily usage has completely revolutionised the way business entities interact with one another (Franco, 2019 cited in Lo &

Peng, 2022; Lo, Yu & Chen, 2020; Lo & Peng, 2022). With the rise of a multi-channelled social media diffusion, digital marketing has seen a peak growth with an important migration of celebrities online to assert their presence (Appel et al., 2020; Gannon & Prothero, 2018; Lo & Campos, 2018, Lo & Peng, 2022). Consequently, with the acknowledgment of this newly found marketing tool known as "personal branding", marketers have begun to integrate celebrities in their strategies to capitalise on the latter's followers and seize potential customers (Lo & Peng, 2022). With the right set of personal branding tactical traits, any unknown musician can later become a celebrity with a platform jammed with followers and an enormous fanbase (Booth & Matic, 2011). As such, the title of "internet celebrity" is then attributed and is synonymous to lending an influential voice in the market with the potential of being a valuable asset to business companies (Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011).

Efficiently constructing a personal brand can serve as a fertile ground for music artists to promote themselves in a cost-effective way while hoarding economic benefits (Karaduman, 2013; Whitmer, 2019; Salo, Lankinen & Mäntymäki, 2013). Engaging with fans has transcended the spatiotemporal barrier within the digital world, as now music artists can respond to their fans by sharing posts, replying to comments and exclusively feature short video teasers about their upcoming releases on social platforms like Twitter, Instagram and TikTok (Whitmer, 2019; Salo et al., 2013).

Affirmatively, when tackling personal branding, self-identity becomes a pivoting point as it holds the expedient criteria to fathoming "who you are" and "what do you stand for" (Rein Kotler, Hamlin & Stoller, 2006). For that reason, music artists have to inwardly look into their identity and the elements that define it to properly apply personal branding which will shape their online persona (Hackley & Hackley, 2015). With a well-tailored personal branding, artists can resort to capitalising on this phenomenon to drive more traffic into their social media platforms, as well as profiting off of positioning strategies that hold promising career opportunities (Whitmer, 2019, Salo, et al., 2013).

Musicians nowadays appear to be adhering to this digital realm shift as nearly every celebrity is being pushed to adopt this new lifestyle and establish a personal brand (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009; Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). As such, the personal gain or motivation for employing a personal brand comes into a dichotomous package; it is said to have an intrinsic or internal impetus, and an extrinsic or public one (Vallerand, 1997).

On one hand, the internal motivation is deemed as disclosing your authentic self to others yet presenting yourself in a neatly polished manner (Schlosser, 2020). Internal motivation is then prompted by the inclination to build an exemplary digitally driven self (Michikyan, Dennis & Subrahmanyam, 2015). Indeed, this intrinsic motivational aspect is impelled by individually distinctive traits that are enmeshed to support self-expression (Lo & Peng, 2022). On the other hand, Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that the extrinsic or external motivation is most of the time accompanied by a certain gain, which is wrought as a two-sided coin wherein one side is covering physical gain and career opportunities, and the other side is known as a virtual one such as fame and completing self-actualization goals through self-branding. Akin to the intrinsic motivational aspect, the extrinsic motivational aspect is also impelled by the size of the reward (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

These two motivations have a dualistic essence that does not entail a mutually exclusive nature, but in fact, make them complementary (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Bringing forth these motivations can also be tricky as they require a prior existing factor that is compelled to be measurable known as the number of fans (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). The bigger the size of the fandom a musician possesses, the more they would be attracting new incomers into the fanbase, and the more likely business corporations and sponsors would be interested in collaborating with them and offering them better opportunities (Sook Kwon, Kim, Sung & Yun Yoo, 2014). As a consequence, Scarpi (2012) asserts that artists ought to resort to employing few expansion strategies that would be appealing enough to capture potential followers. These strategies are forked into two main ones: hedonic and utilitarian (Scarpi, 2012). The former one is depicted as the set of likeable traits that the celebrity showcases such as their physical appearance and performance: focusing on how the musician-fan interaction should bring about a pleasurable experience that ascertains satisfaction to the fandom, and this should be consummated via artists' frantic efforts in being digitally active, conducting live responses and engaging in other fan-artist interactions (Kamins, 1990; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Whereas the latter strategy is known by its informative facet that is handy and useful to the fans (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Since most social media platforms are predominantly designed to disseminate knowledge and information, celebrities utilise it as their key utilitarian strategy to appeal to their digital audience (Sook Kwon et al., 2014).

The proliferation of social media has transformed the way businesses engage with each other and paved the way for the rise of personal branding (Franco, 2019 cited in Lo & Peng, 2022; Lo et al., 2020; Lo & Peng, 2022). With the integration of celebrities in marketing strategies, personal branding has become an effective way for musicians to promote themselves and gain economic benefits (Karaduman, 2013; Whitmer, 2019; Salo, Lankinen & Mäntymäki, 2013). Building a personal brand requires self-reflection to determine one's identity and tailor their online persona (Lo & Peng, 2022). This approach has intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, with both internal and external rewards (Vallerand, 1997). Expansion strategies, including hedonic and utilitarian approaches, are employed to attract and retain fans (Scarpi, 2012). For us researchers, these strategies become important for inducing distinct consumer archetypes that foretell the latter's attitude towards personal branding. Indeed, the size of a musician's fanbase determines their appeal to business corporations and sponsors, leading to potential career opportunities (Sook Kwon et al., 2014). Notwithstanding, personal branding has become a crucial tool in the digital realm for music artists to capitalise on their followers and promote themselves effectively (Lo & Peng, 2022).

2.3 Fan-Artist Engagement

The significant upswing in social network sites—or commonly referred to as SNS—activity for the sole purpose of connecting with one's fellow peers and contacts, comes as a proof that people are generally engaged in social media for both personal and professional reasons (Lacoste, 2016). The literal definition of social media engagement is wrought in the way other users interact with the content that one posts on their SNS account which ranges from commenting, liking to sharing it either on the same platform or a different one (Ellison & Vitak, 2015). Jahn and Kunz (2012), have also explained that engagement is seen as a reflection of how the public views the social media content, from their moral and interest compass, and is to be measured by the way they search for, comment, react and share content online. Other authors like Úblová (2014) argued that engagement activities are composed of three categories which are consuming, participating and producing. While Smith (2014) reintroduced engagement as a four-component activity: information consumption, sense of presence, interest immersion, and social interaction.

Switching the gear to the focus on music artists in relation to social media and fan engagement, facts have shown that the majority of musicians and celebrities have been

resorting to the digitally driven communication network and social media platforms for the sheer purpose of widening their popularity scope by dint of connecting with their audience in a diligent manner (Stewart, 2018).

Lull (ed. 1987) asserted in his book "Popular Music and Communication" that famous artists and musicians are "loved, even worshipped, not only for their abilities to write songs and perform them publicly, but for their ability to 'speak' to their audiences" (ed. Lull, 1987, p. 11). The aforementioned statement is an evidential support that artists, although seeking validation from their fans, are also intertwined within a communication process that designates the need for reciprocity in this regard (Russell, Ito, Richmond & Tuters, 2008). Yet Russel et al. (2008) explain that fans not only admire the former for their talents and outstanding performances, but also for the way they actively speak and interact with the latter. The stale mass media model that used to prescribe a top-down hierarchical approach wherein artists engage in a one-to-many relationships via media broadcasts is long obliterated now, as a new model that supports many-to-many horizontal relational hierarchy has taken over with the surge of a digital age (Russel et al., 2008). Additionally, Pavlik (2008), has also added that not only the hierarchy has shifted, but the audience has seen an important alteration as well. Undeniably, as the same author mentions, the latter has moved from the position of being passive TV watchers, and radio listeners known as "receiver of mediated messages" (Pavlik, 2008, p.56) to being active consumption agents of media content as produsers (both producers and users).

Another primordial factor of engagement is the communication involvement—which is a key component of CIT or "Consumer Involvement Theory" introduced by Sangeeta (2017, cited in Rahman, Moghavvemmi, Suberamanaian, Zanuddin & Bin Md Nasir, 2018)—as involvement is deemed to be functional of time and makes it circumstantial (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). As such, being inclined to engage in fan page accounts will subsequently lead users to be also interested in other SNS of the same brand, and in this specific case music artists altogether (Rahman, et al. 2018). It has also been proved that positive followers' engagement has been weaved in the way fan pages present themselves (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). As an acknowledgment response to the benign attribution of fan engagement and fan pages, music artists are now more committed to include their fans as fellow collaborators (Panay, 2011). Involving fans can be exemplified in the way (a): thoroughly interacting with the fanbase via social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook as musicians can grasp how

platform-mediated engagement strategies ought to work (Hyatt & Hall, 2011); (b) establishing a website wherein fans can build a community by directly using chatrooms and forums as means to digitally mingle with one another; and (c) involving fans in collaboration plans to solve issues or ensue suggestions related to their music releases and future fan interactions (Benkler, 2011).

Nonetheless, the surge of social media activity among people for both personal and professional reasons indicates the significance of social media engagement in today's digital age (Lacoste, 2016). Engagement reflects how the public views social media content, and its measurement encompasses a range of activities, including consuming, participating, producing, information consumption, sense of presence, interest immersion, and social interaction, these being sets of activities that can foreshadow the different attitudinal patterns present within the perception of consumers' in regards to the content they are exposed to (Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Úblová, 2014; Smith, 2014). In the context of music artists, their popularity and success are dependent on their ability to connect and communicate with their fans through social media (Stewart, 2018). The traditional mass media model that prescribed a top-down approach has been replaced by a new model that supports a many-to-many horizontal relational hierarchy that focuses more on the consumer (Russel et al., 2008). Fans are no longer passive consumers of media content; they are active produsers who play a crucial role in shaping the way music artists present themselves on social media—as their online attitude towards music artists can be read as a reflection of their impression (Pavlik, 2008). Finally, communication involvement, which is a key component of CIT, is a significant factor in fan engagement (Sangeeta, 2017 cited in Rahman et al., 2018). Positive followers' engagement is essential in building successful fan pages, and music artists are increasingly involving their fans in various ways to enhance their fan interactions and promote their music releases (Panay, 2011).

2.4 Parasocial Relationships

A parasocial relationship has been at the crux of fan-celebrity behavioural studies since the mid-fifties (Sood & Rogers, 2000). Giles (2002) explains that a parasocial interaction stems from one's response to celebrity figures as if the latter is a close acquaintance of the former. It is important to note that Horton and Wohl (1956) were the initial conceptualizers of this phenomenon that was coined in a psychiatry magazine in 1956 and to which the parasocial

relationship theory was first defined as a delusional "face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). The performer was elucidated as a "personae" as Horton and Wohl (1956) disclose it as a party who seeks to attain intimacy with an audience of strangers by the mediation of a continual interaction. As such, the progressive yet steep development of parasocial bonds is emanating from a repeatedly consistent and regular exposure to media figures and celebrities to which the individual frequently finds themselves basking in the illusionary realm (Auter, Ashton & Soliman, 2008). Consequently, this vehement investment in celebrities that consumers emit is often akin to interpersonal relationships (Tsiotsou, 2015).

The parasocial interaction (PSI) theory was later on adapted within the radio broadcasting of popular music by Spangardt, Ruth and Schramm (2016), to which the findings have pointed out that the strong affiliation of PSI has served as a bridge towards the likelihood of direct interaction with the Facebook page of the Radio. Moving from Horton and Wohl (1956) original visually induced parasocial relationship, it has been reported that Spangardt et al. (2016) contribution is the very first documentation of an auditory inferred PSI. In the context of the music industry, it has been shown that hearkening to mood-congruent and emotive music genre has been assimilated to confiding into a friend with high empathic abilities who is willing to listen and share those emotions (Lee, Andrade & Palmer, 2013). Undeniably, music streaming platforms like iTunes, Spotify and social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have collectively fostered the social and digital inclusion of consuming music (Turner & Tollison, 2021). The online sharing experience of interacting with music has the potential to influence the preference and inclination towards certain music genres or artists, as well as shape the way fans identify themselves with each other and with the musicians (Epps & Dixon, 2017).

Kurtin, O'Brien, Roy and Dam (2019) also claimed that the music industry has been congested with the most parasocial experiences, and that PSI is predominantly present in shared content through social media platforms. The same authors have further expounded on how the choices that music artists make when it comes to sharing content, is a determinant of the audience disposition on the extent to which the former is willing to create a considerably intimate and chiefly reciprocal relationship with the artist. The perceived intention that is underlying within the mediated content is conclusive to how fans would experience the level of connection with the music artists (Kurtin et al., 2019). Additionally, the parasocial

relationship theory can reveal the behavioural patterns that are on a quest to support media artists both financially and affinity wise (Turner & Tollison, 2021). This aligns with Hyatt's (2012) "music marketing funnel" wherein artists implement a give and take relationship with their fans: they offer them free music videos and fans in return must follow them or subscribe with their email to their websites; as fans become more invested with the musician's content through interaction, they now become entrapped within a marketing funnel. The author concludes that "the more loyal, engaged, and interested your fan becomes, the more money he will be willing to spend" (Hyatt, 2012, p. 143).

Interestingly, parasocial relationships have been seen to exert an indirect impact on the individual's own purchase intentions (Fiore, Jin, & Kim 2005). Notably, the more intense and personally entangled the parasocial relationship is, the more likely it is for fans to buy endorsed products that their favourite artist consume (Martin & Ballantine 2005). Particularly, Burnasheva and Suh (2020) have proven that not only parasocial interaction plays a major factor in affecting purchasing decisions affiliated with endorsement, but also the more credible the celebrity endorser is perceived to be, the more brand affection is incited and abets to fans buying intention. These findings also consolidated prior ones that proved that triggering fans' emotive state and buying responses are both positively related (Yuan, Moon, Kim & Wang, 2021; Kusumasondjaja & Tjiptono 2019; Kim, Lee & Baek 2020; Dwivedi, Johnson & McDonald 2015; Dwivedi, Johnson & McDonald 2016). However, Burnasheva and Suh (2020) emphasised that these buying intentions and credibility would not be present in the first place if the audience is not parasocially associated with the music artist. Indeed, the stronger the PSI is, the more likely the buying intention effect would be stronger (Burnasheva & Suh, 2020).

In short, the concept of parasocial relationships has been discussed in fan-celebrity behavioural studies for several decades (Sood & Rogers, 2000). From its initial conceptualization as a delusional face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer (Horton & Wohl, 1956) to its adaptation to radio broadcasting (Spangardt et al., 2016), gaining more popularity with the music streaming platforms and SNS (Kurtin et al., 2019), the strength of parasocial bonds between fans and media figures has been shown to be positively correspondent to fans' purchasing intentions and brand affinity (Burnasheva & Suh, 2020). The music industry has particularly been shown to be a hub of parasocial experiences, with shared content on social media platforms serving as a motive of fans' perceived intimacy

and reciprocity with fellow musicians (Kurtin et al., 2019). These findings imply that parasocial relationships play a crucial role in the music industry's marketing funnel (Hyatt, 2012) and underscore the need for musicians to strategically manage their online presence to enhance parasocial bonds with fans (Burnasheva & Suh., 2020).

Notably, previous research has focused on the central role of parasocial relationships in fan-celebrity behavioural studies over several decades, highlighting its positive correlation with fans' purchasing intentions and brand affinity. However, past studies have not fully explored the heterogeneous nature of parasocial relationships, and how different consumer archetypes can be tracked along the way. This gap in research accentuates the need for a more nuanced understanding of the formation of distinct consumer archetypes in the music industry, and how attitudes towards parasocial relationships can influence these archetypes. By delving into the unique characteristics of various consumer segments and their parasocial experiences with musicians, this research can stipulate potential insights into how music artists can strategically manage their online presence to enhance parasocial bonds with fans and navigate the challenges of the digital era.

2.5 The K-pop industry

Following the so-called lift of the Korean media censorship that took place in the early nineties, the Korean Pop Music or better known as K-pop has exponentially spread through the Korean Television making it consumed by 99% of Korean households (Romano, 2018). The Korean wave or Hallyu that consisted of the popularisation of Korean Dramas or TV series, along with the dissemination of the K-pop has served as a political and touristic weapon to make South Korea the new Eastern Hollywood or "Hallyu-wood" (Farrar, 2010). Markedly, K-pop has seen two important evolvement phases that were respectively substantiated by the government in early stages, and later by the digital boom that birthed social media (Doré & Pugsley, 2019). The authors mentioned how the first generation that could be traced from the nineties till 2000s, has been exposed to a push by the government and specifically the "chaebol" or "Rich Corporation Business entities" that used K-pop as a soft cultural power to influence other east Asian countries like China, Japan and Thailand (Doré & Pugsley, 2019). The embellishment of the Korean culture to neighbouring countries is a tool K-pop idols or artists use for not only enhancing the Korean entertainment industries but also boosting the country as a whole (Howard, 2016). The second and most valuable

phase of K-pop dates from mid 2000s till today that has been bolstered by the digitalization era and the rise of social media whereby K-pop idols have seen global success outside the Asian periphery and reached an international audience (Parc & Kawashima, 2018).

By dint of accommodating the digital trends, Parc & Kawashima (2018) addressed how K-pop entertainment companies have begun to utilise digitally driven strategies that capitalised on different SNS platforms at very early stages. K-pop entertainment labels have been encouraging the K-pop fandoms to diffuse content on social media platforms with the only condition of not violating copyrights agreements (Berg, 2018)—as online video platforms are the best mediator to enhance the K-pop fan community while also spawning hype around subculture music (Berg, 2018; Liebler & Chaney, 2016). Strengthening the K-pop fan-artist bond by sharing K-pop related edited videos and "fancams"—known as an individual K-pop member focus live performance taken by fans—is now a conventionally feasible task as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok have become social media platforms that adopted the video sharing features which outstrip other online video platforms (Kim, Hwang & Kim, 2021).

The technological boom has served as an impetus to drive the K-pop industry to utilise digital strategic tools to encompass a more fluid environment: as the value creation model became multifaceted with all parties colluding to co-create for better content quality (Leung, 2017). Existing within an ecosystem that strives to satisfy consumers, producers and distributors, the K-pop entertainment companies have established their own digital platforms and have also collaborated with other online platforms to promote their idols' intellectual rights and exclusively distribute independent content (Kim et al., 2021). Fans are also considered to be a highly valuable asset to the K-pop labels as the former not only serve as a pathway to further endorse their idols' content, but they can also benefit from it by creating paid fan club memberships and fan-made merch which will strengthen the fans' loyalty to the K-pop idol (Leung, 2017). The second phase of K-pop is thus depicted as a panoramic and highly interactive ecosystem where the "locus of innovation is extended to include all actors" (Tan, Ondrus, Tan & Oh, 2020, p. 884). The integration of a non-linear value network success can be seen in the way Naver, a Korean search portal akin to Google, has launched its own K-pop video streaming platform back in 2015 called V-live (Kim et al., 2021). Kim et al. (2021) have described the V-live app as unique in its way as it brings together all K-pop idols and prompts them to post original content while interacting with global fans. This app has also

instilled live generated subtitles in multiple languages that are showcased live, which stimulates the appeal to international fans (Kim et al., 2021). Indeed, V-live now has more than 29 million active users per month, and is driving more than 80% of its traffic from international fans (Jun, 2019). Its fan-focused strategy has led to its global successful reach and could be a suitable example that studies the top-down and bottom-up approach that in this case, the K-pop industry has converged both for long lasting proliferation of the community (Kim et al., 2021; Jun, 2019).

Another notable aspect is the aesthetics presented by the K-pop idols that tend to encompass distinct characteristics like femininity, cuteness, and soft images (Epstein & Joo, 2012). Upon debuting, K-pop group members ought to embody a certain aesthetic and role within the group; for instance the "maknae" or youngest member is usually the one who should exhibit a cute image and would appeal to the audience who are attracted to this (Moon, 2019). Fans can choose from the wide personae diversity within the group and focus on their favourite member whom they identify the most with (Moon, 2019, Elfving-Hwang, 2018). This tactic is implemented to cater to the wide heterogeneity of the K-pop audience's preferences and to elicit a stronger bond with the artists (Moon, 2019, Elfving-Hwang, 2018). Additionally, Hong (2014) has also explained that by observing European fans talk about K-pop groups, the author asserts that the fact that K-pop music videos are almost completely devoid of sexually provocative and violent content, has caught the eye and appealed to female international fans. Oh (2015) has also addressed this matter by expounding on how the western-gaze of male K-pop idols has been intrigued by the revolutionised gender expression.

Furthermore, entertainment companies have sought to recruit K-pop idols with different backgrounds and nationalities as a strategy to appeal to the global audience and compel acceptance from the latter (Howard, 2016). This hybridised version of K-pop artists has led to the creation of a phenomenon that transcends the outskirts of the local country and accommodates for a multicultural setting (Oh, 2013). The incorporation of English lyrics within K-pop songs, as well as the ability of K-pop idols to speak different languages as they come from distinctive origins, would reinforce the connection with local and global fans and promote their releases even further (Kim et al., 2021). Indeed, Iwabuchi (2010) argues that cultures resort to the concept of hybridisation—which is defined as "a space where intercultural and international communication practices are continuously negotiated in interactions of differential power" (Kraidy, 2002, p. 317)—to further promote the local

cultural production, to which would abet to the plummet of Western supremacy in internationally fruitful markets (Iwabuchi, 2010). Hence Shim (2006, p. 27) describes the "Korean media development as a metaphor for thinking about the complex relations of cultures to the forces of globalisation".

Lastly, Tan et al. (2020) have affirmed that K-pop entertainment labels are striving to be more technologically inclined and present on multiple social media platforms to enhance the K-pop idols image as well as include fans within the content creation process. For instance, the SM entertainment "Everysing" app was launched for the sole purpose of instigating fans to become "produsers", and the "SMRookies Entertainment" app has also been established to generate feedback for future potential K-pop idols that have yet to debut in groups (Tan et al., 2020). Rojek (2001, p. 17) has addressed this intertwined engagement of fans as the way "celebrity status is rendered transparent through the articulation and recognition of common traits between the psychology and culture of celebrities and fans". In fact, interviewed US K-pop fans have mentioned that this inclusion has made them believe that K-pop idols are more interested in their international fans and genuinely look after them more than any other Western celebrity (Yi, Kwon, Chung, Ko, & Lee, 2015). As such, K-pop fans are more likely to engage in multiple fandom activities to ensure the relevance and success of their favourite idol that range from: voicing out their truthful opinion and complaining on Twitter to condemn the entertainment decision, casually starting streaming sessions to increase their K-pop idol music on global charts, as well as collectively voting for their artist on music awards (Kang, Kim, Yang, Park, Ko, Lee & Han, 2021). Interestingly, fans can also tend to collaborate with other fandoms and offer fan labour work by streaming other fandom's artist songs and voting for the latter that would require the other fandom to do the same in return (Kang et al., 2021). The overall success of the K-pop industry could be indeed shown in the way South Korea has generated a global recorded music revenue that increased by 17.9% in 2018 (IFPI, 2019). Not to mention how BTS, a famous K-pop boy group, ranked 3rd on Spotify global chart and have persistently won the "Billboard Music Award for Top Social Artist" for three years in a row to which implied the acknowledgement of them being the most influential artist on social media (Kang et al., 2021).

To finalise, the K-pop industry has been able to successfully integrate a non-linear value network, catering to the diverse preferences of its global audience (Kim et al., 2021). The industry has strategically implemented unique aesthetics, varied cultural backgrounds and

technological advancements to create a strong bond between K-pop idols and their fans (Moon, 2019, Elfving-Hwang, 2018). This has effectively leveraged the power of parasocial relationships present within the K-pop realm to establish a diverse range of consumer attitudes (Elfving-Hwang, 2018). Jun (2019) describes how V-live, an app launched by Naver, is an example of such a strategy, which has stimulated the appeal of international fans. K-pop idols are intentionally moulded to embody specific roles and aesthetics to entice a broader range of preferences within the audience (Jun, 2019). The industry's focus on creating hybridised versions of K-pop idols and the incorporation of English lyrics has further expanded the industry's reach (Oh, 2013). The K-pop industry's incorporation of fans in the content creation process has cemented the bond between fans and K-pop idols, resulting in a wide range of fandom activities (Tan et al., 2020). Overall, these strategies have helped the industry to generate a significant amount of global revenue (Kang et al., 2021) and create a revolutionised gender expression that has challenged the Western standards (Oh, 2015). In conclusion, the K-pop industry has been successful in its bottom-up and top-down approach, creating a community that transcends borders and cultures (Kim et al., 2021), while also demonstrating the effectiveness of parasocial relationships as an exemplar to navigate the challenges of the digital era in the music industry.

3. Methodology

Throughout this upcoming chapter, the methodological groundwork that aligns with our research question will be showcased. First, the readers will find the philosophical approach, highlighted in a way to display the selected world view angle and understanding of reality and knowledge. Second, in a subsequent stage the research design is introduced, underpinning the method approach for the research, and expounding on the method of data collection which comprises the chosen sampling strategy. Consequently, the procedure of data analysis is presented, while outlining its specific selected approach that is imperative for analysing empirical data. Finally, a detailed elaboration of the quality of the research and the ethical considerations that it entails are demonstrated.

3.1 Research Philosophy

It comes with great significance to understand and address the philosophical baseline of this research prior to delving into the design and the methods. Notably, it is paramount to deconstruct our philosophical impetus behind our choices in order to keep track of our reflexive standpoint (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). As such, us researchers ought to outline the lane that this study is following without straying from it for more precise accuracy purposes. Undeniably, this chapter serves neither intent to define a general truth that underpins a definite answer to what is right or what is wrong, nor does it aim to undermine other standpoints that form reality and knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This is rather a presentation of our stances on how we perceive the nature of the world and the truth that surrounds it all while bestowing a set of pragmatic assumptions.

This research paper is mainly outlined to explore the parasocial relationship theory in the context of the music industry and the different attitudinal archetypes it brings about. While it is worthwhile to clarify that the parasocial interaction theory has been at the backbone of behavioural studies for a few decades now, the variety of personae that it can abet to has never been a subject of past scholarly interests. The effect of the parasocial relationships aspect has been talked about in both qualitative and quantitative research papers, but the complexity as well as the intricacy behind fans' consumption attitudes that shaped many archetypes within the music sphere has long been overlooked. As such, it goes without saying that the theme of diversity within the experiences of fans—that are deemed subjective in this

context—ought to be scrutinised to unveil the multiple subjective realities that comprise them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The different perspectives that exist in this framework, and shall be further elucidated on, suggest that this study will take on a relativistic ontological inclination against the perceived parasocial relationships from the point of view of fans, and thus, these parasocial relationships can be interpreted in miscellaneous of ways, depending on the person's attitudes towards it, since it generates many fan archetypes, or in an ontologically relativist sense; many truths (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Hence, there is no definite answer or one reality when tackling the parasocial experience, but the relativist stance encourages the mindset of having different viewpoints that are relative from one person to another that shall be explored (Levers, 2013).

While ontology is a philosophical approach that deals with the concept of the perceived "reality" and "truth", another philosophical element that is essential to refer to in this regard is "epistemology", or better known as the theory of "knowledge" that bring about assumptions that either see knowledge from an objectively positivist angle or deem it as a socially constructed notion, and therefore is considered relative (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In alignment with what our ontological ground entails, we propose that the epistemology of this paper continues highlighting the knowledge element from a social constructionism perspective (Levers, 2013). As the focus is casted on the multiple attitude archetypes of fans that the parasocial relationships engender, in this regard, rather than relying on external factors to determine a positivist knowledge, social constructionism emphasises on the importance of people and the meaning behind their experiences to draw on their thinking and feelings, thus their attitudes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, reality in this thought process, is far from being deemed as objective, universal, and holds external attributes to make up the knowledge that it beholds, but is rather subjective, relative, and socially constructed in the way that meaning is only pertained to experiences of people (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Nevertheless, assuming that parasocial relationships are subjective, a research design is essential to unveil its insightful constituents in a detailed manner.

3.2 Research Design

This research paper seeks to enquire about the different consumer archetypes that the parasocial relationships has abetted to in the context of the music industry, while exploring the multifaceted aspects of the parasocial relationship theory. As aforementioned, our philosophical assumption stances in the previous sub-chapter have indirectly indicated our predilection towards a qualitative approach. On the one hand, the qualitative method has been diligently chosen in this case as it is well suitable for understanding the complex conceptualisation of our subject while exploring the potential outcomes borne by the different archetypes. On the other hand, this choice can also be construed as a counteraction due to the overwhelming amount of quantitative based research papers within the field of parasocial relationship theory. Previous research and literature reviews have solely studied this phenomenon with close proximity on the correlative side that tackled behavioural consumption patterns and the intensity of the parasocial relationship aspects. Yet, they have inadequately failed to excavate even deeper and uncover the heterogeneity of fans archetypes due to constrictive characteristics of the quantitative design. As such, no exploratory follow up inquiries have taken place that could lead to interesting findings in this regard. Accordingly, studying the attitudes of fans that have been entangled within a parasocial relationship with their favourite music artist impose a research design that ascertains flexibility, depth, and closeness, to which have long been attributed to a qualitative approach (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Since our research mainly seeks to provide multiple archetypes within the field of parasocial relationships, while keeping in mind the prominent dichotomous nature of our question that pursues to assume at the same time explore the possibilities, an abductive approach has been selected. This approach is known to also adhere to a dualistic disposition, combining both the inductive and deductive approaches into one (Bell et al., 2019). The latter is described as having a predisposed set of theoretical assumptions as a starting point, then from there few hypotheses are developed to later on being tested accordingly to either be retained or eliminated—to which it has been mainly affiliated with a quantitative research design (Bell et al., 2019). In our case, the research is partially deductive in a way that assumption-based elements have been perceived within our literature rhetoric. The former on the other hand, is believed to focus on observation and exploration as a starting point, to arrive at the formation of certain theories that resulted from the research analysis, hence its association with the

qualitative research design (Bell et al., 2019). This inductive approach pertains to our research field in a sense that it aligns with the exploration and observation aspects that aim at bringing about different attitudinal archetypes in the context of studying parasocial relationships in the music fandoms. Consequently, impending post-analysis theories may surge out.

According to Tavory and Timmermans (2014), an abductive approach is essentially used when the subject does not fit into any predisposed theoretical mould, and in order to broaden up the baseline of the theoretical knowledge, one ought to first study in depth what those moulds really are. Additionally, the abductive approach possesses a continual and reiterative essence that allows us to tweak the analysis and theories depending on the findings, which might serve as potential answers to what could not fit into the said mould (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). In short, a qualitative research design has been assigned to challenge past studies and explore the untracked archetypes along the way of researching parasocial relationships. An abductive approach has also been woven into this thesis as its dichotomous nature reflects the ambidexterity of our research study.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Method

The qualitative approach offers the researchers different methods for data collection to choose from and after a first evaluation, the final decision for gathering primary data relied on conducting focus groups. The reason behind the adoption of this method is connected to the research questions and the purpose of the thesis itself. As stated before, this research aims to delve into the complex realm of the parasocial relationships between artists and their audience to then provide a clear structure of consumer archetypes based on their attitudes towards the support of the singers. Therefore, to be able to efficiently and effectively identify the said archetypes it is fundamental to analyse the wide spectrum of this reality. As Carson, Gilmore, Perry, and Gronhuag (2001) affirmed, focus groups posit a helpful tool to handle all kinds of research that need to focus on the great variety of different angles regarding a specific topic. Specifically, the main strength of focus groups is the ability to extract valuable information from complex phenomena (such as behaviours, motivations, and attitudes), enriching the knowledge and comprehension of the studied matter thanks to the ongoing

interactions within the group that highlight different aspects by having people arguing and explaining their thoughts to the others (Carson et al., 2001). In the case of this thesis, the interactions in the form of discussions and opinions sharing were crucial to identify the archetypes through a process of comparing and contrasting, which exalted the commonalities and disparities between the participants (Carson et al., 2001).

The decision regarding the number of focus groups to conduct for this research was not pre-determined as it was based on the closeness to the saturation point, where the new results would have not added much more to the ones already gathered (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Carson et al., 2001). Precisely, we reached it after three focus groups where two of them had seven participants and the other one eight, which is in line with the guidelines outlined by Carson et al. (2001). In this way, as stated by the same authors, time would not cut off opportunities for people to develop their thoughts and opinions, allowing for greater participation and the consequent development of relevant insights. Moreover, the participants of the focus groups appeared to be excited to contribute to this research and they lasted 2:00:03, 2:06:05 and 2:30:37 hours respectively, which also respects the suggestion of Carson et al. (2001) to stay within the range of 1-3 hours for better results.

Regarding the settings for the focus groups, all of them were conducted online through the use of the video-conference platform Zoom. The reason behind this relies on the fact that the field of K-pop was chosen as the focus for this thesis to extrapolate the archetypes, and by being a global phenomenon, the participants included people from different countries and cities, which will be further explained in the section 3.3.2 about the Sampling. Hosting focus groups remotely have several implications and raise concerns among scholars, spacing from technical issues to the ability of the moderators to guide the process in a less contextualised space with reduced non-verbal communication signals (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the online video-conference platform offered the possibility to have synchronous data collection that resembled the ones done in a physical setting, which enabled the researchers to not lack in the depth of the process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Furthermore, before starting we asked the participant if they could keep the camera on, and the agreement of everyone involved made it possible to not only analyse their words but also not miss some crucial non-verbal signals such as facial expressions and gestures (aside from the ones involving sounds fillers sounds and pauses). Lastly, the pandemic made people used to these digital platforms for school, work and social contacts, therefore all the people

involved were tech-savvy enough to use Zoom. Possible technical issues were also planned to be covered by one of the moderators to avoid stopping the process, and a plan B with the link for the video-conference platform Google Meet existed in case Zoom was not working for everyone. It is important to specify that in the case of this thesis, we decided to split the work so that one of the two researchers was the actual moderator asking questions, and the other one the co-moderator that took care of all the technicalities as suggested by Carson et al. (2001).

In general, when opting for conducting focus groups (either face-to-face or online), several things need to be taken into consideration for it to go as smoothly as possible and generate valuable results. Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) agree with Carson et al. (2001) by affirming that what allows the focus groups to be successful relies on the ability of the moderators to guide the process and on their organisational skills in terms of setting the environment and the designing the structure with topics and questions. The remaining part of this 'Method' section will be used to further elaborate on these factors.

As previously mentioned, the focus groups were conducted online, which also helped in terms of setting a comfortable environment and less intimidating scenario since the participants were in their own houses, playing an important role in making them feel at ease (Carson et al., 2001; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Moreover, the day and time for each focus group were discussed with the participants, adapting to their schedules. The result of this had all the focus groups being conducted in the early evening (respectively two at 8:30pm and one at 7:30pm), which also followed the suggestions of Carson et al. (2001), who stated that this is an optimal time for the stimulation of participation and opinion-sharing enjoyment.

The focus groups followed a semi-structured approach that allowed for "finding the right balance of openness and control" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p. 214), which is one of the main issues when opting for this method of data collection. In this way, certain fundamental areas and questions were covered while also allowing flexibility regarding the order of the discussion and the introduction or removal of some questions based on what the participants openly discussed. This choice is supported by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) who argue that contrary to the beliefs, focus groups should not entirely lack a structure to be successful. The same authors affirmed that the use of open questions can come in handy when trying to avoid research bias; nonetheless, it is fundamental for the researchers to analyse different angles

that can be brought up by the questions pre-stipulated. Moreover, letting the participants freely talk without interruptions or guidelines from the moderators would have impeded the easiness of the following analysis by producing poor data due to the confusion regarding what the participants are answering (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Regarding what has been said, all the focus groups that we conducted followed the same set of questions, which were adjusted based on the ongoing discussion, enabling the smooth conduction of the analysis by making the process of comparing and contrasting to draw the archetypes way easier. Specifically, we structured an exploration stage that followed a first phase of familiarisation (see Appendix 1) in which people were asked about their age, name (or a pseudonym), and the K-pop artists they follow. Moreover, the familiarisation stage had general questions about K-pop as an introductory and ice-breaker phase, where we asked things such as why they became a fan of the K-pop idols they follow and the elements that they believe make them successful among fans. Inserting this phase was fundamental not only to contextualise the focus group and build connections among the participants—as Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) suggest—but also to start grasping some aspects of parasocial relationships and their importance in the K-pop field.

Before delving deeper into the explanation of the exploratory stage, it is fundamental to mention some technicalities regarding the organisation of the meetings. Specifically, before starting, we introduced ourselves and illustrated the scope of the research to obtain the trust of the participants and avoid any intimidating feelings or shyness by reassuring them that there are no wrong and correct answers to the questions we asked (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Moreover, as suggested by Carson et al. (2001) we proceeded to explain the ground rules to keep the flow of the conversation as smooth as possible (such as waiting for someone to finish speaking to intervene, using the 'raise my hand' button offered by the platform, respecting the opinions of the other participants). Furthermore, we reassured the participants regarding the ethical aspects of the research, informing them that the focus groups will be used only for the writing of this thesis and that everything will be anonymous, meaning that they could have also picked a pseudonym for their name if they felt the need to do it. During this part, we also asked for the consent of the participant to record their voices to facilitate the analysis of the data gathered.

Following the familiarisation stage, we moved to the exploration one, where we asked questions to encourage conversation around the critical areas for our research. After pondering the amount of queries to ask in this phase of the focus group, we ended up opting for having a guideline of 16 questions since, as Carson et al. (2001) state, there is no agreement among scholars regarding the number of questions that make a focus group more or less structured, and focus groups having around 17 questions were described by authors such as Byers and Wilcox as nearly unstructured (1991 cited in Carson et al., 2001). Moreover, as previously mentioned, some flexibility was allowed based on the ongoing discussions.

One crucial thing for the focus groups regarding the questions asked in the exploratory stage was to briefly explain the concept of parasocial relationships before starting with this phase (see Appendix 1). As suggested by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), while it is important to not overwhelm the participants with numerous theoretical concepts, it is also fundamental to explain the ones that are the pillar of the research so that the participants can have the correct interpretation of the discussed topic and generate valuable results. In this case, the participants needed to reflect on the parasocial relationships connected to their attitudes towards the support of the K-pop artists, therefore it was crucial to give them a quick overview of the broad sphere of this concept to not circumscribe their thoughts but rather stimulate them by making people reflect on it. Once this was done, the focus groups were well-contextualised and the participants felt more at ease after the ice-breaker introduction; which allowed the researchers to move forward with the exploratory phase.

The questions asked followed a path with different topic sections, even though those were extremely inter-connected within each other's, as suggested by Carson et al. (2001). Firstly, we investigated the parasocial relationships with the K-pop idols in terms of the engagement of the participants in the said relationships, as well as their thoughts and opinions on the parasocial relationships in the K-pop industry, fostered by the idols. After this, we moved to questions regarding the support towards the K-pop idols, asking people to explain the ways in which they show support to the artists and making them reflect on the influence that the parasocial relationships can have in this case. The specific topic cluster was necessary as a junction segment to the following cluster narrowed down to the consumer attitudes since there are forms of support and consumption that are not strictly monetary and need to be included in the research to better develop the archetypes. The cluster with questions about the

attitudes towards consumption involved different thought-provoking queries with the scope of making the participants reflect in a critical way directly on these attitudes in relation to the parasocial relationships with the K-pop idols, as well as capturing the said attitudes by gathering personal thoughts on different consumption habits generally present in the K-pop industry. Consequently, as suggested by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), to end the focus groups we prepared some more specific and detailed closing questions to foster critical thinking, touching also on the aspect of the loyalty towards the artists, as well as the competitiveness among fans and the counterproductive part of the parasocial relationships with the feelings of exploitation and what would this mean in terms of reaction from the fans. Lastly, once we finished going over our questions, a space for additional ones and suggestions coming from the participants was left, followed by thanking the people that joined the focus groups to make them feel appreciated (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Carson et al., 2001).

As previously mentioned and remarked by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) and Carson et al. (2001), one of the crucial things when it comes to conducting focus groups is the ability of the moderators to facilitate them and guide the process. According to the same authors, one of the main challenges relies on including everyone in the conversation and avoiding having some people speak more than others. Aware of this possible issue, the moderator in charge of asking questions not only remarked on the friendly and confidential atmosphere at the beginning of the focus group to encourage even the more shy people to intervene but also prompted the conversations with laid-back statements such as "I would like to hear the thoughts of x people as well if that's possible" when someone was being quiet for too long, an effective probing technique suggested by Carson et al. (2001). Moreover, regarding the moderation style and probes, during the process, the main moderator sometimes used laddering up and down techniques to go more in-depth with the data collection (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Specifically, the one that was used the most between the two was the laddering up, asking people the 'why' question and elaboration when needed, as this is helpful to "reveal the individual's value base" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p. 205), which is an essential part to investigate when having to formulate consumer archetypes in regards to the parasocial relationships.

3.3.2 Sampling

This thesis aims to investigate how parasocial relationships in the music industry shape different consumer archetypes by analysing the K-pop field through the use of focus groups; therefore, it was essential to have an accurate sampling frame and make the decision on the sampling strategy also by taking into consideration the challenges in terms of the representativeness and precision levels (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Specifically, for this study, we decided to combine purposive sampling and convenience sampling, two designs from the non-probability techniques as reported by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021). The same authors describe purposive sampling as the selection of the participants from the target population based on the purposes of the study, asking them to participate if they fit into the eligibility criteria (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In our case, this was useful because to be able to present the results in the form of archetypes there is the need to explore the complex sphere of the researched topic by capturing its different angles; therefore it was crucial to avoid selecting people that appeared to have all the same level of approach to the parasocial relationship in K-pop. Moreover, Carson et al. (2001) state that focus groups usually use purposive sampling as it is more relevant when wanting to gain diverse insights that can cover multiple perspectives, regardless of the frequencies in terms of the presence of these people in the entire population. In practice, we were able to select the possible participants by generally observing the K-pop fans on Twitter and contacting the ones that, from their statements, seemed to have different approaches to parasocial relationships with the idols. For this last point, we have also used another way to recruit people by contacting friends that are K-pop fans. This is where purposive sampling merged with convenience sampling, by counting on easy accessibility (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Nonetheless, even in this case, those selected were based on the perceived diversity of the approach to the parasocial sphere, in order to contribute to the development of different archetypes.

Regarding the sampling strategy, as suggested by Carson et al. (2001) we have also opted for heterogeneity within the focus groups, which is preferred when having to analyse the broadness and wideness of a phenomenon, especially when the latter is unframed. Nonetheless, the same authors state that the majority of the heterogeneous focus groups have some homogeneous elements, which was also the case for the ones we conducted. Specifically, our participants for the focus groups were sought from the population of K-pop fans, all of which were females and aged from 18 to 27 years old. The choice that we made

relied on the fact that the majority of K-pop fans are female, and the average age is 23 years old (Kiaer, n.d.). Moreover, Elfving-Hwang (2018) affirmed that the parasocial sphere is more evident especially when it comes to people in their youth, from teens to young adults. Nonetheless, heterogeneity constituted a big part of the sampling not only because of the selection of participants that were hinting at a variety of approaches to parasocial relationships but also because of including people from different countries and not considering their nationality, as we were exploring a global phenomenon and the differences under this level were not relevant. Moreover, we decided to not restrict the samples to fans of specific K-pop groups, to avoid limiting the heterogeneity of the sampling and strengthen the representativeness level while also aiming to be more precise with the results. The need to explore different angles of the research topic, mentioned with the purposive sampling and the heterogeneity of the groups, matched the number of focus groups suggested by Carson et al. (2001) in these cases, as the authors stated that the saturation point is usually reached after three focus groups, like in this case. A list of the participants with their information can be found in Table 1.

Although English may not be the mother tongue of all the participants, the focus groups were conducted in this language because of the different nationalities involved in each of them. Everyone taking part in the research was informed in advance and this appeared not to be a problem since, as also stated by Kiaer (n.d.), English is the main language that K-pop fans use to communicate online with the idols and with each other. Moreover, this fastened the transcription process as no translations were needed, making these transcriptions more accurate. Nonetheless, while English is used a lot in the online community, it could have been possible to still have people being shy to use their second language in front of strangers. Therefore, we decided to create different group chats for the specific focus groups not only to decide the date and time of these but also to help them socialise and overcome any intimidating feelings. Precisely, while Carson et al. (2001) state that researchers can gain better information with focus groups composed of strangers, it is also true that, as Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) remarks, it is crucial to obtain trust and help with the creation of a serene atmosphere.

Table 1: Information on the participants of the focus groups

Focus Group	Name/Pseudonym	Age	K-pop artists
1	Angel	18	BTS
1	Valentina	23	BTS, Seventeen
1	Adriana	20	BTS
1	Margot	25	BTS
1	Aurora	20	BTS, Twice
1	Chiara	26	BTS, Seventeen
1	Ica	24	BTS, Got7, Seventeen
2	Charlie	27	BTS
2	Caitlyn	21	BTS
2	Katia	21	BTS
2	Yosra	22	EXO
2	Sahar	24	Dreamcatcher
2	Elizabeth	18	BTS
2	Fran	20	BTS
3	Narmin	23	NCT
3	Yasmine	23	NCT, Stray Kids
3	Wissal	24	BTS, STAYC, NCT
3	Sondes	26	EXO
3	Arbia	26	EXO, Stray Kids
3	Ghofrane	26	EXO
3	Leila	27	EXO
3	Sarah	25	Blackpink

3.4 Procedure of Data Analysis

The analysis of our qualitative data through the conduction of focus groups has been conveyed by dint of relying on Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) for crafting the data as well as Carson et al. (2001) for plotting the interviews for the focus groups. For the sake of safeguarding every information covered during the focus groups, the realisation of the sessions' materials has been recorded and noted for more accurate transcription later on during the subsequent analysis. As Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) have expounded that the act of transcribing is defined as preserving the conformity of what has been said by the participants orally and reproducing it into written content instead for more diligent dissection of the data.

Bell et al. (2019) have also suggested that the recording of the totality of the interviews, and in this case focus groups is necessary to avoid missing small details. As such, this has allowed us to not only be able to track and refine the analysis back and forth in a continuous manner, but it has also facilitated the tracking of the recurrent themes and attitudinal archetypes thoroughly. It is notable to mention that our participants had provided us their answers in English, so we were fortunate to not invest an additional time to translate and readjust the presented raw data while transcribing, to which it served us as a shortcut to directly extract worthwhile input to include in the analysis. Us researchers have organised three focus groups in total, with sixteen questions that with the consequent empirical data have been assigned to be categorised under certain themes. Prior to coding, the sorted-out data necessitated to be interpreted constantly to designate the relevance of it according to the found themes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

As aforementioned, our research design compelled the integration of an abductive approach throughout the research and most importantly to employ it within the data analysis chapter. The iterative characteristics of this approach has permitted us to be aligned with the continuous generation of the data into subthemes, that is later on matched into pertinent findings, and moulded into theoretical insights (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2006). Although our sole purpose of this research is to transform the empirical data and arrive at a final step of outlining relevant theoretical knowledge, the challenges as Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) have asserted, remain in chaos, representation, and authority. The same

authors have surmounted these obstacles by implementing the approach of *sorting, reducing, and arguing* respectively. In the first step, the ascription of the data to subthemes and archetypes must take place. Indeed, it is employed via the procedure of coding and labelling accordingly (Rennstamm & Wästerfors, 2018; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

As such, the sorting has already been exemplified in deriving relevant themes in respect with relevant archetypes, yet the reducing aspect can also be seen in the way we minimise the number of themes and subthemes, as well as recurrent content. Mapping out the presented arguments mentioned during the focus groups is essential as repetition could be mainly tracked and so similar participants' ideas have been subsequently reduced to keep one representative significant example. In alignment with our abductive decree, this perfectly depicts the subjective side of the thesis, wherein the outcome heavily depends on representative themes and examples that have been tweaked all along (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Lastly, the final step is arguing—wherein us researchers draw conclusions in accordance with building theoretical knowledge that reflect the found, sorted, and reduced empirical data. Not only additional theoretical insights are bound to surge during this process, but also the initial theoretical framework is either to be strengthened or scrutinised to fill in the underlying gap within the research. Once the data analysis is finalised, the development as well as amendment of the theoretical framework is crucial to provide a resolution to the research question (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

3.5 Research Quality

A critical factor when doing research is to constantly perform some quality judgement throughout the research: from the contextualization to the data collection and the consequent analysis and discussion (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Bell, et al. 2019). In particular, Bell et al. (2019) pointed out that the researchers need to use different criteria to judge the quality when opting to do a quantitative or a qualitative study because the data collected for the latter do not consist of the use of variables and consequent measurability. Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Bell et al., 2019) and Guba and Lincoln (1994, cited in Bell et al., 2019) stated that the criteria to evaluate qualitative research relies on authenticity and trustworthiness, the latter composed of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The reason behind the need for different criteria also relies on the fact that the same authors believe that there is not only one exclusive truth in the researched area but that the outcomes can instead

be multiple, which matches our philosophical perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Bell et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Bell et al., 2019).

The concept of credibility to assess the quality of the research refers to what was just presented, this one being the criterion that emphasises the fact that the social reality is faceted and that there are different angles to consider regarding a specific phenomenon (Bell et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Bell et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Bell et al., 2019). This is in line with the approach that we decided to have for this research, based on a social constructivist epistemology and relativist ontology, which is also fostered by the fact that with the need to find archetypes concerning the complex parasocial sphere, as mentioned throughout the thesis, it was fundamental to not circumscribe the study to a single view but to analyse the different perspectives and attitudinal outcomes that can emerge. Moreover, we adopted an abductive approach that has a base of theory to start from, nonetheless when formulating the questions for the focus groups, we tried to not be too biased by what we read (as well as our knowledge of the topic) and open up to different scenarios and perspectives by also interrogating the participants regarding the negative sides or risks involved in the sphere of the parasocial relationships with the idols and explore the consequences of these, which efficiently counterbalanced the literature and unlocked another viewpoint. Furthermore, to gather as many useful insights as possible and various perspectives, we have highlighted that the number of focus groups was not pre-determined but relied on the saturation level. Throughout the research it was also stated that our contribution is part of a bigger scenario that can be investigated under different lights in future research (see Chapter 6.3 on Research Limitation and Future Research). Additionally, credibility relies not only on the good practice of conducting the research but also on the use of respondent validation by sending the findings to the people involved in the study (Bell et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Bell et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Bell et al., 2019). Therefore, to increase credibility, we submitted a summary of the findings (including the specific quotations) to the respective group chats that we created for the different focus groups to ensure that any of the things mentioned was a result of misinterpretation; although we used clarifying probes during asking for confirmation of what people were saying during the process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

The second criterion is transferability, which refers to whether the findings can be applied in other different contexts or the same analysed context but at a different time, considering that

the qualitative research uses a small sample of people, which increases the uniqueness of the study (Bell et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Bell et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Bell et al., 2019). Although we cannot claim that our findings are precisely transferable to different scenarios and timeframes, as mentioned, it was crucial for us to analyse different perspectives and angles, trying to go both in-depth and in-breadth with the analysis in order to to be able to create more accurate and various consumer archetypes. This was also helped by the use of heterogeneous sampling on the level of engagement in parasocial relationships and the consideration of a global phenomenon with participants from different countries. Specifically, we consider the K-pop industry as a good research focus because of the profound level of engagement in the parasocial sphere (covering the complexity of this phenomenon). Moreover, to make the readers judge with caution whether the research is transferable or not, we provided a lot of details on our methodological choices (Bell et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Bell et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Bell et al., 2019).

Dependability—akin to reliability within quantitative research—is wrought as a measurement that assesses how stable the research outcomes are and whether they are valid enough to be replicated in the future (Bell et al., 2019). By ensuring that this research comprises all progressive stage details and steps, the dependability aspect is met. Lincoln and Guba further elucidate on this chapter that preserving every record of the research—from the selection of the method participants, transcription of the answers to data analysis procedure—fulfils an "auditing" approach wherein the methodological and theoretical stances are inferred (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Bell et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Bell et al., 2019). This auditor position is enmeshed in the way us researchers scale our overall consistency and alignment with our initial method plan. This could also be tracked in the way theoretical deductions can be upheld (Bell et al., 2019). Although the authors suggest that the audit approach is chiefly time consuming and complex due to not only dual authorship but also due to the large database it requires, we have assuredly tried to keep every phase data progress intactly safeguarded (Bell et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Bell et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Bell et al., 2019).

The last criterion is the confirmability aspect, and to which is deemed as vital to achieve trustworthiness of the research paper (Guba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Bell et al., 2019). Achieving sheer objectivity when conducting qualitative research is deemed to be nearly

impossible, so confirmability could be stemmed from the way the researchers showcase that the study followed the criteria of acting in good faith, which is prominent enough for the reader to grasp that we have not let subjective stances and theoretical propensities to delude the findings of the research (Bell et al., 2019). Therefore, ensuring that we did not favour any personal values included within the conduction of the focus groups was essential. Although the implemented design approach is abductive, we embodied the role of an external party when presented with the empirical data and tried to derive attitudinal archetypes in a raw and devoid of personal implication manner (Guba and Lincoln, 1994 cited in Bell et al., 2019). As such, we abstained from enquiring leading questions that could favour a certain standpoint, and resorted to establishing open questions wherein participants can freely engage with each other.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Although this thesis does not involve the collection of sensitive information (regarding topics such as politics, religion, sexuality, or health), we touched upon the more personal sphere of parasocial relationships, analysing the attitudes of the consumers, which involved non-monetary support but also monetary consumption, and led us to give important consideration to the ethical side of the research itself (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In particular, we followed the principles illustrated by Bell and Bryman (2007 cited in Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) for the protection both of the participant and the broad research community panorama. Therefore, as explained by the same authors, we conducted the focus groups with the intent of not harming the people involved in any way, respecting their privacy, dignity, and anonymity, avoiding deception and handing out misleading information, as well as ensuring optimal communication regarding the research and informed consent.

As previously mentioned, even though our topic is not sensitive, it touches on the intimacy of the people involved and it also requires the elaboration of thoughts while also stating personal beliefs and opinions, which means that it was crucial to give an overview to the participants of the topic of the research and the aims of the study. Moreover, to respect the dignity of the participants we gave them a detailed introduction regarding the ground rules, asking people to show respect to everyone involved, which is something that we applied ourselves as well by not commenting on people's thoughts and beliefs with own personal statements to not let them feel judged or intimidated, also because of a reason of power balance (Easterby-Smith

et al., 2021). During the introductory part, we also asked for consent multiple times to proceed with the focus groups, including the one about recording the process for analysis purposes only. Additionally, we have also carefully explained that the participation is voluntary and that they have the right to stop their participation whenever wanted, as well as avoid answering some questions or asking the researchers to not include anymore their statements in the study once the focus groups ended. Regarding privacy and anonymity, we gave the participant the possibility to choose a pseudonym or declare their name without mentioning their surnames and their country of residence to ensure their anonymity (these were also information not relevant to the study itself). Lastly, we reassured the participants that the recordings will be used only by the researchers to transcribe them and avoid not remembering things correctly, which can involuntarily lead to misleading reporting of the findings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Nonetheless, we have informed everyone correctly regarding the fact that even though the files will be deleted after transcribing them, the transcriptions could be asked for consultation by the university and that quotes will be inserted in the thesis during the presentation of the results, which led us to ask for their consent once again.

4. Findings & Analysis

This chapter presents the empirical findings gathered from the participants of the three focus groups. The questions regarding the parasocial relationships with the artists and the interconnection with the sphere of consumption (see Appendix 1) resulted in the collection of valuable insights on the corresponding attitudinal outcomes while examining thoughts, beliefs, and opinions. Following the thematic approach for the data analysis, after a process of transcription and coding, the data were categorised into themes, which are presented in this section of the thesis. Specifically, the three main themes are presented: Different kinds of parasocial connections to the artists, Fans' investments, and Self-awareness and support. All of these macro themes have their underlying sub-themes that will be carefully presented, with the use of quotes coming directly from the participants. The thematic analysis in this chapter will be helpful to illustrate the different types of consumer archetypes in Chapter 5, dedicated to the Discussion.

4.1 Different kinds of parasocial connections to the artist

The first theme illustrates the different levels of attachment and kinds of parasocial connections that the participants conveyed during the focus groups, both directly and hinted at from the expressions of thoughts, opinions, and personal narratives regarding the questions asked. All the participants discussed their level of engagement in this sphere, while also doing a process of comparing and contrasting with attitudes and statements they see online on platforms such as Twitter and TikTok, as well as reflecting on their friends' approaches to the artists. Specifically, by delving deeper into the analysis of this theme, three specific sub-categories were identified. These sub-themes touched upon the resemblance of in-real-life relationships (such as the ones people usually have with family, friends, and romantic partners) and the consequent evocation of feelings and sensations related to these particular connections; moving to the kind of bonds that were more towards the comfort and escapism from reality with an important relevance given to the healing properties of these relationships with the idols; lastly, some participants showcased a classic fan-artist relationship in which there is a connection with the artists that brings joy, excitement, evoking positive feelings and a sense of affection that, nonetheless, remains superficial in terms of attachment.

4.1.1 Resemblance of in-real life relationships

The first sub-theme identified under this chapter is the recurrent iteration of the resemblance of fans' in-real life relationships. Most of the participants have alluded that their relationship with K-pop idols is akin to finding a friend or a family in the latter, hence the sturdiness of the said bond, something that the following quote from Valentina exemplifies:

"I perceive them as… Well saying the word family maybe it's too much but something like that. Of course, you can perceive them as well as long-distant friends, maybe that also is something I feel." (Valentina)

Many participants shared the same perception and described these emotional bonds as values that ought to be present when supporting K-pop idols. In particular, connected to this aspect, several fans brought up that they perceive these people as friends or family while also declaring that they know that they are not their real-life acquaintances but that this doesn't change the pride of being a fellow K-pop fan and the expression of their adamant admiration of their favourite artists, assimilating it to how they would feel proud of a family member's accomplishment. This is illustrated by a quote coming from Margot:

"It's hard to explain because I know that they're not my best friends but inside my head, they are… You know? […] you know when someone from your family does something really cool and you want to show it to everyone? Exactly that, it's like I'm proud of them, you know?"
(Margot)

The fans explained how different types of content (variety shows, live streams, music releases, vlogs, behind-the-scenes, and different other projects) not only allow a more personal interaction with the idols but also show the brotherhood within the members, which increases the connection they feel with the idols as if they are a part of their friendships and familial bonds:

The content that they upload shows a lot of the relationships within the idols […] seeing that they love each other kind of makes you grow more the bond you have with them because it makes you see them as friends and not only co-workers. This is a thing that then also makes you see them as friends of yours because it's kind of… Well it's as if we are entering their world more and more you know what I mean? (Adriana)

I feel like the curtain lifting is important. [...] For example BTS releases 'BangtanBombs' on YouTube, which are like the behind the scenes of different things that they do, music videos details, the concerts they go to, memories and other little things of also their private moments as well. It gives you a deeper friendly connection with them. (Caitlyn)

Recently Dreamcatcher joined the messaging app, so sometimes you see them coming after midnight and texting us "Hey, I cannot sleep, what are you doing?", sometimes they answer you directly, sometimes not… But it feels more like a one to one relationship to me. (Sahar)

Additionally, some of them have emphasised on knowing when to set boundaries as it is imperative to keep the fan to artist relationship healthy devoid of unwanted fallacies. Different participants have clarified that no intended envisionment of being involved with their idols romantically have been made, such as Leila exemplifies:

"I would say there are some boundaries between us obviously, I appreciate them a lot, but I would not envision myself being in a relationship with one of the members for example, I just simply want to see them happy and content with their life as they truly made me happy before." (Leila)

Disregarding the romantic sphere of parasocial relationships to maintain a healthy and respectful dynamic is something that was emphasised throughout the focus groups by many participants, especially by condemning any content that shows a hint of romantic connection, preferring instead something friendly and family-like. These fans argued that such content is unnecessary and can lead people to think they have the right to control idols' personal lives and sometimes damage their careers. The following quotes are examples of what has been discussed:

"I love to see anything that shows support to the idol and communicates to the fans in a friendly way, or the ones in which they make them feel a family-like environment. But I feel that any kind of content that shows a romantic connection is completely unnecessary, and it makes some fans think that they have the right to control the celebrities' personal lives."
(Yosra)

"For example the SM company that made that paid app in which there is your favourite idol on the screen and you can caress him or her and give them kisses… Like, that aliments a lot this romantic side. It is a paid app just to interact with the avatars of these idols you really

love, which is a bit creepy if I can say that. I don't like these kinds of things. Of course they play a lot with it because they know the public as well, and many people enjoy this shade of the relationship." (Adriana)

Connecting to the last statement Adriana made, although a minority has showcased a delusional mindset that considers K-pop idols as potential romantic partners, some have expressed that they harboured intense feelings, to which, as an example, Ghofrane has glossed over her experience in detail:

"On his birthdays I would send letters and gifts, I would make big projects and spend money on printing posters that are the size of a wall. I organised a project wherein I painted a graffiti wall of his face on his birthday, and I even spent 2 years being single just because I thought my feelings for him were very intense. I think I have bought everything and anything related to him, I also started learning Chinese because of him since he is originally Chinese"
(Ghofrane)

And on another instance, she also added:

"[to another participant] How does it feel to be better than all of us? [laughing] wow boundaries? To be honest I relate to you to some extent, for the resemblance part and the emotional attachment [...] As for the boundaries, I don't think I relate to that, I was so obsessed to the level that I would not tolerate another fan liking him or doing better than me when it comes to supporting." (Ghofrane)

Another noteworthy aspect that stands out is that most of the participants that deem their relationships with the idols as analogous to real-life friendships, believe that it was consequent to the fact that they have similar personalities. They ascertained that they feel the closest to K-pop idols that portray their values, demeanour, and character traits. These following participants elucidate on this statement even further:

"For my favourite member, who is Kai of EXO for example, I feel the closest to him emotionally, and sometimes I wonder [laughing], if it is because we have very similar personalities? [...] I certainly see the resemblance in our life values and behaviour. When I think like this right now, it makes me think that this is what has drawn me to him maybe?"
(Arbia)

"They feel closer to me now and I see them as more human rather than celebrities who are untouchable like before. They are just like me almost. And which brings me to point out the resemblance theory, the more I relate to them, the more I would be attached to them."

(Wissal)

4.1.2 Comfort and escapism

Among the participants of the focus groups, a recurrent concept regarding the kind of entanglement in the parasocial sphere is represented for different people by the perception of the connection with K-pop artists in terms of comfort and escapism from reality.

"More than friends, they are an element of comfort [...]. The fact that we were in a situation x and they were there in a way, helped to grow attached to them. Like I said before, I discovered them during the pandemic, a moment of time where I felt alone, I was not active and engaged in my everyday life, I felt apathetic. So, the fact that I saw myself in their lyrics or that they kept me company during the pandemic with the loads of content, it helped me to go through this moment." (Aurora)

The above quote is something that summarises the thoughts of many participants and underlines different aspects brought up by several people while discussing their fan-artist engagement. One of the things that Aurora mentioned is the sense of closeness to the artists through the multiple content available on different platforms, which is a way of comfort that helps to overcome the hardships in life. Several people agreed with thing and during the focus groups they opened up by sharing examples about their personal life, such as:

"My parents were already divorced but I found them in a period of time in which I was doing really bad mentally and… Well they helped me a lot, they made me understand that there is always a way to rise from these difficult times. Well, they were there when I needed someone [voice cracking]... If I was sad I was going to watch their funny moments, their programs, so basically they were there. They are my safe place when I want to distract myself, to escape reality, they're still there, every time" (Margot)

Aside from the comforting characteristic of the relationship with the idols when dealing with difficult times in life, at the end of her contribution, Margot narrowed down this aspect by citing the escapism from reality through the content that the idols release, related to music but not exclusively. During the focus groups, multiple times it was mentioned the connection

with the artists through the numerous content, as a distraction from their busy difficult lives and a way to enter the life of the artists with the diverse types of interactions, concepts exemplified by Ica and Margot, respectively.

"In different ways, everyone can find in K-pop a distraction from real life, and I think that the attachment is because of that, coming from the security that once I come home, after a busy day, I am destroyed, I can take my phone and will find those videos that give me comfort. I think that this is the main part. It is a beautiful distraction." (Ica)

"We can see it a lot with Jungkook for example, he opens the livestreams and he does his casual little things such as cooking, washing the dishes, doing the laundry… All while speaking with us for more than 3 or 4 hours sometimes. It is a way to keep us connected and make us enter in their daily life, you know?" (Margot)

Moreover, as previously mentioned by Aurora, a recurring aspect extrapolated from the focus groups is the comfort found in K-pop and the amount of content during the period of the pandemic and the loneliness it brought, as phrased by Angel:

"Also during the pandemic we had a lot of free time and […] there was a lot [empathised] of old and new content to keep up with, so in those months I have also used this to feel less alone and I used to spend a lot of time keeping myself entertained with them, so that's how I stayed a fan… I grew attached to them basically." (Angel)

The concept of comfort found in the relationship with the idols during lonely times is something that was also mentioned by highlighting on how the said parasocial relationships were able to fulfil some connections that were missing in real life, as exemplified by Katia and Arbia:

"It was something that I was personally missing in my own life so I felt like it would be nice to feel that through them mostly, yeah" (Katia)

"[In] fan-service when they deliver cheerful messages, and support their fans in a wholesome way that I don't think someone I know in real life would do it" (Arbia)

Moreover, the parasocial relationships in the K-pop field are described by different participants as an element of comfort because, throughout the variety of content, the idols are

used to resonate with the fans by opening up about their private issues and situations, in which the fans can reflect themselves. The participants that mentioned this concept also proceeded to reinstate how, to them, this strengthened the relationship they have with the specific idols. The following quote from Caitlyn illustrates this aspect in detail:

"A lot of groups incorporate actual stories in their things, which sometimes also refers to their private lives. Like BTS they have a whole universe for that with parallel stories that highlight on the concepts of mental health and their personal struggles, and I know other groups such as TXT and Loona I think that they have similar universes that you as a fan can explore and that it helps you to connect more with them though the emotional level."

(Caitlyn)

4.1.3 Superficial level fan-artist relationship

One of the other approaches that was also present throughout the discourses that were exchanged during the focus groups, is the theory of classic fan-artist relationship. Participants have insinuated on some instances that their relationship with their K-pop idols is posed as casual, superficial, or detached in a way. The following statements highlight this concept in more elaborate details:

"Well. I truly, TRULY, care about them. I am really fond of them and so attached. They are a big part of my day. I come back home from work knowing that I have a lot of content to keep up with and that makes me feel warm and happy. Of course, I know that it is something unilateral. What I feel is definitely different from what they feel because as much as they can love their fans, they don't know me individually. While my affection is individually towards them. I try to set boundaries and see them as a relationship fan-artist even though I care about them a lot, truly." (Chiara)

In the above quote, the participant, although admitting to being attached to her idols, recognizes that it is a one-sided relationship and that setting boundaries while practising detachment is paramount to maintain a healthy relationship. The acknowledgement of fan-artist roles are emphasised in a way to shield the participant's feeling in here while in the consequent example, the participants believes that keeping a boundary is practised due to other reasons:

"[…] Well in my experience I don't think I have considered an idol as my best friend, I have always kept this boundary between us and it's almost like you're telling me to befriend some stranger I have never met really." (Arbia)

"[…] now I just watch them and appreciate them a lot in a sense that as if I am watching a vlogger maybe?" (Yasmine)

Here, Arbia exemplified the thoughts of several participants regarding befriending a stranger she has never met, implying that the relationship is one of admiration and appreciation rather than genuine friendship. Whilst some fans like Yasmine compared the relationship with the idols to a more passive experience rather than an active one. People like Yasmine admitted that despite the apparent admiration, they do not feel a strong personal connection. Narmin has also elucidated this further:

"I feel almost the same as Yasmine, I see them as a source of inspiration now rather than my friends, it's more about how they portray themselves […] Maybe it's also that I do not want to get disappointed later on?" (Narmin)

Moreover, some participants also expressed that they do not feel the need to talk to or meet any of the members, as they recognize their position as fans and do not hold any significant influence on their lives.

"I'm that kind of person that doesn't really want to talk and meet any of the members, not because I don't care but…I would like to keep it as it is. I mean I am no one to them, there is no point in me wanting to speak to someone that doesn't know me so yeah. I know it sounds bad but I promise that it's actually not." (Katia)

Lastly, in the theme of recognising oneself as holding no compelling importance, Charlie admitted that although she should want to meet her idols, she abstains from doing so, as she notes that she is no one to them and that a one-on-one interaction would not matter in the grand scheme of things.

"I maybe should think that "I want to meet them, one to one or personally", but again… Like it has been said I do not want a one-on-one interaction as I am no one to them, it doesn't really matter." (Charlie)

4.2 Fans' investments

Something that was particularly present among the participants regards the way fans talked about the investment in terms of time, money, and energy to support their favourite K-pop artist. Even in this case, the people present in the focus groups brought up this topic by discussing their attitudes with the share of thoughts, opinions, and practical examples, while also referring to the statements they see in the online communities and what they get the chance to experience daily by being a part of the K-pop fandoms. From the focus groups, it emerged that the participants spent a lot of time reflecting on the different kinds of investments they can make when being a K-pop fan, especially by comparing their attitudes (both on a personal scale and to the general K-pop community) when it comes to the contribution in terms of monetary consumption and the non-monetary support, while considering the influence of the relationship with the artists. The theme is then forked into two sub-categories: Monetary vs Free support, and Social identity within fandoms and expectations. The latter covers the reflections of the fans regarding how the different types of investments and the way these investments are made, shape the fans in the eyes of others, as well as influence the way these fans think about themselves in relation to the bond they have with the idols.

4.2.1 Monetary vs free support

"We constantly have new content and that doesn't let you drop them [laugh], every day there is something new." (Valentina)

The above quote represents what all the participants expressed regarding the amount of content available to consume in K-pop (referring both to paid and free content), especially when asking them to state what they believe to be its main reasons of success. In this respect, some of the fans expressed that they consume almost all the kinds of content available, such as Adriana reports:

"Well basically I'd say that I do everything, sharing the content, streaming […] I also do fan arts which can expand the fandom by reaching other people with my drawings. Then I buy a lot of things, go to concerts and yeah…" (Adriana)

On another hand, different participants expressed that due to their economic situation, they are more inclined to invest in the consumption of free content, even though they sometimes

have the attitude of thinking of saving money and investing them in K-pop consumption, something that the quote below from Leila points out. Moreover, multiple participants highlighted that the parasocial relationship plays a huge role in their will to support monetarily and that desire to do so is present, as mentioned by Aurora.

"The fact that EXO are coming back again with a new album, it's making me think of how I should start saving money for it." (Leila)

"I don't have the possibility to do so, not because I don't want to do it and regardless of how much I can love them […] what influences is the want we have to support them, maybe not always the way we actually do it." (Aurora)

Regarding the emphasis that some participants put on the free content available, several fans said that they prefer it because it is a way to involve friends that are not into K-pop, investing their time to share moments with the people they are close to, by showing content that is both music related and non. Frequently this resulted in those people joining the K-pop community:

"What I do a lot is sharing the content with my friends and I was able to get my friends into K-pop as well by making them see the behind the scenes of BTS, funny moments…" (Fran)

"With two friends, after tormenting them with the K-pop content, I won and they became fans as well, which made me really happy because I absolutely love to speak about the things that I love with my people. So yeah, this automatically means supporting them as well." (Chiara)

Conversely, other fans affirmed that they are more inclined to monetary support, and some of them mentioned that they reached an extreme level of consumption by doing some crazinesses such as flying to the other side of the world for a concert or putting K-pop before their financial priorities:

"So my support is definitely monetary. I kind of try to buy as often as I can […] I'll fly to America tomorrow to go to Yoongi's concert, so I am probably excessively spending my money." (Charlie)

"When I was receiving a notification saying 'x product will be released on x day' I was there contemplating if I had the money to buy […]. And sometimes I also did some crazy stuff, especially when I couldn't afford them at the moment but I bought them anyway." (Valentina)

Reconnecting to putting K-pop before other priorities, while some people discussed their attitudes when it comes to financial constraints (such as the examples from Valentina and Aurora), others debated regarding the investment in terms of time dedicated. In this case, the majority of the people present in the focus groups argued that they are willing to rearrange their schedule when it comes to things that are deemed to be important for the artists, like illustrated by Katia. Nonetheless, some others pointed out that they put K-pop before their time constraints even when it comes to supporting every piece of content the artists release, such as the quote from Arbia illustrates.

"During album releases or important events, like yesterday even I skipped 20 minutes of classes just so I can go buy the new Yoongi's album and listen to it— I think during album release I am willing to skip classes to catch up." (Katia)

"Ever since EXO debuted, my consumption was a bit too much [...] I even skipped classes and important things to watch lives and award shows that featured EXO [...]" (Arbia)

The time and energy investments were also mentioned concerning group fan activities to consume specific content (paid or free), such as streaming parties, mass buying and voting, and more. All of the participants underlined the big investments that come with these things and, while some hated even the idea of it, different people recognized the relevance of these activities and admitted to trying to find the time to be engaged in them:

"I hate the streaming parties and all these sorts of things. Aside from the fact that I would never be able to join and sustain the fan activities' rhythms [...] I think that in general, for example, streaming parties are not my thing. I prefer doing these things by myself, maybe listening to the song 200 times and I do my streaming party. I don't like it, I honestly want my moment alone with the songs that I love, written by the people that I love." (Ica)

"[...] It's a little bit half and half for me because for the first ever releases I am always a part of those massive fan streaming activities to get the views up and make the initial impact which is always important for an artist. [...] I work at a 9 to 5 service job so I don't have the time or energy to keep up with all of the activities so I kind of pick and choose what I want to do." (Charlie)

In the quote above, Ica mentioned the concept of intimacy with the artist, and a crucial thing that came out from the focus groups regards the attitudes of the participants when it comes to paying to have any sort of interaction with their idols. As presented in the first theme, some fans said they would avoid engaging in those things, while others mentioned being subscribed to messaging apps and similar services. Additionally, different people said that money is a critical decisional factor when it comes to these things and that if the price for these types of content does not match their expectations, they would rather support the artist by spending money on albums or merchandising:

"There is the desire to participate in the meet and greets or the fan calls, but as Margot said, it depends on the price. I don't go around and spend a fortune to do 5 or 2 minutes of a call with an artist. I'd say that I prefer spending this money for albums or for the content they release." (Aurora)

Another substantial thing discovered is that the attitude of numerous people appeared to be critical and judgmental towards the fans that spend a lot of money on their favourite K-pop artists while showing some contradictions when they pointed out that they would be willing to do the same if they had the economic means, as Margot elucidated. Meanwhile, the people deeply invested in the monetary consumption had the attitude to justify their purchases a lot by explaining their economic situation, as exemplified by Adriana:

"If you want to buy 4 versions of the same album [...] you can do it, but speaking about me, I don't do this. I buy one album and that's it, personally to me it doesn't make sense to buy more copies. Then… If I am rich and I have the chance to do it, I would 100%." (Margot)

"I am guilty for the things she said [...]. For example I bought Proof Collector [a 300$ album] *because I was working that summer, I just had my salary…"* (Adriana)

Regarding monetary support, a thing that was already hinted at by the quotes in this sub-theme is that some people are more reflective when it comes to consumption, choosing to spend more when it comes to the idol they feel closer to or the concept they liked more; pragmatism that is not as present regarding the consumption of free content:

"For example, for the last Jimin's album—which is my favourite member—I bought multiple copies of all the versions available. [...] I don't do this for all the items, generally I only buy one copy, whether it is an album, magazine or merchandising." (Ica)

"I would watch and consume everything, I would stream the albums and music videos. But I would get the albums if I liked the photo-book and the era of the comeback" (Yasmine)

Nonetheless, previously Valentina already signalled her impulsiveness when it comes to monetary consumption and doing some crazy things for K-pop, and this was elaborated even further by people mentioning the trust in the artist. Specifically, different people elucidated that they are impulsive when it comes to buying things even when they don't know the content until the moment they have them in their hands (as it happens with pre-orders, the purchase of exclusive photo-books and merchandising), as Sahar exemplifies:

"But since DREAMCATCHER has been so consistent with the album quality and aesthetics, I trust them and I don't really think about that [referring to the risk of pre-orders]*"* (Sahar)

4.2.2 Social identity within fandoms and expectations

Fans' investments in terms of time, money and energy were found to be critical when it comes to fandom dynamics, especially through the lenses of the parasocial sphere. One relevant thing that was brought up by several participants is the sense of belonging in the community of a specific K-pop artist. These communities were described not only as a means to get more involved into the support of a specific idol, but also as something that strengthen the parasocial relationships with them. As exemplified by Elizabeth:

"Many people started listening to K-pop because of loneliness and K-pop helped to fulfill that part, when you don't have friends and then you end up making a lot of friends along the way. Which is something really cool and it kind of adds up the relationship that is created between the artists and the fans, actually I think it makes it stronger. Being a part of a community like that can be something really fulfilling and it kind of incentives you more to support." (Elizabeth)

In this respect, different participants explained how they have organised group orders from the official Korean shops so that the fans could have avoided big shipping fees and costs while giving them the chance to help the idols with the charts in their country, as the quote from Adriana illustrates:

"I do group orders of merch and albums from their official shop in South Korea. It's a way to help the fans since we do not have an European shop and the shipping fees are absurd"

(Adriana)

Moreover, multiple participants have expressed how a lot of people are willing to help the fans that could not afford to spend money on paid content by sharing their credentials. Regarding this aspect, numerous people also shared how on Twitter is very frequent to find accounts that do this, so that everyone can sense that they are included in the support of the artist.

"I had a conversation with someone and they asked me if I watched the recent "Bon Voyage" episode with BTS and I said no because you have to pay a subscription, but she was willing to share her credential of the account to let me watch it and talk about it together" (Caitlyn)

"Some people would record everything, such as paid online concerts, and post the links on Twitter. They also have some dedicated pages for that, because the copyrights agents always come soon and they have to come up with new links quickly, to let other people enjoy the show. It's because they know how much we care and that we would feel sad otherwise."

(Sahar)

The discussants in the focus groups multiple times portrayed the different K-pop fandoms as incredibly strong and how this creates certain expectations on how someone should follow an artist. Specifically, one of the main things that were discovered is that numerous fans have the attitude of pressuring other people in the fandom to be attached only to their main idols and not engage with the supporting of other artists:

"I remember that I used to do these kinds of flames when because I was influenced a lot by some friendships that had this way of thinking and they were against following other groups. It was a thing of "You only have to follow your main artist because if you don't do this, you're not a good fan". Then I grew up and totally changed my mind, even by distancing myself from these friendships. But for example, the other day I made a tweet about Woozi from Seventeen instead of my classic BTS content and 5 people unfollowed me." (Adriana)

"Being on Twitter is hard because I can see that they are quite harsh when they catch you supporting other groups whether it is monetary or not, because they say that this investment could be used for your main group" (Charlie)

Connected to this aspect, some participants explained how this thing can intimidate fans and preclude them from approaching another artist, because it stimulates a sense of betrayal:

"I also felt that I was betraying myself and my favourite band for liking another band, so the guilt would not allow me to look at anyone honestly." (Arbia)

"I have a friend that has some difficulties in following another group because she is afraid of removing part of the attention from BTS, and not being too loyal to them. This thing she said that it was alimented by Twitter […]. For example, if you start posting about other groups you can see your followers dropping and people indirecting you by saying that you don't care about your artists and stuff like that." (Valentina)

Nonetheless, other fans expressed that they do not actively search for other groups because the bond they have with their favourite artist through the content they release is already fulfilling enough, but, in either case, despite the pressure coming from the online world, this wouldn't stop them from following other K-pop artists. The following quote from Leila exemplifies the concept:

"I am fulfilled and satisfied with EXO alone that I would not feel the need to look somewhere else. Am I loyal? Yes definitely, but I wouldn't feel guilt for supporting other people, also because I won't be able to even bring myself to feel a connection in the same way I do with EXO" (Leila)

Among the participants, another aspect that was brought up on the expectations from the fandoms is how some people believe that there are certain standards to meet to be addressed as a fan of a K-pop idol, which is frequently interconnected to the amount of care and love you have for them. While people like Chiara expressed that they do not care about these things, others explained that an attitude that multiple fans have is to increase their consumption and show this off as a way to display the strength of the relationship with the artist:

"I don't feel obliged or forced to do either stream or buy or other things because otherwise I am less of a fan. Like, absolutely not, it doesn't even pass through the antechamber of my brain." (Chiara)

"For example if someone has the same bias as someone else, they'd be like "Yeah prove it" [laughing] so definitely that puts you in the mindset of having to be constantly present on a social media and show how much you support them by reposting stuff, joining streaming parties, also posting about the things that you bought, since the more you have the more of a fan you are for some people…" (Caitlyn)

Connected to this aspect, a specific attitude that came out from the words of the participants of the focus group is that some people constantly try to beat the standards by investing money and time in the consumption and sharing of a specific content because the parasocial relationship with the idols makes them crave the first spot and because they cannot stand seeing people doing something more than them since this is considered as a stronger connection to the artist than theirs. The following quotes elucidate this further:

"I used to go all the way, in the literal sense of it, and I think I have done that in order to feel like I am worthy of being a super fan, I used to stan an ex-member of EXO and it got really intense. I have done things not to be acknowledged as a fan but as "the" fan." (Ghofrane)

"I know some friends that said that they want to show that they love the artists more than other people by posting the thousands of things they bought last week." (Valentina)

4.3 Self-awareness and support

This theme would delve into the different dynamics of the relationship between self-aware fans and their K-pop idols as well as the whole industry. It seeks to uncover the roles played by K-pop artists, their entertainment companies, and their fans respectively within the trinity of the "victim, villain, and hero" outlined through the lens of the fans. First, it would investigate the subtheme of "justification behind consumption" which unveils the reasons behind supporting while being conscious of the parasocial relationship effect. Second, this theme will also comprise the subtheme of "exploitation through the fans' lenses" which entails the implementation of resistance and empowerment as means of retaliation, and this would explore the fans' tendency to blame the industry or the company for the negative outcomes while supporting their idols.

4.3.1 Justifications for consumption

This subtheme would examine the justifications that K-pop fans use to justify their consumption behaviour in the context of parasocial relationships under the guise of the presence of a sense of intimacy and their utopian perception towards their artists. As well as the contradictions and conflicts observed among fans who are self-aware of the parasocial nature of such relationships but still engage in purchasing behaviour, and how they justify their behaviour to themselves and others.

The subsequent participant, among other people, acknowledged the parasocial nature of their relationship with K-pop artists, while still feeling a sense of empathy towards them. Specifically, these participants disclosed the importance of boundaries in a parasocial relationship, especially since the less boundaries there are, the more money can be spent.

"I always liked the idea of BTS keeping this friendship-oriented relationship, but I think that some people don't really understand that this friendship is not the same one as the ones that you have in real life. So, I think that sometimes it is necessary to foster this relationship but also put some boundaries which is really hard to do as the less boundaries you have, the more you get in terms of money." (Fran)

The next quotes are an exemplification of the fans that described the spending for their K-pop artists as a fulfilment of a sense of intimacy. These people justified the attitudes towards consumption due to the unique relationship fans (including themselves) have with them, especially leaning on the emotional connection with the idols, as well as the healing properties of it.

"I did all the support because it was something very comforting for me to do and it was like a repaying gift for the emotional support I got from them." (Ghofrane)

"I know that the parasocial relationship could get super intense sometimes and fans tend to spend every penny they have just to get closer to their idols. I remember once an EXO fan used to follow EXO around from country to country and never missed any tour dates. They are not to blame, maybe it is a coping mechanism that they adopted" (Arbia)

"I am kind of coming out of an age in which people think "Your childhood and teenage years are done" where people think that you should have your life put together when in reality what

does that mean? No one knows, and I think that… When I don't want to think about that, I can dive into the massive catalogue of content they put out" (Charlie)

Moreover, several participants explained that their support for K-pop artists is not due to pressure, a sense of urgency, or obligation but because they genuinely want to support them. In this respect, multiple fans highlighted that they do what they do because that is how friendship or close bonds work; meanwhile, some others mentioned that they do not feel the pressure because they simply consume the items due to their enjoyment:

"Also, I do not feel pressured because of this parasocial relationship. Again, It feels more like you are supporting your friend anyway and it's not because I feel pressured and obligated to do the things that I do… Simply, I really want to give the money to them and to show support, because I love what they do and how they do it—the effort they put in everything they do makes me believe that this has to go noticed." (Elizabeth)

"I do support my artists, but I do this because I like doing so. Meaning that I don't feel obliged or forced to do either stream or buy or other things [...] Like, absolutely not, it doesn't even pass through the antechamber of my brain. Simply, if I do something, I do it because I like it and enjoy it. So, if I stream 100 times a song, I do it because I want to listen to that song 100 times." (Chiara)

Notably, others like this following statement describe how K-pop artists have had a significant impact on their life by lending a hand in becoming more motivated and working on themselves. Leila here also explains how being an admin of a fanbase helped her with character development. This category of fans justifies their support for K-pop idols based on how the latter has helped them personally.

"I was the main admin of a big EXO fanbase [laughing], but I was not doing it for ego purposes but rather to show support and bring in albums and sell them for other fans, and I also organised support projects for food trucks during comebacks. And being the leader and admin made me become more daring and helped me a lot for character development purposes." (Leila)

Throughout this sub-theme the concept of support was hinted at by different participants and some of them elaborated further, describing it as a main motivation for the consumption of

content, through the lenses of the parasocial sphere. The statements from Margot and Valentina exemplify what some people brought up during the focus groups:

"But now that they are releasing the solo albums, wanting to support them, I am actually buying all of them even though for example I do not have a CD player at home. But I still buy them because I know that the purchases help them to rank high in the charts. So, under this point of view, yes. I care about them and therefore I care about seeing them succeed and I want to contribute" (Margot)

"It's them and I like to support them by buying their products or support their content. It's BTS basically, so for that, I want to buy the things, you know? The fact of feeling this close bond with them kind of makes me feel that I want to buy these products" (Valentina)

Additionally, numerous participants have brought up the side of being a collector within the K-pop community and how, although self-aware, their consumption is strictly tied to adhering to the collector role, justifying this also with the emotional side of being a collector, as phrased by Caitlyn. Parallel to this, several people justified the consumption related to the collector aspect by highlighting the experience that the K-pop items bring, which is interconnected to the parasocial sphere, as exemplified by Margot.

"I really enjoy the collector aspect of it. So, for example, even if I did not like the photoshoot of the first 2 versions, I would still get them to complete the set, so yeah for me it's more emotional than practical. I think that being a collector is not entirely rational." (Caitlyn)

"In K-pop they basically gift to you an experience when you buy for example an album, because it is not only buying the thing, put the CD on and listen to it, but they give you the photobooks that are always pretty, the photocards, they give you the chance to go into collecting and this is already something more. And it kind of strengthens the parasocial relationship, as you know the items only have one photocard of a random member and you want to buy them with the hope to pull your favourite one, and some people for that buy more than one copy" (Margot)

4.3.2 Exploitation through the fans' lenses

This sub theme would explore the ways in which the hero-victim-villain narrative is used by fans as a means of resistance and empowerment. Certainly, it would explain how fans use

their support of artists as a way of resisting the exploitative practices of the industry and empowering themselves in the process. It would serve as a way to sail on the wavelength that explicates the reasoning behind fans' perspective and perception of the industry.

"I believe that once you get into K-pop, you have to start by thinking that there are a lot of fake actions and irony when it comes to the fan service that they are forced to do. Like for example when during the signing sessions the idols act all flirty with everyone. [...] I think that you have to start by thinking that it is a thing that they play with a lot because the company knows that this will give them money, in this way you don't feel as exploited." (Ica)

Ica exemplifies the statements of the participants regarding their stance on exploitation within the K-pop industry while excluding K-pop idols. They believe that it is not the artists' fault if fans misinterpret their actions as personal, as they are simply carrying out their job and providing fans with the service the latter desire. Moreover, some participants either blamed the company of their favourite idols, or the whole entertainment industry is to be scrutinised for normalising such exploitative practises. The following fans argued that idols are just doing their job and fulfilling their tasks, and they cannot oppose their companies:

"I agree with what has been said and how they see the fans as money machine, but I would put the blame on the K-pop entertainment industry instead, because at the end of the day, idols are just doing their job and fulfilling their tasks, they are selling fake lives, dreams and fanservice, it's their job anyway and they cannot possibly concede to that and oppose their companies so we cannot blame them as the entertainment industry is not easy, being an idol is hard in itself." (Leila)

"The idols are not to blame, as Leila said earlier, some idols even say "don't buy the albums" but yeah it is the whole industry and the entertainment companies [...] I think also when it comes to the Bubble app which is the messaging app fans monthly pay for to text their idols in a chatroom format, I think the companies are just doing this to again further make the fans more entangled within this parasocial relationship, and idols are actually forced to respond and be active there just so the company can generate more revenue." (Arbia)

In response to this, some fans admitted that they have the attitude to be more cautious when it comes to consumption, pondering their choices and thinking on what to invest for the idols to get more revenue rather than the company, as phrased by Yosra. Nonetheless, while being aware of the exploitation in the industry, some of them expressed that contributing to this

system is the only thing they can do, such as Charlie did when referring to premium prices for concert tickets and other items, saying that while being careful to not purchase everything if you want those things in your hand and not seeing them through a screen, you can only buy:

"I would still spend money on things that I find important, like albums and stuff like that, because it mostly supports the music itself and it would be more significant to the album more than buying merch or things like that, since I think it would benefit the company more."
(Yosra)

"I don't necessarily think it's the idols or the company's fault but rather the whole industry itself. So yeah, sometimes you have to be exploited because that's the only option you have kind of? Sometimes you have to play in the system, but then you have to understand yourself that you maybe don't want to fall into the trap of "I have to buy every single item" because then it's just on you, on a personal level. You have to be mindful of yourself to not be exploited." (Charlie)

On another hand, different people explained that, although they are aware of this exploitation in the industry, they continue to want to support the artists as much as possible, just because they know that their idols are struggling, as Sahar exemplified:

"For example, when I knew that there was going to be a comeback, I used to skip lunch at college and save for that. Just to support them because they told us that they struggle and I feel bad for them, so I just want to do that." (Sahar)

Regarding the exploitation in the industry (connected to the parasocial relationships) and the desire to support a specific content, while participants like Aurora accepted that this promoted behaviour is not desirable, and had an underlying unscrupulous disposition. Some people admitted that the exploitation of the profound affection that people have with their K-pop idols is not even bad because at the end, if engaging with this thing, people are supporting the artist that they claim to love; exemplified by Elizabeth and Adriana:

"For example, I think that the fact that winners of the fan calls are based on album purchases, that's exploitation a bit. Because to win a call you have to buy an album from their official store and that's one entry, so many people go and buy 200+ albums just because of wanting their moment with their person, I'm not even kidding. It's insane and as much as it's the fan's choice, I can't stop myself from thinking that that's exploitation and I don't like how

they [the companies] are promoting this behaviour. They could find a different way to choose the winners and sometimes this extreme capitalism in K-pop makes me less incentivized in supporting that particular release and it stops me from buying the copy of the specific album." (Aurora)

"I think with BTS, they are really really big, and with that kind of attached fanbase, sometimes their company would release merch and content that has zero correlation to the music or them in general, but since they know that the fans would still buy them because they love them, I think this is a bit exploitative. At the same time, I understand but that's how the company is, it's their job and they need to make money out of it. I guess it is not necessarily a bad thing if you want to support your idols." (Elizabeth)

"Coming back to the example of the paid app to caress and kiss the virtual form of your idol, they do that to exploit that relationship and nurture it daily, but I don't care about that, I just don't engage with it and that's it. Some people buy this stuff and okay, good for them if they like it. I'm also happy because at the end of the day the artists that I love get money from that as well [laughing]." (Adriana)

5. Discussion

After providing the readers with a detailed description of the empirical results and the consequent analysis that led to the identification of three main themes with their specific sub-themes, the thesis will now proceed with the presentation of the identified four consumer archetypes. Specifically, these will be also discussed in relation to the theories and concepts illustrated in the previous sections.

5.1 Introduction to the archetypes

Before stepping into the presentation of the archetypes, it is relevant to present a few facts that were similarly and consistently caught during the analytical process from all the fans present in the focus groups. Among the things discovered, everyone pointed out the numerous and variegate amounts of content that the artists release, varying from the ones strictly related to music (i.e. physical and digital albums, songs, online concerts and non) to the ones outside this sphere (i.e. behind the scenes, variety shows, live streams); these latter being a crucial integration highlighted by Hull et al. (2011), Green and Sinclair (2022), and Grome (2021) as something that deemed to be fundamental to increase the engagement with the audience and generate additional revenue. In this respect, the fact that all the participants affirmed that it is this daily release of new and disparate content in K-pop that caught their interest and now keeps them attached—especially because of the relationship the artists develop with the fans through them—is in line with the statements from Elfving-Hwang (2018) and Li (2022). Specifically, the fans advanced the fact that they all engage, more or less, with content that can present the artists in their mundane lives, which follows the decree or reciprocity illustrated by Clark et al. (2017) for the fostering of the peculiar bond between the parties. From the analysis, this bond—the so-called parasocial relationship—appeared to be faceted and have different nuances, which resulted in fragmented different attitudes concerning the consumption sphere, as hinted by Tofalvy and Barna (ed. 2020), and Baym (2018). The categorization of these through thematic analysis helped to shape four relevant consumer archetypes, schematically presented in the below Table 2 and further developed in the following subsections of the discussion.

Table 2: Consumer archetypes

	The Top Fan	**The Hero Friend**	**The Dreamer**	**The Enjoyer**
Theme 1 (Different kinds of parasocial connections to the artists)	- Feeling a part of something more in real terms - Feeling that the artist complement them - Sometimes romantic entanglement is present	- Close to the artist in terms of friendship / familiar bond - Sometimes aware that the relationship is not comparable to the bonds in real life - No resemblance of a romantic relationship	- Comfort and escapism more than friendship - Relationship with the idols as something they mostly take energy from	- The entanglement in the parasocial sphere is not as deep and more on the surface level - Feeling of happiness, excitement and admiration but no more than that
Monetary vs free support	- Consume everything (free and paid content) - Frequently reach an extreme level of consumption - Compulsive consumption - Always prioritise their artist over everything	- Consume both paid and free content. But if they can't afford the paid content they are more inclined to compensate this with the consumption of free content - Logical consumption - Free content to attract their non fans friends into the artist - Prioritise their artist only in case of important events	- Mainly into consumption of free content because of the economic impediments - Jealous of people that can spend a lot because they would like to do the same - Circumstantial consumption - Intimate way of consuming	- More into monetarily consumption - They can go extreme in their consumption, but only when and if they like the content - They go frequently into collecting - Experiential consumption
Social identity within fandoms and expectations	- Sense of competitiveness - Being 'the' fan among others - Bragging online - They pressure people to not follow other artists - Dictating the rules while being the best	- Helping the community to support the artist - No show-off tendencies - Follow only their favourite artist because the relationship is fulfilling and because of the sense of betrayal	- Sense of belonging - No desire to follow other artists because the relationship with their favourites is fulfilling, being everything they need and want	- Little care about contributing to the fandom dynamics - No pressures felt from the people in the fandom - Not intimidated to support other artists they like
Justification for consumption	- Need to feel closer to the artist on an intimate level	- Consuming to show support	- Consuming to pay back for the comfort and everything the artist did for them	- Consuming simply for the enjoyment and excitement of consumption brings
Exploitation through the fans' lenses	- Not self-aware of the exploitation aspect - The company is acting and working normally in their eyes - They engage regularly with this exploitation without noticing it, by keep consuming everything as much as possible	- Self-aware of exploitation aspect -The company is painted as the villain while the artist is the victim - Fan power as activism - Consuming things that can be more rewarding to the artist rather than the company	- Self-aware of the exploitation aspect - The company is the villain, but… - …They do not play the hero - They urge fans to be more self-conscious, especially in their consumption decisions	- Self-aware of the exploitation aspect but they believe that it's the company's job - They believe that sometimes all you can do is to engage with this exploitation if you want to have that content/item for yourself

5.2 The Top Fan

In line with what was declared by Stever (2011), Chung and Cho (2017), and Ma et al. (2022), this archetype includes those fans that, through the content, feel like they are a part of something more, not only limited to a strong friendship but also reaching a romantic entanglement with the artists and worship. Specifically, reconnecting to what Moon (2019) and Elfving-Hwang (2018) stated regarding the heterogeneity of pre-set personalities in K-pop to set the conditions to create strong bonds with desperate people, these fans tend to choose their favourite artist by picking the one that can complement them. Most importantly, this aspect also matches the concept of self-identity in personal branding, which illustrates how singers can shape their facade by strategically presenting some peculiar aspects of their persona that can be captivating (Hackley & Hackley, 2015; Rein et al., 2006).

The extremely deep entanglement in the parasocial sphere leads them to frequently consume content as a sense of intimacy fulfilment, wanting to be close to the artists and, therefore, willing to pay for personal one-to-one interaction. This latter aspect emphasises a shift from a top-down hierarchical approach to something more horizontal, as mentioned by Russel et al. (2008), nonetheless, it also enlarges it by focusing on the said one-to-one interactions and not only the many-to-many ones. For 'The Top Fan', the need to feel closer to the artist as a justification of consumption is forked into the belief that the more they spend, the more they can feel this intimacy, as well as the desire to pay for services such as messaging apps, fan calls, or VIP concert tickets to be as close as possible to the stage (and therefore, the artist), that directly provide them this closeness. Therefore, the hedonic aspect of the celebrity's personal branding appears to have a strong influence on this archetype, emphasising the need of the artist to constantly provide a pleasurable experience through these personal interactions (Scarpi, 2012; Kamins, 1990; Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

'The Top Fan' tend to consume all (or almost all) the content available, from free to paid ones, sometimes doing what they call 'crazinesses' and reaching an extreme level of support especially monetarily, such as going to another continent for a concert or buying multiple copies of the same album (often also with the hope to win a hypothetical video-call with their artist, with the entries based on album purchases). As mentioned by them, this is especially due to the level of trust in the artist, which leads 'The Top Fan' to even purchase something when they do not know what will be on the inside (i.e. pre-orders)—a concept of trust

supported by Garbarino and Johnson (1999), who make it a pillar of customer loyalty. The level of trust and the justification of consumption given by the fulfilment of a sense of intimacy with the artist, leads to this compulsive consumption, with the urge to engage with everything the artist releases. This argument is in line with the statements from Fiore, Jin, and Kim (2005), Martin and Ballantine (2005), and Hyatt (2012) regarding the fact that the deeper entangled you are in the parasocial relationship (fostered by the content per se), the more you are willing to consume and, specifically, spend. Moreover, the 'The Top Fan' appear to always put their favourite artist over every priority they have in terms of time and energy, a surprising finding extending the literature by showing that this archetype does not entirely fit in the fact that involvement is functional of time and circumstantial—as elaborated by Sangeeta (2017 cited in Rahman et al., 2018) in the Consumer Involvement Theory.

As previously mentioned, these fans believe that the more they spend, the more they can feel closer to the artist, and one of their additional characteristic is to brag online on the amount of consumption (whether monetary and non) they do because of the sense of competition they perceive coming from other fans in terms of closeness to the artist. This is something that is supported by Epps and Dixon (2017) in relation to parasocial interaction in the entertainment industry when they talk about how online sharing can craft and shape the way the fans identify themselves in the fandom and with respect to their position with the singers. In this respect, 'The Top Fan' frequently pressures people to show support only to the artist they follow, also dictating the rules to be a perfect fan; nonetheless, no one is or can be better than them. They want to be recognized as 'the' fan, always on top while commanding the others. A fan-artist engagement having its reflection on the entire fandom and that relies a lot on the categories of interest immersion and social interaction, mentioned by Smith (2014).

Lastly, as elucidated in the presentation of this archetype, the fans here included do not appear to be self-aware of the exploitation of this parasocial level in the industry compared to the other three archetypes that will be presented in the following sections. They believe that both the idols and the company are working normally and nothing is regarded to be dubious regarding certain choices, therefore the fact that they perceive just general authenticity is reflected in what Burnasheva and Suh (2020) stated regarding the increase in brand affection and, consequently, buying intentions, which are still very high for this archetype for all the type of content with no distinctions.

5.3 The Hero Friend

This archetype, in respect with the first found theme of "Different kinds of parasocial connections to the artist" has been coined to explicate the so-called presence of familiar bond between the fans and the artists. Although highly self-aware of their entanglement with the concept of parasocial relationship, the 'Hero Friend' see themselves as a potential friend to their favourite idol, whereby the theory of resemblance to a particular friendship is prominent. As Chung & Cho (2017) explain it, this bond is characterised by an unequal term of investment, where the fans regard their idol whom they have never been in close contact with, as someone who resembles an important acquaintance in their lives. Their self-awareness is relative as some acknowledge that this connection is seldom comparable to real life friendships, but they all accede to the fact that this bond is stripped of any romantic association.

On recurrent instances, this archetype has showcased a reasoning behind 'The Hero Friend' label that is extracted from the online persona that the artists bring forth. Theoretically, in the chapter 2.1 of "Content Creation" the idea of personalization has been ascertained by Abid et al. (2020) wherein music artists tend to tailor their content accordingly to engender a fanbase that mirrors the values of the former. This archetype has also shown that in terms of the "Monetary vs Free" support, the latter tends to consume both, with the slight inclination towards free support by dint of streaming and sharing, which is deemed as a compensation if they do not have the financial means to contribute monetarily. They would also attempt to indirectly promote their favourite artist to their friends to generate additional support that encompasses free consumption. Indeed, their consumption is seen as logical in the sense that they tend to only prioritise their favourite artist over their financial situation and time in case of an event that is alleged to be important for their idol—which reflects the consumer involvement theory by Sangeeta (2017 cited in Rahman et al., 2018) who define investment as being functional of time and adhering to certain circumstances. Moreover, as Ansari et al. (2018) demonstrate, the free aspect of the content creation ought to be used as a powerful tool to not only assert the online presence but also attract fans who would alternatively engage in non-monetary support.

'The Hero Friend' has appropriately been assimilated to a saviour or a hero companion for the pertinence of a certain disposition that renders the fans portray their idols as a victim of a

corrupt entertainment industry that reaps the rewards from parasocial relationships. As such, in respect to the previously mentioned logical consumption, this archetype is compelled to engage in consumption habits that would be deemed as more rewarding for the artists rather than the company, by trying to diligently mirror back the idols' efforts to keep the connection buoyant, whereby the social exchange theory is upheld (Steinhoff et al., 2019). Additionally, this mirroring in actions can also be attributed to the theory of reciprocal obligations coined by Clark et al. (2017), and to which further explains the fans' urgency for emotional as well as financial contribution. In alignment with the personal branding theory, artists carefully sculpt a persona that is highly prompted by the achievement of building an exemplary demeanour but that alternatively poses ulterior gains (Schlosser, 2020). Parallelly, K-pop fans are lured by this "innocence" concept that is perfectly polished by their favourite idols online, which leads to the instillment of the victim mentality when perceiving the latter.

Consequently, 'The Hero Friend' archetype is always seeking to aid the community to further support their favourite artist with nullified show-off tendencies. Their social identity within the fandom is wrought in a way that follows a collective spirit which entails the unison of fans to engage only with their favourite idol—as the latter brings a sense of fulfilment that it would insinuate "betrayal" if they engage with other artists. This is highlighted in the theory of the interaction horizontal hierarchy that was supported by Russel et al. (2008) but with the additional facet of bottom-up hierarchy that Kim et al. (2021) and Jun (2019) showcased in the chapter 2.5 on the K-pop Industry. This dynamic is seen as "many-to-one" unlike what Russel et al. (2008) has exhibited, and it could be seen in the way this archetype of K-pop fans host group orders and activities within the community, in the same way it is outlined within the fan-artist engagement theory that defines engagement in three elements; consuming, participating and producing (Úblová, 2014).

Indeed, when the justification of consumption inquiry has been brought up to this archetype, it was highlighted that their sole reason was to only show support to their one specific artist whom they consider a fellow "friend". Although no additional reasoning has been brought up, the theory of the marketing funnel within the chapter 2.4 on Parasocial Relationships is relevant here, as it reveals that the more invested the fans are, the more they are likely to be entrapped within a marketing funnel (Hyatt, 2012). This theory is also extended because of the mentioned pondering over their consumption in a logical manner, not willing to spend time and money for anything that is released. As such, and in alignment with the K-pop

chapter, this archetype is more likely to engage in multiple fandom activities to ensure the relevance and success of their favourite idol for further support reasons (Yi et al., 2015).

Lastly, as aforementioned, 'The Hero Friend' has shown a high level of self-awareness of the exploitation element of the parasocial relationships within the K-pop realm. Their "hero" role consists of saving their "victim" friend—known as their favourite idol—from the villain hands of the entertainment companies. This hero-villain-victim trinity dynamic is wrought in the way this archetype believes that their idols are not to be scrutinised for further promulgating the parasocial aspect, but the latter is simply adhering to what the companies dictate. 'The Hero Friend' uses the means of fan-power as activism in this respect, would consume only if they believe it benefits more the artist rather than the company, and as the K-pop theory chapter suggests, they resort to diffusing complaints on Twitter to condemn the entertainment labels' decisions (Kang et al., 2021).

5.4 The Dreamer

This archetype includes the fans that, through the content, mostly perceive their artist as an element of comfort, as well as a way to escape from the problems in their lives, rather than strictly speaking in terms of friendship. Their closeness to the artist is not simply something in terms of values mirroring like with 'The Hero Friend' or a complement to their personae as illustrated by 'The Top Fan', but it goes deeper by feeling this connection due to the artist opening up about their struggles and vulnerabilities, which puts the singers at their same level and make it possible for the fans to not feel alone by seeing even their most fragile characteristics in the idols. As mentioned by Rein et al. (2006), this heavily relies on the self-identity concept, with a specific focus on the "who you are" criteria, for the creation of a perfect strong bond, and leads to the fans choosing their favourite artist because of this sense of comfort and the ability to identify themselves in the idols—something that is again supported by Moon (2019) and Elfving-Hwang (2018), specifically when talking about the heterogeneity of personae offered by the K-pop industry. Moreover, as mentioned, 'The Dreamer' also perceive this deep connection with their favourite artist because of being able to escape from their real lives and project themselves into their universe, especially during hard moments, which is something not only soothing but also described as a perfect distraction. This sense of escapism was frequently mentioned by this archetype in relation to the pandemic, and it is something that is supported by Bond (2021), labelling the parasocial

relationships enforced by the content available as a coping mechanism during the difficult situation.

The peculiar type of parasocial connection to the artist leads 'The Dreamer' to justify their attitudes towards consumption as a way to pay back the artist for their comforting presence; a concept that easily reconnects to the social exchange theory by Steinhoff et al. (2019), with its underlying concepts of reciprocal obligations (or decree of reciprocity) advanced by Clarck et al. (2017). These authors explained that the relationship can be fortified by releasing content more entangled with the idols' private moments related to their work or personal lives (behind-the-scenes, documentaries, live streams, and more) and that the fans would feel the need to engage with them because of the entanglement in this reciprocal obligations. In this respect, 'The Dreamer' highlighted multiple times that they consume these sneak-peeks as a way to thank the artist for letting them in on their personal affairs.

The sense of reciprocity is extremely present when it comes to free content (including the types previously mentioned), but it is also instilled when it comes to monetary consumption. Nonetheless, this archetype includes the fans that are mainly into the consumption of the said free content because of the frequent economic impediments they have, which leads to the development of a sense of jealousy manifested by judgmental statements towards the people that can afford more than them because they dream of being able to do the same. Indeed, 'The Dreamer' frequently stated that because of their financial situations, when it comes to the purchase level, what is truly influenced by their affection towards the idol are their intentions and attitudes rather than actual behaviours—which is in line with the statements made by Fiore et al. (2005). Moreover, regarding their way of consuming, these fans usually opt for a more intimate approach, preferring to strictly engage with the content by themselves (such as watching the videos uploaded by the artists, streaming, buying products, and more) as it relates to their well-being and serenity; which reconnects their engagement to the concept of interest immersion brought forth by Smith (2014). Nonetheless, while their consumption is more intimate, the aspect of sharing content and being engaged in the community by commenting on things with other people is highly present as they consider it as something that strengthens the bond with the idols because of being able to find this level of comfort and escapism by talking about their favourite artists with people in the fandom that these fans perceive a sense of similarity with. This is in line with what was expressed by Epps and Dixon (2017) regarding the importance of the online sharing experience to the reinforcement

of the inclination towards the artist and the shaping of the identity in the fandom, in this case, characterised by a sense of belonging.

Lastly, despite wanting to pay back to the artist by consuming content, 'The Dreamer' appear to be self-aware of the exploitation of the parasocial relationships in the industry and for this reason, through the use of their social media platforms, they urge the fans to be more cautious with their consumption decisions, especially when it comes to paid content. This extends what Kang et al. (2021) elaborated regarding the condemning online of this side of the industry, by having this archetype not only complaining about the companies frequently exploiting the relationship fans have with their artists, but also voicing the need for the formers to be more conscious of this aspect and not be fooled by this system. 'The Dreamer' is aware of the fact the genuine authenticity of the artists is often shadowed by the company, by either teaching them how to act and interact in peculiar situations (Elfving-Hwang, 2018) or by the constant release of content endorsed by the idols that can bring more and more revenue to the labels. Nonetheless, they seem to be more focused on condemning the fans that continue to engage with this exploitation by constantly increasing their consumption without reflecting, and advocating against the system remains more in the back. Indeed, while this self-awareness is a relevant characteristic of 'The Dreamer', the internal contradiction regarding wanting to be able to spend more money on K-pop but not being able to do so because of their economical impediments, cannot be left behind.

5.5 The Enjoyer

This archetype, as opposed to the previously mentioned ones, has distinct traits in a way that they are unattached and seldom affected by the presence of the parasocial aspect in a fan to artist relationship. In respect with the first theme, their entanglement in the parasocial sphere is described as laidback and tipping on the surface level. The enmeshment of 'The Enjoyer' within the K-pop community, although seen as frivolous in the hindsight, is proven to be solidified on the basis of experience, admiration and enjoyment—thus the labelling of this archetype. Correspondingly, Elfving-Hwang (2018) has expounded on this in her paper that admiration is considered as the backbone of K-pop parasocial relationships.

Notably, this archetype is driven by a monetary consumption impetus that can only be triggered when the content bestowed upon them is worth their financial investment. As they

value "the experience" more, their contribution is strongly tied to whether their favourite idol's merchandise or content meet their standards of "enjoyment". In fact, genuineness and reliability in terms of content quality, as Clark et al. (2017) suggests, are the driving forces that compel 'The Enjoyer' to engage with their artist. Since their consumption is described as "experiential", when genuineness and reliability have been attained in previous instances, this archetype tends to engross themselves in purchasing habits even when they do not have any prior idea about what the content can look like. As such, this type of fans are most likely to become "collectors" just for the sake of the enjoyment this experience brings to their plate.

In parallel with what has been said, 'The Enjoyer' has a more passive disposition in terms of belongingness within a fandom and the expectations of the latter from them. Their carefree attitude poses a hindrance in finding a "social identity" in their own community, and they feel null pressure from other fans to contribute to the collective dynamics. Since they fit into the category of pursuing the "hedonic" form of consumption—as Scarpi (2012), Kamins (1990), and Marwick and Boyd (2011) elucidate in the expansion strategy theory within personal branding—they are hardly intimidated to support other artists that are apt to fulfil the experiential hedonic element that they seek.

Consequently, their justification for consumption, or in most cases collecting, is simply reasoned by the sheer enjoyment and excitement that consumption brings. Úblová (2014) ascertains that engagement is intertwined with consuming for the "pleasure", and the Enjoyer can be presented as an exemplary archetype of this theory. Although they appear to have a superficial association with their favourite artist, and their consumption is solely experiential, it has been implied that behavioural patterns that align with financial support and collecting in this case, correlate with the parasocial relationship theory (Turner & Tollison, 2021).

Lastly, as the Enjoyer is the only archetype that conforms more to the "top-down" interaction theory introduced by Russel et al. (2008), their stance regarding the apparent exploitation in the K-pop realm is driven by a sense of nonchalance. Indeed, they are aware of this said exploitation yet believe that the entertainment companies are simply carrying out their jobs. Unquestionably, this archetype states that participating in this exploitative sphere is inevitable, and being a major instigator in this as a fellow collector is as irrevocable if it is at the stake of owning the item they want.

6. Conclusion

The main purpose of this thesis was to provide clarification on the disparate attitudinal outcomes regarding the sphere of consumption derived from fan-artist parasocial relationships. Throughout the introduction, it was mentioned multiple times how, nowadays, these peculiar bonds started to gain more popularity in the music industry, with artists needing to rely on them because of the changes brought by digital technologies and the consequent shift in requests and requirements coming from consumers. Nonetheless, parasocial relationships have different facets reflected in fragmented consumption attitudes, leaving a general confusion that can consequently make it hard for artists to handle them properly and for companies to tailor their strategies. Hence, the research question that guided our study focused on categorising disparate attitudinal outcomes into clear consumer archetypes. This question was shaped after consulting relevant literature on the concept of parasocial relationships and the ones that are also strictly interconnected to this sphere (such as content creation, personal branding, and fan-artist engagement), and once realising the big gap regarding the understanding of the plethora of attitudinal consumption responses. In this respect, to study this topic, we decided to focus on the fruitful K-pop industry as literature indicated that this field in the music realm is deeply entangled in the use of parasocial bonds in marketing actions, covering the complexity of the sphere. Therefore, guided by the literature consulted, we were able to shape relevant questions that, through the use of focus groups, made us gain peculiar insights on the topic and eased the process of comparing and contrasting the statements coming from the participants, also prompted by their internal discussions. The subsequent analysis of the empirical findings first led us to the individuation of three macro-themes, namely: 'Different kinds of parasocial connections to the artist', 'Fans' investments', and 'Self-awareness and support'; each of them also with their specific sub-themes. With the help of these themes, we were able to conclude by identifying four different archetypes: 'The Top Fan', 'The Hero Friend', 'The Dreamer', and 'The Enjoyer', interlinking the level of parasocial connections the fans have with their artists to their peculiar attitudes towards consumption. The clear categorization underlying the differences as well as the latent similarities between the archetypes, helped us to answer the research question and the main aim of our thesis. Moreover, surprising findings made it possible for us to contribute to the existing literature by extending some of the principles mentioned and highlighting novel concepts, as the following section 6.2 on the Theoretical Contributions will illustrate.

The archetypes also made it possible to fulfil the aim of developing some practical implications for the artists and their companies to better use these parasocial bonds in their strategies, mentioned in section 6.3 on the Managerial Contributions.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

- Parasocial Nuances through the archetypes:

This study proposes several additional theoretical contributions that not only challenge the literature in a few aspects, but also serve as a way to introduce novel theories that are multi-faceted and intricate in alignment with the research question. First, it has been revealed through the preceding Literature Review and Theoretical Framework section (chapter 2) that the parasocial relationships have been seen to exert an indirect impact on the fans' own purchasing intentions, while specifically correlating the intensity of the entanglement with the likelihood of adopting an extreme consumption attitude (Fiore et al., 2005; Martin and Ballantine, 2005). Hyatt (2012) has also backed this position by expounding on his marketing funnel theory that "the more loyal, engaged and interested your fan becomes, the more money he will be willing to spend." (Hyatt, 2012, p.143).

However, although true to some extent, the outcome of our findings has abetted to the extension of the said theory and pinpointed that the strength and level of engagement in the parasocial sphere is not always positively reflected in the monetary contribution of the fans. The above archetypes have showcased that—in respect with the subtheme of monetary and free support—adding to prior theoretical statements, 'The Enjoyer' as a counter example has been assimilated to having a more superficial relationship with their favourite artist yet still contributes monetarily. This archetype has had a laidback entanglement with the parasocial aspect, and their purchasing attitude is solely built on the basis of gratifying the concept of experience. They are known to be adamant collectors which is at the crux of their experiential consumption, but this does not necessarily highlight an accentuated level of affiliation with a parasocial relationship.

The initial theory is best fit for the first 'The Top Fan' archetype who seems to be deeply intertwined in the parasocial dynamic and adopts irrationally compulsive consumption habits that comprise both monetary and free support. These fans particularly, strive to be "the" fan and not any fan by the means of prioritising their artists over their own duties. Moreover, the

Hyatt (2012) theory can be further supplemented with the rest of the study findings. The archetypes have unveiled a dissimilar way of perceiving the parasocial relationship theory and disclosed it in a sense that the said concept is way more complex and not as uniformly linear as it has been proclaimed to be in previous studies. Parallelly, the research has also revealed that 'The Hero Friend' archetype, although being subject to the parasocial entanglement, has seen to be having logical consumption patterns. This can be elaborated in the way they are pragmatic in the choices they make, and adding to the supported claims by Fiore et al. (2005), and Martin and Ballantine (2005) declare, 'The Hero Friend' is more inclined to consume free content and only prioritise their artist in the case of highly important events. The monetary element is not emphasised in this case despite the profound involvement in the parasocial realm, which can bolster the initial literature assertions.

- Reasoned support through the archetypes:

Additionally, the study has further uncovered the concept of reasoned support in alignment with the parasocial relationship theory, which past studies have not touched upon. The latter archetype has vehemently justified their support for their favourite artist in a similar way a friend would support another friend. 'The Hero Friend' perception of the artist is correlated with a friendship, and their consumption is tightly solidified through this bond. The concept of reasoned support has also been underlined through the last found archetype of 'The Dreamer' fan. This one has justified their consumption by finding comfort and escapism rather than a friendship, and although they proved to be associated with the parasocial facet, their consumption is predominantly established upon free content—correspondingly adding on the prevalence of both Hyatt (2012) and Fiore et al. (2005), and Martin and Ballantine (2005) theories. As such, this archetype has brought the insight of supporting as an act of payback to compensate for the emotional underpinnings that the singer has underlyingly offered.

- Conspicuous Exploitation:

Notably, another theoretical contribution that this study imparts is the perceived exploitation through the fans' lens and its different repercussions, or as we refer to: conspicuous exploitation. Expanding on what Burnasheva and Suh (2020) have asserted in the literature—regarding how the usage of brand affection can instigate buying intentions—three out of four archetypes have reportedly mentioned that, despite the overly

emotionally-inducing content, they are self-aware of the exploitation. For instance, the self-awareness of 'The Hero Friend' and 'The Dreamer' archetypes has led to them being selective about their consumption choices, the former possessing a logical consumption while the latter having a circumstantial one. Despite both of them painting the entertainment companies as the sole villain and the artist as the victim, 'The Hero Friend' strives to embody the role of the "hero" by only consuming specific content that can be rewarding to the singer and not the company. While 'The Dreamer' fan on the other hand does not seek to play the hero, but rather urges fans to be more conscious, specifically in their consumption decisions. Undeniably, excessively producing content that is emotionally laden to evoke a certain relatability that ignites a parasocial bond, can in fact, trigger a self-awareness within the fandom that mitigate buying decisions. Consequently, the study findings clarify that this conspicuous exploitation, that is apparent to the fans' eye, can cause a backlash of course of actions, and diminish the possibility of monetary support from the fans.

6.2 Managerial Contributions

The analysis and discussion made it possible for this thesis to contribute to the academic field, as well as gathering from the archetypes valuable insights for relevant managerial contributions. In particular, these insights can come in handy to music practitioners when trying to use the parasocial sphere in their marketing strategies in a way that is effective and can help to survive the hurdles of today's music industry.

To begin, the archetypes illustrated how the fans are engaged in parasocial relationships with the artists in different ways, also showcasing different preferences regarding the content they like to consume more, the ways they enjoy consuming, their stances on the interactive approaches, and more. While some fans appeared to love some specific aspects, others disregarded them or were indeed neutral. Therefore, something that is clear from the K-pop industry, making it so successful all over the world, relies on the fact that artists try to fulfil multiple different requests, taking into consideration as many of them as possible. Artists outside of K-pop, once looking at this specific field, can learn how to create or improve the engagement in the parasocial sphere by keeping the variety and diversity of content as broad as possible to fit with different archetypes and their needs, and consequently making sure to appeal to almost everyone. Artists can release content that is comforting, as well as content that can put them at the level of their fans to foster the friendship aspect. Along the lines of

focusing on the experience level, the content can even resemble a romantic attachment, which can evoke a plethora of fan-artist bonds. Moreover, these archetypes helped us to understand the importance of having this great variety when it comes to both paid and free content so that people can have multiple options and accessibility to support the artists in miscellaneous of ways based on their parasocial affections, also nurtured through the things released and services available.

Secondly, the findings and the relative archetypes illustrated the importance of authenticity when it comes to implementing parasocial fan-artist connections. Exploitation was a word that was frequently mentioned, and this concept was reflected differently in each archetype. Both the artist and the company must remain cautious, trying to be as transparent as possible in every situation. Usually, it is the company to be the one painted as a villain, and this does not have positive consequences as it can happen to have fans complaining and advocating online by teaching people to stop engaging with some of the content released (as it happened with 'The Dreamer') or having 'The Hero' spending money and time to support only specific releases. Therefore, the thesis highlights how transparency should be the backbone of these interactions even when fans appear not self-aware of the exploitation or would simply continue spending, in order to avoid having other fans boycotting. The resemblance of romantic feelings is the most criticised one and, while this can bring a lot of revenue, it can be a crucial suggestion to have the artist and the company state that these peculiar interactions are nothing more than fictional every time they try to touch that area.

Lastly, while opening up our study, we have illustrated the difficulties of today's music industry and how important physical items are still considered for general revenues. From the findings, we have discovered how, in the K-pop industry, the fans are engaged still notably engaged with the consumption of these products (some more and some a bit less) as the parasocial aspect is still fostered through them, and also because of the big consideration given to the experiential side. A few examples of this can be either the inclusion of photo-cards and personalised things, having different concepts for the same item, or the possibility to win an extra prize. Artists outside of K-pop can take inspiration from these pull (rather than push) techniques, to attract fans to consume their physical items. In this case, it is crucial to still be careful of the feeling of exploitation the fans can perceive and try to make things as fair and transparent as possible without forcing the level too intensively.

6.3 Limitations and Further Research

Aside from the several theoretical and managerial contributions mentioned in this last chapter, it is important to underline some limitations of our study, which can serve as a pinpoint for the development of further research. One of the main ones relies upon the time constraints for the elaboration of the thesis, which had repercussions on some of the choices made. Specifically, the relatively short time frame led us to focus on the use of a specific sample and one particular method for the individuation of consumer archetypes. Regarding the sampling, while we explained that the reason behind the choice of involving as participants of the focus groups only the female gender aged from 18 to 27 years old was because this group of people is the dominant one when it comes to K-pop fans, further research with loosened time constrictions can delve deeper into the analysis of the consumers attitudinal outcomes related to the male gender (and non-binary people), or do a compare and contrast processes with other age gaps. Although these people compose a minority of the fan population, considering them can highlight several details that can reinforce the developed archetypes or lead to the discovery of additional ones, as well as strengthen the transferability of our findings to other contexts.

Additionally, throughout the presentation of the empirical findings and the analysis we have pointed out how multiple participants referred not only to their personal experiences but complemented them with the mentioning of behaviours they see online and statements that other fans post on different social media. Therefore, while the focus groups were an optimal way to analyse the plethora of attitudinal outcomes by also having people discuss the topics with each other, further research can couple this method with direct online observation of the fans in their 'natural habitat'; something that can bring forth peculiar additional details that can enrich the archetypes and lessen the general bias of the research. Finally, we have a last suggestion for further studies on this interesting topic. The consumer archetypes we found are helpful to have a clear delineation and categorization of the attitudinal outcomes coming from the parasocial relationships between fans and their artists, leading to the insightful contributions mentioned in the previous sections; for this reason we believe that it could be significant to deeply analyse them each on their own and continue enriching this study field that is becoming more and more relevant in these last year and is not covered enough in the literature.

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Appendix 1 - Focus Group Guide

Familiarisation stage:
1. Can you tell me your name (or a pseudonym), age and the main K-pop artists that you follow?
2. How did you first get interested in K-pop? And why did you become a fan with time?
3. Can each of you list 3 elements that you believe make K-pop idols successful and popular among fans?

Exploration stage:
[*Brief explanation of what parasocial-relationships are before starting the exploration stage*]

Topic cluster 1: engagement in the parasocial relationships, opinions and thoughts on these.
1. How would you describe your relationship with the K-pop idols? Do you feel emotionally connected to them in any way? *(Can you elaborate on that?)*
2. What do you think of the parasocial relationships between K-pop idols and their fans? *(Can you elaborate on that?)*
3. How do you feel about the way K-pop idols interact with their audience? *(Can you elaborate on that?)*

Topic cluster 2: parasocial relationships and support towards the K-pop artists (monetary and none)
4. How do you show support to your K-pop idols? And how important is this for you? *(Can you elaborate on that?)*
5. Do you prefer showing support to the K-pop artist you follow by yourself or by participating in collective fan activities? Why is that?
6. Do you feel that your parasocial relationship with K-pop idols influences the ways you want/do to support them? *(Can you elaborate on that?)*

Topic cluster 3: parasocial relationships and attitudes towards consumption

7. And what about your consumption attitudes specifically? *(Can you elaborate on that?)*
8. Have you ever considered spending money for a service that can connect you more to your idol (e.g. meet & greet, fan calls, signing sessions, messaging apps…)? Why or why not?
9. Have you ever felt a pressure to consume (or support) more K-pop content (e.g. music, merchandise, concert tickets…) because of your parasocial relationship with the artist? Why or why not?
10. Have you ever thought of purchasing more than one copy of the same item? Why or why not?

11. When thinking of purchasing something from a K-pop artist (music, merchandising, concert tickets…), do you value more the emotional factors or the practical ones (e.g. quality, price…)? *(Can you elaborate on that?)*
12. Have you ever considered purchasing something that you have not necessarily liked (e.g. a song, album, merchandise…) and why?

Topic cluster 4: closing questions on loyalty, critiques, risks and opportunities

13. Have you ever thought about putting the support towards your favourite K-pop artists before other priorities (e.g. financial, work, school/university or general time constraints?) *(Can you elaborate on that?)*
14. Do you think that your parasocial bond with your idol makes you loyal enough to not support other artists the same way you do with your favourites? *(Can you elaborate on that?)*
15. Do you think that the parasocial relationships with K-pop idols produce competitive feelings within the fandom? How does this impact your attitudes towards consumption? *(Can you elaborate on that?)*
16. Have you ever had the feeling that your parasocial relationship with a K-pop idol was exploited for second purposes? What would be your reaction?