

*From Screens to Souls: Parasocial Relationship, Belongingness, and Zest for Life  
Among Emerging Adulthood K-pop Fans*

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**Abstract**

In the era of technological advances and widespread internet use, forming parasocial relationships, those one-sided connections with admired figures like Korean celebrities, have become effortlessly accessible. These relationships often play a pivotal role in enhancing individuals' zest for life - enthusiasm and energy to live. While past research has delved into parasocial relationships and belongingness, there remains an unexplored territory: the relationship between parasocial relationships and zest for life, with belongingness as the mediator. This study endeavors to bridge this gap by involving 182 K-pop fans (aged 18-29 years old), acknowledging the profound influence of K-pop's popularity and the prevalence of parasocial relationships within this fan community. Moreover, emerging adulthood is characterized by a fundamental need to build intimate relationships, making it a critical stage for investigating how parasocial relationships may affect overall well-being. Data analysis for this research will use Model 4 of the Hayes PROCESS for SPSS 27. The research findings reveal a significant direct effect of Parasocial Friendship Communication and Parasocial Friendship Support on the zest for life among emerging adulthood K-Pop fans. Interestingly, both Physical and Emotional forms of Parasocial Love do not demonstrate a significant direct effect. Furthermore, belongingness does not appear to act as a mediator between parasocial relationships and zest for life. These findings will contribute not only to our understanding of this unique fan culture but also to the broader exploration of one-sided relationships in the digital age. As we navigate the ever-evolving landscape of fan interactions in the digital era, this study offers a glimpse into how the virtual bonds forged between fans and their idols can have a tangible impact on their overall enthusiasm for life.

Keywords: Parasocial Relationship, Belongingness, Zest for Life, Korean Pop Fans

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## 1. Introduction

In the past two decades, Korean culture has spread to various countries. The diffusion of Korean popular culture encompasses various aspects, ranging from dramas, music, to lifestyle. This phenomenon is known as the "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu". The Korea Foundation (2022) states that the number of Hallyu fans worldwide has reached 178.8 million people. This figure has increased 19 times compared to 2012. This demonstrates that the "Hallyu" phenomenon has gained broad acceptance among people worldwide, including in Indonesia.

The dominance of Korean Pop music, or K-Pop, is one of the most prominent aspects of the Hallyu phenomenon. K-Pop music, characterized by its unique musical style and spectacular stage performances, has achieved significant global popularity. K-Pop groups and solo artists from South Korea have managed to capture the attention of fans worldwide, forming a strong and diverse fan base. According to CNN Indonesia (2022), Indonesia is the country with the largest K-Pop fanbase in the online world. Indonesia is also noted as the country that discusses K-Pop the most on the Twitter platform, reaching 7.5 billion tweets related to K-Pop (Javier, 2021). This position is followed by the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand.

According to the IDN Times survey (Triadanti, 2019), 40.7% of K-Pop fans in Indonesia are aged 20-25 years, 38.1% are aged 15-20 years, 11.9% are over 25 years old, and 9.3% are aged 10-15 years. From the survey results, it is evident that the majority of K-Pop fans come from the emerging adulthood age range, i.e., 18-29 years old. The emerging adulthood stage is a phase with the task of establishing intimate relationships with others. If individuals do not fulfill this stage, it can result in feelings of isolation from their environment and potentially disrupt their psychological well-being (Arnett, 2014; Santrock, 2006).

Koreaboo (2024) recently shared stories of several netizens who credited their idols for saving them from deep depression and suicidal thoughts. The idols igniting a zest for life within them. Despite recent struggles with isolation and social issues, they find solace and strength in their idols' support, acknowledging they would not be alive today without them. These testimonies underscore the profound impact idols can have on their fans' mental health and well-being, serving as beacons of hope and inspiration in challenging times.

Collins et al. (2016) define zest for life as the desire to live that emerges as a feeling of engagement in life and a positive outlook on life. According to Peterson et al., (2007), individuals with a strong zest for life typically experience heightened activation and motivation in their daily activities. This zestful outlook has been associated with decreased feelings of anxiety and boredom. However, as noted by George et al. (2020), zest for life may diminish when desires for belonging remain unfulfilled, highlighting the interconnectedness between belongingness and one's zest for life.

Zest for life is crucial for individuals to develop adaptive coping mechanisms. Moreover, it maintains the feeling that life is worth living, even when an individual feels pressured or unpleasant. As an individual's zest for life increases, disturbances like depression decrease (Lam, 2020). Furthermore, Shahram et al. (2021) discovered that zest for life appears to act as a protective factor against suicide among young individuals and is linked to traits of resilience.

Concurrently, the relationship between K-Pop and its fans has given rise to parasocial relationships, which are deeply embedded in fan culture. Parasocial relationships refer to one-sided relationships formed by individuals with media figures, such as celebrities or idols (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These parasocial relationships are characterized by feelings of closeness, emotional attachment, and identification with idols, even without reciprocal interaction (Dibble et al., 2015). Fans engage in parasocial relationships by following their idols' activities, enjoying their music and content, and participating in fan communities both online and offline (Purwaningtyas & Oktara, 2023). The phenomenon of parasocial relationships has become an essential aspect of K-Pop fans' lives, depicting how fans feel an emotional connection with their idols, as if they have a personal relationship with them.

Tukachinsky (2011) divides parasocial relationships into two dimensions: Parasocial Friendship (PSF) and Parasocial Love (PSL). Parasocial Friendship (PSF) is the imagined support and closeness one would experience if the media character were real. Parasocial Friendship consists of two factors. The first factor of friendship centers on communication themes like disclosure and seeking advice. The second factor of friendship is defined by themes of support and companionship, encompassing trust, sharing, and mutual assistance. Next, the second dimension is parasocial love (PSL) refers to feelings of affection and physical attraction towards the media character. Parasocial Love is divided into two factors: physical attraction and a deep emotional response to the character (e.g., admiration, mood alteration).

Parasocial relationships are often associated with negative impacts on individuals such as loneliness, depression, and low self-esteem due to comparisons between individuals and their idols (Baek et al., 2013; Hoffner & Bond, 2022). However, on the other hand, parasocial relationships potentially contribute to enhancing an individual's well-being. This is because of the feeling of connection with idols, which could potentially fulfill an individual's need for belongingness. This phenomenon can be explained by the social surrogacy theory, which suggests that individuals can develop meaningful bonds with media figures. These connections can act as substitutes for real social relationships. Thereby fulfill their belongingness needs (Derrick et al., 2009).

Belongingness involves feeling accepted, respected, and supported by one's environment. It stems from the need-to-belong theory where individuals strongly desire to form and maintain close and enduring relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gao et al., 2017). When individuals lack belongingness, it can lead to pathologies such as depression, loneliness, and social anxiety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Moeller et al., 2020). Meanwhile, McAdams and Bryant (as cited in Moeller et al., 2020) found that belongingness significantly contributes to human well-being and happiness. This indicates that belongingness is a crucial aspect for individuals to possess.

Building on the preceding discussion, this research aims to examine the relationship between parasocial relationships and zest for life, with belongingness as a mediator, among K-Pop fans in the emerging adulthood age group. While previous studies have explored the connection between parasocial relationships and belongingness (Derrick et al., 2009), and indicated that zest for life may diminish when the need for belongingness remains unmet (George et al., 2020). There is a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between parasocial relationships, belongingness, and zest for life among emerging adulthood-aged K-Pop fans. Hence, this study aims to bridge this knowledge gap.

## 1.1. Research Hypothesis

This study aims to examine the effect of the independent variable (parasocial relationship) on the dependent variable (zest for life). Furthermore, the analysis is conducted to determine whether the variation in the relationship between the two variables is influenced by the mediator variable (belongingness). Based on this description, the hypotheses proposed in this study are:

- H1: There is an influence of parasocial relationships on Zest for Life (ZFL) among participants mediated by belongingness.
- H2: There is a direct or indirect influence of parasocial friendship communication on ZFL.
- H3: There is a direct or indirect influence of parasocial friendship support on ZFL.
- H4: There is a direct or indirect influence of parasocial love physical on ZFL.
- H5: There is a direct or indirect influence of parasocial love emotional on ZFL.

The following is the interaction model among the variables in this study, which will help us understand how the parasocial relationship with K-Pop idols can affect belongingness and subsequently influence the zest for life of individuals in the emerging adulthood age group.

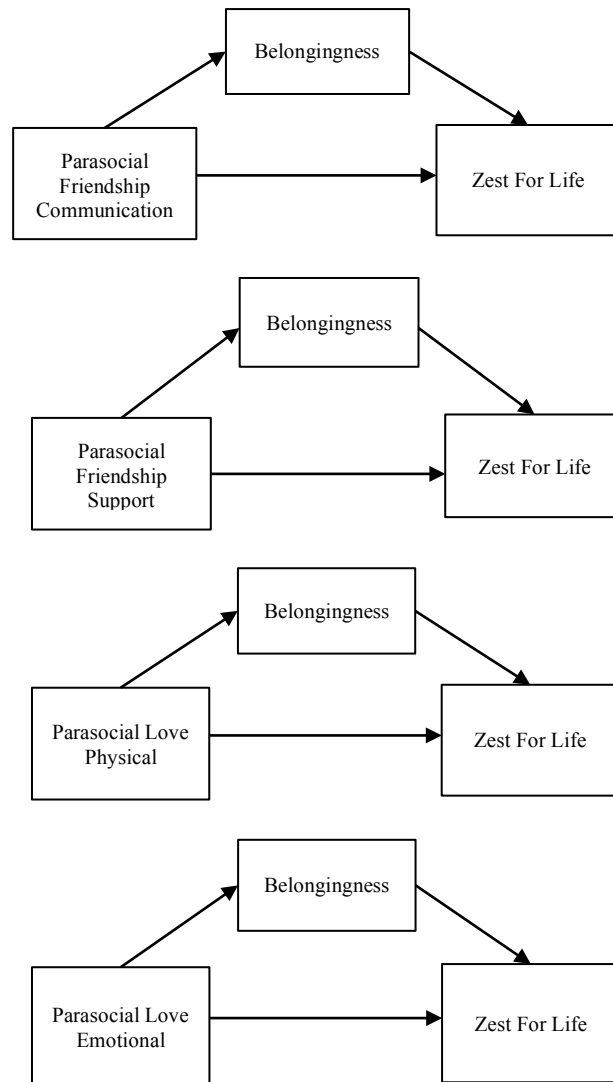


Figure 1. Interaction Model

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Participant and Research Design**

This research employed a quantitative survey method utilizing purposive sampling as the chosen sampling technique. The participants in this study met the criteria of (a) being between the ages of 18-29 and (b) having an interest in K-Pop. The rule of thumb utilized to determine the minimum sample size is as follows: 150 - 315 respondents (Muthén & Muthén, 2002). Initially, 205 individuals completed the questionnaire; however, after screening for alignment with the research criteria, a total of 182 participants were found eligible. According to this rule of thumb, the minimum number of respondents for conducting hypothesis testing in this study exceeds the prescribed threshold.

### **2.2. Instrumentation**

In this study, three measurement tools were used: the multiple parasocial relationship scale, need to belong scale, and zest for life scale. Validity testing was conducted using the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) method. In determining model fit, several common fit statistics and indices were utilized, including Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). The standards used to assess model adequacy are  $RMSEA < 0.08$ ,  $SRMR < 0.08$  (Furr & Bacharach, 2013), and also  $CFI > 0.9$ ,  $TLI > 0.9$  (Schumaker & Lomax, 2016). JASP software version 0.18.1.0 with the maximum likelihood estimation method was used in conducting this analysis.

#### ***2.2.1 Parasocial Relationship***

The measurement of parasocial relationships utilized the Multiple Parasocial Relationship Scale (Tukachinsky, 2011). MPSR consists of 24 items assessed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The M-PSR encompasses two dimensions: Firstly, parasocial friendship, comprising two factors — parasocial friendship communication and parasocial relationship support. Secondly, parasocial love, consisting of two factors — parasocial love physical and parasocial love emotional. In this study, the M-PSR exhibited satisfactory psychometric properties. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) indicated an acceptable fit of the scale model:  $RMSEA = 0.074$ ,  $CFI = 0.909$ ,  $TLI = 0.895$ , and  $SRMR = 0.076$ . The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for this scale in this study was 0.930.

#### ***2.2.2 Belongingness***

The measurement of belongingness utilized the Need to Belong Scale (Leary et al., 2013). NTB consists of 10 items assessed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Not at all to Extremely. The NBS has been found to have satisfactory psychometric properties in this study. The index of CFA showed an acceptable fit of the scale model:  $RMSEA = 0.073$ ,  $CFI = 0.934$ ,  $TLI = 0.910$ , and  $SRMR = 0.059$ . The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of this scale in this study was 0.807.

### 2.2.3 Zest for Life

The measurement of zest for life used the Zest for Life Scale (George et al., 2020). ZLS consists of 12 items assessed on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 8 (very much). ZLS encompasses two dimensions: (a) general zest, which includes a general desire for life and a positive outlook on life, and (b) engagement, reflecting current involvement in life. The ZFL has been found to have satisfactory psychometric properties in this study. The index of CFA showed an acceptable fit of the scale model: RMSEA =0.079, CFI =0.959, TLI =0.948, and SRMR =0.51. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of this scale in this study was 0.874.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

The collected data will be analyzed using various software tools. Firstly, JASP software version 0.18.1.0 will be utilized with the maximum likelihood estimation method to process the instrumentation analysis. Subsequently, SPSS version 27.0 will be employed for descriptive statistical testing and correlation analysis. Finally, the researcher will utilize the PROCESS macro model 4 (Hayes, 2017) to investigate the presence of a direct effect between parasocial relationships and zest for life, as well as to explore the potential mediation of belongingness between parasocial relationships and zest for life.

### 3. Result

The results of this study are divided into four parts: (1) participant demographic information in the study, (2) descriptive statistics, (3) direct effects between variables, and (4) indirect effects between variables.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Research Participants (N = 182)

	<i>Demography</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Gender	Male	15	8.2%
	Female	167	91.8%
Age	18	9	4.9%
	19	11	6.0%
	20	6	3.3%
	21	10	5.5%
	22	12	6.6%
	23	28	15.4%
	24	31	17.0%
	25	21	11.5%
	26	10	5.5%
	27	20	11.0%
	28	11	6.0%
Education level	29	13	7.1%
	High School/Vocational High School	55	30.2%
	Diploma	10	5.5%
	Undergraduate	110	60.4%
Domicile	Graduate	10	5.5%
	Sumatera	10	5.5%
	Kalimantan	12	6.6%
	Java	149	81.9%

<i>Demography</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Sulawesi	4	2.2%
Papua & Nusa Tenggara	7	3.8%

The results in Table 1 indicate that the majority of participants in this study were female (91.8%), aged between 23 and 24 years old (15.4% and 17% respectively), their highest education level were undergraduate (60.4%), and the majority residing in the Java Islands (81.9%).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	M	SD	Pearson Correlations						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	
1. PSF_Com	17.34	4.37	—						
2. PSF_Sup	25.54	5.47	-.573**	—					
3. PSL_Phy	21.95	2.72	-.268**	.278**	—				
4. PSL_Emo	24.20	5.93	.360**	-.423**	-.276**	—			
5. Belonging	32.00	6.09	.103	-.116	-.117	.124	—		
6. Zest for Life	71.73	15.59	-.157*	.169*	.115	-.097	-.125	—	

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

The tables above present detailed descriptive information regarding the mean (average) values, standard deviation (a measure of data dispersion), and correlations of each variable. This information aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics and variability of each element studied in this research. In correlations, it was found that some variables correlate significantly, but there are also some variables that show non-significant correlations.

Table 3. Direct Effect Between Variables

<i>Path</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E</i>	<i>Z-Value</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	$R^2$	<i>Note</i>
PSF_Com → ZFL	-.143	.072	-2.00	-.146	.049	.037	Significant
PSF_Sup → ZFL	.153	.072	2.14	.157	.035	.040	Significant
PSL_Phy → ZFL	.101	.074	1.38	.102	.172	.026	Not significant
PSL_Emo → ZFL	-.078	.071	-1.12	-.082	.270	.022	Not significant

Based on the table above, it can be seen that there is a direct effect on parasocial friendship, while there is no direct effect on parasocial love. First, the parasocial friendship communication variable has a negative significant influence on the ZFL. This can be seen from the value of z-value = -2.00 ( $z > 1.96$ ). Second, the parasocial friendship support variable has a positive significant influence on the ZFL. This can be seen from the value of z-value = 2.14. Third, the parasocial love physical variable has non-significant influence on the ZFL. This can be seen from the value of z-value = 1.38. Lastly, the parasocial love emotional variable has non-significant influence on the ZFL. This can be seen from the value of z-value = -1.12.

Table 4. Indirect Effect Between Variables

Path	B	S.E	Z-Value	95% CI	Note
PSF_Com → B → ZFL	-.011	.010	1.02	(-.044, .008)	Not significant
PSF_Sup → B → ZFL	-.012	.011	1.07	(-.007, .046)	Not significant
PSL_Phys → B → ZFL	-.013	.011	1.10	(-.006, .049)	Not significant
PSL_Emo → B → ZFL	-.013	.011	-1.14	(-.047, .006)	Not significant

Based on Table 4 above, the interaction between parasocial relationships and enthusiasm for life which is mediated by belongingness is not significant. First, the parasocial friendship communication variable has non-significant influence on the ZFL through the mediator variable belongingness. This can be seen from the value of z-value = 1.02. Second, the parasocial friendship support variable has non-significant influence on the ZFL through the mediator variable belongingness. This can be seen from the value of z-value = 1.07. Third, the parasocial love physical variable has non-significant influence on the ZFL through the mediator variable belongingness. This can be seen from the value of z-value = 1.10. Lastly, the parasocial love emotional variable has non-significant influence on the ZFL through the mediator variable belongingness. This can be seen from the value of z-value = -1.14.

#### 4. Discussion

This research aims to investigate the relationship between parasocial relationships and zest for life among K-Pop fans. Furthermore, it explores whether belongingness plays a mediating role in this relationship. Upon analysis, the final model illustrating these connections can be observed in Figure 2.

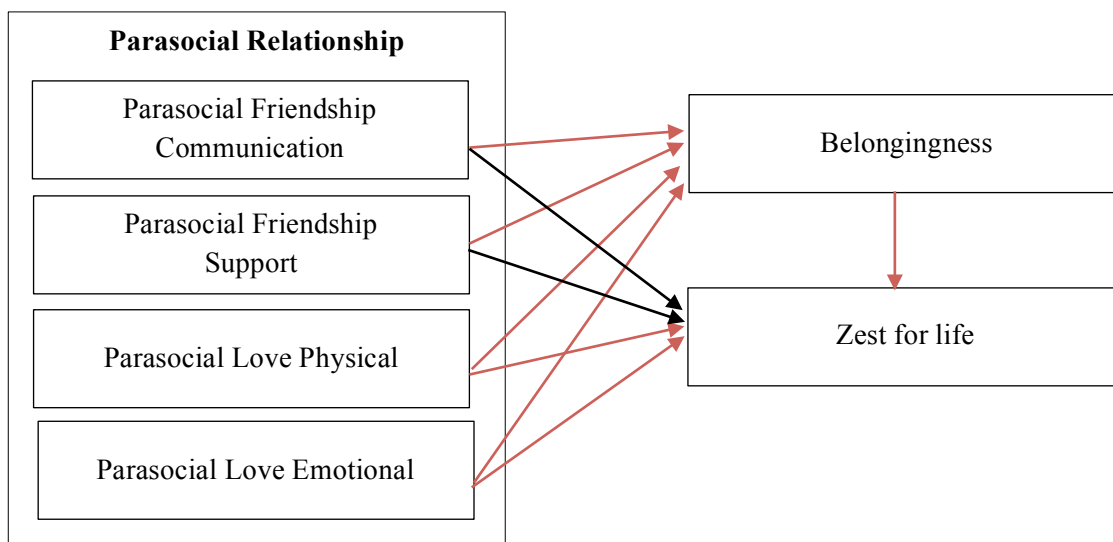


Figure 2. Final Model

(Note: Red Line= Not significant; Black Line= Significant)

The study's findings highlight a significant direct impact of Parasocial Friendship Communication (PSF Communication) and Parasocial Friendship Support (PSF Support) on the zest for life among K-Pop fans. Interestingly, PSF Communication exhibits a noteworthy negative influence, while PSF Support demonstrates a positive effect on zest for life. These outcomes are explained by the dynamics of these interactions. The negative impact of PSF Communication could be attributed to the unmet expectations associated with seeking advice, attempting to open up, and desiring direct communication. When these expectations remain

unfulfilled, it may lead to dampening individual enthusiasm for life. As highlighted by Bi and Wang's study (2021), positive communication patterns, characterized by openness and ease of interaction, have been consistently linked to increased life satisfaction, while challenging communication has been correlated with lower levels of satisfaction.

Conversely, the positive impact of PSF Support likely arises from the affirming and constructive aspects found in supportive relationships. There's a sense of contentment in providing support to others (Hu et al., 2021; Laffan, 2020), even in the absence of face-to-face interactions, which lead to individual zest for life. This is particularly evident in the passionate support exhibited by fans towards their K-pop idols. Despite physical distance and limited personal interaction, the bond between fans and idols often serves as a source of encouragement and inspiration. Directly contributing to the well-being of fans and the continued popularity success of K-pop artists in the global entertainment industry.

In this study, both physical and emotional parasocial love did not demonstrate a significant direct effect. This supports Tukachinsky's findings (2011), suggesting that adolescents may report higher levels of parasocial love compared to older adults. On the contrary, older adults tend to develop higher levels of para-friendship than adolescents. This could be attributed to earlier research, Karniol (2001) proposing that individuals might form affectionate connections with fictional characters or personas during adolescence to shape their personal identities, prepare for their sexuality, and integrate into peer culture. Consequently, teenagers might be more predisposed to developing feelings of affection towards individuals that aren't purely romantic - a phenomenon known as parasocial love. Moreover, studies indicate that the peak of celebrity idolization (admiration and imitation) occurs during early adolescence and diminishes with age (Raviv et al., 1996). Therefore, it would be intriguing to examine parasocial relationships, belongingness, and zest for life among teenagers.

This study found that belongingness does not act as a mediator in the relationship between parasocial relationships and zest for life. This phenomenon could occur because in Indonesia, as a collective country, the sense of belonging primarily originates from real-life communal interactions. If these interactions are communal and available face-to-face interactions, there might be a possibility belongingness mediate this relationship. Furthermore, according to Chaturvedi et al., (2015), when individuals have a moderate need to belong, it may lead to reduced online interactions, such as parasocial relationships. This happens as individuals feel their belonging needs are already fulfilled through face-to-face relationships in the real world (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Consequently, belongingness did not mediate the relationship between parasocial relationships and zest for life. Furthermore, it is crucial to explore the sense of belonging within fandom groups, an area that remains largely unexplored. Kim and Kim (2017) suggested that K-Pop culture might offer individuals a sense of belonging in online K-Pop fan community groups. However, current research has not thoroughly examined this aspect.

Nevertheless, this study provides important initial information regarding the role of parasocial relationship to zest for life in emerging adulthood. Furthermore, the findings of this research will contribute not only to our understanding of this unique fan culture but also to the broader exploration of one-sided relationships in the digital age. As we navigate the ever-evolving landscape of fan interactions in the digital era, this study offers a glimpse into how the virtual bonds forged between fans and their idols can have a tangible impact on their overall enthusiasm for life.

## **5. Limitation and Future Research**

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the primary limitation lies in the fact that the majority of participants were female. This could potentially introduce gender bias into the findings. Future studies should aim for a more balanced gender representation to ensure broader generalizability. Secondly, this research did not differentiate participants based on their involvement or non-involvement in the community, which might affect their belonging. Future research could focus on how parasocial relationships, the sense of belonging within the K-Pop community influences members' zest for life. Moreover, future research could explore how parasocial relationships impact zest for life during adolescence. Given the potentially stronger influence of parasocial relationships during adolescence and the uncertainties of this developmental phase that can impact one's zest for life during this phase. Investigating this relationship could offer valuable insights.

## **6. Conclusion**

The research findings reveal a noteworthy direct effect of Parasocial Friendship Communication and Parasocial Friendship Support on the zest for life among emerging adulthood K-Pop fans. Interestingly, both Physical and Emotional forms of Parasocial Love do not demonstrate a significant direct effect. Furthermore, belongingness does not appear to act as a mediator between parasocial relationships and zest for life. Nevertheless, this study serves as a critical initial exploration shedding light on the influence of parasocial relationships in shaping the zest for life during the phase of emerging adulthood.

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