



**NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
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**SINGAPORE**

**SEUNG-RI AND THE BURNING SUN SCANDAL:  
A STUDY OF K-POP IDOL REPUTATIONS AND  
IDENTITIES**

**LUU VINH TRINH  
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
2022**

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IDENTITIES**

**LUU VINH TRINH**

**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in  
partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

**2022**

## Statement of Originality

I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

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Luu Vinh Trinh

## Supervisor Declaration Statement

I have reviewed the content of this thesis and to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain plagiarised materials. The presentation style is also consistent with what is expected of the degree awarded. To the best of my knowledge, the research and writing are those of the candidate except as acknowledged in the Author Attribution Statement. I confirm that the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

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J. Patrick Williams, Assoc Prof.

## Authorship Attribution Statement

This thesis contains material from ONE paper accepted at conferences in which I am listed as an author.

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The contributions of the co-authors are as follows:

- Associate Professor Williams revised my drafts and made suggestions to improve the organization of the findings and literature review as well as the clarity of the analysis.
- I made changes to the paper based on Associate Professor Williams’ suggestions

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## **Abstract**

This thesis offers an examination of reputational work and identity processes that are often part of it by studying the contested reputation of Seung-ri from K-pop music act BigBang, who got caught up in the 2019 Burning Sun scandal and was convicted for prostitution mediation, illegal overseas gambling, fund embezzlement, distribution of explicit footage of women, among other offenses in early 2022. Though not the only high-profile figure involved in the scandal, the K-pop artist has arguably received the most public attention since the case became publicized. Communities of K-pop fans and those interested in Korean media in general were split in their reactions to news of Seung-ri involvement in the scandal. Some believe he was framed and scapegoated for the crimes of others or unfairly trialed by the media and uninformed public. Others are under the impression that the idol really did commit the crimes he was committed of. Groups with divergent takes on the scandal often clashed on social media, constructing almost contradictory public images of Seung-ri in support of their claims regarding his involvement. Applying Fine's theoretical framework on reputation construction, which holds that a person's reputation is embedded in the interests, relations, and perceptions of those creating it (or reputational entrepreneurs) to online discussions of the Burning Sun scandal and interviews with former and current fans of BigBang, I found that the reputations that those interested in the scandal created for Seung-ri were shaped by their cynical views of celebrities, negative perceptions of South Korea due to its widespread corruption and patriarchal social structure, mistrust of the South Korean media

and government, rivalry among different K-pop fandoms, negative public perceptions of K-pop fans, and fans' emotional connection with Seung-ri and BigBang. Moreover, as part of constructing Seung-ri's reputations, reputational entrepreneurs constructed for themselves and each other a range of categorical identities with the purpose of using the social images these identities generate to influence the credibility of their reputational accounts of Seung-ri.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Purpose of the study

This thesis aims to answer the research questions - (1) how do supporters and critics of a controversial public figure construct and negotiate their public image and (2) what is the broader context that shapes the reputations constructed for them by different segments of the public? - by looking at the case of Seung-ri, a famous K-pop singer from the K-pop act BigBang whose career was completely derailed following his involvement in the 2019 Burning Sun scandal. The thesis discusses the scandal that Seung-ri was caught up in and its significance before uncovering the ways his supporters and critics constructed for the idol two contradictory personas: a kindhearted feminist on one hand and a womanizer with sexist friends on the other. Following Fine's (2001) argument that a reputation is not factual and transparent but is grounded in the interests and relations of those crafting it, this thesis argues that the public images that critics and supporters of Seung-ri created for him were not arbitrary but could have been informed and influenced by their skepticism towards celebrities, negative perceptions of South Korea due to gender inequality and elite corruption, mistrust of the South Korean media and government, conflicts across different K-pop fandoms, the stigmatization of K-pop fans designated as delusional, and the emotional bonds between BigBang and its fandom.

## **1.2 An introduction to K-pop**

In January, 2022, the third album of K-pop act NCT17 became the only K-pop album released in 2021 that remained on the Billboard 200 chart for 17 consecutive weeks (Dong, 2022). Less than a month later, another video of the female quartet BLACKPINK's song "How You Like That" surpassed one billion views on Youtube, their sixth video to do so (Kim, 2022). Then on March 15th, the U.S recording academy announced that the seven-piece BTS, which has been making headlines for the past few years, would perform for the third consecutive year at the 64th Grammy awards ("BTS to perform at Grammy Awards", 2022). Given the dominance of American artists in the contemporary pop culture scene, the achievements of these K-pop music acts are quite impressive. While K-pop artists may not yet be on par with their American counterparts in terms of global popularity, K-pop seems unstoppable in its global rise. In fact, despite the unrelenting spread of covid-19, the industry accumulated \$220 millions in sales of physical albums in 2021, exceeding the figures in all preceding years (Park, 2022). Riding on the success of K-pop in recent years, JYP Entertainment, one of the four most successful K-pop labels at the moment, has set up a U.S branch to expand into the North American market ("JYP Entertainment sets up US branch", 2022). The future looks bright for the industry, its artists, and of course, the millions of K-pop fans.

K-pop is a multi-faceted cultural phenomenon that encompasses Korean popular music, many cultural products related to it, and the participatory culture of

K-pop fans, which emphasizes the emotional bonds between K-pop artists, or idols, and their fandom (Jung, 2012; Kim et al., 2014, as cited in Sun, 2022; Ju, 2015). Ever since its conception in the 1990s, the K-pop industry has placed a great importance on creating appealing public images for its artists, producing music videos (MVs) with stunning visuals, and cultivating deep fan-idol emotional connections. This is due to the increasing popularity of music videos (MVs) in the 1990s and the Japanese idol-making system that the K-pop industry took inspiration from (Jin, 2020; Howard, 2006). Agencies invest heavily in the public images of the idols they manage, evident in their rigorous control over the schedules, diets, and in some cases even personal lives of trainees and artists as well as the intense training regime that produces generations of idols proficient in a wide variety of performance skills: singing and dancing on stage, hosting variety shows, acting in films and television dramas, among many others (Seabrook, 2012; Lee, 2015; Sunio, 2020; Yim, 2019). At the roots of the industry's emphasis on the images of K-pop stars, again, is the emotional connection between idols and their fans, the majority of whom are teens or young adults from the upper and middle classes (Ahn, 2014; Maliangkay & Song, 2015; Shao, 2019). Strict control over K-pop artists is to ensure that they always stay in shape and not behave out of line, for less glamorous looks and controversial behaviors may compromise their relationships with fans. Meanwhile, having multiple performance skills increases the media presence of K-pop artists, heightening their exposure to fans and deepening their relationships with

the latter (Lee, 2015; Seabrook, 2012). Intimacy between ordinary people and media personas, such as the emotional connection K-pop fans feel toward their idols, has been variously referred to as parasocial relationship, defined as forming an imaginary, non-reciprocal relationship with a media persona; identification, defined as conforming to the perceived identity of a media persona; and celebrity worship, defined as intense devotion of time, financial resources, and freedom to venerate a media persona (Brown, 2015; Konjin & Hoorn, 2017; Giles, 2020). Like most fan-celebrity relationships, K-pop fans' relationships with the artists they support are generally affective, important to their sense of self, and marked by a desire for "knowledge of and personal contact with the celebrities they admire" (Ferris & Harris, 2011, p. 30; Click et al., 2017). Many K-pop fans have spent large sums of money on concert tickets in the hope of meeting their idols in real life, followed their idols' social media accounts, and participated in fan groups where anecdotes about what their idols are like in real life can be found. They also identify strongly with their idols, wanting to improve themselves to make their idols proud, feeling proud and happy when their idols accomplish a new feat or angry when their idols face injustices, and staying loyally by the idols' side when the latter experience problems or setbacks in their careers.

Like many fans whose fervent fandom is misunderstood by or alarms the general public, K-pop fans tend to be uniformly stigmatized, lumped together as a group of pathologized and overly zealous individuals (Jenkins, 1992; Ju, 2015;

Williams & Ho, 2016). This is despite the fact that the K-pop fandom, like any other fandom, is far from homogeneous in its practices and is rife with conflicting discourses and in many cases, heated disputes (Hills, 2002; Gray & Harrington, 2007; Tinaliga, 2018). Fans are put off by negative stereotypes of themselves in the media and among the non-fan public and try to negotiate or resist them. Many distance themselves from “extreme” forms of fandom, with extreme put in quotation marks as characteristics like extreme and normal are not inherent but always intersubjectively constructed (Williams & Ho, 2016). Others participate in charity work and activities of a similar kind to create a positive image of their fandom (Jung, 2012; Ju, 2015). Summing up, in this section, I have discussed key achievements and defining characteristics of the K-pop industry, the affective bonds between K-pop artists and their fandom, public perceptions of K-pop fans, and how fans negotiate their public images. The next section will zero in on Seung-ri, whose reputation is the focus of the present study, as well as his widely popular music act BigBang.

### **1.3 Seung-ri and BigBang**

While in recent years they are not in the news as often as the newer K-pop groups such as BTS or BLACKPINK, BigBang, also sometimes written as BIGBANG, BIG BANG, or Big Bang, was and is still one of the most influential K-pop acts. When news of their comeback after a four-year hiatus went out early in 2022, fans were overjoyed and poured out social media platforms to celebrate this long-awaited return (“BigBang brings exhilaration to fans”, 2022). Managed by the

K-pop powerhouse YG, the group debuted in 2006 and became a household name in South Korea in only a few years and has since been called “Kings of K-pop” on various occasions (Hancocks & Sit, 2017; Greenburg, 2016). While it has its roots in hip hop, BigBang has dabbled in a wide variety of genres from R&B to electro pop to trap (Bui, 2016). Apart from its versatility, the group is known, loved, and admired for defying K-pop conventions. The group’s members: G-Dragon (also known as GD), T.O.P, Dae-sung, Tae-yang, and Seung-ri, are given creative control over their work, which was rare at the time the group was formed (Sun, 2015). In the 16 years that it has been active, BigBang has had myriad achievements on a national, regional, and global scale, many of which are “firsts” for K-pop artists. BigBang’s 2011 album “Alive” was the first Korean language album that made it to the US Billboard 200 album chart (“BigBang is going on tour”, 2015; Liu, 2017). In 2015, its arena tour was the largest K-pop arena tour in U.S history (Bui, 2016). In 2016, the group’s 10-month MADE tour drew a total of 1.5 million fans from 13 countries around the world, with the tour’s attendance in Japan and China breaking records for the largest audiences as a foreign artist and a K-pop group’s concert respectively (Kim, 2016). BigBang was also on Forbes’s 30 under 30 list in 2017 and ranked 54 among the world’s highest paid celebrities (Greenburg, 2017).

Each of the members brings a unique set of skills and flavor to BigBang. Band leader G-Dragon, perhaps the most popular member of the group, is a “multi-hyphenate talent” who sings, raps, composes, and produces songs for the group and

is also a fashionista (“BigBang is going on tour”, 2015; Brown, 2015). Like his bandmates, he has a very successful solo career (Brown, 2015; Bui, 2016). T.O.P, the rapper with a deep voice, has to his name a few solo digitals and launches a fairly successful acting career (“BigBang is going on tour”, 2015; Bui, 2016). Lead singer Tae-yang is a well-recognized R&B vocalist while Dae-sung is known for having a powerful singing voice and remembered for his humor on variety shows (Bui, 2016). Former member of BigBang, Seung-ri, is the group’s youngest member (or maknae in Korean) and has choreographed many of the group’s dance routines (Brown, 2015; “BigBang is going on tour”, 2015). He has appeared on many variety shows, acted in a couple of Korean and Japanese dramas, and successfully run a few businesses, including restaurants, dance academies, and night clubs, until the Burning Sun scandal in 2019 put an end to both his music and business careers (“[SUPER RICH] Big Bang net worth”, 2016; Park, 2013). Among BigBang fans, Seung-ri is generally viewed as a gregarious person who speaks several languages, has a wide network of friends, is humorous, good with words, and full of positive energy. Nicknames such as “the moodmaker of BigBang” or “the spokesperson of BigBang”, bestowed by fans or the media show this affable side of him as well as his wide connections (Bui, 2016; “11 K-pop artists”, 2018).

The official name given to the fandom of BigBang is V.I.P, also sometimes written as VIP, which is short for very important people (“10 K-pop fandom names”, 2016). As BigBang is a veteran K-pop group that has been active for 16 years, some

of their fans are slightly older than fans of newer K-pop groups. BigBang fans' participation in the fandom includes concert attendance, purchasing related merchandise, blogging and sharing news about BigBang, organizing fan events, posting and editing videos and photos of the group or its members, or simply raving about them online, which are quite typical of all K-pop fans. The fandom is active on various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. During the course of my study, fans participating in Facebook fan pages of BigBang mostly shared photos, videos, and news about BigBang members, discussed the group or each member's music and performances among themselves, shared their personal experiences as fans, and mobilized each other for important activities, such as voting for their idols, signing petitions, mass reporting or mass disliking unfavorable contents about BigBang, and defending BigBang members against those seen as haters or anti-fans.

#### **1.4 The Burning Sun scandal**

While scrolling Facebook one morning in March 2019, I came across a spate of statuses and news articles about a K-pop scandal. At first I was uninterested and simply got on with my day, having not listened to K-pop for almost ten years. In the next few days, however, the scandal became hard to ignore. Called the Burning Sun scandal (hereafter the BS scandal), the scandal was not just some controversy over an idol's controversial conduct like I initially assumed but was something so serious that it got the police and president Moon Jae-in of South Korea at the time involved

(“Dead actress, former justice official”, 2019; Bicker, 2019). English-language media outlets that only occasionally carry K-pop news covered the scandal in great detail, offering comprehensive commentaries on wider, systemic issues that it exposed. My interest in the case was formed around this time.

News of the BS scandal broke in the early months of 2019 when the MBC Newsdesk reported on an allegation made by a person known as Kim Sang-kyo against the police and staff at the Burning Sun nightclub in Seoul, who he claimed assaulted him after he tried to help a woman that was being sexually harassed there (Kang, 2019; Lee, 2019). MBC also aired a testimony from a man claiming to be a VIP client of the nightclub in which he said he received from the club’s employees text messages, photos, and clips of drugged women being raped (Kim, 2019). As allegations of wrongdoings at Burning Sun piled up, the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency conducted an investigation into illegal activities taking place there, including drug use, prostitution, sexual misconduct, and police corruption (Kim, 2019; McCurry, 2019; Bahk, 2019). Investigation on Seung-ri, who was the public relations director of Burning Sun at the time, for alleged prostitution procurement and mediation uncovered a Kakao Talk chatroom where sexually explicit footage of women having sex with or raped by singer-songwriter Jung Joon-young, filmed by him without their consent, was shared with other members of the chatroom (“Jung Joon-young: K-pop star quits”, 2019). Apart from Jung and Seung-ri, Choi Jong-hoon of the rock band F.T. Island and Lee Jong-hyun of the rock band CNBLUE

were reportedly also in the said chatroom (“CNBLUE member”, 2019; Dong, 2019; “Jung Joon-young: K-pop star quits”, 2019; Yeung & Jeong, 2019). Both Jung and Choi were later convicted of gang-raping intoxicated, unconscious women and sentenced to six and five years in prison respectively; Jung was also found guilty of secretly filming the women he raped or had sex with and sharing the videos without their consent (“K-pop stars”, 2019; Loh, 2019). In May, 2020, their sentences were shortened by the court, with Jung’s sentence reduced to five years and Choi’s sentence halved on the grounds that Jung had submitted documents stating his remorse whereas Choi had reached an agreement with one of his victims (“K-pop sex scandal”, 2020). Neither details of Jung’s submitted documents nor Choi’s agreement with his victim were reported in the media.

Stating that the scandal had become too big and that he did not wish to bring further disgrace to his band members and management company, Seung-ri announced his retirement from the entertainment industry on Instagram on March 11, 2019 after charges of procuring prostitutes for foreign investors was brought against him the day before and promised to “sincerely participate in investigations into all allegations” (McCurry, 2019; “BigBang: K-pop star quits showbiz”, 2019). Charges of sexual bribery aside, Seung-ri was later also investigated for other offenses, such as embezzlement of Burning Sun’s funds, illegal overseas gambling, illegal currency transactions, and distribution of explicit footage of women (“Police probing”, 2019; Ock, 2020; “Court denies arrest warrant”, 2020). After many trials, which together

spanned the course of two years, Seung-ri was convicted by a military court<sup>1</sup> on a total of nine counts, including the charges mentioned above and was sentenced to three years in prison in addition to paying a fine of 1.15 billion won (Allkpop, 2022; “K-pop star Seung-ri”, 2021; “Seung-ri: former K-pop star”, 2021). He appealed in August 2021 and had his sentence reduced to one and a half years in January 2022 and was given a smaller fine (“Disgraced K-pop star”, 2022).

Placed under intense public scrutiny due to conservative societal norms in South Korea, K-pop stars walk on eggshells to maintain a wholesome public image, as one small slip can stir up controversy or spiral into a huge scandal (Borowiec, 2019; “Sulli: the woman who rebelled”, 2019; Cadavillo, 2021). Even among international fans, there is an expectation, albeit arguably less than among the South Korean public, for K-pop idols to be squeaky-clean and good role models. Despite the industry's efforts to keep the public image of its stars spotless, many K-pop idols have been caught up in scandals, some of which stem from groundless rumors or actions not punishable by law yet controversial in the public eye. Sulli, who took her life in 2019 at the age of 25, was subjected to an onslaught of malicious comments online for posting braless pictures of herself on social media, dating rapper Choiza who was 14 years older than her, quitting her five-piece K-pop act f(x), a move ruled as selfish and irresponsible by some fans of the group, and sometimes completely untrue stories about her private life (Harber, 2019; McCurry, 2019). More recently, RM of boy band BTS came under fire from the BTS Chinese fan base after speaking

fondly of the US-South Korea relations in the 1950-1953 conflict, while Chinese member Ningning from the girl group Aespa was in the hot seat for celebrating the Chinese team's success at the Olympics, which many Korean fans saw as unfair ("BTS in trouble", 2020; Dong, 2022). Other scandals arose from idols' actual breach of law or allegations of law-breaking. Super Junior's Kangin, for example, was caught up in several scandals when he was fined for drunk driving and booked for using violence against his former girlfriend ("Police called on Kangin", 2017; "Scandal-ridden member", 2019). Singer and actor Park Yoo-chun, BigBang's T.O.P, and BtoB's Jung Il-hoon, to name a few, have each been key figures in some high-profile drug scandals (Loh, 2019; Choi, 2021).

While scandals have always been part of the K-pop world, the BS scandal is on a different scale. The scandal exposed the ugly underbelly of K-pop, but not only. Its effects rippled through South Korea throughout the years of its unfolding, leading to a police probe into two earlier scandals. One involved late actress Jang Ja-yeon who named in her suicide letter directors, media executives, and CEOs that she was forced to sleep with; the other implicated former minister of justice Kim Hak-eui, who was accused of rape and receiving sexual bribes (McCurry, 2009; "Dead actress, former justice official", 2019; Bicker, 2019). The scandal drew outrage from some segments of the South Korean society and was linked to systemic issues many have been protesting against such as entrenched gender inequality, sexual violence against women, and the epidemic of spycams (known in the country as "molka") that

victimizes mostly women (Bicker, 2019). Furthermore, unlike the other K-pop scandals that are the concerns of only K-pop fans or specific K-pop fandoms, the BS scandal has attracted the attention of the general non-fan public and sparked enthusiastic conversations both within and outside the K-pop fandom. Of the many wrongdoings linked to the BS scandal, it is charges related to prostitution, sexual assault of women, and filming explicit footage of women and distributing it without their consent that constitute the focus of most public and media discussions of the scandal. Seung-ri's case, which went on for much longer than the cases against the other celebrities embroiled in the scandal, has been fervently debated by his critics and defenders even after his final sentence came down early this year. By "supporters" or "defenders", I mean those who support Seung-ri and believe that he was not engaged in prostitution mediation and sexual misconduct. Since it is not always possible to ascertain whether or not a person defending Seung-ri on the Facebook pages of the K-pop news outlets included in this study identifies as a fan of BigBang, I'll refer to them as "supporters" or "defenders" unless their identification with the BigBang fan label is clear, in which case the label "supportive fans" will be used instead. I also use "supportive fans" for members of the BigBang fan pages that I participated in. Meanwhile, I refer to anyone who condemns Seung-ri and thinks he was guilty of charges related to organizing sex work and sexual misconduct, which includes many BigBang fans, as critics.

Since the break of the scandal, conflicting narratives about Seung-ri have been created by supporters and critics of the idol on social media. Far from petty disputes, these discussions offer a glimpse into how the public persona and reputation of celebrities are constructed against a set of existing conditions and how collective identities shape and are negotiated in interactions between different social groups. In other words, if the BS scandal opens a window into a corrupt social and political system, conversations around one of the scandal's key figures allow researchers to gain insights into perceptions of these issues as well as the social processes of identity construction and claims-making.

### **1.5 Thesis Structure**

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 has just explained the purpose and research questions of the study. It also gave an overview of K-pop and briefly introduced Seung-ri, BigBang, the BigBang fandom, and the Burning Sun scandal. Chapter 2 describes the methods employed for this research project as well as its research ethics. Chapter 3 reviews relevant literature on reputations, identities, celebrities, K-pop, and fandom. In the first part of the chapter, I consider how reputation has been theorized and studied in existing reputational and celebrity research, with a focus on studies that adopt a constructionist or meaning-centered approach to the reputations or public images of celebrities. The theoretical framework introduced in this part is used to frame my analysis in chapter 4 and chapter 5. In the second part, I define and engage with previous studies on the

concepts of social identities, auxiliary characteristics, and imagined subjectivities, which structure the analysis of my findings in chapter 5. Findings of the study are presented in chapter 4 and chapter 5. In chapter 4, I analyze the public identities that critics and supporters of Seung-ri constructed for him using the concepts and theories discussed in chapter 3. I find that despite the scandal, supporters of the idol perceived him positively, and the public identities they created for him, as a good person and a feminist, were shaped by their view of him prior to the scandal and by mistrust of the media and government of South Korea. On the other hand, critics portrayed Seung-ri as a womanizer and an accomplice in the many crimes against women committed by his celebrity friends, whose wrongdoings were uncovered when the BS scandal broke out. This portrayal is linked to critics' negative attitudes towards celebrities and South Korea due to the country's gender inequality and corruption among its social elite. In chapter 5, I examine the negative identities that Seung-ri's defenders constructed for his critics and vice versa. Critics of Seung-ri placed his defenders in the delusional fan identity category, which is linked to characteristics such as being out of touch with reality and resorting to all manners of actions to defend their idols. In response, fans redefined the fan identity by tying their fan identities to another set of positive qualities, including being mature, being in respectable occupations, and having the expertise to form "informed" opinions on the Burning Sun scandal. Supporters also put critics in several negative categories: haters and jealous fans of other fandoms, such as that of the K-pop group BTS. These

identities were rooted in simplified idealizations or imaginations of the subjectivities of the people they were enacted for. The idealized image one holds of a certain person, including oneself, is called imagined subjectivity (Hills, 2002). Imagined subjectivity attributes positive traits to oneself and members of one's social group while perceiving all other subjects different from oneself and one's group as deficient in perception and taste (Hills, 2002). I argue that Seung-ri's critics and supporters' simplified characterizations of each other and themselves are not only a matter of perception but can be seen as a strategic move to deal with reputational accounts that differ from the ones they endorse. This thesis focuses on the reputational entrepreneurship of K-pop fans because media reports and the K-pop literature have already demonstrated the roles that people on the production side of K-pop can play in managing the public reputations of K-pop artists (Lee, 2015; Yim, 2019). On the other hand, fans have only begun to be conceived as actors that have the ability to influence public perceptions of their idols in certain ways. The focus on fans allows this research to show that reputational entrepreneurship includes identity work on the consumption side and how this conceptualization can be applied to provide a more holistic view of K-pop idols. Moreover, K-pop fans represent an interesting set of reputational entrepreneurs, as their investment in the public identities of their favorite artists, compared to that of paid agents and the media, tends to be pathologized and misunderstood as being driven entirely by emotions. Insights into their reputation construction processes therefore have the potential to nuance this

common perception of K-pop fans. The thesis concludes with chapter 6, where I map out the limitations and contributions of this study and discuss directions for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

#### 2.1 Choice of methods

As stated earlier, the goal of this research is to capture the meaning and reputation construction process that unfolds in defenders and critics' discussions of Seung-ri and the BS scandal. To this end, I decided to employ digital ethnography and in-depth interviews to collect data because these are interpretative methods that allow researchers to understand the phenomena under study from the perspectives of participants and based on the meanings they attribute to it (Prus, 1996; Weiss, 1995). The use of two rather than one research method for data collection was because triangulation, or the use of multiple research methods, helps researchers understand what they are studying in greater detail and with greater accuracy (Brewer & Hunter, 2006; Blackstone, 2012). In my research, meanings attached to people, actions, and events are studied not only in interviews where former and current fans of BigBang recounted past experiences but also in their "moment of production in interaction", that is, in the naturally occurring conversations that happen between supporters and critics of the group's former member, Seung-ri (Khan, 2011, p. 204).

#### 2.2 Digital Ethnography

The fieldsite in my research is not a bounded space or fixed location but "a heterogeneous network" of meanings and interpretations, news sources, public and

closed online spaces, and the people using these spaces to platform their preferred readings of the BS scandal and one of its key figures, Seung-ri (Burrell, 2009, p. 182, 189). Contrary to the conventional ethnographic notion of a static fieldsite to be discovered and isolated for study, the site of my study was continually constructed throughout the data collection phase (Burrell, 2009; Hine, 2017). I followed news, discussions, and people from fan page to fan page and news site to news site and used connections between them to map the contours of my field site, which in the end looked less a definitive virtual terrain with clear boundaries and more an ongoing discussion consisting of specific, recurring themes that unfold through the cybersphere. From February to December 2021, I followed the Facebook pages of several major English-language news outlets covering Korean entertainment, observed, and participated in interactions unfolding in the comments that responded to these outlets' reports on the BS scandal. In addition to these public online spaces, I followed one BigBang fan account and four international BigBang fan groups) on Facebook that had large followings and were active at the time of data collection to get a grasp on the conversations that fans were having about the BS scandal, media coverage of the case, and public reactions to it. Locating K-pop news sources to follow was relatively easy, as I was already situated in a network of Facebook friends who consume and share K-pop news sources regularly. Finding and getting permission to join the fan pages and fan account mentioned above, on the other hand, was a bit of a hurdle and took me several weeks since the few K-pop fans I was

acquainted with prior to my study were unfortunately not very active in their fandom and thus could not help point me to any fan pages. Just as Hine (2000) was guided by her “ethnographic sensitivity to follow up leads that looked interesting”, I first joined a fan page found by typing the keyword “BigBang” in Facebook’s search engine, then followed the digital trails of some of its admins and members to other fan pages and fan accounts (p. 12). After gaining permission from the admins, I interacted with contents posted in these groups through the like and comment functions and communicated with fans by posting questions on the groups’ timelines or commenting on their posts when necessary to ask for clarification or explanation on details that I did not understand.

In the early stages of my research, which lasted between February and June, I was open to following participants, as they moved through different online spaces where discussions related to K-pop took place, such as in Facebook fan groups targeting all K-pop fans and the Facebook pages of news outlets covering not just K-pop but also K-dramas and other forms of Korean media. During this period, I looked very broadly at the conversations and disputes that K-pop fans often had, the kind of news and media that attracted them, K-pop scandals other than the one I was studying, and how understandings of these scandals and other K-pop news were formed and negotiated. As the research went on, I realized that I was looking at too many sites, and the majority of interactions not related to the BS scandal were not exactly helpful to my study. For this reason, I decided to focus on only contents and discussions that

pertain to the BS scandal and Seung-ri and stay put in the Facebook pages mentioned earlier to intercept information, meanings, and people, keeping in mind they were connected to other sites, people, and discourses that due to logistical reasons could not be included in my study (Burrell, 2009). From late June to December, I checked the sites selected for digital ethnography several times a week and spent one to three hours each time going through, screenshotting, and writing brief notes or analyses of what I observed. Aside from interactions taking place on the fan groups and fan account selected for this study, I also looked at the discussion taking place in the comment sections of 14 news articles. Every week between June and August, I checked the Facebook pages of two K-pop news outlets, Allkpop and Koreaboo, for articles reporting on Seung-ri's involvement in the BS scandal that were published after my research commenced and picked the first two articles for analysis. There was virtually no coverage of Seung-ri's involvement in the BS scandal by these two news outlets outside of this period. Though I selected for analysis the comment sections of only 7 news articles, chosen either because (1) they covered aspects of the scandal I saw discussed in BigBang Facebook fan groups or (2) the amount of interaction, analytical themes present in those sections can be observed in those that were not included in the analysis as well. Details of news articles with comment sections selected for analysis can be found in the table below. While I describe it as digital, my ethnographic account does not "topicalize the digital as a theoretical concern" (Hine, 2017, p. 6). In fact, the online pages selected for my study were just

one of the many sites, online and offline, where discussions of the BS scandal could be observed and were simply chosen for their accessibility, frequency of activity, and amount of data.

No.	Article title	News outlet	Date published on website	Date published on Facebook	Link to article
1	Seungri explains questionable text messages and continues to deny arranging prostitution	Allkpop	30/06/2021	30/06/2021	<a href="https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/06/seungri-explains-questionable-text-messages-continues-to-deny-arranging-prostitution">https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/06/seungri-explains-questionable-text-messages-continues-to-deny-arranging-prostitution</a>
2	Netizens aren't buying Seungri's excuse of writing, 'Girls? Go with the one that give it good' was the result of autocorrect	Allkpop	30/06/2021	01/07/2021	<a href="https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/06/netizens-arent-buying-seungris-excuse-of-writing-girls-go-with-ones-that-give-it-good-was-the-result-of-autocorrect">https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/06/netizens-arent-buying-seungris-excuse-of-writing-girls-go-with-ones-that-give-it-good-was-the-result-of-autocorrect</a>

3	Seungri faces 5 years in prison for prostitution charges	Allkpop	01/07/2021	01/07/2021	<a href="https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/07/seungri-faces-5-years-in-prison-for-prostitution-charges">https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/07/seungri-faces-5-years-in-prison-for-prostitution-charges</a>
4	Dispatch Reveals Kakao Chat Logs Of Seungri And Others, Countering His Claims Of “Auto Correct” And Showing his true nature	Koreaboo	01/07/2021	02/07/2021	<a href="https://www.koreaboo.com/news/dispatch-reveals-text-messages-seungri/">https://www.koreaboo.com/news/dispatch-reveals-text-messages-seungri/</a>
5	Seungri officially sentenced to 3 years in prison for mediating prostitution	Allkpop	12/08/2021	12/08/2021	<a href="https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/08/seungri-officially-sentenced-to-3-years-in-prison-for-mediating-prostitution">https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/08/seungri-officially-sentenced-to-3-years-in-prison-for-mediating-prostitution</a>

6	Seungri sentenced to 3 years in prison	Koreaboo	12/08/2021	12/08/2021	<a href="https://www.koreaboo.com/news/seungri-former-bigbang-prison-sentence/">https://www.koreaboo.com/news/seungri-former-bigbang-prison-sentence/</a>
7	Seungri plans to appeal his 3-year prison sentence	Allkpop	19/08/2021	20/08/2021	<a href="https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/08/seungri-plans-to-appeal-his-3-year-prison-sentence">https://www.allkpop.com/article/2021/08/seungri-plans-to-appeal-his-3-year-prison-sentence</a>

Ethically, I made an announcement post on the fan pages to inform the members of my research and explain how they could notify me if they wanted their posts or comments to not be included in my study. No fans have requested me to exclude what they said on the fan pages at this point. In the data analysis in chapter 4 and 5, if a comment or discussion thread was retrieved from the Facebook page of any of the news outlets chosen for this study, I use direct quotations and include the actual user names of the persons involved. This is similar to the approach taken by the study conducted by Marwick & boyd (2011) on celebrities' engagement with fans on Twitter where actual usernames of fans and accounts of famous people were included in the analysis because their tweets are publicly available and searchable. However, if the comment or interaction was taken from private Facebook groups, direct quotes will still be provided but pseudo usernames and pseudo fan group

names will be used instead of the actual ones. This is because many BigBang fans see their fan groups as a safe zone where they will not be criticized or ridiculed for their interests and opinions. Many fans do not intend for those outside of their fandom to see what they say or do there despite the fact that some of the groups I participated in were publicly available. In other words, regardless of the privacy settings they used for their interactions in these fora, they expected these exchanges to have some form of group privacy (Association of Internet Researchers, 2020). It is therefore ethical to adopt their perspective and give them some measure of privacy protection in my study.

### **2.3 In-depth interviews**

Apart from the ethnographic approach just detailed, I also carried out 14 online interviews that were between 40 and 110 minutes long with people who have identified as fans of BigBang at some point. The interview period lasted from June to December, 2021, and a list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A. As I could only conduct complex interviews in English and Vietnamese, participants were given a choice to use either of these two languages in the interview. Though my intention was not to foreground the perspectives of Vietnamese fans, I decided to also conduct interviews in Vietnamese because it would make it easier for Vietnamese fans who agreed to be interviewed to share their thoughts. In other words, this methodological choice was to make the process of interviewing more accessible and less intimidating to any fans that were willing to participate in my project but

faced language barriers. Had I spoken any languages other than English and Vietnamese, I would have given respondents the choice to be interviewed in these languages as well. Interviewees also selected a time, platform (Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, or Facebook Messenger), and form of interview (in person or through messages) that best suited them. I used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants. Purposive sampling was used to recruit fans from the fan pages I participated in and my network of friends on Facebook. After obtaining permission from the admins of these pages, I posted a recruitment advertisement that included my contacts and links to the information page of my study and the online informed consent form participants had to sign. I also posted a recruitment post on my own Facebook page as I was acquainted with some K-pop fans on Facebook as well. Ten people reached out to me through Facebook after seeing the recruitment post on my timeline or their fan pages, and I proceeded to schedule an interview with them as soon as I received their message. Regarding snowball sampling, two interviewees were referred to me by interview participants while the other two knew about my research through friends whom I asked for help with recruiting interviewees. Details about the interviewees are summarized in the following table.

No.	Pseudonym	Fan status	Gender	Method of recruitment

1	Ain	Fan	Female	Recruited through fan page
2	Daisy	Fan	Female	Referred
3	DomiBB	Fan	Female	Recruited through fan page
4	Florencia	Fan	Female	Recruited through fan page
5	HeSe	Fan	Female	Recruited through fan page
6	Laville	Fan	Female	Recruited through fan page
7	Li	Fan	Female	Recruited through fan page
8	Lily	Fan	Female	Referred
9	Riiimy Lee	Fan	Female	Recruited through fan page

10	RK	Fan	Female	Recruited through fan page
11	Sean Yoon	Former fan	Male	Referred
12	TM	Fan	Female	Recruited through fan page
13	V	Former fan	Male	Asked to join after seeing the recruitment post on my Facebook page
14	Van	Fan	Female	Referred

As a female researcher, I was conscious of the gender bias in my interview sample. In fact, it has been pointed out in several studies that media fans or K-pop fans generally skew female (Sun, 2022; Tinaliga, 2018; Hills, 1992). Nevertheless, I chose not to focus on the gender aspect because (1) I was more interested in generic reputational and identity processes among fans and (2) no clear gender difference in how interviewees perceived Seung-ri, the BS scandal, and reactions to it emerged from their responses.

My choice of field sites where the medium of communication is mostly English could potentially introduce biases and thus needs to be addressed. Since English is widely spoken and many people consume media in languages other than their first language, it is highly possible that the fans I collected data on also included Korean fans. A number of fans in my study in fact claimed and could be believed to be Korean. It is important to point out that Korean and non-Korean fans may differ in their knowledge of the Burning Sun scandal and views of K-pop idols. First, Korean fans are likely to have more information on the Burning Sun scandal compared to their non-Korean counterparts, as news outlets outside of Korea reported only the most major developments of the case, skipping over certain details that were covered by local media. This asymmetry in information could lead to formations of different perceptions of the case among K-pop fans inside and outside of Korea. Moreover, news reports have often portrayed Korean fans as being harsher and more conservative compared to non-Korean fans in their views of K-pop idols. This difference in attitudes towards K-pop artists between Korean and non-Korean fans could potentially result in differences in their perceptions of the K-pop idol Seung-ri.

While I anticipated no risks to interviewees, I took several measures to protect their privacy. I did not ask participants in the in-depth interviews to reveal identifying information such as their real names, nationality, and age. Some interviewees mentioned their real names, country of origin, and age when

introducing themselves, and I omitted these details when transcribing the interviews. Interviewees were also asked to pick their preferred pseudonyms, which I use where they are directly quoted in this paper. All interview transcripts and audio recordings were stored in a password-protected folder on the NTU cloud, accessible only to my thesis supervisor and myself.

## **2.4 Data coding and analysis**

I carried out data collection, coding, and analysis concurrently. Drawing on a grounded theory approach, I put the data collected for my study through an initial and then focused phase of coding (Charmaz, 2006). Defined as “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data”, coding is an indispensable step in research that brings researchers closer to understanding their data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). During the initial coding phase, my codes were short, descriptive phrases that would capture what was going on in a piece of data, be it a specific thing said in an interview or a comment in an online thread. Where possible, I would include the exact words participants used in my codes (Weiss, 1995; Charmaz, 2006). At the end of every two or three weeks of coding, I reviewed all the codes and analyzed them to determine their connections to each other and their relevance (or lack of) to my research project. When themes emerging from these initial codes started to repeat, I moved on to focused coding. At this stage, I zeroed in on conversations and responses featuring constructions and contestations of reputations and identities. As

for data analysis during this period, I wrote brief notes putting the data collected into dialogue with concepts and theoretical frameworks I came across while doing literature review and then examined my data support, challenge, or be illuminated by those.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1 Theorizing reputation and reputation construction

Reputation is defined as “the recognition of a social persona or an organizing principle by which the actions of a person...are linked into a common assessment” (Fine, 2008, p. 1). A reputation, Fine elaborates, reflects the pattern of a person’s actions and can be compared to a moral gestalt that shapes how that person is perceived (Fine, 2001; Fine, 2019). Though reputation denotes a principle for person perception, it is conceptually distinct from personal identity. A personal identity includes a range of elements such as names, appearances, personality traits, and a biography “told to and by others” that makes a person distinguishable from other individuals (Goffman, 1963, as cited in Vryan et al., 2003; Hewitt & Shulman, 2011, p. 85). This definition suggests that, separate from idiosyncratic characteristics, how one presents oneself and is perceived by others constitute one’s personal identity. A reputation still sets the person that is its target apart as a unique individual but is not people’s personal or private opinions of the person formed on the basis of their direct interactions with them as with personal identity. Rather, it is “[a] shared, established image...[a] collective representation of [the] person” constructed out of what is known about them through the words of other individuals or depictions in the media (Fine, 2001; Fine, 2008, p. 1). This is especially true of the reputations held by

celebrities in contemporary societies. Much of the common public's perception of these people comes from how they are represented in the media and in the words of their personal acquaintances or, as celebrities increasingly take to social media for fan maintenance, how they appear to interact with followers on social media.

Reputation is not simply a transparent reflection of what the reputational target has said or done but is constructed, based partly on what happened, by those who have the resources for and benefit from establishing it (Fine, 2001; Fine, 2012). Those who use resources at their disposal to create reputations for others are called reputational entrepreneurs (Fine, 2001; Fine, 2012). Reputation construction, though distinct from personal identity construction, is similar to the latter in that it also involves suturing a person's past, present, and future into a coherent biography and narrative of self. In this process, the past is drawn on as a resource to make sense of the here-and-now yet is not left completely as it is but is reassessed and reconstructed, of course within limits, from "the standpoint of the concerns and needs of the present" (Mead, 1929, as cited in Fine, 2001, p. 1; Jenkins, 2008, p. 48). When crafting someone's reputation, reputational entrepreneurs have to create some degree of consistency between past and present actions of that person in the reputational account they endorse because people are commonly believed and expected to behave in consistent ways across time and space (Vryan et al., 2003; Brekhus, 2015). The self, despite constantly evolving as a person moves through life, is thought to remain stable; as a result, on occasions where discontinuities between the past and present

self emerge, people often make attempts to manage such discrepancies through “reparative narrative work” to maintain a sense of self-consistency (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 1998, as cited in Brekhus, 2015, p. 158). In the case of reputation construction, reworking a person’s biography so that the reputation currently created for him holds up against what he said or did in the past is often achieved by selectively underscoring some actual past events while leaving out others (Lofland, 1969; Coser, 1992; Maines, Sugrue, & Katovich, 1983, as cited in Fine, 2001, p. 33).

Reputation, as defined and used by Fine, is synonymous with public persona, public image, and public identity. In his study on different constructions of Canadian pop star Avril Lavinge’s public persona, Vannini (2004) writes that the singer’s persona is “a complex interplay” of her staged performances and appearances, life stories, and public interpretations of them (p. 50). Following this remark, Lavinge’s public persona is not a direct result of what people see of her in the media but the interpretations they make based on her mass mediated images. Throughout Vannini’s analysis, terms such as public image and public identity were occasionally used in place of public persona. Likewise, Bickerdike (2014) uses the word public persona to describe the images created for iconic rock stars Ian Curtis and Kurt Cobain by the public, media, and various industries capitalizing on their deaths. Thus it can be said that terms such as public persona, public image, public identity, and Fine’s concept of reputation capture more or less the same social phenomenon and are for this reason used interchangeably in this thesis.

While Bickerdike studies the posthumous public images of musicians and Fine the reputations of mostly historical figures, Bickerdike's book on the public personas of Ian Curtis and Kurt Cobain resonates quite well with some of the key ideas in Fine's comprehensive treatises on reputations. Bickerdike (2014) argues that the images that have been established for Curtis and Cobain since their deaths are in fact quite different from the "living, breathing men" (p. 6). In death, they are elevated to the ranks of martyrs who sacrificed themselves for the noble cause of preserving their music's authenticity in a world corrupted by fame, wealth, and commercialization; their drug addiction, illnesses, and other complications that were really parts of their lives are suppressed so their hallowed public personas as martyrs, which embody values cherished in contemporary societies, can live on (Bickerdike, 2014). Fine's writings on reputations, too, revolve around the idea that reputation is not a transparent reflection of a person's actions but is shaped by the interests and relations of reputational entrepreneurs (Fine, 2001; Fine, 2008; Fine, 2012). Thus, not only is it possible for a person to have multiple and even conflicting reputations but the public identity of a person might be disparate from how they are known to their personal acquaintances, even more so if the person is a celebrity. It is quite accurate to say that celebrities do not own their public identities: their images "[belong] to the cultural industries...and the fans who can make of [them] what they will" (Holmes & Redmond, 2006, p. 5).

It should not be assumed, however, that reputational entrepreneurs can say anything they like about a famous person. While past events are indeed reworked, as stated earlier, in the making of reputations in the present, this reworking happens within limits. Reputation construction, Jansen (2007) observed, is a kind of memory project in which those involved must work with both opportunities and constraints created by actual events and structural factors rather than work with a blank slate. An understanding of reputations as constructions constrained by an obdurate reality and structural factors beyond the control of reputational entrepreneurs derives from a version of social constructionism named weak constructionism that forms the basis of Fine's model of reputational entrepreneurship (Fine, 2001). This model basically explains the making of a reputation. First, reputational entrepreneurs must consider it to be in their interest to make a reputational account about someone (motivation). Second, the account made has to have narrative facility, that is, it has to culturally resonate with and is credible to the audience that it is presented to. Lastly, the reputational entrepreneur has to be in a structural or social position that helps lend credence to the account of which they are proponents (institutional placement). As identities indicate people's positions in a social structure, Fine's notion of institutional placement means that the plausibility of a reputational claim, is shaped by the identities of those sponsoring it. This means that if, for example, reputational entrepreneurs are seen as rational, fair-minded, and knowledgeable people among a community that values these traits, their reputational claims are more likely to be

believed; if, however, they are considered biased or not of sound mind, their reputational claims are less likely to be taken seriously. While a reputational claim may or may not be believed due to the identity of the person sponsoring it, the reverse is also true. There are cases where a reputational account can affect its endorsers (Fine, 2012). When a reputation is widely consensual or is strongly linked to moral evaluation, for instance, any reputational accounts challenging it risk stigmatizing the reputational entrepreneur (Fine, 2012). While a reputational claim does not always lead to stigmatization of its endorser it characterizes and shapes perceptions of them because reputations “are not only merely claims about others, but about selves” (Fine, 2012, p. xvi).

### **3.2 Scandalous reputation construction**

Some of Fine’s works focus specifically on scandals, which constitute a subtype of constructionist reputation work where “the target’s moral standing is challenged” after an actual or alleged wrongdoing by the target is publicized to an audience (Fine, 2019, p. 254; Adut, 2018). Though Fine (2001) uses scandal to refer to media and public perceptions of certain actions and incidents as morally reprehensible, he stresses that not all wrongdoings become scandals. The moral violation exposed in a scandal must be framed and perceived as symptomatic of a structural corruption, as representative of a specific social segment rather than just transgressive actions committed by an individual. Reputations created in the wake of a scandal, like reputations created in all other circumstances, are shaped both by

the agency of reputational entrepreneurs and cultural and institutional structures that present both challenges and auspicious conditions for their reputational accounts. Besides his model of reputational entrepreneurship that applies to the making of all kinds of reputations, Fine (2001) also borrows from Smelser's (1962) value added theory to develop a framework specific to constructions of scandalous reputations uses it to examine the infamous reputation created for Hollywood comedian Fatty Arbuckle following a scandal in which he was accused but later acquitted of murdering a young woman who died while attending a party he hosted at his house. In Fine's analysis of Arbuckle's blemished public identity, the adapted theory consists of six elements. The first element, structural conduciveness, refers to pre-existing conditions in the U.S that permit the collective endeavor of creating a negative public image for Arbuckle in the wake of the scandal such as the wide reach of the media, its penchant for publicizing sensational news with a moral message, and the government's concern with upholding public morality. The second element is structural strain, which describes the fraught relations and ensuing tensions between different social groups that contribute to the collective endeavor mentioned above. Structural strains in the case of Arbuckle include strife between film producers and distributors and social division due to the 1930s' changes in moral norms. Related to structural strains are generalized, concretized beliefs about them. Fine identifies perceptions of Hollywood as a place of moral degeneration and films as driven by profits rather than moral values as some examples of such beliefs.

Constructions of Arbuckle's scandalous image were also contingent on a precipitating event, the scandal itself, which focused public attention on perceived problems in Hollywood and society at the time and allowed strains to crystallize into generalized beliefs. Next, reputational entrepreneurs who saw the scandal as representative of a larger social issue such as gendered violence or the moral collapse of America had to be mobilized. Last were responses from social control agents: Hollywood producers that worked to rectify the public's misconceptions about Arbuckle's scandal and shift their negative attitudes about Hollywood. Building off Fine's framework of reputational entrepreneurship and Smelser's value added theory, I treat the reputations that critics and defenders established for Seung-ri as constructions reflecting not only their motivations as reputational entrepreneurs but also the myriad conditions that had existed before the BS scandal exploded. In chapter 4 and parts of chapter 5, I rely on the reputational entrepreneurship model to unpack the positive reputation that defenders constructed for Seung-ri and use Fine's adaptation of Smelser's value added theory in analysis of the negative reputation established by his critics. As the data collected are only sufficient for understanding the strains, generalized beliefs, and precipitating event (the BS scandal itself) contributing to critics' negative reputational accounts of Seung-ri, my analysis of his negative reputation will focus on only these three factors.

The notion that reputations are constructions and studying them provides important insights into social structures, norms, relations, and perceptions of social

issues is not unique to Fine's reputational studies. Though I draw readily on his ideas to lay the analytical groundwork for my analysis of Seung-ri's public identities, I also draw on other studies that examine not only the public personas of celebrities but also the context, process, and people that play a part in engendering them. Ferris & Harris (2011), for example, suggest that when researching celebrities, scholars should take a meaning-centered approach, that is, to examine meanings people attribute to the celebrities they are interested in and interactional practices through which these meanings arise and are negotiated. Judith Franco (2006) observes that fans project their tensions with each other and personal values and experiences on the identities they construct for celebrities. She compares the public persona of lesbian Canadian singer-songwriter k.d. lang to "a site of ideological struggle" between lesbian fans who uphold her as "a lesbian icon" and heterosexual female fans who see her as "a liberal, humanist role model" (Franco, 2006, p. 276). Unpacking the divergent meanings k.d. lang has to her fans reveals the friction between the lesbian community and the mainstream, heterosexual culture that marginalizes the experiences of gender and sexual minorities. Likewise, according to Fraser & Brown (2002), the public image of the iconic and tremendously influential singer Elvis Presley is not only grounded in "a historical figure" but also in many Elvis fans and impersonators' "cultural and personal experiences and beliefs" (p. 197). A more recent study by Ahn & Lin (2019) looked at the conflicts that flared up across the Chinese and Taiwanese fandoms of K-pop girl group TWICE after its

Taiwanese member Tzuyu waved a Taiwan's flag on a Korean TV show. The ways Tzuyu's flag-waving action and ensuing apology were interpreted in those two fandoms indicate both fans and management companies' gendering of K-pop female idol's image and the uneven power relations between K-pop artists and their management companies, between management agencies and their consumers, and between China and Taiwan (Ahn & Lin, 2019). Furthermore, it has been found that when discussing the actions and public identities of celebrities, people also negotiate and debate moral norms and social issues and even express their feelings toward these matters (Fraser & Brown, 2002; Holmes & Redmond, 2006). The alleged extramarital affair of David Beckham facilitates discussions about infidelity while Prince Harry's assault of a photographer allows people to debate whether it is appropriate for one to resort to violence when provoked (Johansson, 2006). Meanwhile, Lee & Abidin's (2021) research on public discussions of the backdoor advertising scandals involving Han Haeyoun and tzuyang, two prominent South Korean influencers, reveals that a large number of those two influencers' harshest critics were disgruntled young men who displaced their discontent with the neoliberal economy of South Korea and resentment toward the perceived privileges of influencers on an easy target: two female influencers caught up in scandals.

To conclude, the reputations of celebrities are not arbitrary constructions but are specific to the context in which they are created. Relying on previous reputational and celebrity research, I have demonstrated that reputational entrepreneurs cannot

and often do not just invent reputational accounts as they please but have to negotiate with actual events, prevailing social norms and attitudes, and existing conflicts and social relations. Reputations are also entangled with the identities of those creating them. Given that I mentioned identity only in passing without theorizing it in this and the preceding section, it makes sense to discuss theories and concepts related to identity in the next two sections.

### **3.3 Social identity**

Identity is an aspect of self that gets named in situations and indicates where one is in a social structure (Vryan et al., 2003; Williams, 2019). Hewitt & Shulman (2011) and Vryan et al. (2003) categorize identities into three types: situated identities, social identities, and personal identities. In this thesis, I focus on social identities, which are transsituational and depend on memberships in or identifications with social groups or categories (Hewitt & Shulman, 2011; Vryan et al., 2003). While personal identities emphasize individual uniqueness, social identities simultaneously highlight what group members have in common with each other and differentiate them from other groups. Social identities are enacted in situations when people “announce themselves, place others, or get placed as...members of social categories” (Williams, 2019, p. 4). When the social group one places oneself in (identity announcement) coincides with the social identity one is said to have by others (identity placement) in a given situation, social identity is established (Hewitt & Shulman, 2011). This, however, does not always happen. The

construction of social identities involves both external definitions by outsiders and internal definitions by group members, which do not always match (Jenkins, 2008). It is common for individuals to reject identity labels that are attached to them, especially if these labels carry negative meanings, or to have their identity claims not accepted by others. Besides, even when announcement and placement of a social identity correspond, outsiders and in-group members may attribute different meanings to the identity. An identity label that appears negative from an outsider perspective may be seen as positive from an insider perspective and vice versa, depending on which qualities are associated with it (see “auxiliary characteristics” in the next section).

Constructing identities for self and others is a collective process of classification that is evaluative and shaped by individual and collective interests (Jenkins, 2008). Identities are strategic resources used to assign status as well as stigma, include as well as exclude, open as well as close options, which is why people accept some identities but reject others (Brekhus, 2015; Brekhus, 2020). My study finds that the social identity categories emerging from my data such as delusional fans, mature fans, haters, jealous fans, and BTS fans were strategically created, claimed, and resisted by critics and defenders of Seung-ri to enhance the credibility of their own reading of the BS scandal, undermine the claims put forward by those who disagree with them, and in the case of Seung-ri’s supportive fans, negotiate negative stereotypes associated with the K-pop fandom. Identities are also relational

(Jenkins, 2008). When one defines oneself against what one is not, one is constructing a relationship of difference; conversely, when one defines oneself in terms of what one shares with others, one is constructing a relationship of similarity (Jenkins, 2008; Brekhus, 2020). Oftentimes, the relations between social identities are hierarchical. As social psychologists Tajfel & Turner (1986) suggest, social groups tend to differentiate themselves from each other in ways that elevate themselves above outgroups and do so by claiming desirable characteristics for themselves (as cited in Brekhus, 2020). Applying this understanding of identities to the findings of my study, I argue that labels such as delusional fans, haters, jealous fans, and BTS fans not only describe what each of these social groups or categories is or does but also outline very specific relations between them where some groups are set up as normal while others are configured as deviant.

### **3.4 Configuring a social identity: relevant concepts**

Every social identity is associated with specific “behavioral and presentational traits” that constitute a cultural template for performances of that identity (Brekhus, 2020, p. 80). Brekhus (2020) called such attributes auxiliary characteristics. Previous studies that use auxiliary characteristics as an analytical framework have generated several important insights about identity processes. First of all, it has been found that individuals tend to construct social identities around “criteria to which they themselves conform” (Williams, 2019, p. 10). McLeod’s (1999) research on constructions of the authentic hip hop identity offers a pertinent

example. The six auxiliary characteristics through which the identity was constituted, namely (1) being true to oneself, (2) being racially black, (3) having underground credibility, (4) displaying masculine traits, (5) hailing from urban neighborhoods, and (6) doing old school hip hop, were qualities that the hip hop artists participating in the research derived from themselves. Second, the same social identity might be configured in different ways and attached to not one fixed but various assortments of attributes. There are occasions where in-group members formulate their shared identity differently from how out-group members formulate it, and even people identifying with the same social group do not always conceive of themselves and one another in the same way (Jenkins, 2008; Brekhus, 2020). For instance, Johnston (2021) finds that while for members of the public and yoga practitioners (yogis) in other communities, clothings, props, and diets are central to performances of the yoga identity, yogis at The Integral Yoga Institute distanced themselves from stereotypical traits of the yoga identity and linked it instead to attributes such as embracing a spiritual rather than exercise-centric approach to yoga, embodying ethical principles of yoga in one's everyday life, and serious commitment to the practice (Johnston, 2021). When an identity has negative social images or meanings, configuring it differently than how it is commonly articulated by ascribing to it new auxiliary characteristics is also a strategy to recast the identity in a positive light. Such was the case of young female knitters in a study conducted by Fields (2014), who replaced undesirable traits traditionally linked with the knitter identity with new

ones. Introducing new characteristics such as being young, cool, and belonging to the creative class was their attempt to shift public views of knitters as old ladies to knitters as young professional women. These insights get at a crucial point: constructions of social identities intersect with people's perceptions of themselves and others, which can be simplistic and reductive sometimes. In his 2002 book "Fan Cultures", Hills calls such characterizations of self and others "imagined subjectivities".

Imagined subjectivity, Hills (2002) explains, is an idealized image one has of a person, including oneself. People tend to attribute desirable or positive attributes to the imagined subjectivities of themselves and those that they identify with, such as members of their social groups, and attach negative characteristics that connote, for example, deficiency in perception and taste to the imagined subjectivities of groups and individuals that they dissociate from. As idealized images, imagined subjectivities may lack basis in "the actual, embodied subjectivities" of those they are constructed for (Hills, 2002, p. 36). Nevertheless, in establishing a good, normal subject to measure against a bad, abnormal one, imagined subjectivities are "powerful cultural [devices]" that legitimize and normalize some cultural groups while pathologizing others (Hills, 2002, p. 21). Conceptions of fans as a problematic social category in many academic and media accounts of fandom resonate with Hills's notion of imagined subjectivity. Commenting on public perceptions of television fans, Jenkins (1992) writes that:

The fan still constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire. Whether viewed as a religious fanatic, a psychopathic killer, a neurotic fantasist, or a lust-crazed groupie, the fan remains a ‘fanatic’ or false worshiper, whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of ‘normal’ cultural experience and whose mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality. (p. 15-16).

Hills (2002) concurs that fans are often pathologized and seen as too immersed in the object of their fandom to accurately and critically appraise it like normal, rational members of society. Jenson (1992) criticizes characterizations of fans in many media and academic writings as a category whose experiences are fundamentally different from the rest of society. In other words, there is a tendency among members of the common public, media critics, and scholars to question the rationality and perceptual ability of fans and position their own values and practices, which from their perspectives are on the “normal” side of society, as different and better than those of fans. Fans themselves, Hills (2002) cautions, are not inculpable, however. Expanding on the point Hills made about fans’ views of themselves and those who are not fans in “Fan Cultures”, it can be said with some accuracy that many fan communities think of themselves as normal, perceptive individuals and view non-fans as deficient subjects whose perceptions are distorted by their hyper-rationality, lack of passion, or uncritical prejudices against fans or the objects of fandom. Taking the analytical points made in this section regarding the concepts of auxiliary characteristics and

imagined subjectivities, in chapter 5, I will examine how the opposing identities of “supportive fan” and “critic” that emerged from my data were constructed and how negative social meanings associated with the K-pop fan identity were reproduced, contested and transformed.

### **3.5 Chapter conclusion**

In this chapter, I have defined reputation and theorized reputation construction in times of scandal. Theoretical writings and empirical studies drawn on suggest that reputation is not a fact about what an individual is like as a person but a construction mediated by actions and identities of people called reputational entrepreneurs and various social conditions making up the context in which the reputation is established. Constructions of Seung-ri’s reputations by his critics and defenders and how their reputational claims intersect with their social identities, perceptions of celebrities, the media, and South Korea will be examined primarily using frameworks and concepts related to reputations in chapter 4 and parts of chapter 5. My main arguments are that, first, reputational claims put forward by critics and supporters are shaped by a complex range of factors, some of which are actually not unique to any specific community, for example, the K-pop fandom. These factors, some of which are used to frame my analysis in chapter 4, include skepticism towards celebrities, negative perceptions of South Korea, mistrust of the South Korean media and government, conflicts across the K-pop fandom, stigmatization of K-pop fans designated as delusional, and fan-idol emotional bonds.

Second, as part of their reputation work, reputational entrepreneurs may claim for themselves socially desirable identities while attributing negatively perceived identities to their rivals to increase the credibility of their reputational claims and undermine that of the latter. In addition, I will apply three identity-related concepts, namely social identity, auxiliary characteristics, and imagined subjectivity to various identities emerging from my data in chapter 5. Seen through the analytical lens provided by these three concepts, categorical identities that critics and defenders of Seung-ri constructed for each other are modeled on their rather reductive views of themselves and each other and that through strategic use of specific identity attributes, meanings and perceptions of a social identity or group can either be reproduced or negotiated.

## CHAPTER 4

### SEUNG-RI'S CONTESTED REPUTATION

As the title suggests, this chapter focuses on the reputations, both negative and positive, that critics and supporters constructed for Seung-ri and conditions conducive to such reputation constructions. Data for analysis include interview responses, comments, and posts gathered from both private Facebook fan groups and public Facebook pages run by the K-pop news outlets Allkpop and Koreaboo. In examinations of Seung-ri's positive and negative public images, I rely on the notion that reputation work involves creating a coherent biography in which the reputation target's past self is made consistent with their present self (see chapter 3) to make sense of patterns that emerged from both critics and defenders' reputational work. Specific tactics employed by Seung-ri's defenders to tame negative reputational accounts of him and construct in their place a positive reputation are analyzed in terms of "techniques of neutralization" or strategies employed for dealing with identity attacks on a community (Fine, 2001). Lastly, I apply Fine's narrative facility and his reworking of Smelser's (1962) value-added theory to the findings to explain the context shaping constructions of Seung-ri's public identities.

#### **4.1 Scandalous reputation: Seung-ri's mistreatment of women and association with "problematic" friends**

The public image that critics constructed for Seung-ri was uncomplimentary. Overall, it centered on his attitudes and behaviors towards women and connected the idol's past actions with present allegations of prostitution arrangement, sexual assault, filming and distributing explicit footage of women without their consent. Some critics described Seung-ri as “shady”, “sketchy”, and “problematic”, substantiating their assessments of his character with commentaries made by the other four members of BigBang in which they expressed concern towards their bandmate's private life, especially the people that Seung-ri was friends with. Others pointed to Seung-ri's friendship with the likes of Jung Joon-young, his actions on variety shows that he had appeared on, and a past scandal where a Japanese tabloid publicized sensitive details of his sexual affair with a Japanese woman as proof of Seung-ri's womanizing behaviors and disrespectful treatment of female colleagues. Various conditions shape the construction and narrative facility of this reputation, making it believable to Seung-ri's critics yet not really so to his defenders.

*Constructing consistency between Seung-ri's past actions and present allegations*

The following thread, which I took from the comment section of an Allkpop article titled, “Seungri explains questionable text messages and continues to deny arranging prostitution” that came out on June 30th, 2021, encapsulates unflattering portrayals of Seung-ri by critics. In the thread, critics shared their opinions about the article, which was about Seung-ri's explanation, given in one of his trials, for a text message that led to suspicions of his involvement in arranging prostitution. The

explanation given was that the text was autocorrected to something Seung-ri did not intend.

**Excerpt 1:**

**Alexia Owusu-Sakyi**

[...] Ever since I was a VIP, I noticed the way Seungri regarded women, whether it was on television or in one of his scandals. He was a Casanova but of course, I ignored that as a young fan and simply said he was a “lady’s man” [...] And on top of that, he openly associated with those who disrespected and sexually assaulted women. Ya’ll really think this dude was in a group chat with Jung Joonyoung + all his sexist buddies and is still a good person??? Y’all really think he wasn’t in on ANYTHING?

**Janine Marie Laue (in reply to Alexia Owusu-Sakyi)**

this! this is what I’ve been saying all along. Seungri isn’t a good person. Look at who he’s friend with an associates with. That enough right there shows he’s not a good person [...] it’s always been known that’s he doesn’t treat women well. Did we all forget the japanese woman?

**Saya Anda (in reply to Alexia Owusu-Sakyi)**

omg yess this! [...] he is the most problematic member in BigBang. The members even told him couple times that some of his friends were shady, yet he didn’t care [...] Yall know what kinda guy he is when he was under fire for inappropriately mistreating Sejeong like a bar girl in Salty Tour

**Karolina Kaluzna (in reply to Alexia Owusu-Sakyi)**

Yes. That exactly. Seungri was sketchy for many years. Some things were minor and so I ignored them. But then when all this came out it all came into place [...] his treatment of women isn’t something admirable.

The reworking of the past in service of the present mentioned in chapter 3 is evident in the comments presented above. First, critics in the thread reframed and reclassified

behaviors and incidents “once seen as...virtuous, unremarkable, or irrelevant...as confirmation of [the negative] identity” they created for Seung-ri in the wake of the BS scandal (Fine, 2001, p. 40). To do this, they contrasted what they had previously “ignored” due to their young age or thought to be “minor” with what now “all came into place” after publicization of the scandal. Second, consistency between Seung-ri’s actions before the BS scandal and his alleged involvement in mediation of prostitution and various sexual misconduct in the present was constructed through selective emphasis on past actions and events that highlight his conduct towards women. Here, it can be argued that consistency across the idol’s pre- and post-scandal selves was not constructed for the sake of it but was brought up to relate “the present evil of [a reputational target]...to past evil that can be discovered in [the target’s] biography (Lofland, 1969, as cited in Fine, 2001, p. 40). In other words, the critics in the excerpt linked the charges of prostitution arrangement and sexual misconduct brought against Seung-ri to his pre-scandal affair with a Japanese woman, treatment of other female media entertainers, and friendship with “sexist” men. By situating the accusations brought against Seung-ri within a history of questionable behaviors, critics were able to corroborate the former. That is, if Seung-ri’s actions around women and the company he kept had always been cause for concern, it would be a lot easier to believe that he did participate or assist in the wrongdoings perpetrated against women that were exposed in the BS scandal.

*Context of Seung-ri’s scandalous reputation construction*

Having shown how consistency between Seung-ri's past and present was constructed by critics to paint him as a sexist and problematic person, I now turn to the context that allows for this reputation to be constructed and gain resonance among some segments of the public interested in the scandal. Given the focus of their reputational account on how Seung-ri viewed and treated women, I suggest that four types of tensions, which are equivalent to Smelser's (1962) notion of social strains, are responsible for shaping constructions and reception of this reputation among critics. The first tension is between members of the common public and celebrities and materializes in cynical views the former have of the latter. The second is between the patriarchal culture of South Korea as well as its elite class and those opposed to patriarchy and elite corruption, which is reflected in poor impressions that some segments of the South Korean populace and the international community have of Korean culture. The last tension is between K-pop fans designated as delusional and those seeing themselves as different from and better than such fans. The first and second tension, in light of the precipitating event that is the BS scandal, concretized into the generalized belief that contrary to their seemingly impeccable public image, K-pop idols are capable of wrongdoings due to the corrupt and sexist industry and country that they are in. I argue that this belief is one of the factors enabling the construction of Seung-ri's scandalous public identity by critics and make it credible to them. The third tension between pathologized K-pop fans and their denouncers

corresponds to the idea of institutional placement (Fine, 2002) and will be analyzed separately in chapter 5.

*Skepticism toward the moral standing of celebrities*

Regarding the first tension, Marwick & boyd (2011), and Ferris & Harris (2011) quite accurately observed that the relationship common people have with celebrities is of an asymmetrical and complicated nature. Celebrities are simultaneously “objects of envy and desire”, evoking a mixture of awe, adoration, disdain, and resentment among those loving or consuming them (Schmid, 2006; Shin, 2015, p. 135). On one hand, celebrities are hailed as role models and represent privilege and power that can be abused, commanding so much influence, trust, and respect among admirers and the rest of society that their moral transgressions are, until and unless their status diminishes, often willfully ignored and played down (Lines, 2001; Fraser & Brown, 2002; Holmes & Redmond, 2006; Greer & McLaughlin, 2021). On the other hand, in the media and some academic writings, celebrities are represented as superficial individuals lacking in moral virtues and achievements or depraved and distressed figures hiding fallibilities behind their glamorous public images and are thus “unworthy of the privilege they enjoy” (Connel, 1992, p. 78; Holmes & Redmond, 2006; Ferris & Harris, 2011). There is, in short, a skepticism towards media stars, renowned athletes, and all kinds of famous people lying right beneath contemporary societies’ obsession with them that predisposes the common public to believe in unflattering reportage of celebrities.

### *Poor perceptions of South Korea*

Moving on to the second tension, South Korea has for years been the target of both domestic and international criticism due to its lack of gender equality and rampant corruption among the elite class. Following the spread of the #metoo movement to South Korea around late 2017, myriad cases of sexual misconduct among male politicians, media personalities, artists, and other high-profile figures have been uncovered by the media or brought to light by female victims, many of whom are colleagues or juniors of the accused (Jeon et al., 2021; Lee, 2019). Acclaimed poet Ko Un, former presidential contender Ahn Hee-jung, former senior prosecutor Ahn Tae-geun, actor Cho Jae-hyun, and renowned film director Kim Ki-duk are among those that have been caught up in allegations of sexual harassment and assault (Hasunuma & Shin, 2019; Lee, 2019). In recent years, national and international media have also reported, on more than one occasion, on the epidemic of voyeurism in South Korea that mostly victimizes women. Hidden cameras, or *molka* in Korean, have been found installed in many public toilets and changing rooms among other places to capture explicit footage of women, which will then be distributed to porn sites (Hasunuma & Shin, 2019, Lee, 2019). Existing regulations, nevertheless, are deemed inadequate to deter this increasingly common practice (Hasunuma & Shin, 2019; Lee, 2019). Apart from prevalent sexual violence, women also face gender discrimination and stifling gender norms in other aspects of life. With respect to women's economic participation and opportunity, education

attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report released in 2018 ranked South Korea 115 among 149 countries, highlighting the huge gender disparity in the country (World Economic Forum, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2018). The entertainment industry of South Korea, unsurprisingly, is not immune to structural sexism. Lin & Rudolf (2017) observed that the male-dominant culture of South Korea's entertainment industry subjects female K-pop idols to greater extents of sexual objectification, stricter controls of their bodies, and more exploitation compared to their male counterparts. The suicide of actress Jang Ja-yeon in 2009, which gained renewed attention in light of the 2019 BS scandal and was linked to her being forced to provide sex services for powerful men in the entertainment industry to advance her career, is a striking example of the industry's dark side. Female idols who challenged restrictive beauty standards and gender norms imposed on women have often received backlash from many segments of the South Korean society, the intensity of which drove some to commit suicide (Borowiec, 2019; "Sulli: the woman who rebelled", 2019).

Intersecting with its systemic gender inequality is the abuse of power among the elite class of South Korea. While the issue of corruption perhaps became most salient around the time of Park Geun-hye's presidency, before Park came to power, her predecessor Lee Myung-bak and late president Roh Moo-hyun were both soiled by corruption scandals ("Why South Korea's corruption", 2016). It is also widely

known that those with connections to powerful politicians in the country, such as heads of family-owned conglomerates, or “chaebols” in Korean, can and often do take advantage of these ties to unfairly secure favorable business deals, get their kids into prestigious schools, or escape punishment for wrongdoings, among other things (“Why South Korea's corruption”, 2016). Wide coverage of these structural issues in South Korea, both in the national media and international news outlets contribute to the populace’s disenchantment and foreigners’ negative perception of the country.

### *Generalized belief*

News stories about powerful men, whether media stars or politicians using their wealth and socio-political influence to commit malfeasance, oftentimes with impunity, are quite believable in a context marked by cynicism toward celebrities and widespread perception of South Korea as a country where misogyny and corruption run deep. In discussions of the BS scandal, negative perceptions of celebrities and South Korea crystallized into the generalized belief that while K-pop idols appear perfect in public, some of them are not innocent and in fact are capable of the wrongdoings prevalent in the K-pop industry, as seen in the following comment.

### **Excerpt 2:**

#### **Lukas Lelouch Franke**

So much Prostitution and abused of underage girls in the KPOP industry. So its no wonder that dirt will come out of one of those Kpop idols and the fan

girls are crying out loud " he is innocent! How can someone so cute be charged by this!?" Lmao

The comment was posted in the comment section of the Allkpop article titled “Seungri faces 5 years in prison for prostitution charges” published on July 1st, 2021. According to the article, the military prosecution was seeking a five-year sentence against the idol for charges related to prostitution. In the comment quoted above, the phrase “no wonder” signifies a lack of surprise on the part of the writer when misdeeds (“dirt”) committed by K-pop idols, which contradict their persona (“so cute”), were exposed. This lack of surprise suggests that the person’s view of the K-pop industry and its idols had been negative even before the BS scandal broke out in 2019. As Seung-ri’s reputation as someone who treats women poorly aligned with this kind of preconception among critics, it easily got established and found support among them.

#### **4.2 Positive reputation: the friendly, feminist, big-hearted Seung-ri**

In the article titled “Techniques of neutralization: a theory of delinquency”, Sykes & Matza (1957) introduced the term “techniques of neutralization” to refer to strategies that rationalize delinquent behaviors and allow those designated delinquents by society to neutralize and deflect internalized feelings of disapproval that arise from committing legal or moral offenses. Adapting Sykes & Matza’s (1957) thesis to his study of community-identity construction, Fine (2001) employed the notion of techniques of neutralization to describe strategies that residents of Sauk

Center utilized to deal with challenges to their community identity, which emerged following the success of Sinclair Lewis's critically acclaimed novel "Main Street" in which the town dwellers were portrayed as "small minded, gossipy, and provincial" people (p. 232). Five techniques were used in the process of constructing their community identity. Given the particulars of the reputation construction and negotiation process that I study, only three of these five techniques, namely incorporating positive commentaries, engaging with criticisms, and contextualization will be used for analysis.

First of all, residents of Sauk Center incorporated positive commentaries by outsiders about the town into their reputational accounts of it to make their accounts appear objective (Fine, 2001). When confronted with negative commentaries about their community, the townspeople did not act defensively nor ignore them but used identity attacks as an opportunity to articulate their community identity in a positive light (Fine, 2001). Lastly, when constructing the community's reputation, residents also put a critic's attack into context to "conscript [him] as an ally of the community" (Fine, 2001, p. 243). In employing this technique, Sauk Centreites suggested that while Sinclair Lewis did indeed write about the town in a way that made it look bad, his words "have meaning other than that which a surface reading would give them" (Fine, 2001, p. 250). Explaining that Lewis would not have written about the town at all and in such vivid detail as he did had he not loved, cared about, and understood it deeply, the townspeople transformed Lewis's harsh description of Sauk Centre

into evidence of his love for it (Fine, 2001). Citing Swidler (1986), Strauss (1961), and Suttles (1984), Fine (2001) observed that though these techniques of neutralization are grounded in the specificities of each case of reputation construction, they also represent generic processes that can be applied widely. Furthermore, as noted in Jenkins (2008), the constructions of identities for communities and for persons, while different, are similar in some important respects. Therefore, I use three strategies adopted in constructing the community identity of Sauk Centre's people in this section to frame the analysis of how supporters established Seung-ri's reputation when faced with critics' denunciation and unfavorable media reports of the idol.

In online discussions of the BS scandal, defenders of Seung-ri engaged in several related but different processes. One is what I call reputation negotiation in which supporters contextualized the statements made by those who know Seung-ri personally and past actions or events used by critics to construct Seung-ri's negative public image and reinterpreted them as savage jokes not to be taken at face value or a kind of acting up on variety shows that was not "applicable for understanding who [Seung-ri] 'truly' [is]" (Fine, 2001, p. 243). The other is positive reputation construction, by which I mean creating a positive reputation for the idol in place of the negative public persona discussed in the preceding section. In this process, supporters treated critics' unflattering appraisal of the idol as an occasion for them to weigh in with reputational claims that incorporated both knowledge about K-pop

and BigBang and positive commentaries made by outsiders about Seung-ri. In these reputation processes, Seung-ri's supporters actively discredited news outlets they perceived to be biased in their reporting of Seung-ri's involvement in the BS scandal while attributing greater veracity to their own assessment of the idol's character.

### *Taming negative reputations*

Negotiation of Seung-ri's public persona is at work in the two threads below. They emerged after Allkpop released the article titled, "Netizens aren't buying Seungri's excuse of writing, 'Girls? Go with the one that give it good' was the result of autocorrect" on June 30th, 2021.

#### **Excerpt 3:**

##### **Maria Eduarda Schuh**

He's not innocent at all... Even Big Bang members knew that, look at the amount of interviews during the years where GDragon always complained about Seungri's friends... Also, look how Seungri used to treat women, even CL was uncomfortable with him... There are a lot of videos showing how suspicious he is.

##### **Maria Eduarda Schuh (in reply to themselves)**

OH... And one more thing... All VIP knows how a womanizer Seungri is...It's not a secret to anyone... He was in a lot of scandals and troubles because of that... He himself used to talk about it on TV...

##### **Syahira Nordin (in reply to Mariah Eduarda Schuh)**

thankyou for showing us you judge him based on variety tv shows.

#### **Excerpt 4:**

**Nikita Barlow**

Even big bang themselves alluded to concerns about his involvement with bad ppl.

**Syahira Nordin (in reply to Nikita Barlow)**

Of course there's a lot of bad words towards him because the members always tease him as he is the youngest. But you cannot conclude he is guilty based on just words on TV....Those guy throw bad words to each other savagely but to seungri the most.

Similar to what I analyzed before, Maria construed Seung-ri's bandmates' complaints about him and his friends as their disapproval of his behaviors. The discomfort that rapper CL from the K-pop female act 2NE1 felt when he was around, his actions on variety shows, and how he used to talk about himself on TV was likewise interpreted as clear indicators of how "suspicious" and how much of a "womanizer" he had always been. Syahira, however, disagreed, quipping that what was said or seen on variety shows could not be used to "judge" him, without really specifying why. When Nikita again brought up what the other BigBang members said about the people Seung-ri associated with, Syahira reframed what was said as rough teasing among members of the group rather than arising from their genuine disapproval or concern. How was this reframing or recontextualization of BigBang members' statements achieved?

The answer is defenders strategically used knowledge about K-pop culture and the dynamics of relationships among the then five members of BigBang to recast

statements made by the other four BigBang members. In the early phase of my data collection when I looked widely at all kinds of news contents related to K-pop to get a sense of what K-pop fans are generally interested in and what the media are likely to report on when it comes to K-pop artists, I came across multiple articles reporting on idols teasing each other or getting teased by their fandom. The articles were generally well received by K-pop fans. Digging a little deeper, I learned that savage joking is a fixture of K-pop culture. Not only do K-pop news outlets report regularly on it but much of the appeal of Korean variety shows, which many K-pop idols either host or participate in as guests, comes from the exchange of banter between the hosts and guests of the shows.

Reveling in the humor of their idols was also a fundamental part of the BigBang fandom. Among fans, BigBang was known for their humor and tendency to crack savage jokes about each other. Consider, for example, the following extracts from interviews with fans:

“I was watching a show called Weekly Idol and BigBang was on that show. I was struck by their cheerfulness, energy, and sense of humor.” [Riiimy Lee, interview]

“They [BigBang] did not participate in many variety shows but when they did, it would be really fun.” [Van, interview]

Ethnographic data, too, indicate similar perceptions of the group among their fans. On June 16th, 2021, for example, a fan shared to the Facebook group BIGBANG IS 5 a post recapping the memorable speech made by Seung-ri at the 5th Gaon awards

where BigBang won the title “Artist of the year”. This speech was dubbed the “most hilarious speech in K-pop history” by the fan writing the original post because when making the speech, Seung-ri playfully talked only about himself and not the whole group as he was supposed to. On another occasion, the admin of Global VIPs shared a post captioned, “Daesung Never Failed to Amazed me”. The post recounted the two times Dae-sung savagely teased his bandmates. One is when he said his bandmate T.O.P got the nickname Bingu T.O.P because he “does stupid things”. The other is when he said he misses his bandmates but regrets seeing them in person when they eventually get to meet. Both posts were liked, hearted, and haha-reacted, which signify approval and enjoyment among BigBang fans. Savage jokes, in short, are common in the K-pop world and among the members of BigBang. Supporters of Seung-ri, such as Syahira from before, strategically called on this specific context and the fact that Seung-ri is the youngest member of BigBang to redefine his bandmates’ words of concern as rough teasing of him. Though it was not clear why Syahira rejected Maria’s literal reading of Seung-ri’s actions on variety shows and the reactions they generated from other female artists, her reply to Maria was probably suggesting that they were a kind of “acting” done to bring laughter to viewers and, like what the other four members of BigBang said about Seung-ri and his friends, not to be understood too literally nor used to judge him. By putting the “facts” that Maria and Nikita used to condemn Seung-ri into context, Syahira was

able to tame them and turn critics of Seung-ri, such as his bandmates and female artists like CL, into non-critics (Fine, 2001).

### *Constructing a positive reputation*

On top of taming unfavorable reputational claims, supporters responded to reputational attacks by articulating their idol's "true" identity. On July 1st, 2021, not long after new updates on the BS scandal engendered a new wave of condemnations targeting Seung-ri on social media, the fan account VIP Forever published a comprehensive post that asserted Seung-ri has been consistently kindhearted and respectful of women in all the years that fans have known him. The post was composed of 15 photos or screenshots with separate captions. Due to the amount of information compressed into this post, I will focus only on its 15 captions and discuss the post's photos or screenshots only when necessary. As the captions are quite detailed and encapsulate the contents of the photos they represent, it is safe to say that most of the post's visual and textual contents are retained in the analysis. Qualities ascribed to Seung-ri in the post can be divided into three categories, which I label altruistic, feminist, and friendly. I reproduce the captions (numbered according to the order in which they appear in the original post) in the table below and rearrange them according to these three qualities. While the post was circulated only within the BigBang fandom and not in online public spaces where critics were also present, the timing and phrasing of

**Excerpt 5:**

Altruistic qualities	(1) They don't know how you spending your birthdays doing charities
	(4) They don't know how your words boosted someone's self-esteem
	(5) They don't know the first thing you did when you got money from bigbang was to pay your family's debt
	(10) They don't know how you always help people without them asking
	(11) They don't know that you cross-stitched a baby shoe for your neighbor's baby
	(14) They don't know how you stayed with your members through thick and thin and I know they are doing the same for you
Feminist qualities	(2) They don't know how you defend women from men
	(3) They don't know how you respect people regardless of their sexuality
	(7) They don't know how women were so brave enough to defend you on social media like this girl not bcos they are blindly supporting you but they know your real character
	(8) They don't know that you have so many female friends
Friendly qualities	(6) They don't know that everyone who met you or even just had a virtual conversation with you has nothing but nice things to say about you
	(9) They don't know that the people around you know how a softie you are
	(12) They don't know how "galante" you are to fans

Others	(15) So lastly this is for Ri, I hope you never allow yourself to be defined by people who don't even know you bcos how do they possibly understand everything there is to you when they, in their little judgmental minds, have decided exactly who you are from a moment when you are fragile. Free yourself, the most important opinion was yours all along. All the people who love you know who you truly are.
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the post suggest it was provoked by critics' attacks and was made with the purpose of correcting misperceptions of the idol. Firstly, the post was published right after comments linking Seung-ri's past conduct with the BS scandal began to surface online following the media's new updates on the case in the period between late June and early July. Second, the refrain "they don't know" was repeated 14 times throughout the post, indicating that it was composed to debunk what critics said about Seung-ri.

The altruistic side of Seung-ri was formulated through the support he was known to give to his community by "doing charities", to his family by "paying [their] debt", to his bandmates by "stay[ing] with them through thick and thin", and to virtually anyone around him, be it someone whose "self-esteem" he boosted or his neighbor's baby whom he "cross-stitched a [...] shoe" for. The feminist side of Seung-ri, or more specifically his allyship with women and queer people, was articulated through actions that showed respect to or helped defend them, the defense he received from "brave" women fans believed "know [his] real character", and his friendships with many women. Lastly, the post constructed Seung-ri's friendliness

by pointing to his “galante” behaviors towards fans and the assessment by those who know him that he is “a softie”.

*Undermining the veracity of unsupportive reputational accounts*

These three noble attributes were made known not simply for the purpose of showing to the fandom a different side of their idol. The description of Seung-ri in the post was in fact also given a higher reality status in comparison to unflattering descriptions among critics in order to cancel the latter out. This was achieved in several ways, first of all, through the refrain “they don’t know” at the start of every caption from the first to the fourteenth. This refrain attributed to critics a lack of knowledge or ignorance about Seung-ri, which presumably impaired their ability to make accurate judgments of his character. The last caption in the post employed the same strategy: the post-writer encouraged Seung-ri, referred to as “Ri”, either to show affection or to indicate closeness and thus a better understanding of the idol, to look past the unfair assessments by judgmental and petty-minded attackers because they “don’t even know” him. Critics’ opinions were thrown into sharp relief with supportive claims that supportive fans made about Seung-ri by the use of words such as “real” in the seventh and “truly” in the fifteenth caption of the post, both of which established the opinions of his defenders, referred to as “this girl” and “all the people who love you” as the ultimate truth.

*Incorporating outsiders’ positive commentaries*

The post addressed criticisms not only by undermining the veracity of unsupportive reputational accounts but also by drawing on positive commentaries made about Seung-ri. Captions 1 and 6, as the photos or and screenshots accompanying them suggest, were written based on accounts made by those allegedly from outside the fandom such as favorable media reports of Seung-ri's charity work and anecdotes shared by those who had met and had a pleasant experience with him. Integrating accounts allegedly made by outsiders into the reputation that the author of the post constructed for Seung-ri lent it a veil of impartiality that made it appear less biased and more real (Fine, 2001).

*Constructing Seung-ri's innocence based on past actions*

It is notable that all incidents recounted in excerpt 5 had happened before the BS scandal erupted. The only exception was the anecdote referred to in caption 7 that was written and shared on social media by a female fan claiming to have met Seung-ri in person to defend him after news of the scandal emerged. Highlighting Seung-ri's conduct prior to the scandal, which contradicted the many offenses that Seung-ri was now convicted for, could be seen as an attempt to discredit the charges brought against him. In the same way critics linked Seung-ri's past actions with current charges to support their claim that he was involved in the wrongdoings discovered at Burning Sun and the Kakaotalk chatroom, here it looks like the post's author, as a reputational entrepreneur, constructed for the idol a benevolent past self to create a factual basis for believing that he was innocent in the present, as the self

is generally believed to stay constant and unchanged across time and space (Vryan et al., 2003; Brekhus, 2015). Hence, if he had always defended women and queer people when they were put into difficult situations and been kind and helpful to those around him, it would be quite difficult to think of him as someone capable of mediating prostitution or abetting the likes of Jong Joon-yong and Choi Jung-hoon in the drugging, raping, and illegal filming of women at the Burning Sun club as suggested by critics and the media.

*Context of Seung-ri's positive reputation construction: fan-idol emotional connection*

There are several reasons why the reputation constructed in VIP Forever's post was resonant and widely accepted among many BigBang fans. First to consider is the emotional connection between BigBang and its fandom, which is an indispensable part of being a fan and takes various forms, from being interested in the personal lives of the group's members,

“As a fan you don't just listen to their music but also want to know more about their lives [...] Not too private things. But things [...] they can share with us.” [Daisy, interview]

to seeing them as family or a source of guidance and support in life

“Being their fan means to me that i [...] consider them as my family.” [Florenca, interview]

“Being a BB fan helps me be a better person. It helps me to be wiser in seeing life [...] I learn good things from them. I learn how to be a strong person. I learn how to be humble. I learn to be who you are” [RK, interview]

“Yesterday I get another panic attack and BIGBANG flower road song saved me and got me out of that hell [...] I just listened to my favorite song for my favorite band and they make me feel better and there's someone take care of me in this ugly world.” [fan post on the fan page Global VIPs]

to trusting and supporting the group in hard times

“BigBang members are A-list stars, so there are always some bad rumors about them. So if you're their fan at their best, you have to be there for them on their worst days as well.” [Riiimy Lee, interview]

to resonating with their music at a deeper level than the casual listener

“I actually feel their songs in my heart....Which makes it different from just listening to their songs and considering it as an another song in your playlist.” [Florencia, interview]

In previous research on audience involvement with celebrities, it has been pointed out that strong parasocial relationship with famous people, defined as “a sense of intimacy or friendship” with them due to repeated media exposure, and identification with them, which means taking on their attitudes and beliefs, are “a filter through which people process information” (Brown et al., 2003, p. 589, 601). The study of O.J. Simpson's murder case by Brown et al. (1997) found that those who had a

stronger psychological involvement with him prior to the case were more likely to believe he was innocent and reject evidence suggesting otherwise. In another study, fans of the baseball player McGwire were found to exhibit a greater level of concern towards child abuse as it was one of the social causes that McGwire advocated for (Brown et al., 2002). It follows from these findings that a strong emotional connection with BigBang might have biased supportive fans' opinions in favor of Seung-ri even in the face of unflattering reportage in the media and critics' reputational accounts. Related to emotional connection is supportive fans' favorable perception of BigBang members, inferred from the fact that many of them look up to the members as role models and fall back on their music in challenging times. While scandals are generally damaging to the scandal target, whether the scandal narratives involving the target will be accepted as plausible or rejected depends on the public's former view of them (Newman, 2003, as cited in Fine, 2019). Since BigBang members had been held in high regard among many fans prior to the BS scandal, it is unsurprising that some segments of the fandom gravitated towards the positive public identity established for Seung-ri while disbelieving his scandalous reputation.

*Context of Seung-ri's positive reputation construction: mistrust of the media and government*

Involvement with their idol alone, however, was not enough to convince defenders that the idol was innocent despite the court's ruling and incriminating

evidence published in the media, which is why some fans dropped their support for Seung-ri after news of the scandal emerged. Seung-ri's positive public image was considered plausible among his supporters because constructions of it corresponded to their mistrust of the media and a conspiracy-theory view<sup>2</sup> upheld by some segments of the K-pop fandom, including the fandom of BigBang<sup>3</sup>, which holds that celebrity scandals are used to cover up political issues or misconduct committed by the government or those with some kind of connections to them. From a defender's perspective, media reports of the BS case were biased in their coverage of Seung-ri and did not capture the "true story" of the scandal. In some interactions, defenders directed their criticism at a specific media outlet while in others, they talked about the media in a general way. The news site Allkpop, for instance, was dubbed a "gossip site" and criticized for making money by damaging the reputation of celebrities.

**Excerpt 6:**

**Asheya SY**

allkpop is a gossip site they make money by defaming celebrities [online comment, taken from the comment section of the Allkpop article titled, "Seungri explains questionable text messages and continues to deny arranging prostitution" published on June 30th, 2021]

When Koreaboo republished from a Dispatch article several chats, allegedly sent by Seung-ri, where the arrangement of prostitution services for foreign investors and sexual assault of intoxicated women were discussed in a piece titled "Dispatch

Reveals Kakao Chat Logs Of Seungri And Others, Countering His Claims Of “Auto Correct” And Showing his true nature” on July 1st, the reliability of the Korean tabloid newspaper Dispatch was instantly challenged by Seung-ri’s supporters.

**Excerpt 7:**

**Prachi Gaikwad**

If dispatch is claiming evidence then i aint believing any shit of it. They are not even legit media company.

When news came that Seung-ri was facing a five-year sentence for prostitution charges, the title of the Allkpop article reporting on the news, “Seungri faces 5 years in prison for prostitution charges” was instantly picked on by the idol’s defenders. To them, the word “face” in the title did not clearly convey that the five-year sentence was only a possibility and not yet the actual sentence. They demanded for greater clarity, which they thought could be achieved either by using the titles they made up or adding the modal verbs “could” or “may” before the main verb “face”. For these defenders, the “misleading” title represented the outlet’s attempt to attract readers’ attention at the expense of accuracy.

**Excerpt 8:**

**Rose Anne Lirio**

**M I S L E A D I N G** The correct title would be this: "Prosecutors demand for 5 years in prison, if seungri is found guilty" [...] They haven't proven that his guilty. It's just a possibility as he “may” face a 5 year imprisonment. Please learn the language correctly [...]This page **SHOULD** be informative. You musn't use it for your petty clickbaits. It's terrible [online comment,

taken from the comment section of the Allkpop article titled, “Seungri faces 5 years in prison for prostitution charges” published on July 1st, 2021]

Then again, when the verdict came down on August 12th, 2021 and Allkpop reported on public reactions to it in a piece named, “‘Only 3 years?’ Netizens angered that Seungri’s prison sentence is so short”, some supporters were quick to cast doubt on some of the evidence that had been revealed by the media such as one of Seung-ri’s chat logs and insisted that artists and the management company of BigBang were being used by the media to cover up political issues.

**Excerpt 9:**

**Kizhia Anne**

[...] Even the media fabricated a chat convo. and we know how the media use YG and artists to cover up political crimes....

Mistrust of the Korean government, reflected in the conspiracy view mentioned earlier, can also be discerned from the interpretations made by many supporters of Seung-ri. In the extract below, the commenter argued that coverage of the BS case was intentionally used to suppress and take public attention away from news of political issues and crimes that the government wanted to bury.

**Excerpt 10:**

**Shagun Rana Magar**

[...] so many political issues were covered by this case! It clearly hints to the conspiracy. The big news of Seoul's mayor mysterious murder and few political leaders being involved in prostitutions were covered in no time! [online comment, extracted from the comment section of the Allkpop piece

titled, “Netizens aren’t buying Seungri’s excuse of writing, ‘Girls? Go with the one that give it good’ was the result of autocorrect”, June 30th, 2021]

That unflattering reportage of celebrities is profitable, prompting many media outlets to criticize immoral behaviors among famous people but to also relentlessly seek out and report on them in a salacious manner is a reality that has been noted and documented by many scholars (Lines, 2001; Holmes & Redmond, 2006). Given how commonplace this practice is, it is quite likely that any average person is more or less aware of it. Tabloid readers, for instance, immensely enjoy sensational celebrity stories but are also not blinded to the fact that these stories are salacious, gossipy, and that tabloid newspapers capitalize on readers’ interest in them (Johansson, 2006). Rather than a belief that is unique to the K-pop fandom, skepticism towards the media is probably one of the many commonplace beliefs that K-pop fans simply carry with them when entering the fandom, which they then draw on to make sense of the K-pop news that they consume. The assumption that celebrity news was somehow connected to the South Korean government's attempts to cover up its own scandal, while having a distinctive K-pop inflection to it, reflects a very specific view of celebrity and governments that is not exactly exclusive to K-pop fans either. Some celebrity scholars such as Adorno & Horkheimer (1993), King (1992), and Marcuse (1991) theorized famous people as a kind of commodity that diverts the public’s attention from tyrants’ control over their lives (Ferris & Harris, 2011). Likewise, Boorstin (2006) devised the concept “pseudo-event” to refer to media-generated

spectacles, often involving celebrities, that deflects the common public's attention from real sociopolitical concerns (as cited in Yeo, 2017). More contemporarily, the study on military service evasion of Korean artists conducted by Yeo (2017) pointed out that too much coverage was given to cases of celebrities' military service evasion, which in turn generated an amount of public reactions and attention disproportionately higher than cases of evasion found among children of politicians or high-ranking public officials. Among the common public, there is a perception, which I mentioned in the previous section, that elite corruption is rampant in South Korea. Given this context, it is quite possible that the K-pop fans in my study did not develop their conspiracy theory about governments' use of celebrity news from scratch just to protect their idols, but probably proceeded from a general mistrust of the government formed based on their observations of how cases of misconduct committed by South Korean authorities and those with ties to them are covered in the media and ideas that have been circulating outside the K-pop fandom. In other words, fans' processing of information concerning their idols is shaped by attitudes and beliefs that extend far beyond their fandom. In the case of Seung-ri, these existing beliefs and attitudes towards the media and the Korean government might have predisposed some BigBang fans to see the BS scandal as a conspiracy by high-ranking authorities to scapegoat the idol to cover up their own crimes and thus led them to believe that Seung-ri is friendly, big-hearted, respectful of women, and most

important of all, innocent of charges related to sexual misconduct and mediating prostitution.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the reputations that critics and defenders of Seung-ri established for him, explored their motivations in constructing these reputations, and considered factors that might have contributed to the narrative facility of the reputations constructed. I found that while their reputational accounts of Seung-ri widely differed, as reputational entrepreneurs, critics and supporters of the idol went through the same process of reconciling his past with his present self and using the public personas constructed to determine whether and how much he was involved in the wrongdoings he was accused of. Both Seung-ri's negative and positive reputations were constructed and found their communities of support because they resonated with existing beliefs and attitudes in these communities. In the case of critics, his blemished public identity accorded with their perceptions of celebrities as fallible and South Korea as a corrupted and misogynistic country. In the case of supportive fans, Seung-ri's innocent, kind, and feminist image fitted well with their favorable views of him prior to the scandal and mistrust of the South Korean media and government.

## CHAPTER 5

### REPUTATIONAL ENTREPRENEURS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF THEIR OWN AND EACH OTHER'S IDENTITIES

It has been stressed in various places throughout this thesis that an idol's reputation and the identities of those constructing it are closely linked. Following chapter 4 which sheds light on how Seung-ri's public image was created and in what context, this chapter offers an analysis of the identities of those directly involved in the construction of Seung-ri's public identity: his critics and defenders. Both ethnographic and interview data collected from Facebook groups of BigBang fans, Facebook pages of K-pop news sites Allkpop and Koreaboo, and interviews with current and former BigBang fans are drawn on in the analysis. The analytical distinction between external and internal definitions of a social identity and the concepts of auxiliary characteristics, imagined subjectivities, and institutional placement are used to explain constructions of identities by critics and supporters as a kind of strategic resource crucial to the process of reputation construction. In addition, identity studies that highlight calibration or the use of foil as strategies of identity construction are also drawn on to make sense of the data.

#### **5.1 Fan identity: external definitions**

To reiterate insights from Fine's (2001, 2012) reputational studies cited in chapter 3, reputational claims characterize and are characterized by the identities of

their proponents. If so, then how did perceptions of Seung-ri’s supporters shape and were shaped by the public image they established for him? How do critics’ ways of characterizing defenders and constructing their identities as a certain kind of K-pop fan help answer the question just raised? For lack of a better word, I call the identity that critics constructed for Seung-ri’s supporters in my study the deviant fan identity. While the category of deviant fans could be found in all kinds of K-pop discussions and was distinctively constructed in each, formulations of the deviant fan identity in my study very specifically described K-pop fans in terms of their extreme fandom who refuse to accept that their idols have done something bad and are willing to resort to all manners of conduct to excuse and defend their idols’ actions.

In the sample of online threads collected for this study, it appeared that in comments made by critics, supporters of Seung-ri were almost always denounced and described in negative terms, their emotional connection to the idol pathologized. Their deviant fan identity was constructed through four categories of auxiliary characteristics that indicate (1) psychological problems (psychotic, delusional), (2) impaired intellect (idiotic, brainless), (3) destructive emotions (hateful, toxic), and (4) criminal dispositions (dangerous, scary), as summarized in Figure 1. These

Psychological problems	Impaired intellect	Destructive emotions	Criminal dispositions
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In denial	Idiotic	Hateful	Dangerous
Insane	Brainless	Toxic	Scary
Irrational	Fantard		
Psychotic	Dumb		
Delusional	Ignorant		
Obsessed	Without common sense		

**Figure 1. Delusional fan attributes, collated from online comments on Facebook.**

undesirable traits imbued the deviant fan identity with “images of deviance” and reduced those placed in this identity category to “a monolithic Other” that is dysfunctional, pathological, different from, and threatening to “normal” society (Jenson, 1992, p. 9; Williams & Ho, 2016, p. 87). Rather

than look at how this way of characterizing K-pop fans has been influenced by media accounts that dramatize the boundaries between the mainstream society and fandoms or subcultural communities, in this section, I examine the construction of the deviant fan identity by critics as a process of stigmatization that happens to reputational entrepreneurs when they challenge a reputation that is not only widely consensual but also laden with moral judgment (Fine, 2012).

*Reputation construction as a moral issue*

In the book “Sticky Reputations”, Fine (2012) observes that the few people who established a positive reputation for Adolf Hitler against the negative view that is widely shared of him risk stigmatizing themselves and having their morality and sanity questioned. Explaining why embracing reputational accounts that praise and vindicate Hitler can have such adverse effects on his proponents, Fine notes that reputational claims are perceived as carrying “an illocutionary force”, which means they are not merely viewed as “the presentation of belief but as a vehicle by which other things are achieved” (p. xiv). Praising Hitler is disapproved, and the people commending him are often stigmatized and marginalized because in the minds of many, approval of Hitler’s character paves the way for many of the dictator’s policies to be reassessed and even reintroduced (Fine, 2012).

A similar case can be made regarding contestations of Seung-ri’s reputation by his critics and defenders. While my research lacks data to establish whether the criminal reputation of Seung-ri is held by overwhelmingly more people than the positive image defenders have of him as in the example Fine (2012) gives of Adolf Hitler, what one thinks of Seung-ri is definitely a moral issue to both his critics and supporters. Ethnographic data indicate that debates between critics and defenders of Seung-ri concern not only the legality but also the morality of his actions. To them, the issue is not just whether or not Seung-ri broke the law but whether he did or did not sexually assault women or assist and enable those who do. Of the nine charges

on which he was booked, only those relating to organizing sex work and sexual misconduct were debated since these offenses are indicative of the moral standing of the person committing them. Conversely, offenses such as fund embezzlement or violation of the foreign currency exchange transaction, which contain light moral evaluation, received comparatively less if any attention from critics and were thus tangential to their debates with the idol's supporters. Comments such as "even if he is proven not guilty let's not ignore that he is actually a shady guy" or "i don't care if he's proven innocent in terms of legality... he's not innocent in terms of humility and respect for women" also support the preceding point. Hence, from the standpoint of critics, denouncing versus supporting Seung-ri was not simply a matter of having a different opinion but was equivalent to having versus lacking morality. The comments made in response to the Allkpop news article announcing Seung-ri's official sentence on August 12th, 2021 demonstrate this point.

**Excerpt 11:**

**Renee Roesler**

Yet, so many fangirls said he was innocent. Knew he was shady and as a VIP glad he's getting punished to some degree.

**Anosi Mara (in reply to Renee Roesler)**

he is not gonna marry you, stop defending criminals!!!!

In response to Renee’s mention of fangirls still in support of Seung-ri, Anosi put them in the deviant fan category by alluding to their psychological problem, which supposedly manifests in the thought that they can be married to him. She then proceeded to equate their support for Seung-ri to the unethical act of “defending criminals”, thus adding another auxiliary characteristic that indicates moral failings, to the identity category that his defenders were just put in. In this enactment of the deviant fan identity, endorsing favorable reputational accounts of Seung-ri was cause for being perceived in a negative light.

In another thread taken from the comment section of Allkpop after it published a piece titled, “Seungri plans to appeal his 3-year prison sentence” on August 19th, 2021, it becomes clear why endorsing Seung-ri reflected so badly on supporters and was taken seriously by critics.

**Excerpt 12:**

**Anyssa Aguirre**

he deserves way longer, especially the crimes he’s charged with right now I feel bad for the females not for him

**Lisa Clarke (in reply to Anyssa Aguirre)**

You feel bad for the females? The same females who said Seungri was innocent and that police even tried to get them to change their testimonies?

**Carl Bonifacio (in reply to Lisa Clarke)**

You really love this guy no? females like you who keep on protecting sex offenders like him are the reason why there are alot of women getting sexually harrassed. But you don't care cause it's Seungri.

Just as many are concerned that supportive views of Hitler allow some of his policies to be implemented, here, the critic named Carl appeared concerned that favorable views of offenders like Seung-ri allow them to escape the consequences of their actions and perpetuate sexually inappropriate behaviors against women. Overall, to many critics, the claim that Seung-ri is innocent and a good, feminist person was not just a claim but was tantamount to enabling a wrongdoer and protecting them from accountability for their actions.

#### *Imagined subjectivity*

Moreover, critics' constructions of the deviant fan identity appeared to derive from the irrational, emotionally-driven imagined subjectivities of Seung-ri's supporters because formulations of the identity were solely rooted in critics' assumptions that it was entirely their extreme fandom and intimate relationships with the idol that caused defenders to continue to believe in his innocence. As already addressed in chapter 4, though former favorable views of Seung-ri and their emotional connection to him could make some supportive fans more receptive to information that reinforces their existing impressions of the idol, characterizing Seung-ri's supporters as subjects wholly motivated by emotions discounts other

factors that were also at play, such as their attitudes towards the media and the South Korean government. Critics either attributed supportive views of Seung-ri to defenders' obsession with the idol (wanting to be married to him) without considering other factors or refused to take these factors into account when supporters brought them up. Harking back to excerpt 12, even when it was pointed out that some female witnesses reversed their testimonies<sup>4</sup> in a direction that favor Seung-ri in court because some details in their former statements were allegedly altered by the police, a detail that was reported in a number of journalistic reports and disseminated through many fans' accounts and news translations of the scandal, the critic in the excerpt continued to frame defenders' affection for Seung-ri as the sole cause for supportive views of him. Such assumptions divided supporters of Seung-ri and critics into two opposing types of subjectivities: the delusional, ignorant, and even criminal subjectivity of the former is implicitly juxtaposed against the rational, restrained, and morally correct subjectivity of the latter.

### *Institutional placement*

The important thing to remember about imagined subjectivities and identity categories constructed on their basis is that they are the vehicle through which one debases individuals and communities different from oneself while normalizing and elevating the status of oneself and communities that one identifies with. Juxtaposing the normal critic against the deviant fan, seen through this lens, was likely a strategic act done to achieve a goal. This is where Fine's notion of institutional placement

becomes relevant. In reputational battlefields, Fine (2001) notes, the structural position of reputational entrepreneurs, or their institutional placement, is crucial. When reputational entrepreneurs' institutional placement endows them with a positive social perception, their claim will be lent greater credibility and authority. Nevertheless, when their institutional placement reflects badly on them and generates a negative social image, their claims may have a lower chance of being believed, as illustrated in the interaction below, which unfolded in response to the Allkpop article reporting on the 5-year sentence that prosecutors were seeking for Seung-ri.

**Excerpt 13:**

**Trace Hyatt**

FINALLY! Jail time for the criminal

**Iye Kwon (in reply to Trace Hyatt)**

[...] And what do you think he do to be in jail?

**Trace Hyatt (in reply to Iye Kwon)**

you're a Big Bang stan, I have no need to discuss this with you because your perspective is already too biased.

By depicting Seung-ri's supporters as individuals whose perception of events is severely distorted or with psychological problems and criminal traits, like in the example above, critics strategically placed them in a discredited social position that

undermines their claim and justifies critics' choice to ignore their point of view. Through negative attributes attached to the deviant fan identity constructed for Seung-ri's defenders, critics were able to not only express their poor impressions of defenders due to the latter's reputational claims but also weaken their institutional placement and limit the credibility and impact of supporters' reputational accounts.

## **5.2. Fan identities: internal definitions**

Social identities are accomplished through two interrelated processes, namely categorization and group identification (Jenkins, 2008). In categorization, individuals are lumped into a category by virtue of a number of shared attributes assigned by outsiders, regardless of whether the members conceive of themselves in the same way; definitions imposed on a social group by those external to it are called external definitions (Jenkins, 2008). In group identification, the reverse occurs. Here, individuals identify with a collective entity, now called a social group rather than a social category, and define their collective identity and the auxiliary characteristics linked to it on their own; definitions created by group members are called internal definitions (Jenkins, 2008). When recruiting insiders of what is known as the hipster culture, Cronin, McCarthy, & Collins (2014) discovered that despite being given the "hipster" identity label by non-members, members of this cultural category "shun[ned] the very label used to define them" and preferred to be seen instead as "indie[s]" (p. 8). The moniker "hipster" imposed on research participants in the study conducted by Cronin et al. (2014) is an example of external definition while the emic

label “indie” with which participants classified themselves as members of the community is an internal definition. Contrary to impressions that might have been fostered by the example given, categorization and group identification are dialectically related and occur simultaneously (Jenkins, 2008). Groups’ definitions of themselves are generated by outsiders’ *categorization* whereas external definitions of a social group proceed from *group identification* (Jenkins, 2008). Social identities, for this reason, are constituted simultaneously by categorization and group identification, external and internal definitions (Jenkins, 2008). I have up to this point considered critics’ characterizations of Seung-ri’s supporters, or external definitions of the fan identity of defenders. What about internal definitions of this identity? Did supporters of the idol also see themselves as critics saw them, that is, as irrational, dangerous and psychologically unsound subjects?

The answer is a resounding no. While seeing themselves as having something in common and belonging to a certain category of K-pop fans, many Seung-ri’s supportive fans rejected the deviant label imposed on them and defined their fan identity, which from this point onwards will be called the normal fan identity, through a variety of shared traits (Figure 2). Notably, the

mature	Casual	respect bias privacy
--------	--------	----------------------

older	care not about fanwars	know our limits
open-minded	care not about charts, views, votes	stay in our lane
chill	the most patient fandom	loyal
secured	the coolest fandom	different breed

**Figure 2.** Mature fan attributes, collated from online comments on Facebook and interviews.

impression of normality was achieved through various processes through which supportive fans strategically qualified their affection for BigBang and Seung-ri and distanced their fan practices from stigmatized behavioral extremes. Furthermore, articulations of the normal fan identity appeared to be shaped by situational factors: emotional investment and involvement with BigBang and Seung-ri were recognized as a crucial part of being a BigBang fan in interviews with former and current VIPs but rarely surfaced in online public spaces where critics of Seung-ri were also present. In what follows, I examine how the normal fan identity was constructed in terms of its auxiliary characteristics, which indicate four kinds of qualities, namely (1) maturity, (2) rationality, (3) knowledgeable, and (4) restraint.

### *Maturity, rationality, and knowledgeability*

Constructions of the normal fan identity in terms of these three defining attributes tended to go together and emerged in two kinds of situations: discussions of the Burning Sun scandal on public pages and interactions not pertaining to the scandal in private Facebook groups. In the former, maturity was often articulated through age and knowledgeability through displays of knowledge of specific details or information about South Korea or the BS scandal. Meanwhile, rationality was constructed as the ability to make judgements based on knowledge rather than emotions. For example, in response to attacks by critics on the fandom, two self-identifying VIPs wrote:

#### **Excerpt 14:**

##### **Nimfa Jupio Alicando**

[...] VIPs are older and many are professionals already. Some of them are lawyers / barristers and those people have been explaining to other VIPs what is happening. The intricacies and a bunch of other know hows of this case. The fandom is not being delusional. Many fans have been studying this case. [comment taken from the comment section of the Allkpop article titled “Seungri officially sentenced to 3 years in prison for mediating prostitution” released on July 1st, 2021]

#### **Excerpt 15:**

##### **Twinke**

We are not blindly defend idols there's no proof..go and listen what happened in the court seungri proofed that he didn't wrong but where is the justice? [comment taken from the comment section of the Allkpop article titled

“Seungri officially sentenced to 3 years in prison for mediating prostitution”  
released on July 1st, 2021]

While some critics derided Seung-ri’s supporters for defending him because of his cute looks or his benign public image prior to the scandal, very few supporters on public pages actually defended him on that basis. Instead, similar to the examples given above, most comments made by supportive fans portrayed supportive VIPs as mature, rational, and knowledgeable by (1) calling attention to the age of the BigBang fandom, which is older compared to that of other K-pop fans; (2) explicitly claiming to have done thorough research on the scandal; (3) leveraging their esteemed professions to proclaim expertise; and (4) raising concerns about government corruption and fairness of the South Korean judicial system or citing specific “facts” such as police coercion during the investigation process, favorable witnesses’ testimonies, and the lack of incriminating evidence in support of their views that Seung-ri was not involved in any sexual misconduct to show knowledge. Though the veracity of some of these “facts” can be disputed<sup>5</sup>, presenting them as facts or objective information in their debates with critics allowed Seung-ri’s supporters to appear disimpassioned in their defense. Even when defenders drew on Seung-ri’s upright public image before the scandal erupted (see chapter 4) to make their claims, their accounts likewise integrated proofs such as screenshots of what was said or done on variety shows that he had gone on, commentaries made by

outsiders, and news articles reporting on the charity work he had been engaged in to appear neutral and objective.

In interactions not directly related to the scandal in private Facebook groups, being mature and rational were often collapsed into the same category of being able to separate reality from fantasy, which many VIPs hailed as a virtue of their fandom. When asked how they felt about K-pop fans who reacted poorly to news of their idols dating or getting married, for instance, two fans from the Facebook group Global VIPs responded:

**Excerpt 16:**

**Liz**

A lot of VIPs are mature fans. We know that the idol's need to live their personal life [...] one day they would get married then start their own family [...] only delusional fans without a mature mindset act like the idols belong to them.

**Asher**

Some fans treat their idols as their personal boyfriends or girlfriends, so they will feel betrayed if their idols are dating someone else. But for VIPs, we all know that our idols [...] have their own principles and we have to respect it

In both excerpts, the fan identity of VIPs was articulated using a foil, which in literature means a character with negative characteristics that contrast with and highlight positive qualities of another character (Williams & Khoo, 2021). The

sexually obsessed fan who fails to accept that their idols are autonomous human beings (reality) rather than objects of fans' sexual fantasy (fantasy) functions as a "foil with...low social status", a pathologized archetype (see section 5.1) that rational and mature VIPs were defined against and dissociated from (Williams & Khoo, 2021, p. 137). By using this pathological and socially denounced category of K-pop fans as a foil, these two VIPs not only emphasized positive qualities that defined their fandom but also normalized their fan identity.

### *Restraint*

Among BigBang fans, there seemed to be a reluctance to make public their affection for their idols. While affective investment in BigBang and Seung-ri was set up as a distinguishing trait to set VIPs apart from those who are not fans of BigBang in interviews and private Facebook groups, few supportive VIPs used this trait when articulating their fan identity on public pages in the presence of Seung-ri's critics, who tended to view any declaration of love for the idol in the context of the scandal as a form of pathological sexual obsession (see section 5.1). Even in spaces where fans felt relatively safe from the scrutiny of outsiders like their Facebook groups or interviews, the emotional aspect of their fandom was made to appear within acceptable limits, or normal, through a process known as calibration. According to Cairns & Johnston (2015), calibration is a balancing act performed to distance oneself from behavioral extremes. Calibration allows individuals and groups

members to create acceptable or normal versions of social identities that are often or easily stigmatized (Cairns et al., 2019), as in the following comment:

**Excerpt 17:**

**Nat**

VIPS don't care about rivalry. They don't even care about charts, views, votes whatsoever. Should BB top in charts, views, or votes, well that's an achievement and we're happy and proud of it, but we're not going in a "bloodbath" just to gain it [...] If ever other fandoms attack BB in a severe way, we're up to defend them without going beserk brainless. We prefer "play smart" [...] We all know that BB got nothing to prove anymore, they're legend period.

For context, this comment was a response to a question I posted in the Facebook group Global VIPs regarding their perceptions of and actions when faced with rivalry or wars across different K-pop fandoms. Practices bordering on belligerence and excessive competitiveness like "going in a bloodbath" to gain votes for and "going beserk brainless" to defend idols, which some segments of K-pop fans are known for (Tinaliga, 2018), were constructed as behavioral extremes from which VIPs differentiated their restraint and nonchalant attitudes. This restrained image of VIPs is mirrored in several interview responses of Seung-ri's supportive fans.

I used to communicate a lot with other fans [...] Now not that much because I don't have time [...] now I don't like to spend time communicating with strangers like in the past anymore [...] I just think that I should focus more on my real life relationships just now. [Lily, interview]

I don't [interact with other fans] on daily basis. Because I have my life right? I have my work. I have my family. When I have time I interact with them. But not very intense [...] I have my own work. They have their own lives. [RK, interview]

Here, use of language suggesting moderation, such as “not that much” and “not very intense” could again be read as an attempt by these two fans to subtly distinguish their own practices of fandom from practices that are too “much” or “intense”, or, in other words, extreme. Furthermore, emphasis placed on aspects of life not related to K-pop fandom like work and family in the interview responses normalizes the fan identity these fans constructed by fostering the impression that while being a K-pop fan was indeed an important and enjoyable experience, it did not dominate VIPs' lives nor make them any different from the average non-fan person.

### *Discussion*

Though Seung-ri's supporters offered an alternative definition of their fan identity to the one by his critics, their definition too was not exactly untouched by imagined subjectivities. Idealized images that supportive fans had of themselves did not always hold up in the face of “[their] actual, embodied subjectivities” (Hills, 2002, p. 36). Contrary to the claim that “[VIPs] don't care about charts, views, votes”, data collected for my study show that VIPs in fact did care. On more than one occasion, members of the fan groups I participated in put up posts to call for other VIPs to vote and sometimes even instructed them to make multiple votes to help BigBang members win a given title or award. There were also several calls for

fellow VIPs to help bring the followers of Seung-ri's Instagram up to a certain number. In a similar fashion, while many supportive fans insisted that their judgment of the BS scandal and Seung-ri was not clouded by emotions and firmly grounded in facts, this was not always the case. There were some instances, such as in the interview response presented below, where defenders of the idol actually relied on their feelings towards his relationships with other BigBang members or the idol himself throughout the years to make their assessment.

“Seung-ri made a special appearance in that concert [of G-Dragon]. Many people often say that anything can be faked, but the eyes never lie. In that concert the way they looked at each other shows that they were comfortable in each other's presence [...] that really made me believe that no matter what happens, what they felt at the time had to be real. And Seung-ri is a good person. I believe in that [...] There was this group of supportive fans [...] They would [...] make posts on social media, saying that many things can be false in this world but the time you spend with someone cannot be. What we should trust is the time you spend with someone. What you feel about the person during all this time is what you should believe in most. Media reports, on the other hand, can be false.” [Van, interview]

Moreover, while critics and supporters of Seung-ri did not conceive the fan identity of the latter in the same way, their constructions of it, or its internal and external definitions, were closely related. Like the yoga practitioners in Johnston's

(2021) study or the sasaeng fans in Williams & Ho's (2016) article, defenders of Seung-ri formulated their fan identity "in conversation with and comparison to other cultural templates available in the broader social field" rather than from a vacuum (Johnston, 2021, p. 29; Williams & Ho, 2016). On public pages where critics were co-present, supportive fans defined their fan identity against the ignorant, childish, and delusional archetype that critics set up to demean them by claiming to themselves the very qualities, from maturity to knowledgeability to rationality, that critics said they lacked. In their fan groups and interviews, VIPs not only described themselves and their fandom as normal but also did so by comparing themselves to and expressing disapproval of several other types of K-pop fans - the overly aggressive and competitive fan and the sexually obsessed fan.

Findings from this section also suggest that when a social identity is desirable but associated with negative meanings, people may attempt to transform those meanings by replacing existing auxiliary characteristics with new ones (Laybourn, 2021; Fields, 2014). It is possible that on public pages where critics and defenders battled over the reputation of Seung-ri, supportive fans' portrayals of themselves, in which their fan identity was linked to a new set of positive attributes, were constructed to negotiate negative public perceptions of the K-pop fandom. Alternatively, using Fine's framework of reputational entrepreneurship as an analytical lens, these positive portrayals could be seen as supportive fans' attempts

to enhance their institutional placement and credibility of the claims they were making about the idol.

### **5.3 Constructing the identities of Seung-ri's critics**

It is hard for reputational entrepreneurs to emerge from the reputational battlefield entirely unscathed without suffering some kind of cost to their own social images, which Fine (2012) calls “reputational price”. To be sure, not every reputational entrepreneur ends up being perceived as a moral deviant and excluded from the dominant public discourse the way those challenging the villainous reputation of Adolf Hitler or the virtuous public image of Martin Luther King did (Fine, 2012). Few public and historical figures had reputations as sticky, that is, “widely consensual”, firmly established, and consequential, as those two (Fine, 2012, p. xx). Nevertheless, just as supporters of Seung-ri were maligned and demeaned by critics for throwing their support behind his benign public image, critics of the idols could not escape from some level of villainization at the hands of Seung-ri's defenders, albeit probably much less than endured by the reputational revisionists in the case of Hitler and King, for insisting he was a bad and criminal person. Undesirable qualities ascribed to critics could be sorted into three major categories, namely hateful, jealous, and ignorant (Figure 3). From a supportive fan perspective, critics of Seung-ri were either haters or envious

hateful	irrational	dimwitted
vitriolic	deluded	stupid
toxic	small brain	dumb
jealous	brainless	immature
biased	ignorant	kiddo

**Figure 3. Attributes assigned to critics, collated from online comments on Facebook.**

K-pop fans bent on denouncing YG artists, BigBang, and Seung-ri to elevate the status of their favorite artists. The critic-as-hater identity was constructed around attributes representing hate and ignorance, while traits suggesting envy and hate were used for the critic-as-jealous-fan identity. The analysis below considers different configurations of these two categorical identities and how critics responded to them. It treats negative characterizations of critics both as a strategy to lower

critics' institutional placement and as a kind of reputational price paid for endorsing negative views of Seung-ri.

### *Critics as haters*

The critic-as-hater identity emphasized critics' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive sides. In one configuration of it, Seung-ri's supporters described his critics as people who harbored hatred for Seung-ri or his music act even before the scandal (emotional) and expressed their hostile feelings through comments denouncing or deriding Seung-ri for crimes that defenders believed he did not commit (behavioral). In another, a connection was made between critics' antagonistic feelings and actions toward the idol and their ignorance or lack of a correct understanding of the BS case (cognitive). From a supporter's point of view, hatred toward Seung-ri and expression of it in the comments were due to critics not knowing the scandal well enough or misunderstanding it. An example of how the critic-as-hater identity was constructed is presented in the discussion thread below, which is extracted from the comment section of the Koreaboo article titled, "Seungri sentenced to 3 years in prison" released on August 12th, 2021.

#### **Excerpt 18:**

##### **Jaymie De Guzman**

Clearly all those hating on or against Seungri did not follow the case since the beginning. Commenting and hating for the sake of commenting and hating without educating themselves.

**Veronica Katralen Furfjord (in reply to Jaymie De Guzman)**

Accepting that he has been deemed guilty is not a hateful act

A typical critic's response to being placed in this negative identity category was to shun it by just verbalizing their rejection or both denying accusations of holding a grudge against Seung-ri and and reframing their actions in more neutral, emotion-free terms. As in the thread above, showing approval of Seung-ri's three-year sentence was decoupled from a defining trait of the critic-as-hater identity, enmity toward the idol, and reinterpreted as an acceptance of reality, which conveys a sense of impartiality.

*Critics as jealous fans*

With the second category of critics envious fans, only critics' emotions (envy) and behaviors (translating their feelings of jealousy into hostile comments against Seung-ri to make their own idols look better) were highlighted. One important basis for constructing this categorical identity is BigBang's status and achievements as a music act relative to other music groups in the K-pop industry. By elevating the act to the industry's rank of giants, who outmatch other artists in terms of impact, sales, and awards, some Seung-ri's defenders established the inferior status of other artists compared to BigBang and thus the insecurity and envy of their fans. On some occasions, supporters were vague and did not specify which of the many K-pop

fandoms those described as envious fans belong to, such as in the following interaction.

**Excerpt 19:**

**Trace Hyatt**

LOL at all of the people getting excited to defend him [...] Only a delusional Big Bang stan would defend him at this point, and that's what 90% of you are.

**Mia Markova (in reply to Trace Hyatt)**

well I know that people who are against him it's mostly jealous antis from other fan stans ! Which one you are ? [discussion thread taken from the comment section of the Allkpop article "Seungri faces 5 years in prison for prostitution charges" released on July 1st, 2021]

When the fandom of critics-as-haters were specifically mentioned, it would always be the BTS fandom, known and written variously as "armys" (official fandom name), "ratmys"<sup>6</sup>, or "the purple fandom", as in the following excerpt.

**Excerpt 20:**

**Katakari Yu Rui**

You can really see that the most eager fandom are the purple one

**Ryu Wat (in reply to Katakari Yu Rui)**

As always. Too excited for BigBang to fall. As if they can erase BigBang history in Kpop industry. You can never replace legend.

**Daniel Gonzales (in reply to Ryu Wat)**

Why we're excited? Lmao say that to those kpopies who are really excited for bts to d4\$b@nd just because BTS alone, sold out and ended their faves in terms of achievements, charts, Breaking their own records.

**Katakari Yu Rui (in reply to Daniel Gonzales)**

[...] they are not yet disbanded and many people anticipate their comeback including your faves who look up to Bigbang. [discussion thread taken from the comment section of the Allkpop article "Seungri faces 5 years in prison for prostitution charges" released on July 1st, 2021]

Because those designated BTS fans by Seung-ri's defenders in my study also identified themselves as such, they could not reject the BTS fan identity that supporters of Seung-ri attached to them like the critics labeled as haters. Instead, they divorced the BTS fan identity from undesirable auxiliary characteristics that supporters of Seung-ri used to formulate it. In the excerpt above, when a few supporters of Seung-ri associated the BTS fandom with insecurity and jealousy (feeling intimidated by BigBang's achievements) and malicious intent (wanting to see the group's downfall), a self-identifying BTS fan named Daniel spoke up against this characterization of his fandom. Citing the many accomplishments of BTS, which to him eclipsed that of BigBang, the person reconfigured the BTS fan identity, separating it from attributes of jealousy and insecurity in Seung-ri's defenders' construction of the identity. An important point to make here is that though how BTS fans were defined from an external standpoint was at odds with how these fans conceived themselves, external definitions of the identity still "proceed[ed] hand in glove" with its internal definitions (Jenkins, 2008, p. 110). That is, Daniel did not

come up with random traits to reconstruct the shared identity of his fandom, but strategically chose those that would counter negative definitions of the fandom from outsiders. His attempt to do so, however, was not successful at the interactional level. Towards the end of their interaction, the supportive fan known by the username Kutakari dismantled the very basis with which Daniel created the secure, non-jealous BTS fan identity by asserting that even BTS respected and admired BigBang, implying that the former is inferior to the latter.

### *Discussion*

For all their difference in opinions and affiliations, as reputational entrepreneurs, defenders and critics of Seung-ri resorted to strikingly similar tactics in portraying each other and dealing with reputational claims that are different from their own. In the same way that supporters' perceptual ability was depicted as deficient and defective through traits that suggest psychological problems and limited intelligence, critics were likewise portrayed as subjects whose understanding of the BS scandal and Seung-ri's involvement in it was clouded by emotions like envy and hatred or hindered by ignorance. That the perceptual ability of critics was at the center of supportive fans' formulation of their identities suggests that these identity constructions were not just matters of paying a reputational price for supporting or not supporting a particular reputational account but could also be seen as strategies by Seung-ri's defenders to diminish the institutional placement of their rivals, or, Seung-ri's critics to be precise.

Besides, not unlike how they themselves were characterized, supporters' depiction of critics came from their imaginations and assumptions of the latter's motives and intentions rather than rooted in the actual subjects they interacted with. Not everyone who reveled in the final sentence Seung-ri received or thought he was not a good person, especially in terms of his treatment of women, fitted into the narrow categories of haters and envious fans conceived by the idol's defenders. A good counter-example would be that of BigBang fans who, upon learning about the scandal, decided to withdraw their support for Seung-ri and even openly criticized him, a fact that has been mentioned in many news reports and recognized by some BigBang fans that I interviewed and encountered. Attributes such as having a grudge against BigBang and envy are clearly not applicable to this group. Besides, assuming that unfavorable views of Seung-ri were due to hatred, jealousy, or a lack of knowledge about the scandal might be too simplistic, considering that the way defenders defined what is and is not accurate knowledge about the case needs to be problematized<sup>6</sup> and that there were a range of other factors such as cynical views of celebrities in general, how Seung-ri had been portrayed in media coverage of the BS scandal, and concerns about widespread corruption among South Korea's elite class and the country's misogyny that might have also contributed to how critics came to understand the whole scandal and how much Seung-ri was involved in it.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I analyzed different configurations of the K-pop fan identity associated with supporters of Seung-ri both by those who claimed it (defenders themselves) and outsiders who stigmatized and pathologized it (critics). I also discussed constructions of categorical identities that supporters of Seung-ri used to label his critics, namely the critic-as-hater and critic-as-jealous fan identities. I found that there are two analytical lenses through which the negative identities constructed by critics and supporters of Seung-ri could be viewed. One, their characterizations of themselves and each other reflect Fine's theoretical point that reputational entrepreneurs often endure a cost to their social image when constructing morally charged reputations. Two, per Fine's notion of institutional placement, these characterizations can be seen as a means through which critics and defenders of Seung-ri challenged the perceptions of those they disagreed with and in so doing discredited reputational claims different from their own. Findings in this chapter also showed that the identity construction process through which critics and supporters of Seung-ri describe themselves and each other is entangled with, if not part of the reputational work done to construct Seung-ri's public identity discussed in chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

#### 6.1 Summary of key analytical points

In this thesis, I parsed out the reputations constructed for Seung-ri by two groups of reputational entrepreneurs, namely critics and defenders of Seung-ri, examined specific tactics that they employed in the process of reputation construction, and unpacked preconceptions and social relations that give rise to constructions of opposing public identities for the idol by his critics and supporters. I found that Seung-ri's reputations, whether as a problematic individual or a benevolent, friendly, and feminist person, were established by both critics and defenders by creating a sense of congruence between his past and present actions, which these two groups hailed as a factual basis for whatever claims they made regarding him. This finding resonates with the observation found in many theoretical and empirical writings on identities that identities are generally expected to stay consistent over time and the construction of an individual's personal identity typically involves reconciling contradictions in their behaviors and integrating them into a cohesive narrative of self or biography (Jenkins, 2008; Brekhus, 2020). It is also in line with Fine's (2001) study on the reputation of Benedict Arnold, known for treason, where he argued that the reputational entrepreneurs involved in the making of Arnold's public image following his treason reinterpreted the so-called

traitor's past actions in a way that fits with how they perceived him after his perfidious betrayal of his own country was publicized. Drawing on Fine's notion of narrative facility and his adaptation of Smelser's (1962) value-added theory, I proposed that the construction of Seung-ri's negative reputation was shaped by poor perceptions of celebrities and South Korea among critics. On the other hand, the idol's positive reputation was constructed by supporters and appeared credible to them likely because of their emotional connection to Seung-ri and mistrust of the media and South Korean government.

Apart from reputation, my study also generated several insights regarding identity. Configurations of the fan identity by supportive fans of Seung-ri and critics, which were based on different yet related sets of auxiliary characteristics exemplified the dialectic relation of external and internal definitions of any social identity. On top of that, the negative identities that critics and defenders used to characterize each other were both derived from idealized images of the former as psychologically unsound, ignorant, and dangerous subjects and the latter as uninformed, hateful, and envious individuals. These identities suggest that when constructing reputations that are morally-laden, reputational entrepreneurs risk being perceived in a negative light or even stigmatized by those who disagree with them and view the disagreement in moral terms. Moreover, that the imagined subjectivities on which these identities were based did not always hold up in the face of reality echoes the point raised by Pollock et al. (2019) that when a transgressive behavior violates moral values that

are central to individuals, their judgments of said behavior may become more moral than rational. In addition, the construction of these identities by critics and supporters could also be seen as a strategy that reputational entrepreneurs typically employ as part of their reputational work to impair the social standing or institutional placement of rivals and weaken the credibility of the latter's claims.

## **6.2 Contributions**

This research project has two contributions. While there is some research on the reputations of K-pop artists, such as the studies conducted by Ahn & Lin (2019) and Shin (2015) on the public images of two K-pop idols, it appears to me that no previous K-pop studies have employed Fine's theoretical framework on reputation to examine how the reputations of K-pop artists are constructed and debated among reputational entrepreneurs such as K-pop fans, the media, management companies, those outside the K-pop fandom, and the artists themselves. In a sense, my research extends Fine's conceptualization of the reputation construction process to contemporary popular culture artists, who are becoming more and more important in the lives of those consuming them and yet are rarely given much attention both in his reputational studies and research drawing on his analytical insights.

Findings from my research may also add to previous studies of fan and subcultural practices in Western and Asian fandoms. According to Smutradontri & Gadavanij (2020) and Yano (2004), research on Western fan culture tends to focus

more on how fans resist the power of the mainstream media while studies of East Asian fan cultures, including Japanese and Korean popular cultures, emphasizes the intimacy or emotional bond between fans and the object of their fandom. Despite a difference in orientation, existing scholarship on both Western and East Asian fan cultures seems to focus on aspects of fandom that set fans apart from non-fans. Early subcultural studies, too, have been called out for emphasizing spectacular, non-normative elements of the subcultures and reifying the boundaries between the subcultural and the mainstream, which more often than not are neither fixed nor clear-cut (Thornton, 1995). My study, while not exactly free from the shortcomings mentioned above, found that the practices of BigBang fans, more specifically their defense of their idol, were not resolutely driven by the emotional bonds they have with the idol but also shaped by beliefs and attitudes that they carry with them from other aspects of life into the fandom. In other words, this finding demonstrates that boundaries between social groups and between cultures are porous, allowing elements from both the mainstream culture and cultures of any social groups that K-pop fans are members of to cross into their fandoms and mold their fan practices. This finding can be taken as a reminder that when studying fan activities, it is always important to broaden the analysis to include factors and conditions that are external to a given fandom but nevertheless profoundly shape its activities.

### **6.3 Limitations**

As with any research, there are limitations to my study. First of all, as it is impossible to include every group of reputational entrepreneurs in one analysis, in this research project, I decided to focus only on the perspectives and interactions of individual supporters and critics of Seung-ri while excluding other reputational entrepreneurs such as the media, his management company, his personal acquaintances, and Seung-ri himself through the few public statements that he made after the scandal was exposed. Future research should definitely explore the reputation work done by these other actors and chart how reputational accounts proposed by them are resisted, modified, or further amplified in the reputational claims made by critics and defenders of the idol, which in my research is only vaguely sketched out.

Secondly, considering that supporters and critics in my study come from a wide range of countries and consume all sorts of media about the BS case, from news articles and commentaries published by mainstream newspapers of their own countries or international news outlets down to news translations and analyses produced and disseminated by BigBang fans in different languages, I chose to leave portrayals of Seung-ri in mainstream and alternative media outlets out of my analysis. However, crucial as they are to shaping understandings of the scandal among the common public, they warrant a comprehensive analysis of their own. One direction for future studies on this case is to look specifically at alternative media accounts of the case, which many supporters of Seung-ri rely on to argue for his innocence and

explore their veracity, their process of production and dissemination, the role of fan translators in that process, and finally rejection or acceptance of these accounts by different audiences.

On a related note, the definitions of accurate and inaccurate knowledge about the case held by Seung-ri's supporters, as mentioned briefly in chapter 5, should be problematized since this definition appears to lean towards verifying and privileging their own understandings of the case. Due to my inability to verify fans' translations of favorable media reports of Seung-ri from Korean to English and the small scope of my study, I was not able to offer any analysis of what is and is not considered the right kind of knowledge about the scandal among supporters of Seung-ri and how these supporters come to such a conclusion. Therefore, in future research, scholars can use either the BS scandal or any other scandals involving celebrity figures to further investigate how alternative media and fans-produced contents are used in the construction of fan knowledge.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to various media sources, Seung-ri's case was transferred from the civilian court to the military court in March 2020 after he was enlisted in the army to serve 21 months of military service, mandatory for all able-bodied South Korean men ("K-pop star Seung-ri", 2021).

<sup>2</sup> When there is news of K-pop artists dating or their scandals, there'll almost always be some K-pop fans voicing their suspicions that the South Korean government is intentionally amplifying media coverage of such news in order to bury and deflect public attention from news reports of their own wrongdoings. For example, when I first started collecting data in February, a number of K-pop idols, including Soojin from the girl group (G)I-DLE, Mingyu from the boyband SEVENTEEN, and Naeun from the female group April, were swept up in a spate of bullying allegations and rumors, some true while others eventually proven fabricated. Responding to this news, some of these artists' fans pointed out that it is unusual for so many bullying allegations to be made against K-pop idols at around the same time and it is likely that the government is using coverage of these bullying scandals to cover up something. There was even speculation among fans that the news is being used to divert attention from allegations of sexual misconduct brought against the Seoul's mayor who committed suicide in 2020. In a similar vein, many BigBang fans

surmised that by focusing all attention on Seung-ri, who is the most well-known among those involved in the BS scandal, the South Korean media and government managed to suppress more serious news of malfeasances committed by high-ranking officials or politicians.

<sup>3</sup> It is common for BigBang fans to get new updates about the BS scandal by reading posts made or shared by their fellow VIPs in the fanpages that they participated in. As many fan-made posts relating to the BS scandal explained it using the conspiracy theory mentioned earlier, this conspiracy view was picked up on and further spread by fans reading these posts.

<sup>4</sup> According to some English-language media reports, witnesses at the 13th trial of Seung-ri reversed their testimonies, which they stated were altered by the police. The revised testimonies show that Seung-ri was not involved in organizing prostitution services on a specific occasion indicated in the testimonies (“Witness Denies BIGBANG Seungri’s Involvement”, 2021; Mendoncan, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> With respect to the first “fact”, police coercion, some fan translations of Korean news reports on the BS scandal publicized Seung-ri’s statement that the police used coercion against him in the investigation process. As I do not speak Korean and was not able to find any English-language news reports mentioning police coercion against Seung-ri, I could not verify this detail. According to English-language news articles or commentaries that publicized some key details of Seung-ri’s 13th trial, the judge agreed to investigate whether police coercion of witnesses took place, but I found no news reports in English of the judge’s conclusion of the matter (“Witness Denies BIGBANG Seungri’s Involvement”, 2021; Mendoncan, 2021; Themis, 2021). Regarding the second “fact”, some witnesses’ reversals of their testimonies in a way that favor Seung-ri, while there were indeed several news articles in English reporting on this, I found no media reports saying that all witnesses testified in favor of Seung-ri.

<sup>6</sup> The official name of the BTS fandom is Army. It seems those outside the BTS fandom change the official name from Army to Ratmy, reversing the order of the first two letters making up the word “Army” and adding an additional “t”, to demean BTS fans as the “rat” in Ratmy suggests.

<sup>7</sup> In this study, I did not focus on verifying information relating to the BS scandal that supporters of Seung-ri consumed. Plus, as I do not speak Korean and many contents consumed by supporters are translated from Korean news sources, I could not verify whether a given piece of information was accurate or misinformation. However, I said that the way defenders of Seung-ri decided whether information relating to the case was accurate or false should be problematized because they tend to disregard information that makes the idol appear guilty as false and more readily embrace more favorable accounts of him, which often come from in fan-written accounts or fan translations of news reports in Korean about the scandal.

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