

Analysis of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) Forms Between NCT and Nctzen on the Weverse Platform: A Netnographic Study

Liliyana¹, Febriana Eka Puspitasari², Ferrari Lancia³, Haryo Windratno⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Department of Communication and Language, Bina Sarana Informatika University

ABSTRACT: The Korean Wave (Hallyu) phenomenon has expanded the spread of Korean culture globally, especially through K-Pop, which has now become a lifestyle symbol for the younger generation. One boy group that plays a major role in this phenomenon is NCT, with its global fandom called NCTzen. This study aims to analyze the forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) that occur between NCT and NCTzen on the Weverse platform. The study used a qualitative method with a pure netnography approach and a constructivist paradigm through passive participant observation of digital activities on the platform. The results show that the forms of communication that emerged were dominated by impersonal communication, while interpersonal and hyperpersonal forms were not widely found because direct two-way interaction was still limited. Nevertheless, interactive features on Weverse such as posts, comments, and live broadcasts still allow fans to express emotional support, build symbolic closeness, and strengthen the identity and solidarity of the fan community. These findings indicate that Weverse functions as a new social space that demonstrates how digital technology can shape communication patterns, loyalty, and emotional attachment between idols and fans in the new media era.

KEYWORDS: Weverse Platform, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Fan and Idol Interaction

I. INTRODUCTION

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, phenomenon describes the widespread influence of Korean culture across various countries through popular media such as music, drama, film, and lifestyle since the early 2000s (Wardani & Kusuma, 2021). One of the most influential elements in the spread of Hallyu is K-Pop, which is now seen not only as a music genre but also as a symbol of lifestyle and global cultural identity among the younger generation. According to a survey by the Korea Foundation (2022), the number of Korean popular culture fans globally reached 178 million, a significant increase compared to 9.26 million in 2012, confirming the rapid growth of Korean cultural influence internationally.

In Indonesia, the sandwich generation One of the K-Pop boy groups that plays a major role in the global expansion of Hallyu is NCT (Neo Culture Technology) with an official fandom called NCTzen. NCT is known for its unique concept of limitless expansion, namely a sub-unit system and flexible member changes, which allows for continuous innovation in the music industry (Andriani & Selvia Rahmayani, 2024). NCT's global popularity is evident from their achievements on the Billboard 100 Artists in 2023 through the sub-unit NCT Dream which ranked 21st. This success is also supported by the digital activities of international fandom, with millions of followers on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. This phenomenon shows how digital content distribution plays a role in building emotional connections between idols and fans across cultures, as well as strengthening South Korea's image globally (nation branding).

The role of digital media is becoming increasingly important in shaping the dynamics of interactions between idols and fans. While previously mainstream social media platforms like Instagram or Twitter were the primary means of fandom communication, exclusive platforms like Weverse, developed by HYBE Corporation, have emerged to facilitate direct interaction between idols and fans (Imanina & Palupi, 2023). This platform integrates synchronous communication features, such as live streaming, and asynchronous features, such as uploads and comments, enabling deeper two-way engagement. Data from Music Business Worldwide shows that 90% of Weverse users are from outside Korea, with over 10 million monthly active users, indicating that the platform has successfully reached a global audience and transcended language and cultural boundaries.

This digital communication phenomenon can be explained through the theory of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), which highlights the process of exchanging meaning between individuals through digital media by emphasizing aspects of social presence, nonverbal limitations, anonymity, and the formation of virtual communities (Zagita BL & Agitashera, 2024). In the context of Weverse, the interaction between NCT and NCTzen reflects the formation of symbolic closeness between idols and fans through online activities such as posts, comments, live streaming, and community projects. Computer-mediated

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communication between NCT and NCTzen on the Weverse platform. This study focused on digital activities during NCTzen's anniversary celebration on June 11-12, 2025, as a moment that represents the intensity of global fandom interactions. This research aims to identify the forms of impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal communication that emerge in online communities and understand how digital technology shapes the identity, solidarity, and loyalty of K-Pop fans in the new media era.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses netnography, with text analysis as the primary method. According to Dr. Eriyanto, M.Si., netnography is a method used to research and understand how culture and life exist online, particularly on social media. (Dr. Eriyanto, 2021)

This research uses pure netnography, an approach conducted entirely in digital spaces without direct physical involvement. Like ethnography, which is naturalistic in nature and uses observation as the primary data collection technique, netnography is relevant and important for studying human interaction in the context of today's digital technology. Because this method continues to evolve along with technological developments, it can help in understanding the dynamics of online communities in depth. (Kozinets, 2023) This is the reason why this approach was chosen, namely because it fits the character of the dynamics of the NCTzen community who actively interact with their idols, NCT, digitally. In this research process, the researcher positioned himself as an online observer, paying attention to ethics in data collection.

Using this approach, researchers were able to document various forms of digital communication across 29 Weverse platforms, such as comments, photo and text posts, and the use of interactive features like live streaming and fan letters. Kozinets (2010) explains that the netnography method has five stages in its research process: initiation, investigation, interaction, immersion, integration, and incarnation.

In this study which uses pure netnography, therefore the researcher took data through digital traces on the Weverse platform, which is focused on various forms of interactions that occurred between NCT members and their fans, NCTzen on the Weverse platform on June 11 to 12, 2025. The following is the scope of the analysis unit: 1. Uploads from NCT Dream members, in the form of text, photos and videos. 2. Reply comments from fans on the response to the upload. 3. Feedback from NCT Dream members, if any. 4. Use of the automatic translation feature, to see and understand how fan interactions from various countries respond to content.

Due to the pure netnographic approach employed in this study, no interviews or direct interaction with participants were conducted. The researcher acted as a passive observer of the conversations taking place in the digital world. Therefore, the unit of analysis in this study focused not on individuals but on the open digital interactions that took place between NCT members and NCTzen fans on Weverse. Informants in this netnographic approach are considered a collection of online conversational interactions that can be studied through text, images, and other communication symbols.

There are three types of data in netnography: archival data, elected data, and field notes. Here is a complete explanation: 1. Archival Data Archival data is data collected by researchers that is already available on the platform before the researcher conducts observations, such as old posts by NCT Dream members, previous comments from NCTzens, or published fan letters. This means that this data does not require interaction with the researcher, because this data is already available before the researcher conducts the research. Therefore, researchers can use this data to achieve their research objectives. This data is historical and important for understanding the context of the interactions that have been formed. 2. Collaborative Data (Elected Data) Collaborative data is data generated by researchers with social media users through interaction processes, such as synchronous or asynchronous online interviews. 3. Field Notes These notes are made by researchers during the online observation process. They contain personal reflections, observations about communication style, message tone, response forms, and emotional dynamics that appear from the interactions that occur. Field notes are important to help interpret the meaning behind the digital data collected.

In this study, data processing and analysis were conducted qualitatively using a netnographic approach, emphasizing iterative nature and interpretive interpretation. The analysis process was conducted continuously from the initial stage of data collection from existing digital traces to the final interpretation, following the natural characteristics of the digital ethnographic approach.

The data analysis technique used is thematic analysis (theme), one of the most widely used techniques in this method. Themes are derived inductively, starting with specific observations and then developing general conclusions about the phenomenon being studied. This allows researchers to see patterns of meaning that emerge and understand the experiences of the individuals or groups being studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research focuses on the communication between fans (NCTzens) and idols (NCT) on the Weverse platform. Data were obtained through observation, documentation, and literature review, analyzed using netnography and text analysis. The findings were then examined using a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) framework to understand the

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dynamics of digital interactions, emotional closeness, and communication patterns that occur between fans and idols.

1. Investigation

According to Kozinet (2020), the netnography method is a data-driven method. To obtain data, researchers must search, sort, and then store it for further analysis. (Dr. Eriyanto, 2021, p. 303) The data collected from the comments on the three idols' posts totaled 20,4200, and the researcher was unable to use a tool to calculate the exact number of comments in the fan community.

In this phase, researchers initially planned to use specific "keywords" to filter relevant comments according to the investigation phase. However, after conducting initial observations, researchers found that a keyword-based approach was ineffective in the context of the NCTzen online community. This is because comments in the fan community are very diverse, massive, and unstructured. On a single idol post, thousands of comments can be found in a short time, containing various forms of communication, such as birthday greetings, thank yous, personal stories, and random greetings. This is because Weverse users are spread across the globe and speak various languages, including Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and so on. Therefore, using keywords for filtering is too narrow or even misses contextual comments. Realizing this, researchers decided to use a time-based strategy as an alternative approach. This time-based strategy is carried out by collecting comment data at several different times, at moments predicted to have high interaction intensity, for example, one hour after the idol uploads a post and in the morning, afternoon, and evening. By doing this, researchers observed the natural flow of comments over different time periods, it also ensured that the data collected reflected the diversity of forms of interaction that occurred on the platform.

This aligns with Dr. Eriyanto, M.Si's opinion in his book, "Netnography Methods" (Dr. Eriyanto, 2021), which states that netnography is more interested in the depth of meaning and richness of data, rather than the breadth (amount) of data as in quantitative research. Thus, the researcher's primary focus is not on the number of comments collected, but rather on the ability to understand the deeper meaning contained in fans' digital interactions with idols.

2. Interaction

As the main approach, this study applies an emotional engagement strategy. Kozinets (2020) explains that emotional engagement is a strategy for understanding culture on social media by presenting the researcher's active emotional involvement in reading and absorbing user posts. The researcher positions himself as the party being studied, pouring out emotions (happiness, sadness, enthusiasm, and so on) with the aim of delving into the feelings of Weverse users. The reason the researcher took this form of engagement was because he wanted to see from the perspective of NCTzen, such as understanding why they felt so happy, enthusiastic, and even sad because they missed the interaction or presence of their idols at NCTzen's birthday celebration. To gain an understanding of this perspective, what the researcher can do is to become emotionally involved and truly feel the dynamics that occur among Weverse users.

3. Immersion Notes

On June 11th at 10:00 PM WIB, the author logged into the Weverse platform near midnight Indonesian time, as in Korea it had already become June 12th, 2025, which is the official date of NCTzen's birthday. At that time, the atmosphere on the NCT community page began to get lively. Of the hundreds of comments that appeared, the author noted around 30 comments that explicitly wished fellow NCTzens a happy 71st birthday. The greetings varied, some simply saying "Happy birthday NCTzen!" with an emoji, others were lengthy with touching sentences and full of pride to be part of this fandom. The comments were written by fans from various countries, evident in the use of English, Japanese, Mandarin, and even automatic translations into Indonesian. During this research process, the researcher participated and took notes in the form of immersion notes, thus successfully identifying at least 4 main themes for coding. These themes were formulated based on data collected throughout the research stages.

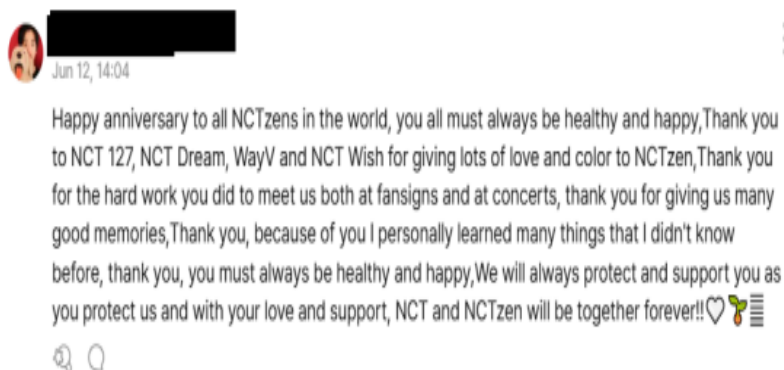
1. Birthday Greetings Birthday greetings were chosen as a theme because they were frequently found and also relevant to the moment on that day, namely celebrating NCTzen's 9th birthday or anniversary spread by fans in the comments column and fan communities. This can also be called "community culture" because it expresses solidarity and ceremonial recognition of collective identity. Reported from the psychologytoday.com article entitled "Fandom Stands Out for Its Culture of Gift-Giving" There is a study that discusses this within the fandom, namely the form of symbolic exchange such as greeting words, emojis, fan-art that act as "non-financial gifts" or gift economy which turns out to be able to strengthen social bonds stronger than ordinary economic exchanges. In this case, birthday greetings to fellow fans are a real form of the gift economy, where they share attention, hope, and affection without expecting anything in return, which in turn strengthens digital solidarity. Another study, on Sense of Virtual Community (SOVC), published in 2023, entitled "Effects of Online Fan Community Interactions on Well-Being and Sense of Virtual Community" by Min Sung Kim et al., explains that interactions such as birthday greetings from someone can create emotional bonds, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of social support within an online community. (Kim et al., 2023)

This highlights the intensity of interactions, such as shared birthday greetings, that foster emotional bonds, a sense of

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belonging, and social support within online communities. When NCTzens wish each other "Happy birthday, Czennie!" or even add a few words of encouragement, they're not speaking to just one person, but to the entire fandom, spreading a sense of togetherness.

2. Expressions of "Thank You" and Gratitude



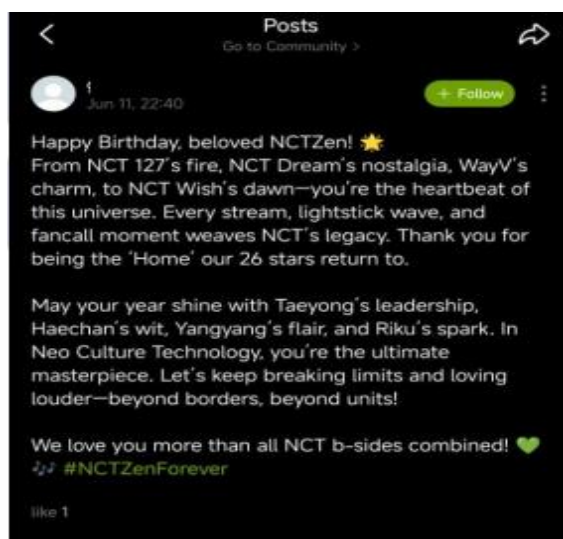
Comments like "thank you" or other expressions of gratitude on the birthday posts of idols (Jeno, Chenle, and Jaemin) are not just polite expressions. They also reflect a real sense of "social connectedness." The fans seem sincere and truly appreciate the shared moments on that day. Like the long text post from the fan above, where she prays for her fellow fandom members and thanks all NCT members, it turns out that during her time as an NCTzen, she has learned a lot from the interactions between NCT members in every day's content and also hopes that NCT and NCTzen will always be together for a long time. In my position as a researcher taking immersion notes, I saw that these comments reinforced the sense of "social connectedness" because they acknowledged each other's existence in the fandom community, felt appreciated, and showed a kind of emotional togetherness. They even showed their concern when one of their 79 members mentioned their birthday on the same day. Of course, simple interpersonal interactions like this are too precious to miss.

3. Expression of Longing

This expression of longing is more often found in the comments section of idol posts. The shared longing creates a warm moment, as thousands of fans share the same feelings, even across time. In this comment, the user expressed his longing because the NCT Dream members hadn't posted any activity updates on Weverse for the previous few days. He also hoped that the seven NCT Dream members would do a livestream on this special day for both of them.

4. Hope for the Future

Researchers found another theme, namely, about the hope for the sustainability of their idols to continue working together and 80 NCTzen as a fandom, doing their duty to continue supporting NCT for a long time. Usually fans also express this in the form of long text. As in the screenshot below, where the user hopes that NCT and NCTzen will remain together, from the era of NCT 127 album "Fire Truck" onwards. The user also expressed gratitude because the 26 NCT members have become a "home" for him.



The main message the user wanted to convey was the crucial role of fans as NCT's "home" and "heartbeat." The user also

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wrote, "Let's continue to break boundaries and love harder and beyond limits, beyond units!" This message calls for fans to continue supporting NCT without limits, both in the form of their work and units. This sentence is a form of hope and an invitation, expressing the desire for fans to continue supporting NCT fully and without limits in the future.

After conducting netnographic observations, the research included the stages of investigation, interaction, immersion, and integration. Data on fan-idol interactions on Weverse was then analyzed using Joseph Walther's computer-mediated communication (CMC) model, which encompasses impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal communication.

1. Impersonal Communication Based on observations, documentation, and literature studies of Weverse user interactions (NCTzen), it shows the dominance of impersonal communication, namely one-way communication without direct feedback from idols. Nevertheless, fans are still able to build personal closeness through digital media, including through the live stream feature of Dharmawangsa University and the use of emojis as nonverbal expressions in the comments column. This phenomenon is in line with the view (Carr, 2021) in Computer Mediated Communication, which emphasizes that the limitations of text media do not prevent the formation of emotional relationships. CMC actually allows users to carefully craft messages and create a real digital presence, so that emotional relationships can still develop even in the context of impersonal communication.

2. Interpersonal Communication Observations show that fans' comments on idol posts, such as "Miss you~ Missing 7D for a while now T^T hasn't had a group live stream T^T" or "Omg thank you Jeno Happy birthday NCTzen" do not fully reflect theoretical interpersonal communication. The interaction is still one-way because there is no direct response from the idol, so there is no feedback or reciprocal adaptation. Nevertheless, the emotional involvement of fans remains strong, indicating a symbolic relationship that maintains a sense of closeness. In this context, communication is still in the impersonal realm, but is starting to move towards an interpersonal stage through a sense of emotional connectedness built in the digital space. The interconnectivity perspective emphasizes that closeness in the digital era does not always depend on two-way interactions, but also through idol activities outside the Platform, so that one-way communication can still build emotional bonds through fan participation in the expression of affection in the digital space.

3. Hyperpersonal Communication Based on observations of interactions on Weverse during NCTzen's anniversary celebrations (June 11-12), no indication of hyperpersonal communication, namely continuous conversations with emotional feedback from both parties, was found. Although fans' affective expression was high and the Weverse Platform supports forms of self-presentation, the interactions that occurred were still one-way and fragmented. The lack of continuity of dialogue and the absence of direct responses from idols meant that the emotional closeness that emerged did not develop into hyperpersonal communication as described by Walther (1996).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of a netnographic study of interactions between NCTzens and NCT on the Weverse platform using a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) approach, it can be concluded that the communication that occurs is generally still impersonal, characterized by a one-way pattern without direct feedback from idols. Nevertheless, fans are still able to express their identity, emotions, and attachments through comments, emojis, and typical fandom terms that strengthen a sense of togetherness. This supports Carr's (2021) view that the limitations of text media do not prevent the formation of emotional closeness in digital communication (Carr, 2021). Theoretically, this form of interpersonal communication has not been fully achieved due to the lack of two-way interaction, but through the perspective of interconnectivity, emotional connections are maintained through idol activities outside of Weverse, such as Bubble messages sent by Mark Lee. Hyperpersonal forms of communication have not yet been found due to the absence of in-depth and repeated dialogue between fans and idols. Overall, interactions on Weverse function as a space for emotional expression and strengthening fandom identity, confirming that symbolic closeness between fans and idols can be built through impersonal yet emotionally meaningful digital communication.

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