

The Romance Between NCTZen and NCT: Commodifying Fan Relationships on the Bubble App

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand how NCT's romance is commodified through the Bubble application. It employs a qualitative approach with a constructivist perspective. Informants were chosen based on their availability and willingness. Data were gathered from two sources: primary and secondary. Primary data were collected through interviews with informants and participant observation on the Bubble app, while secondary data were derived from relevant previous literature. The research data were analyzed in several stages: data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification. The study found that SM Entertainment, the media owner, recognizes the desire of NCTZen to have a closer connection with NCT. Consequently, SM Entertainment engages in three forms of commodification through the Bubble application: romantic content, labor, and audience. This commodification results in significant benefits for SM Entertainment due to the loyalty of NCTZen towards NCT.

Keywords: commodification; romance; bubble app; NCT; NCTZen;

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bagaimana romantisme antara NCT dan NCTZen dikomodifikasi melalui aplikasi Bubble. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan perspektif konstruktivis. Informan dipilih berdasarkan ketersediaan dan kesediaan mereka. Data dikumpulkan dari dua sumber: primer dan sekunder. Data primer dikumpulkan melalui wawancara dengan informan dan observasi partisipan di aplikasi Bubble, sementara data sekunder diperoleh dari literatur relevan sebelumnya. Data penelitian dianalisis melalui beberapa tahap: reduksi data, penyajian data, penarikan kesimpulan, dan verifikasi. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa SM Entertainment, sebagai pemilik media, menyadari keinginan NCTZen untuk memiliki koneksi yang lebih dekat dengan NCT. Akibatnya, SM Entertainment melakukan tiga bentuk komodifikasi melalui aplikasi Bubble: konten romantis, tenaga kerja, dan audiens. Komodifikasi ini menghasilkan manfaat yang signifikan bagi SM Entertainment karena loyalitas NCTZen terhadap NCT.

Kata kunci: komodifikasi; romantisme; aplikasi bubble; NCT; NCTZen

INTRODUCTION

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, is a public term for the global spread of Korean Pop culture (Shim, 2006). This phenomenon has grown significantly, with strike-through fans increasing 17-fold in the last 10 years, reaching 156 million fans worldwide. Asia ranks first with 115 million fans (Molina & Young, 2022).

The massive development of information technology due to globalization has become the main factor behind the public's enthusiasm for the Korean Wave. The Korean Wave initially

emerged in the entertainment world, including music, dramas, and variety shows, which showcased various aspects of Korean culture. One of the most popular Korean Wave products is Korean pop music, commonly known as K-pop (Sarajwati, 2020).

K-pop has become a major part of the Korean Wave. Boy and girl groups from South Korea continue to dominate global markets, including Indonesia. The popularity of K-Pop in the global pop culture industry is evident from the analysis done by X through #KpopTwitter. The hashtag set a record with a global tweet increase from 6.7 billion in 2020 to 7.8 billion in 2021. The 16% increase indicates a growing conversation about K-Pop on X in 2021, with Indonesia ranking first in the number of tweets about K-Pop. BTS (@BTS_twt) ranks first in the list of K-Pop artists most talked about in Indonesia, followed by NCT (@NCTsmtown) in second place (Yeon Jeong, 2022).

Neo Culture Technology (NCT) is one of the K-Pop artists most talked about in Indonesia (Yeon Jeong, 2022). NCT, managed by SM Entertainment, debuted in 2016 and became the first group to use an infinite expansion system, meaning it has an unlimited number of members, later divided into several sub-units: NCT U, NCT 127, NCT Dream, NCT DoJaeJung, and WayV, with a total of 25 members.

In 2021, NCT achieved a record-breaking milestone with a combined album sales total of 10 million copies across NCT, NCT 127, NCT Dream, and WayV, highlighting the group's growing popularity year by year. That same year, NCT 127 released their album *Sticker*, which set records by exceeding one million sales and dominating various music charts, including Melon, Hanteo, Bugs, and Synnara Records (Budiarti, 2022).

In Indonesia, NCT is one of the most popular boy groups. This is evidenced by Indonesia ranking number one on YouTube Chart Insight for the NCT U YouTube account, where most fans are from Indonesia, accounting for 42.2 million views. This led to a sharp increase in the music video release of "Make A Wish" by NCT U on October 12, 2020 (Rie, 2020).

The rapid development of technology has significantly impacted communication technology. With technological advancements, K-Pop has expanded into international markets by utilizing social media, such as X, through accounts such as @NCTsmtown, @NCTsmtown_DREAM, @NCTsmtown_127, and @WayV_Official, they communicate with their fans.

NCT's popularity has contributed to the growth of fan accounts on X. Fan accounts are social media accounts dedicated to idols or artists, where fans upload various content about their idols. These accounts become a communication tool for fans, but the interaction within fan groups through X is limited (Poethrycendrawan & Utami, 2022). To address this, SM Entertainment created a special communication app between idols and fans called LYSN, which successfully transformed idol-fan interactions into two-way communication (Zhang, 2022).

LYSN is an app developed by the South Korean company Dear U specifically for SM Entertainment. It was launched in 2020 as a platform where fans can gather based on their interests in their idols. The app gained popularity with the introduction of a special chat feature called Dear U Bubble or Bubble. This feature, launched in February 2020, allows fans to communicate directly with their idols via chat. Messages are sent directly by the idol to fans in

a broadcast format, meaning that all fans who subscribe to the artist's Bubble chat receive the message.

The Bubble app's interaction format with idols is similar to daily chatting with friends. From the fans' perspective, the Bubble appears as a personal chat. The app automatically changes the fan's name when the idol sends a greeting message, giving fans the impression that they are interacting with their idol as if they know each other well in everyday life (Zhang, 2022)

The Bubble app satisfies NCTZen's (NCT's fanbase) desire for a close relationship with their idols. Various types of content provided by NCT, from asking how fans are doing, and sharing about their daily lives, to offering words of encouragement, enhance the closeness between idols and fans. However, the app's content is accessible only through a subscription model. Fans must pay Rp 69,000 per month to select one idol to chat with (Zhang, 2022)

The app fosters a sense of closeness between idols and fans, giving the illusion that they share a connection like close friends. This personal chat format fulfills the fans' imagination of having a close relationship with their idol. Through text-based communication, the app facilitates intimacy, creating what is known as romantic imagination. Romantic imagination is regarded as a powerful force that deepens a person's emotional engagement (Maclaran et al., 2005).

It is evident that the Bubble app taps into fans' desires for a closer connection with their idols. In response, SM Entertainment launched the app as a tool to bring fans and idols closer. The app generates romantic imagination, which SM Entertainment then commodifies and sells.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method focused on meaning, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions. The goal is to provide a depiction or understanding of how and why a certain phenomenon or reality occurs.

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing observation and objectivity in discovering reality or knowledge. The constructivist paradigm in social science involves a systematic analysis of meaningful social actions through direct and in-depth observation of social individuals, who play a role in creating, understanding, and managing their social world (Hidayat, 2002)

The research was conducted from February to April 2024. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five informants aged 18-30 who had been NCT fans for at least one year and had actively used the LYSN app, specifically subscribing to the Bubble chat feature for approximately three months. In addition to in-depth interviews, data were collected via participant observation, where the researcher engaged in the same activities as the data sources, such as using the Bubble app. Secondary data came from relevant literature, including books, articles, websites, news, and other sources related to commodification.

The data analysis technique used in this research is the Miles and Huberman data analysis method, which involves three key steps: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. After analysis, the data will be presented in a structured narrative form.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on observations, digital media plays an essential role in maintaining the intensity of interactions between idols and fans. In today's interconnected world, platforms like social media, dedicated apps, and digital content streams act as crucial tools in fostering and sustaining these relationships. In this context, NCT and SM Entertainment utilize digital media as a platform that meets fans' needs for interactions with their idols, transforming it into something with marketable value. This transformation not only satisfies fans' emotional desires but also creates a steady revenue stream for the company. Activities involving fan interactions through digital media serve as a form of fan service that helps maintain fans' loyalty to their idols (Labibah, 2023). Furthermore, digital media ensures that idols remain relevant and constantly in the public eye, especially in a highly competitive entertainment landscape. In other words, as celebrities, NCT fulfills the need to stay visible in the media through digital platforms, keeping their fanbase engaged and continually growing.

K-Pop fandoms are known for their high level of loyalty to the idols they admire. As a fandom, NCTZen (NCT's fanbase) acts as both supporters and consumers for NCT, providing financial, moral, and time-based support, as well as effort (Labibah, 2023). NCTZen's loyalty is closely linked to the role of digital media in bridging the gap between NCT and NCTZen, as well as the role of NCT itself in fostering closeness with their fans.

SM Entertainment, as NCT's parent company, plays a significant role in creating closeness between NCT and NCTZen through the Bubble app, benefiting from the loyalty generated by this bond. One of the hallmarks of the K-Pop industry is the intensity and nature of interaction between idols and fans. SM Entertainment enhances the fan experience through various NCT-related activities and consumption, which is then commodified for profit.

Through digital media, SM Entertainment provides a space for interaction and connection between NCT and NCTZen. This aligns with SM Entertainment's goal of building a fandom as the economic base of the idol industry (Labibah, 2023). Fandom serves as both the support system and the primary consumer of products created by agencies acting as producers. NCT taps into romantic elements to increase fan engagement with their music and build loyalty to the idols, who serve as both intermediaries and products of the producers (SM Entertainment). NCT's business model is based on loyalty and live performances, with fandom loyalty becoming a key objective and valuable asset to generate profit (Labibah, 2023).

SM Entertainment uses the Bubble app to strengthen interaction between artists and fans, turning it into a commercial product. The Bubble app provides exclusive content in the form of direct interaction, which strengthens emotional ties and fan loyalty. Fans are required to pay Rp69,000 per month to access this exclusive interaction.

By providing the Bubble application dedicated to supporting interactions between fans and their idols, SM Entertainment significantly enhances fan engagement. This, in turn, leads to increased sales of albums, concert tickets, and merchandise related to the artist. The app serves as both a platform for connection and a driver of economic activity, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between fans and the company. The positive impact on revenue is a testament to the effectiveness of leveraging emotional connections within the K-Pop industry.

The Bubble app allows NCTZen to feel a closer connection with NCT, transforming this closeness into a commodity that can be monetized. The personal chat room format, which mimics private conversation, creates an intimate and private atmosphere (Girsang et al., 2024).

This feature is particularly appealing to fans, as it allows them to share their thoughts and experiences in a space that feels exclusive and safe. Fans often perceive NCT as close friends who understand their lives, even though the communication is one-sided. Despite the lack of genuine two-way interaction, this carefully curated environment fosters a sense of companionship and presence. Fans feel emotionally connected to NCT, even though they have never met in person, highlighting the powerful role digital media plays in shaping modern fandom dynamics.

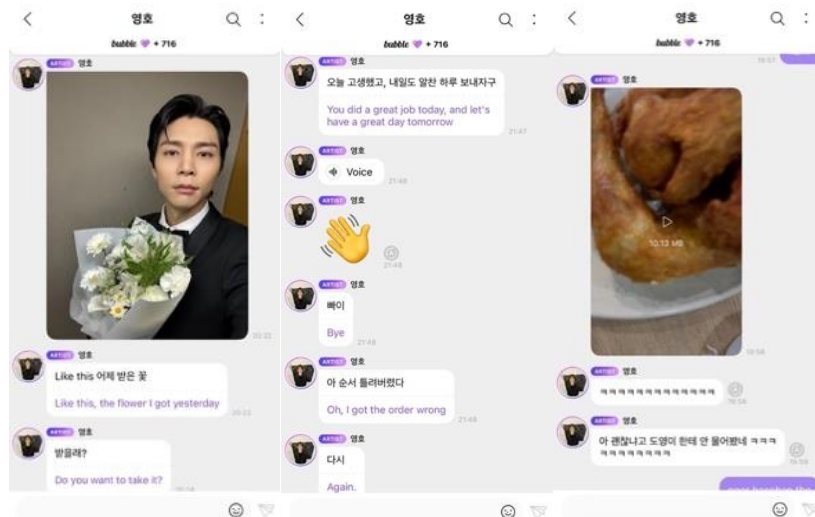
"Because in that chat room, I share a lot of my personal stories, so in my mind, I feel like he's reading my stories. I assume he knows my stories, knows what I've shared, or knows how my day went. So, again, I feel closer to him." (Interview with informant AL, March 17, 2024).

"I often share my feelings with Mark when I'm having a bad day, because it feels like a private chat, so I feel more comfortable opening up there." (Interview with informant RF, March 18, 2024).

"Sometimes we send our complaints there—things we don't want others to know—and with Bubble, we can do that without feeling embarrassed in front of others." (Interview with informant GT, March 22, 2024)

All three agreed that the private chat format provides a sense of privacy, allowing them to feel more comfortable sharing their feelings through the Bubble app. This creates a sense of closeness and emotional bond between NCTzens and NCT. NCTzens perceive NCT as close friends who understand their lives. Although the communication isn't truly two-way, NCTzens feel the presence of NCT members as friends, even though they have never met. Having access to send messages privately to NCT members allows NCTzens to share their stories without fear of being judged by others (Girsang et al., 2024).

Figure 1: The exclusive content provided by NCT members through Bubble app



Source: LYSN Bubble

NCT often provides exclusive content that is only shared through the Bubble app. NCT shares photo, video, and voice message content exclusively within this app. NCTZens who subscribe to the Bubble app receive exclusive information that is not available to other fans who are not subscribed.

The Bubble app provides exclusive access to idols' private lives and behind-the-scenes content, creating an illusion of closeness between fans and their idols. This strengthens emotional bonds, making fans more likely to invest their time and money in consuming NCT-related products (Hisyam et al., 2024). NCT uses the Bubble app to share daily life stories or "TMI" (Too Much Information). While these stories may seem trivial, they make NCTZen feel closer to NCT, as though they are chatting with close friends.

SM Entertainment encourages NCT members to interact directly through special accounts managed by NCT members themselves. This gives an impression of authenticity in their interactions. Knowing that the interaction occurs directly with NCT members, NCTZen believes that what NCT says or does reflects their "true" personality. NCTZen feels little corporate intervention from SM Entertainment in these interactions (Labibah, 2023).

Interaction between NCT and NCTZen via digital media, such as the Bubble app, is known as parasocial interaction. According to Horton and Wohl (Saifuddin & Masykur, 2014), parasocial interaction is a type of one-sided relationship in which media users feel emotionally connected to a media figure, even though the interaction is one-sided. Fans perceive this as a two-way interaction, believing that their idols reciprocate their feelings and understand their desires.

The Bubble app has successfully transformed the one-way relationship between NCT and NCTZen into what feels like a two-way relationship, introducing a commercial element to parasocial interaction (Zhang, 2022).

Parasocial interactions are strengthened by presenting the idol's real character and behind-the-scenes life, making NCT feel more approachable and connected to daily life. NCTZen invests their resources to enjoy NCT's content as entertainment. Fans view NCT as figures who meet their emotional needs, especially within the romantic context (Girsang et al., 2024). However, the romantic feelings are more akin to friendship than a romantic partnership.

In this research, romanticism refers to Romantic Imagination. According to Bowra, p. (1949, p. 2) romantic imagination is an individual's imaginative ability to transcend daily reality and discover deeper meaning, beauty, and existence in the world and within themselves. Through the Bubble app, NCTZen feels a sense of closeness and emotional connection with NCT.

However, the connection that NCTZen feels towards NCT is not purely a natural interaction devoid of economic motives. SM Entertainment profits from the romantic content offered through the Bubble app, which fosters a sense of closeness between NCTZen and NCT. SM Entertainment generates financial gain, as NCTZen must pay Rp69,000 per month to subscribe to the Bubble app. The Bubble app transforms the emotional connection between NCTZen and NCT into a commodity sold for corporate profit, aligning with the theory of commodification.

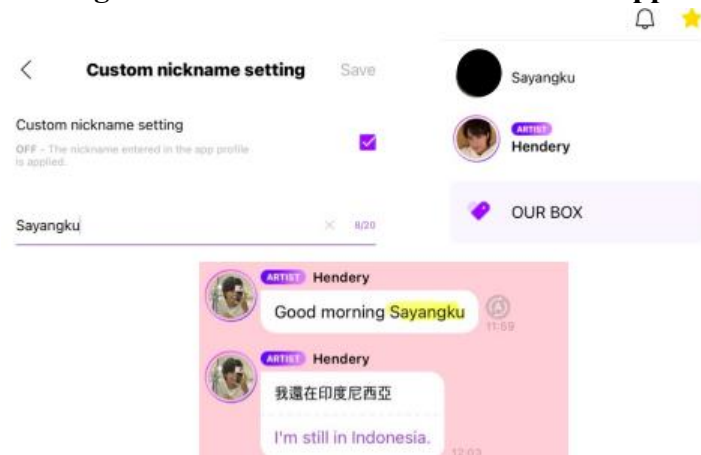
NCT is designed as an ideal product that is easily accessible to NCTZen to secure their loyalty. NCT fulfills identity needs through social and emotional support derived from interactions within the Bubble app.

One of the unique features of the Bubble app is that it allows NCT to address NCTzens by name, making the interaction feel more personal. The Bubble app enables personalization, allowing NCTzens to write their names as they wish. NCTzens can also customize the appearance of NCT members' names to make it feel even more personal.

"What I like about Bubble is that they can use our name, like Y/N (your name), so if, for example, Mark suddenly calls me by my name, it makes my heart race." (Interview with informant RF, March 18, 2024).

"Actually, what often surprises me the most is that I wrote my name as 'dear' in Bubble, so whenever there's a 'dear' chat, I get startled. Sometimes I still feel a bit shocked when a Bubble message comes in from him." (Interview with informant IL, March 23, 2024).

Figure 2: Personalization in the Bubble App



Source: LYSN Bubble

There are several types of fans who desire various forms of content from their idols to fulfill their imaginations. Some of these fans, who may feel lonely or experience anxiety in real life, seek intimacy in relationships, familial affection, or simply the aspiration to succeed in their careers. This drives fans to seek content that provides them comfort from their favorite idols. Because of this, NCTzens are willing to pay Rp69,000 for the content available in the Bubble app (Zhang, 2022)

To gain loyalty, NCT was created as a perfect product that represents the ideal desires of fans while being easily accessible to them (NCTZens). NCT then becomes a means for fans to fulfill their identities through the social and emotional support they receive from interactions with NCT members via the Bubble app.

NCTzens who feel a sense of closeness will generally promote NCT voluntarily. This is done in various ways, with one of the most common being sharing music video links and introducing NCT to people around them. Additionally, NCTzens also voluntarily promote NCT-related content by editing videos or sharing photos. This effort helps increase engagement between NCTzens and NCT through the shared relevance of hard work and the desire to achieve success together, as well as opening further engagement access to products beyond music (Labibah, 2023).

Through the closeness that NCT provides on this app, NCTZens feel a positive impact. NCTZens see NCT as a home or a remedy to help them face their daily lives. NCT, seen as a home, becomes a temporary escape for NCTZens from their everyday lives.

"Maybe it's because I'm a bit lonely... so it's like, 'wow, someone is messaging me.' Since the concept is like we're actually being chatted with." (Interview with informant AL, March 17, 2024).

"Turns out, being a K-Pop fan has become a remedy for us, and K-Pop really has that much influence on my life. So actually, the reason I like NCT is, simply put, because they're my lifesaver." (Interview with informant IL, March 23, 2023)

The desire of NCTZen to feel close to NCT is exploited by media owners (SM Entertainment) for maximum profit, ensuring the continuity of media operations. SM Entertainment produces content in a way that makes media consumption a necessity for fans, creating a dependence on content that fuels their imagination. NCTZen willingly pays Rp69,000 to elevate their fantasies and dreams of having a close relationship with their idols. This false consciousness of wanting a close relationship with NCT blinds NCTZen to the fact that they are being exploited by SM Entertainment.

The Bubble app is not just a platform for interaction but also an economic platform. The relationship between NCT and NCTZen has been commodified, turning what was once natural communication into a saleable commodity (Hisyam et al., 2024). The content within the Bubble app is successfully packaged as romantic content that can be monetized. The messages sent by NCT members in the Bubble app, including motivational words, daily life stories, and even flirtatious comments, are turned into a commodity. The personal chat appearance in the app gives the impression that NCTZen is having a direct conversation with NCT members. Moreover, the Bubble app allows for personalization by fans.

The messages in the Bubble app successfully build a close relationship with NCT. NCTzens feel that the messages from NCT create a parasocial illusion that has been turned into a marketable item, available for purchase at Rp69,000 per month. Additionally, when NCTZen subscribes and enters the chatroom, the Bubble app displays a "Day 1" message, showing how long NCTZen has been subscribed to that particular artist. The longer the subscription period, the more words can be sent in a single text message to the artist (Jinyoung, 2023). This feature enhances the sense of closeness between NCTZen and NCT. In the Bubble app, NCTZen often shares personal life stories, and the private chat format allows them to do so freely without judgment. This content is commodified based on the number of words they can send, and they must continue subscribing to send longer messages. This demonstrates the false consciousness theory, where NCTZen is unaware that they are supporting a system that exploits them.

Figure 3: Bubble message word limits

Subscription Period	Word limits	Subscription Period	Word limits
1-49 days	30 words	200 days	200 words
50 days	50 words	300 days	300 words
77 days	77 words	365 days	365 words
100 days	100 words	400 days	400 words
150 days	150 words	500 days	500 words

Source: Jinyoung (2023)

Within this app, the relationship between NCT and NCTZen, which should be social and emotional, is transformed into a transaction with a market value that benefits the company. NCT's personality, appearance, and interaction with NCTZen become commodities. SM Entertainment organizes and monetizes these interactions, commodifying the idols' identity and emotions. This illustrates the conversion of a resource with use value into one with exchange value (Hisyam et al., 2024).

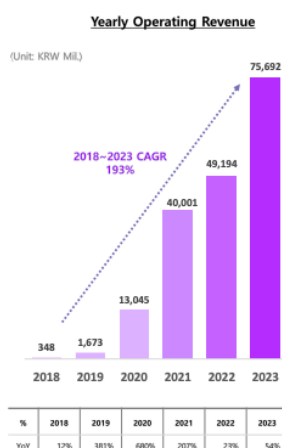
NCT itself is commodified as labor in their interactions with NCTZen. The transformation of media workers' functions brings added value to media companies like SM Entertainment. NCT is commodified to create content for NCTZen through the messages they send via the Bubble app. NCT not only produces content and receives appreciation for their efforts to strengthen ties with NCTZen, but they also turn NCTZen into active participants who distribute content as a commodity.

The interaction between NCT and NCTZen through the Bubble app, which should be emotional and personal, is turned into a commercial exchange that profits the company, while NCT and NCTZen experience forms of exploitation (Hisyam et al., 2024). From NCTZen's perspective, they pay Rp69,000 per month to enjoy the romantic content in this app. From NCT's perspective, they are required to be consistently active on the Bubble app to maintain the attention of NCTZen.

Although NCTZen feels close to NCT, the reality is that this relationship is often guided by the company's profit motives. By offering exclusive access to NCT's personal lives, the Bubble app creates the illusion of closeness between NCTZen and NCT. This emotional connection strengthens fans' loyalty and makes them more likely to invest their time and money in consuming NCT-related products (Hisyam et al., 2024).

The commodification of the audience is evident in the fact that NCTZen subscribes to the Bubble app. They are required to pay Rp69,000 per month to enjoy the content provided by the app. NCTZen is exploited in the sense that their participation in the Bubble app is used for SM Entertainment's financial gain.

The Bubble app monetizes the social relationship between NCT and NCTZen, turning what should be a natural interaction into a product, which generates significant revenue for SM Entertainment. SM Entertainment holds the largest share in the Bubble app, owning 33.66% of the company (DearU, 2021). According to IBK Security, a Korean capital-market company, the Bubble app earned over 40 million won in profit in 2021, just one year after its release, with 1.2 million users (Yang, 2022). In the following year, the app generated 49 million won, and in 2023, profits increased to 75 million won. After three years, the app saw an 87.5% growth in profit.

Figure 4: Dear U Sales Status

Source: DearU (2023)

The Bubble app effectively turns romantic interactions into a commodity. The exchanges between NCTzens and NCT are crafted into purchasable content. SM Entertainment has adeptly packaged romanticism within the Bubble app by commodifying three key elements: content, labor, and audience.

The commodification of romance within the Bubble app is mutually beneficial for both SM Entertainment and NCTZen. From SM Entertainment's perspective, they first gain significant revenue from subscription payments for the Bubble app, at Rp69,000 per month. Second, they increase fan loyalty; by providing exclusive interactions, SM Entertainment strengthens the emotional relationship between NCT and NCTZen, which boosts long-term loyalty and support for NCT and other SM Entertainment products.

From NCTZen's perspective, first, they experience a closer relationship with their idols. NCTZen gains intimate connections with NCT members through seemingly direct messages, which gives them a satisfying and extraordinary fan experience. Second, they enjoy exclusive content such as behind-the-scenes photos, videos, and messages unavailable on other platforms, enhancing their fan experience. Third, the interactive experience in the Bubble app allows NCTZen to build a sense of community and togetherness through direct interactions with their idols.

Overall, the commodification of romanticism in the Bubble app allows both parties, SM Entertainment and NCTzens, to gain significant benefits. SM Entertainment profits greatly from the payment system, while NCTzens enjoy a closer and more intimate experience with their idols, strengthening their emotional connection with NCT.

CONCLUSION

The loyalty of NCTZens is strongly influenced by digital media, which serves as a bridge connecting NCTZens with NCT members. SM Entertainment, as the parent company, produces and manages NCT's interactions with fans through the Bubble app to gain profit from fan loyalty.

The Bubble app offers NCTZens a closer relationship with NCT by providing a personalized chat experience that creates a sense of intimacy and privacy. It successfully satisfies NCTZens' imagination of a close bond with NCT, building an emotional connection

through romanticized content within the app. SM Entertainment's decision to let NCT members interact directly through a special account managed by the members themselves gives an impression of authenticity in interactions with NCTZens. These interactions are parasocial, where communication flows one way from NCT to fans, creating an illusion of a two-way relationship.

SM Entertainment capitalizes on NCTZens' desire for closeness with NCT to generate significant profit, maintaining the app's relevance through romanticized content. NCTZens are required to pay Rp69,000 per month to sustain their imagined connection with their idols, making Bubble not just an interaction-based platform but an economically driven one.

The relationship, which could be purely social and emotional, is transformed into a romanticized product that can be sold. Bubble allows NCTZens to personalize interactions and send longer messages, reinforcing a sense of closeness with NCT. SM Entertainment has commodified romantic content, labor, and audience through this platform. The sense of closeness felt by fans is turned into a profitable transaction for the company. Both NCTZens and NCT are subject to exploitation, with NCTZens paying monthly fees for the illusion of intimacy, and NCT members expected to actively engage on Bubble to keep fans interested.

Through these three forms of commodification, SM Entertainment benefits significantly from NCTZens' loyalty, with the Bubble app achieving a profit increase of 87.5% within three years of its release.

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