

Bubble: Evolving the Landscape of Fan-Celebrity Interaction

Abstract

This paper looks at Bubble as a medium of communication. Fan communities have evolved over the years, following the rise of social media platforms and new technologies that enable fan interaction with celebrities to become closer than ever before. By providing a platform for fans to send and receive private-like messaging from their favourite K-Pop idols, Bubble opens up a new form of communication between fans and celebrities that was once out of reach. David Crystal's seven features of speech and writing will be used to analyse the text-like and speech-like communicative features offered by Bubble. The paper will then conclude with Bubble's effects on the relationship and boundaries between fans and celebrities.

Introduction

Bubble was first launched in 2020 as a service featured on Lysn, an 'interest based community' application released under an IT affiliate of SM Entertainment—one of the largest entertainment companies in South Korea. With a monthly subscription of \$3.49 USD per artiste, Bubble allows fans to send and receive "realistic, text-like messages with their favourite SM Entertainment idols" (Koreaboo, 2020). Subscribers receive exclusive content such as informal updates, pictures and recordings from the artistes themselves through a personal, private-like chat setting (as seen in Fig. 1b). This was proved to be highly received by fans as the entertainment company amassed over ₩4,200,000,000 KRW in the sole second quarter of 2020 since its launch in February of the same year (theqoo, 2020). Stand-alone Bubble applications for other entertainment companies such as JYP, Jellyfish Entertainment and their artistes have been subsequently launched by the affiliate as well.

Fig. 1a:
Overview of subscribed
Bubble chats

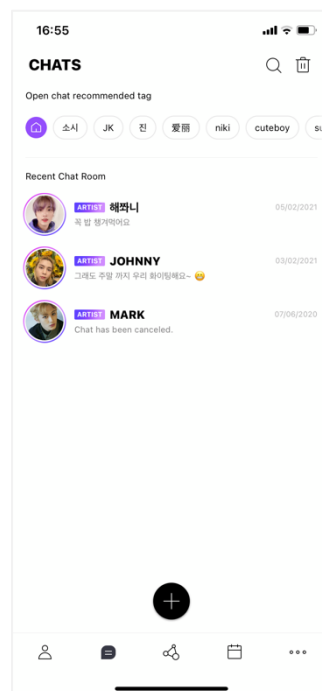


Fig. 1b:
Extract of Bubble
chat with NCT
HAECHAN



Mediums of Fan-Celebrity Communication in K-Pop

Alperstein (2019) noted that the development of social media and user-generated content allows for comprehensive participation in digital media as well as the lives of celebrities compared to the past, where physical autograph signings—widely known as fansigns in K-Pop culture—were one of the few ways to have direct interactions with a celebrity. Current forms of online K-Pop fan-celebrity communication includes fanboards and exclusive online fan communities (see Fig. 2), often with an annual membership fee (Kim & Kim, 2017). As Twitter and Instagram rose to popularity in 2010s, many entertainment companies also turned to these platforms and opened official accounts for their artistes. This opened up a more widely accessible, and therefore international, space for K-Pop fans to come together and keep up to date with their favourite celebrities. Idols would also hold ‘mention parties’ on Twitter, where they will be online and responding to fans’ tweets via the mention function for a certain period of time. It is good to note that such official accounts are typically manned by the entertainment’s staff and not by the idols themselves (unless they opened their own personal accounts), and therefore events such as ‘mention parties’ are always highly anticipated by fans seeking real interactions with their idols. In recent years, live broadcasting applications, such as VLIVE, became another popular medium for interacting with fans in real time. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, physical fansigns were cancelled and instead went online through the use of video calling applications, offering an alternative form of direct face-to-face communication in the field. Another (rare) form of online fan-celebrity communication is Celebrities joining open chats dedicated to them and chatting with their fans in real time. This precedes Bubble as the first form of direct, chat communication between fans and idols.

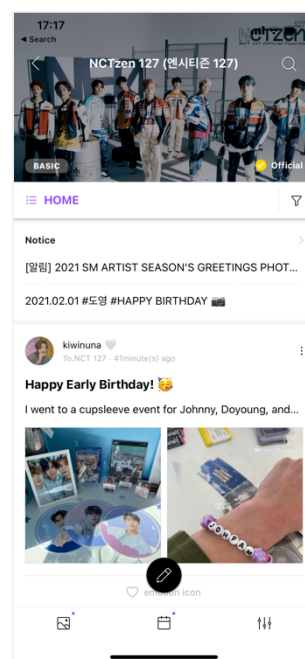


Fig. 2: NCTzen 127 Official Community on Lysn

Linguistic Analysis of Bubble

Speech like	Text like
time bound*	space bound*
spontaneous*	contrived*
face-to-face	visually decontextualised
loosely structured*	elaborately structured
socially interactive	factually communicative*
immediately revisable	repeatedly revisable
prosodically rich*	graphically rich

Fig. 3: Table of Crystal’s (2006) seven features of speech and writing. Words in blue are applicable to Bubble.

In this section of the paper, we will be using Crystal’s (2006) seven features of speech and writing to analyse the communicative features offered by Bubble.

Time/space bound

Communication on Bubble is mainly space bound, as the conversing participants are not of close proximity with each other. Though, it is not as static nor permanent due to the ability to delete messages sent to the idol. It also features time bound characteristics: waiting for a reply from either

the idol or the fans, dynamic movement of the chat if the idol happened to be active online, as well as having addressees—in this case, a fan is addressing solely to the idol (see Fig. 1b) while the idol is addressing to the fans subscribed to their Bubble as seen in Fig. 4a (SUHO UNION GLOBAL, 2020). Even though the idol has many addressees, they are usually a part of the idol’s group and/or individual fandom where they partake in an in-group identity that are often named. Therefore, it can be seen as the idol addressing to a particular collective of people instead of the general mass. Also, it is to note that Bubble has a function that allows the idol to insert the subscribers’ usernames in their messages so as to simulate ‘direct’ addressment of the fan (as seen in Fig. 4b).

Spontaneous/contrived

Communication on Bubble can be seen as more contrived than spontaneous with the inevitable time-lag from the app server across networks and from translating of messages from and into Korean via the app. There is also a limitation of three messages per message the idol sends, causing the fans to think through their replies. Furthermore, idols do not send Bubble messages often and thus fans are not able to communicate with them as and when they wished to. This therefore limits spontaneity and speed of exchanges. Both parties are also able to decide to not respond immediately or at all and it does not bring much disgruntle or annoyance in contrast with regular messaging platforms and conversations in real life. There is, however, a touch of spontaneity if the idol happens to be online sending messages and fans are fast enough to respond at the same time. Even so, the idol is not able to address specific persons and reply every messages sent to them due to the concurrent influx of messages and the nature of the application.

Face-to-face/visually decontextualised

Communication on Bubble does not have any face-to-face features and is visually decontextualised majority of the time as it does not provide channels for any form of extralinguistic cues such as facial expression or gesture to aid meaning. Messages sent by both parties often provide enough context and details as to what they are conveying in exchanges.

Loosely structured/elaborately structured

Communication on Bubble is loosely structured most of the time as compared to being elaborately structured. Being marketed as a private messaging platform with your favourite idol(s), it allows for casual conversations and often times the usage of Korean informal speech (as with between close friends) from the idol in order to build a close relationship with their fans (as seen in Fig. 4b). However, in order to protect their artistes from harm and defamation, obscene symbols and language are prohibited by the application (Lysn, n.d.). Though, the inaccurate detection of prohibited words often causes annoyance amongst fans (as seen in Fig. 5). It is also worthy to note that idols have to upkeep strict social expectations, which results in almost no usage of profanities and slangs in spite of the casual setting of Bubble.

Socially interactive/factually communicative

Communication on Bubble is centred around social interaction, where the idol provides casual updates on their day or about themselves without any prior planning or consideration. Messages sent



Fig. 4a: Screenshot of Red Velvet Joy’s view of messages sent from fans on Bubble (SUHO UNION GLOBAL, 2020)



Fig. 4b: NCT HAECHAN’s Bubble message that addressed username highlighted in green. “U/N sleep well hehehe, thanks for today hehe” [informal speech]

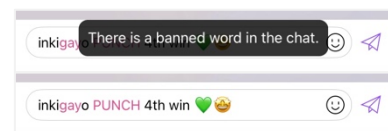


Fig. 5: Banned words on Bubble are indicated in pink. ‘인기가요’ inkigayo is the name of a music show, while ‘Punch’ is the title of the song that won on the show

by the idol are highly focused on engaging the fans in their daily lives, with instances such as asking fans to decide what they should have for lunch (as seen in Fig. 6a). Through this platform, both parties are able to express how they feel about each other, their own thoughts and attitudes towards various things and happenings. There is some form of factual communication, whereby the idol sends practical information regarding their upcoming schedules or self-initiated live broadcasts to remind and promote fan participation—albeit through a quick, conversational message. Instances where both socially interactive and factually communicative features converge include relaying of apologies or writing a long thank you text after winning an award; many of which involves time and consolidation of thoughts which may be hard to communicate through actual, in-person speech (as seen in Fig. 6b).

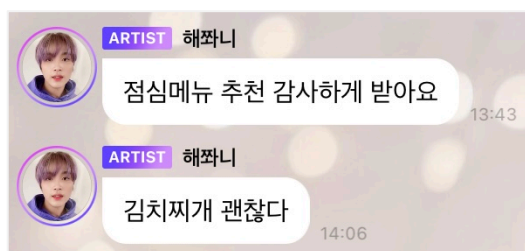


Fig. 6a: “I am gratefully accepting recommendations for lunch menu” / “kimchi jjigae (sounds) good”
NCT HAECHAN asking for lunch recommendations

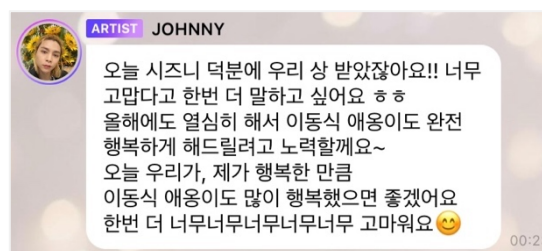


Fig. 6b: “Today we won an award thanks to czennies!! (I) want to express my thanks once again hehe...”
NCT JOHNNY’s thank you speech-like message

Immediately revisable/repeatedly revisable

Communication on Bubble, unlike latest messaging platforms, is not immediately revisable nor entirely repeatedly revisable. Fans are unable to rethink and edit their messages, although they may repeatedly resend or delete the message upon an error in previous messages sent in hopes to rectify it. However, traces of the errors, corrections and deletions are unable to be eliminated and therefore remains visible in the final chat.

Prosodically rich/graphically rich

Communication on Bubble is mostly graphically rich due to its core medium of text. Other examples of graphically rich communicative input include capitalisation (for English), punctuations, emoticons, stickers, images and videos. Both parties often use punctuations and emoticons to emphasise and add on to their expression of thoughts and emotions visually through static text. Another way this is done is often through informal misspelling and /or addition of syllables behind words to visually replicate a cute/whiny tone of voice used in real speech (as seen in Fig. 7), relating to some form of prosody. An element of prosodically rich communication is brought forth by videos and voice messages that the idol is able to record and send to their fans, but is impossible the other way round. Such clips are able to capture the prosody of speech that cannot be easily expressed graphically through text.

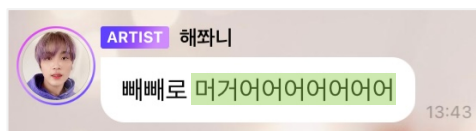


Fig. 7: “eaaaaat pepero”: Misspelling of 먹어 meogeo “eat” [informal] and addition of syllables seen in NCT HAECHAN’s message highlighted in green

New Kind of Fan-Celebrity Communication Enabled by Bubble

Through the casual and often intimate linguistic environment of the medium, Bubble encourages a more interactive and reciprocal form of communication between the fan and their idol(s). It enables a higher frequency of exchanges which is not always readily available through their other official communication platforms. Its visual resemblance, informal and personal exchanges—therefore

simulation—of a private chat allows for a form of communication that replicates the novelty of direct, one-on-one addressment of the fans from their idol(s); a feature hardly accessible with majority of current fan-celebrity communication mediums. As such, Bubble has certainly opened up a new form of communication between the fans and their favourite celebrities.

Effects of Bubble on Fan-Celebrity Relationships and Boundaries

Chung & Cho (2017) noted that through social media platforms, and thus the abundance of personal information shared typically by celebrities themselves with the audience, they are able to feel intimate connections with the media figures and believe that they know them personally. By establishing a platform that enables both fans and idols to reach out to each other in a more personal, intimate fashion than ever before, Bubble has certainly pushed the boundaries of fan-celebrity interactions today. Fan-celebrity interactions can be seen as parasocial interactions, which Alperstein (2019) described as “a concept that was one way with someone the individual does not know, between fan and celebrity” and it is one out of the emotional response that viewers feel from seemingly getting directly addressed by the media figure through media mediums. Emotional identification with the figure seen on the media is the key to parasocial interaction and such interactions become routine behaviour through our daily media consumption (Alperstein, 2019). With such simulation of private messaging interaction and one-on-one addressing, it triggers a greater level of emotional response and identification of fans with celebrities; these parasocial interactions turn into parasocial relationships which has been studied to have positive returns for both parties involved, such as self-enhancing benefits for low-esteem individuals (Derrick et. al., 2008) and positive association with celebrity endorsement (Chung & Cho, 2017).

With Bubble providing a platform for up close and personal, reciprocal interaction and intimate communication with idols, there were unfortunate instances where ‘fans’ have misused this very function to verbally /sexually harass the artistes onboard as seen in Fig. 8 (Valley, 2020). Such actions may cause hurt, leading to refrainment of self-disclosure between the collective of fans and the idol as it crosses the boundaries between trusted connections of parasocial relationships—both important factors that improves parasocial relationships mentioned by Chung & Cho (2017). This will in turn highly affect the quality of interaction and information disclosed by the idol and therefore influencing fan-celebrity relationships detrimentally. While the entertainment has taken a strong stance on its zero tolerance to such violation on the application (Lysn, n.d.), Bubble is easily the most susceptible to such actions as there are no chances of message moderation in the private chat room other than the idols themselves; whilst on other platforms, these moderators can take the form of fans reporting harmful posts and comments for it to be taken down as soon as possible once found. Even though it is currently able to detect words that are indicated to be banned, it is still a difficult challenge for the application to learn and recognise ill-intentioned phrases and their nuances for it to be taken down or barred from sending. This will thus continue to pose a persistent threat on the communication and fan-celebrity relationships on Bubble.

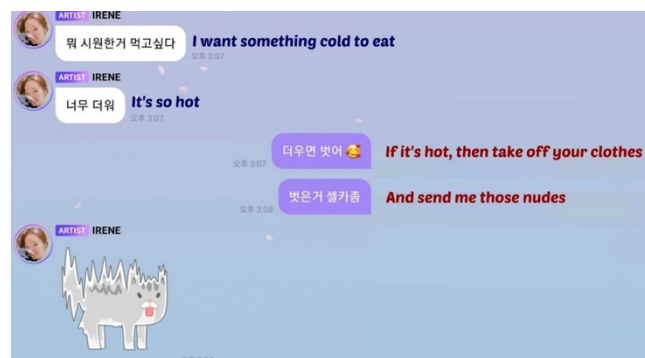


Fig. 8: Screenshot of one user's inappropriate replies to the Bubble messages of Red Velvet's Irene (Valley, 2020)

Conclusion

All in all, Bubble has changed the landscape of fan-celebrity interaction and communication by offering a private, one-on-one messaging experience for fans with their favourite idols. With exclusive content and direct interaction with celebrities in a casual and intimate (linguistic) environment, the application certainly sets itself apart from other mediums of fan-celebrity communication platforms. The various communicative features of Bubble, analysed using Crystal's (2006) seven features, come together and simulate a daily friend-like, chat conversation with the idol—where they willingly disclose personal information and updates about themselves. This, in exchange, enhances the emotional identification fans have for their idols in a parasocial relationship. Given Bubble's provision of a direct access to communicating with idols, some misuse the platform, causing damage to fan-celebrity relationships. Bubble is likely to stay for now, until a new idea or way to be involved in an even closer interaction and communication with celebrities emerges.

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