Predictors of Idol Worship Patterns Within a Chinese Fans Group: Evidence from Age, Gender and Perceived Authenticity

Abstract

Idol worship is the product of pop culture and social media from the macro perspective. On the individual level, it has multiple psychological bases that correspond to different population groups. Using the Idol Worship Questionnaire, data of 244 participants were collected online from the fans group of a Chinese female young idol. Differences in five idol worship dimensions are investigated across age and gender, and age and perceived authenticity are set as regressors to predict the worship intensity. Results reveal the distinct worship characteristics of adolescents and young adults (i.e., 15-25 years old). Significant indices of this subgroup are romanticization and commodification, which are related to special psychological needs during this period. Levels of identification, idealization, and intimatization, however, are homogeneous within the whole fans group. Both age and perceived authenticity are predictors of idol worship, therefore authenticity is considered an important characteristic of an idol.

*Keywords:* idol worship, demographic characteristics, authenticity

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**Introduction**

Idol worship, also known as celebrity worship, has been an increasingly popular phenomenon around the world under the influence of media and pop culture. Here, ‘celebrity’ could refer to a well-known person in any field: science, sports, entertainment, politics, etc. Fans tend to form a ‘parasocial relationship’, a unidirectional affinity with the idol. Parasocial relationship resembles a real social interaction in that one’s uncertainty about the celebrity decreases over time, which further facilitates fandom (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

**Existing Measurement of Idol Worship**

Several measurements have been developed to quantitatively estimate the degree of idol worship in different dimensions. L. E. McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002) designed the 17-item Celebrity Worship Scale (CWS) that focused on the unidimensional intensity of idol worship, who also proposed the absorption-addiction model to describe worship. Meanwhile, the 34-item Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS) suggested three aspects of idol worship: entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological (Maltby, Day, McCutcheon, Houran, & Ashe, 2006; Maltby, Houran, Lange, Ashe, & McCutcheon, 2002; Maltby, McCutcheon, Ashe, & Houran, 2001). From the perspective of acts and worshipping behaviors of the worshippers, the Idol Worship Questionnaire measured 5 types of behaviors: glorification, idealization, identification, emulation and attachment (Yue & Cheung, 2000; Yue, Cheung, & Wong, 2010), which was later revised and now targets at idealization, identification, intimitization, romanticization and commodification (Cheung & Yue, 2011).

**Psychological Basis of Idol Worship**

The psychological basis of idol worship has been widely discussed under different frameworks. Parasocial interaction is considered as an alternative to real social interaction. People who have difficulty in establishing and maintaining a healthy real interaction tend to form parasocial interactions with idols or media personae (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Studies on attachment styles of worshippers revealed that a preoccupied attachment style (i.e., high anxiety, low avoidance) contributes to approach and stalking behaviors for personal validation (K. A. Roberts, 2007). People with anxious-ambivalent attachment styles are the most likely to form parasocial bonds while avoidant individuals have the lowest possibility (Cole & Leets, 1999).

Evidence from a personality perspective would also help illustrate the ‘susceptibility’ of an individual to become a worshipper. Compared to the real relationship, the cost of pursuing a parasocial relationship is lower, therefore it is a safer way to build social connections (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956), especially for people with low self-esteem, who bear more threats of rejection from others (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008; Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003; Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008). However, results from quantitative studies are inconsistent: while many empirical data cannot support such a hypothesis, some studies show that people with low self-esteem like the idols more if the idols resemble their ideal self (Derrick et al., 2008), and that the ‘communicative propensity’ dimension of self-esteem correlates negatively with the likelihood of parasocial interaction (Turner, 1993). Narcissism is another potential predictor of idol worship. According to Ashe, Maltby, and McCutcheon (2005), exploitativeness (i.e., ‘I find it easy to manipulate people’) is a significant predictor of CAS intense-personal scores, and exhibition (i.e., ‘I like to be the center of attention’) links to CAS borderline-pathological scores. Perhaps narcissists’ confidence in social skills increases their need to communicate with the idols, and performing an extreme fervor for a celebrity attracts attention.

Deficits in cognitive development may be another reason for idol worship. Individuals lack of social complexity and cognitive flexibility will overestimate their uniqueness and indulge in imagination (Seiffge-Krenke, 1997). One study proved that the increase of educational levels correlates with lower CAS scores (L. E. McCutcheon et al., 2002), whereas another study failed to find significant correlations between the cognitive ability and idol worship intensity (Lynn E McCutcheon, Griffith, Aruguete, & Haight, 2012).

**Personal Characteristics as Predictors**

Generally, the idol worship patterns are largely different across population groups. Compared to males, females show higher attachments to the idol and have stronger tendencies of consumption (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Furnham & Argyle, 1998; M. L. Roberts, 1998). This might attribute to the social strategies developed during evolution: females are more selective in establishing a relationship, and they devote more resources to that particular relationship to maintain stability. Therefore, as they attach more to the idol, they also devote less to real-life relationships (Cheung & Yue, 2011). Age is another key factor. Adolescents exhibit the highest idol worship intensity compared with secondary students and young adults, especially in the dimension of romantic fantasy and physical attractiveness (Liu, 2013). As consumers, if self-determination needs (i.e., relatedness, autonomy) are encouraged, young adults rather than the older ones will strengthen their attachment to the celebrity (Ilicic, Baxter, & Kulczynski, 2016).

**Desirable Characteristics of The Idol**

Authenticity is defined as exhibiting the true self in public occasions and social media postings (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016), which consists of multiple dimensions such as rarity (i.e., talent, discretion, and originality) and stability (i.e., consistency, candidness, and morality) (Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015). What the idol says reveals his/her genuine intention, and what the idol does demonstrates his/her words. People’s emotional attachment to the idol is stronger with the increase of the perceived authenticity, as is consistent with the nature of the parasocial relationship. Consumption is also promoted by authenticity (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

Some other characteristics that motivate idol worship, according to a qualitative research (Ang & Chan, 2018), include celebrity products, appearance, talents, positive attitudes towards life, appreciation to fans.

**Aim and Scope of The Current Research**

Most of the previous studies adopted the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS) to measure the extent of addiction and absorption. However, with the validation of the Idol Worship Questionnaire (IWQ), the patterns of idol worship could be estimated from five more ‘independent’ dimensions. The patterns across different population groups may only differ in some of the dimensions, which cannot be extracted only from the evidence of ‘intensity’. The current research aims to find distinguishing features that label fans subgroups in terms of the whole worship patterns instead of the stage of intensity. Therefore, the IWQ is preferred.

In the present study, the first question is that ‘what’s the difference in idol worship between males and females, and across age groups?’, with gender and age as independent variables and scores of the five dimensions as dependent variables. Furthermore, we hope to predict idol worship scores using authenticity and personal characteristics and use the estimated model to explain the effect of authenticity on different worship dimensions.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Data were collected from the fans group of a Chinese female young idol, Yang Chaoyue. Yang got popular after her debut in a talent show, Produce 101. Her fans group was chosen because it covers a wide range of age and years of education, and a large number of adult fans are active in several social platforms, which facilitates sampling. Questionnaires and a brief introduction of the study were delivered in Zhihu, Weibo, Douban, Hupu and some online chat groups. 244 subjects participated in the study. The answer of one subject was excluded from further analysis due to unreliable reports (i.e., claimed to be 70 years old). No compensation was offered.

**Measurement**

A survey was developed and implemented via Wenjuanxing, and consisted of three main parts: demographic characteristics and idol worship activities, idol worship patterns, and perceived authenticity of the idol. For demographic characteristics and idol worship activities, participants were asked to report their age, gender, years of education, preferred social platform, start time of worship and average time spent on worshipping per day (i.e., time spent on watching the idol’s videos, reading related articles, etc.). Idol worship pattern is measured by the Idol Worship Questionnaire (IWQ), a 15-item scale developed by (Cheung & Yue, 2011). Each of the 5 dimensions (i.e., identification, idealization, romanticization, intimitization, commodification) contains 3 composites. The perceived authenticity of the idol consists of 3 questions derived from an existing ‘authenticity of celebrities’ instrument (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015). Questions in the second and third parts of the survey were randomized and two of them were reverse coded (i.e., ‘This celebrity is genuine’, ‘I wish to make friends and chat with my idol’).

**Statistical Analysis**

First, the reliability and validity (including an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)) of the questionnaire were examined. Then 5 two-way ANOVAs were conducted to explore the differences of idol worship patterns and perceived authenticity among age and gender groups. Finally, multiple linear regression models were estimated to predict idol worship patterns using perceived authenticity and age as predictors. While the CFA was conducted using AMOS 24 (Arbuckle, J. L., 2014), the rest of the procedures were executed using SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 20.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.).

**Results**

**Personal Characteristics**

Of the 243 valid samples, 184 are males and 59 are females. Their age ranges from 15 to 48 (*M*=25.9, *SD*=7.2) and years of education ranges from 6 to 27 (*M*=15.3, *SD*=2.8).

**Validation of The Scale**

In general, the reliability of the Idol Worship Questionnaire is moderate, with the Cronbach’s alpha ranging from 0.52 to 0.84, and the stratified alpha coefficient (Cronbach, L. J., Schoneman, P., & McKie, D., 1965) is 0.72. Romanticization yields the highest reliability (0.84) while the reliabilities of idealization (0.52) and intimatization (0.54) are below expectations.

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted using maximum-likelihood with promax rotation. Five factors were extracted, which explained 66.7% of the total variance at all. Factor 1 and 2 correspond exactly to identification and romanticization. Factor 3 consists mainly of commodification while factor 5 consists mainly of intimatization. Factor 4 is the mixture of commodification, idealization and intimatization.

Structural equation modeling was used to conduct a 5-factor confirmatory factor analysis, with the maximum likelihood estimation method. Results indicate that the structural model adequately ﬁt the data (*CFI*=0.941, *GFI*=0.922, and *RMSEA*=0.06). CFA also reveals an acceptable composite reliability (CR) of 0.924. Factor loadings of each item are shown in Table 1.

**Effects of Age and Gender**

For all the age and gender groups, their corresponding means and standard deviations of idol worship scores in 5 domains, as well as the perceived authenticity are listed in Table 2 and Figure 1-6.

Five 2-way ANOVAs were conducted with age and gender as between-subject variables. Age was recoded into 5 groups according to the value: 15-20, 21-25, 25-30, 31-40, 41-50. Age yields significant main effects in romanticization (*F*(4,233)=9.6, *p*<.001) and commodification (*F*(4,233)=3.2, *p*=0.015). Post hoc analysis reveals that people below 25 rate significantly higher in romanticization than those above 25, and that people older than 40 are less likely to exhibit commodification behaviors compared to the rest of the groups. Gender does not exhibit significant group differences in any dimension. Interaction effects were observed in identification (*F*(4,233)=4.0, *p*=.003), idealization (*F*(4,233)=3.4, *p*=.011), intimatization (*F*(4,233)=2.4, *p*=.054), commodification (*F*(4,233)=2.8, *p*=.025) and authenticity (*F*(4,233)=8.3, *p*<.001). Fans of older age show less agreement on the above dimensions compared to younger groups. However, it is suspicious in terms of all the interaction effects except for that in intimatization, because their most salient differences are observed only in the 41-50 group, which contains only 1 female subject.

**Age and Perceived Authenticity as Predictors**

5 multiple linear regression models were estimated with 5 dimensions as dependent variables and age and perceived authenticity as independent variables (all after z-transformation). Statistics and the prediction models are shown in Table 4. All the models reach statistically significant levels, with R ranges from 0.29 to 0.43. Age is the significant predictor of identification (*p*=.007), commodification (*p*=.010) and romanticization (*p*<.001), while perceived authenticity could predict identification (*p*<.001), commodification (*p*<.001), intimatization (*p*<.001) and idealization (*p*<.001).

**Discussion**

**Explanations of The Present Study**

Using the Idol Worship Questionnaire, we measured the idol worship patterns of Yang Chaoyue’s fans group. According to the data, IWQ has moderate reliability and construct validity. The overall reliability, as indexed by the stratified alpha coefficient, is 0.72. Specifically, Cronbach’s alpha is above 0.70 as preferred in identification, romanticization and commodification, and the composite reliability is 0.92, also exceeds the recommended value, 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). The convergent validity of the scale is promising since most of the factor loadings are larger than 0.70 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006) and all of them are statistically significant. However, the reliabilities of idealization and intimatization are below expectations, which confirms the results of EFA: these 2 factors are not explicitly extracted, and they mix in Factor 4. One of the explanations, as achieved from a qualitative analysis of subjects’ evaluations, is that some items seem so absolute that the participants tend to rate lower to dispute those descriptions. For example, ‘I regard the idol as the most perfect person’. It may work well on adolescent samples as is first validated in (Cheung & Yue, 2011), but with the increase of education, some of the present participants are super-sensitive to words like ‘the most’ or ‘perfect’. As a result, the motivation to rate against the words itself surpasses that to rate their level of idealization. Another explanation lies in the wide age range of the current sample: people over 30 years old find it hard to view the idol (who is 20 years old) as their ‘siblings’.

Our study shows overall homogeneity among males and females in their worship patterns. This is in contrast with some of the previous studies (Cheung & Yue, 2011; Cohen, 1997; Furnham & Argyle, 1998; Giles & Maltby, 2004) in which females are more immersed in parasocial relationships and commodification behaviors. This may due to the cultural context, since previous research focused mostly on the Western context, and in the original study using IWQ, the interaction effect of culture (i.e., Hongkong and mainland China) and gender was significant. Also, in this study the idol is a fixed female whereas other studies used the individualized ‘idol’, where females could choose a male idol as the target, thus exhibiting stronger attachment.

In line with the consensus, younger fans exhibit stronger idol worship, especially in romanticization and commodification dimensions. The former is evident: a romantic relationship is at the core of adolescent/young adult needs, both biologically and psychologically. This imagined relationship may serve as a ‘dress rehearsal’ for future relationships (Giles & Maltby, 2004; Hinerman, 1992), or simply as a virtual projection of romantic impulse to avoid peer rejection or parental prohibition of ‘puppy love’. The latter is probably caused by pop culture and social comparison. Buying is seen as one of the best ways to show ‘love’ within the fans group, which is also reinforced by peer approval. While adults have to devote more resource to their work and family, young people are more eager to form strong connections with the fans group and win positive evaluations from peers.

Using age and perceived authenticity of the idol as independent variables, we achieved multiple linear regression models to predict all 5 idol worship dimensions. Age is a negative predictor as is discussed in previous parts. Perceived authenticity may facilitate idol worship since it correlates with emotional attachment (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). According to theories of parasocial relationship, the more you know about the person, the less uncertainty you experience, the stronger your tie is. In addition, in the current Chinese entertainment context, people are aware that the characters of a particular idol may be fabricated by his/her company. With the increasing emergence of scandals, more characters have ‘collapsed’. Therefore, authenticity becomes a scarce characteristic that evokes stronger identification and idealization.

**Limitations**

However, it is worth noticing that the present study has some limitations. First is the potential volunteer bias (Sackett, 1979) in sampling. As the survey is delivered online and received most attention in Zhihu, 97% of the participants are adults, with 15 years of education on average. Fans of a younger age group, or those who only focus on the activity of the idol are ‘excluded’ from the research. Second, most of our respondents are males, even though females are actually more active in some of the social platforms like Weibo or Douban. To reach a more universal conclusion, a larger sample size of female participants is needed. Third, according to the validation of IWQ, some of the items have to be revised to achieve a better reliability and validity. Specifically, it is recommended to use phrases that fit the cognition and experience of adults. For example, in measuring intimatization, use ‘I regard the idol as intimate as my family members (e.g., siblings, children, parents, etc.)’ instead of ‘I regard the idol as intimate as my siblings’.

**Suggestions for Future Study**

The present study explores the effect of demographic characteristics and the virtue of the idol on fans’ idol worship patterns. However, existing results cannot explain idol worship behaviors directly from a psychological perspective. To discover the original impetus for idol worshipping, it is recommended that future research focus more on the role of psychological needs in the 5 worship dimensions based on psychosocial, cognitive, or psychodynamic theories.

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Table 1

*Validation of the Idol Worship Questionnaire*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Confirmatory factor analysis | Exploratory factor analysis | | | | |
| No. |  | Factor loadinga | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 | Factor 4 | Factor 5 |
| Identification (Cronbach’s Alpha=.747) | | | | | | | |
| 13 | Regarding the idol as the model for striving | .741 | **.779** | .284 | .254 | .463 | .206 |
| 15 | Feeling a force of stimulation from the idol | .695 | **.777** | .156 | .439 | .218 | .344 |
| 19 | Becoming the kind of person as the idol | .719 | **.809** | .237 | .201 | .364 | .218 |
| Romanticization (Cronbach’s Alpha=.845) | | | | | | | |
| 7 | Fantasizing the idol to like me | .701 | .239 | **.828** | .138 | .242 | .159 |
| 8 | Regarding the idol as the lover in the dream | .896 | .273 | **.895** | .185 | .299 | .184 |
| 22 | Wishing the idol to be my lover | .821 | .233 | **.866** | .220 | .201 | .268 |
| Commodification (Cronbach’s Alpha=.753) | | | | | | | |
| 10 | Buying things related to the idol | .622 | .262 | .159 | **.858** | .313 | .243 |
| 14 | Liking to buy things related to the idol | .772 | .319 | .182 | **.858** | .293 | .198 |
| 16 | Having no reservations about spending on | .782 | .347 | .344 | .601 | **.619** | .159 |
| Idealization (Cronbach’s Alpha=.522) | | | | | | | |
| 17 | Regarding the idol as the most capable person | .511 | .356 | .132 | .296 | **.781** | .119 |
| 20 | Regarding the idol as the most perfect person | .573 | .554 | .466 | .176 | **.588** | -.006 |
| 23 | Regarding the idol as unsubstitutable | .486 | .546 | .292 | **.588** | .005 | .069 |
| Intimatization (Cronbach’s Alpha=.544) | | | | | | | |
| 6 | Wishing to be my idol's friend | .603 | .343 | .350 | .282 | .259 | **.761** |
| 11 | Regarding the idol as intimate as my siblings | .567 | .304 | .310 | .242 | **.705** | .368 |
| 18 | Wishing to make friends and chat with | .455 | .247 | .176 | .190 | .201 | **.815** |

a: For all factors, p<.001

Table 2

*Idol Worship Scores and Perceived Authenticity Across Age and Gender*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Identification | | Romanticization | | Commodification | | Idealization | | Intimatization | | Authenticity | |
|  | *N* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| By age | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 15-20 | 54 | 4.14 | 0.70 | 2.96 | 1.17 | 3.90 | 0.77 | 3.62 | 0.76 | 4.25 | 0.67 | 4.72 | 0.41 |
| 21-25 | 92 | 4.04 | 0.79 | 2.78 | 1.31 | 3.70 | 0.72 | 3.70 | 0.73 | 4.13 | 0.83 | 4.69 | 0.42 |
| 26-30 | 42 | 4.03 | 0.82 | 2.14 | 1.11 | 3.61 | 0.67 | 3.43 | 0.86 | 4.07 | 0.82 | 4.65 | 0.46 |
| 31-40 | 38 | 3.89 | 0.84 | 1.73 | 0.89 | 3.87 | 0.72 | 3.72 | 0.70 | 4.01 | 0.81 | 4.76 | 0.46 |
| 41-50 | 16 | 3.79 | 1.20 | 1.77 | 0.86 | 3.25 | 0.72 | 3.50 | 0.98 | 3.96 | 0.97 | 4.73 | 0.69 |
| By gender | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 184 | 3.98 | 0.80 | 2.40 | 1.25 | 3.72 | 0.74 | 3.60 | 0.79 | 4.13 | 0.80 | 4.73 | 0.43 |
| Female | 59 | 4.17 | 0.87 | 2.68 | 1.24 | 3.77 | 0.86 | 3.74 | 0.74 | 4.06 | 0.81 | 4.64 | 0.51 |
| Total | 243 | 4.02 | 0.82 | 2.48 | 1.25 | 3.73 | 0.77 | 3.63 | 0.78 | 4.12 | 0.80 | 4.70 | 0.45 |

Table 3

*ANOVA Table of Idol Worship Scores and Perceived Authenticity*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Identification | | Romanticization | | Commodification | | Idealization | | Intimatization | | Authenticity | |
|  | *df* | *F* | *p* | *F* | *p* | *F* | *p* | *F* | *p* | *F* | *p* | *F* | *p* |
| Age | (4,233) | 0.82 | .51 | 10.2 | **<.001\*\*\*** | 2.9 | **.02\*** | 1.2 | .33 | 0.76 | .56 | 0.34 | .85 |
| Gender | (1,233) | 1.1 | .30 | 0.316 | .57 | 0.033 | .86 | 1.2 | .27 | 1.70 | .19 | 1.7 | .20 |
| Age\*Gender | (4,233) | 4.0 | **.003\*\*** | 0.210 | .93 | 2.83 | **.025\*** | 3.4 | **.011\*** | 2.4 | .054 | 8.3 | **<.001\*\*\*** |

Table 4

*Multiple Regression Models of Idol Worship Scores*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | ANOVA | | Model | | Age | | Perceived Authenticity | |
| Dependent variable | Estimated Equationa | *F* (3,239) | *p* | R | R square (adjusted) | *t*(240) | *p* | *t*(240) | *p* |
| Identification | = -0.157x1 + 0.400x2 | 26.9 | **<.001\*\*\*** | .428 | .176 | -2.7 | .007\*\* | 6.8 | <.001\*\*\* |
| Romanticization | = -0.360x1 + 0.011x2 | 17.8 | **<.001\*\*\*** | .360 | .122 | -6.0 | <.001\*\*\* | 0.18 | .86 |
| Intimatization | = -0.117x1 + 0.268x2 | 11.1 | **<.001\*\*\*** | .291 | .077 | -1.9 | .06 | 4.3 | <.001\*\*\* |
| Idealization | = -0.074x1 + 0.405x2 | 24.3 | **<.001\*\*\*** | .410 | .161 | -1.2 | .21 | 6.9 | <.001\*\*\* |
| Commodification | = -0.158x1 + 0.280x2 | 13.7 | **<.001\*\*\*** | .320 | .095 | -2.6 | .010\*\* | 4.6 | <.001\*\*\* |

a: y: dependent variable, x1: age, x2: perceived authenticity

Figure 1

*Identification Scores Across Age and Gender*



Figure 2

*Romanticization Scores Across Age and Gender*



Figure 3

*Idealization Scores Across Age and Gender*



Figure 4

*Intimatization Scores Across Age and Gender*



Figure 5

*Commodification Scores Across Age and Gender*



Figure 6

*Perceived Authenticity Scores Across Age and Gender*

