

Idol–Fan Emotional Projection and Collective Identity in the Digital Era

Lianni Wang

Ulink College, Guangdong, China
Corresponding author: hiiok333@outlook.com

Abstract:

In today's digital age, idols are not only entertainers but also play an important role in how fans feel and build identity. This study looks at how fans project their own emotions and self-ideas onto idols, and how online communities make these processes stronger. The research uses two methods: a semi-structured interview with a college student fan, and content analysis of Weibo comments after Nene announced her relationship with Bright in April 2024. The interview shows how an idol's story can influence personal choices and support identity building, while the community data shows how fans reacted with both disappointment and acceptance. The findings suggest idols can be emotional supports, but if their private lives do not meet fans' expectations, fans may feel hurt and may face identity crises. Some fans leave, some stay but change the way they support, and some rebuild by turning to other idols. This case shows that idol–fan relationships are dynamic, shaped by both individual feelings and online group interactions.

Keywords: Idol; identity projection; parasocial interaction; social media; fandom.

1. Introduction

In the digital era, idols have become more than just entertainers; they significantly influence the emotions and identities of their fans [1]. Many young people look up to idols as role models and often turn to them for comfort or inspiration. Social media platforms allow fans to follow idols closely and join online communities, deepening fans' connections to their idols [1]. Through these one-sided parasocial relationships, fans may project their own feelings and ideals onto idols [2].

Understanding these dynamics is important because fan–idol relationships can have real emotional im-

pact. For example, when an idol's personal life surprises or disappoints fans, it can cause confusion or even an identity crisis for some fans [3]. This research focuses on how fans project emotions onto idols and how they build collective identity in online fan groups. By looking at a recent case in which a popular idol announced a romantic relationship, study how fans reacted both individually and as part of a fan group.

The study uses a qualitative approach. First, conducted a semi-structured interview with a college student fan to explore personal feelings: why she admires the idol, how the idol influenced her choices, and how she incorporates the idol into her self-identity.

Second, analyzed fan community discussions on the social media platform Weibo after the idol's announcement (April 2024) by collecting and examining fan comments before and after the news. This combined method lets compare individual experiences with community reactions.

The research objectives are to reveal the emotional and identity processes in idol–fan relationships and to understand how social media amplifies these processes. Specifically, the study aims to show how an idol can serve as an emotional support and identity model for fans, and how fan communities create a shared identity. It also examines what happens when an idol's actions conflict with fan expectations, causing a fan crisis, and how fans cope and rebuild their identity. This combined approach aims to fill gaps in previous research by integrating individual and group perspectives.

2. Literature Review

In today's media environment, idols are not only entertainers but also play an important role in how fans build identity and express emotions. Many young people see idols as figures they can look up to, and sometimes even as people who help them deal with their own personal struggles. With the rise of social media, fans can follow idols closely, join online groups, and even create content together. Because of this, the relationship between fans and idols is becoming more complex and deserves careful study. The purpose of this literature review is to look at the main theories and studies that explain how fans connect with idols, to point out the main findings, and to show the debates and gaps in the current research. One main approach is social identity theory, which explains that people feel stronger when they belong to a group. Fan communities give members a sense of identity and belonging [4]. Some studies say identity fusion theory is needed to understand cases where fans feel almost the same as their idol or group [5].

Another important point is role model identification. Fans often copy the style, values, or even life choices of their idols [6]. Zheng and Tan highlight how fan culture in the digital age is not only about consumption but also performance, where fans actively create identities and negotiate meanings in online spaces. This connects with self-identity theory, which explains that identity develops through interaction and self-reflection. There is also a lot of research on parasocial interaction. This theory describes the one-sided but emotional relationship between fans and idols. Many fans project their feelings onto idols, and this can give them comfort and support [2]. However, if the idol is involved in a scandal or fails expectations, fans may feel hurt or experience an identity crisis [7].

Finally, social media theory shows how digital platforms increase the interaction between fans and idols. Social media allows fans to make and share content, organize events, and feel closer to idols [8,9]. At the same time, it can also spread rumors and cause conflicts within fan groups [10].

Even though these studies agree on some points, there are still arguments about how strong this effect is. Some argue that fan identity can be fully explained by group identity, while others believe identity fusion is needed to understand the deeper bond [5]. There are also different views on emotional projection. Some studies see it as positive support, while others warn it can lead to dependency and emotional problems [2-4]. Social media also has mixed evaluations: it can empower fans [8] but can also create division and toxic behaviors [10]. Even though research has grown, there are still gaps. First, most studies only use one theory, but fan–idol relationships are complex and may need more combined approaches. Second, there are not many studies that follow fans over time to see how identity changes after crises. Third, most studies focus on certain regions or industries, such as K-pop, and less is known about fans in other contexts. Finally, personal differences like age or resilience are often overlooked.

Overall, the literature shows that idols can be very important for fans' emotions and self-identity. Fan communities and social media make these connections stronger but also riskier. At the same time, research still lacks integration and deeper study of how identity changes over time. This study will try to address these gaps by looking at both projection and reconstruction processes in online fan communities.

3. Case Analysis

This study aims to examine the mechanisms through which fans project emotions and construct identities in idol–fan relationships, with particular attention to how these processes are amplified and collectivized in social media environments. Methodologically, use a semi-structured interview in Case 1 with a college student fan and community content analysis of Weibo comments, so can compare individual and group level phenomena. The interview focused on why the participant liked the idol, how the idol affected personal choices, and the idol's role in the participant's self identity. For community data, focus on responses in the fan comment sections after Nene publicly announced her relationship with Bright in April 2024 and posted a statement, collecting typical reactions before and after the announcement to analyze shifts in group dynamics and identity.

In this case analysis combine Case 1 with the group level dynamics and identity crisis observed around the Nene–

Bright romance revelation, to show how idol–fan relations move from projection to collective reaction and then to reconstruction. In Case 1, the participant was first attracted by the idol’s stage performance and later reported that a live broadcast in which the idol shared a “pursue dream” story helped her decide to study art despite family resistance, using the idol’s narrative as emotional support for a personal life choice. This reflects projection and self-identity processes, where the idol becomes a reference for an ideal self and fills an emotional gap left by the participant’s earlier lack of unconditional support [2].

At the community level, after Nene acknowledged her romantic relationship with Bright on Weibo in April 2024, the fan comment section quickly split. Some expressed a strong sense of betrayal, with remarks like “have supported her for so long but this news is disappointing,” while others declared “am done being a fan.” At the same time, another group emphasized “as long as she is happy, that is enough,” urging fellow fans to be rational. This in-group and out-group division illustrates tensions anticipated by social identity theory and identity fusion: highly fused fans experienced a stronger identity threat, while less fused fans adapted more readily [5].

The emotional impact of the disclosure also shows how parasocial bonds, even though one-sided, can produce psychological shock. This leads to different reconstruction pathways, such as complete disengagement, functional fandom where fans only support the idol’s works, or reattachment to other idols as a way of identity reconstruction [3]. Taken together, the three cases form a trajectory from initial attraction to projection and identity construction, then to community rupture when expectations collide, and finally to individual and collective rebuilding [4]. The cases suggest that personal psychology and online group interaction both matter for fandom.

4. Discussion

4.1 Idols as Emotional Surrogates and Identity Models

In the first case, a fan interview showed that the idol served as a source of comfort and a role model. The fan described relying on the idol for support during hard times, which fits with theories of projection and parasocial interaction. Previous research shows that fans often project their own values and emotions onto idols, treating them as part of their own self-concept [2]. By doing this, the idol becomes an emotional surrogate, imagined as someone who understands and shares the fan’s feelings. Parasocial interaction theory also explains why fans feel a one-sided intimacy with idols, believing they “know” the idol even though the idol does not know them person-

ally. In some cases, fans’ identities may even fuse with the idol’s identity, which identity fusion theory suggests can blur the boundary between “fan” and “idol” [5]. This shows that idols can fill gaps in a fan’s self-identity by providing an idealized figure and emotional support.

4.2 Fan Communities and Collective Identity

Along with the idol itself, fan communities give fans a shared identity. According to social identity theory, people derive part of their self-concept from the groups they belong to [1]. In practice, identifying as a member of an idol’s fandom creates a sense of belonging and positive self-esteem. Studies on online fandoms show that group membership offers belonging, purpose, and self-worth [1,4]. For instance, the first case suggested that the fan not only looked to the idol but also drew strength from being part of the fandom. By sharing values and celebrating the idol together, fans construct a collective identity that reinforces their personal identification with the idol.

4.3 Fan Disappointment and Identity Crisis

The second case shows what happens when an idol breaks fan expectations. When Nene announced her relationship, many fans reacted with shock and even anger. Some fans posted thousands of comments expressing betrayal and declaring they would unfollow, while others asked for rational support. From a theoretical perspective, this disappointment comes from the collapse of a parasocial and projection bond: fans had imagined the idol as an ideal single figure, and reality clashed with that fantasy [2]. Social identity theory helps explain why this event threatened the fan group’s positive image [1]. Since idols are symbols of the group’s honor, their actions can damage fans’ sense of collective pride. Other studies also show that when idols fail expectations, fans often experience confusion and denial, leading to a psychological identity crisis [3]. In this way, the Nene case demonstrates how fandom can generate real emotional pain when the idol’s private life does not align with fan ideals.

4.4 Identity Reconstruction and the Changing Fan–Idol Relationship

After the initial shock, fans often attempt to rebuild their identity and their relationship with the idol. Huang et al. note that fans move from confusion to reevaluating their self-identity during such crises. In case, some fans adjusted by supporting each other online, expressing their feelings, or redefining what it means to follow the idol. Others chose to disengage entirely or to shift attention to another idol. This reflects social identity theory’s idea that people may change group membership when their old group no longer enhances self-esteem [1]. Identity fusion theory

also predicts that highly fused fans experience greater difficulty in letting go, while less fused fans adapt more readily [5]. Overall, these cases highlight the dynamic nature of fan-idol relationships: they are not fixed but constantly re-negotiated as fans rebuild their identities in response to idols' actions.

4.5 Cultural and Media Influences on Fan Identity

Finally, the broader cultural and media context shapes these processes. Today's fans rely heavily on digital platforms, where social media allows them to express opinions and create content together [8,9]. For example, Nene's announcement spread rapidly on Weibo, and fans immediately reacted. This shows how social media amplifies both positive and negative emotions within fandom. At the same time, fan culture in East Asia often emphasizes purity and authenticity in idol-fan bonds, making romantic disclosures especially controversial [7]. When idols break this imagined purity, fans experience not only disappointment but also a sense of betrayal. Other studies argue that social media increases both empowerment and conflict: it can give fans agency to participate, but also accelerate rumors and divisions [10]. Therefore, the media and cultural background plays a crucial role in how fans form, maintain, and reconstruct their emotional and social identities.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that idols often serve as emotional surrogates and role models for their fans. Through parasocial projection, fans fill personal emotional gaps by imagining that they share feelings or values with the idol. An interview example showed how a fan used her idol's story to help make a life decision, indicating that the idol became part of her self-identity. At the same time, fan communities provide a collective identity and support network, as many fans share values and celebrate the idol together. However, the study also highlights that these relationships can lead to crises when idols do not meet fan expectations. In the case analyzed, the idol's announcement of a romantic relationship caused strong reactions among fans. Some felt betrayed and withdrew their support, while others tried to rationalize the news. This shows that fans who had fully projected their hopes onto the idol felt hurt and experienced an identity upset. Findings agree with previous research showing that idols can cause real emotional and identity crises for fans.

Compared to earlier work, research offers a combined perspective. By using both an interview and social media analysis, capture personal experiences and group reactions. This gives a more complete picture than many past

studies that looked only at one side. It shows that idol-fan relations are dynamic and context-dependent, influenced by both individual feelings and online community processes.

This study has some limitations. It is based on a single case and one interview, so the results may not apply to all fans or cultures. Also, focused on one specific event and context (an East Asian idol). Future research could include more participants, different idols, and longer time frames to see how these processes unfold. Quantitative surveys and other case studies could test and expand conclusions. Overall, this work contributes an integrated understanding of idol-fan emotional projection and identity formation in the digital age. It highlights the powerful role idols play and how social media amplifies fan emotions. By understanding these mechanisms better, can see why fans react so strongly to idol behavior and how they rebuild their identity after a crisis. Future studies should continue to explore these issues with larger samples and diverse settings.

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