

# Investigation of the Behaviors and Psychology of Young People Engaging in Retaliatory Actions Against Asian Idols After Unfollowing

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## **Abstract:**

“Retaliatory actions after unfollowing” refers to fans ceasing their admiration for a previously liked idol and expressing aggressive or vengeful remarks or behaviors. This phenomenon has become increasingly common in entertainment and fan circles. Fans’ voices, which play an integral role in an idol’s career, are mixed with various evaluations, and the underlying stories and psychology behind these evaluations warrant further exploration. This paper aims to analyze fan culture as a subculture, which could serve as a reference for understanding other subcultural groups or provide guidance on the mental health of young people. The study adopted a questionnaire method and collected over 100 responses on platforms like Weibo and WeChat. The questionnaire covers reasons for unfollowing, psychological states during this phase, and the idols targeted. It also investigates submissions made to “retaliatory bot” platforms. Through a literature review, this paper explores the behaviors of fans engaging in retaliatory actions, spanning various domains, including fan culture, fan socialization, fan emotional research, and cyberbullying. It provides an overview of domestic and international research on fan psychology over the past few years, introduces the research background and importance of studying retaliatory actions after unfollowing, and highlights their practical significance in addressing intersectional issues in contemporary youth, online safety, and related fields. Finally, the paper evaluates existing research and suggests potential trends in fan circles and new methods of unfollowing that may emerge.

**Keywords:** fan psychology; idol psychology; retaliatory actions; fan economy

## 1. Introduction

The rise of Asian idol culture has recently had a profound influence on Chinese youth. As the core audience and most active participants in fan circles, young people play a vital role in shaping fan culture. Their views often dominate and significantly impact fan communities. With the rise of idol culture, the phenomenon of unfollowing idols has also emerged, becoming widespread and common. Alongside it, “retaliatory actions after unfollowing” has become a new trend. Such actions often have positive or negative effects on idols and sometimes result in incidents of cyberbullying. As a result, fan circles have become chaotic, leading to calls for reform within these communities. Moreover, retaliatory actions influence the public’s perception of the targeted idols, offering an alternative means to understand a celebrity, especially when specific incidents trend on social media, amplifying the impact. Understanding the psychological motivations behind unfollowing and the social-cultural backgrounds of fans is crucial for comprehending the idol economy and fan culture. It prompts reflection on the cultural and personal attachments of today’s youth.

This paper employs a questionnaire survey to gather fans’ assessments and perceptions of themselves and others within fan circles, shedding light on how small, organically formed online communities or sub-societies regulate members’ behaviors. The study aims to delve deeper into the psychology of fans during the process of unfollowing and the emotional or behavioral pressures imposed by fan circles. This research can help society gain a more complete understanding of fans, guiding decisions on whether to intervene in fan behavior and improve the ecosystem of fan circles while fostering an understanding of how young people navigate online interactions.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Research on Retaliatory Actions After Unfollowing

Previous studies suggest that fans are often resistant to negative news about their idols, as they perceive idols as perfect beings. Such news can cause emotional trauma, making it unbearable for fans and leading to widespread disillusionment. During this process, fans may experience physical reactions such as trembling, crying, overeating, or even attempting suicide in severe cases. Some fans choose not to leave due to anxiety about being isolated but instead adjust by engaging in communication or reducing their emotional investment (He & Sun, 2022).

Other reasons for retaliatory actions include the lack of adequate regulations to address cyberbullying in the virtual realm, where verbal abuse is rampant, often prompting fans to unfollow (Febrianti, 2023).

Fan circles are not official organizations but self-organized groups of fans. Platforms like Weibo Super Topics serve as the main base for these fan communities, which operate under established rules. Each community typically has an administrator or “chief moderator,” who is elected by fans and must meet high requirements, such as being over 18 years old, having ample time to manage tasks like translating videos, and sometimes providing proof of merchandise purchases or language proficiency (Chen et al., 2023). Moderators must use tactful communication strategies to persuade members and avoid offense, as many fan communities share posts publicly on social networks, influencing both insiders and outsiders’ perceptions (Xue, 2020).

### 2.2 Research on the Fan Economy

In the fan economy, fans are akin to “consumers” and “investors.” For ordinary consumers, purchasing idol merchandise is merely a commercialized entertainment activity. For fans, however, it is a way to shape their identity and establish their standing within fan circles. As a result, fans invest significantly more time and money into idol-related activities than regular consumers (Liu, 2022). Buying products endorsed by idols fulfills fans’ self-expectations, strengthens their connection with idols, and enhances brand loyalty. Fans view idol merchandise as a unique symbol that signifies their affiliation with a particular fan group. These purchases not only reflect active participation but also satisfy fans’ emotional needs (Chen et al., 2023).

Idols, as trendsetters, attract fans who emulate their style and purchase endorsed products, demonstrating personal satisfaction and happiness (Cheriyah & Hadi, 2024).

### 2.3 Research on Fan Psychology

The media creates images, symbols, and codes that form a new reality where “fiction becomes fact, and television becomes reality.” Fans often develop emotional dependence on idols, using the virtual reality of the internet to escape real-life challenges and create a sense of belonging, which is central to fan activities (Jenol & Pazil, 2020).

Idols may provide fans with a sense of belonging, accessibility, and connection. This demonstrates that fan activities can have emotional value (Laffan, 2020). However, idol worship can also have adverse effects, such as fostering materialism, fetishism, and irrational behavior (Cheung & Yue, 2003).

By reviewing past research, this paper identifies that retaliatory actions after unfollowing are a complex psychological and social phenomenon involving identity shifts, emotional loss, and redefinition of self. These actions reflect the role of fan culture in the digital age and how virtual realities shape young people's identities and behaviors.

### 3. Research Methods

This study utilized a questionnaire survey, consisting of 22 questions covering topics such as basic information about the fans, types of idols, reasons for unfollowing, emotional fluctuations after unfollowing, and changes in behavior. The study targeted youth aged 18 to 30 years old, and a total of 387 valid responses were collected.

## 4. Research Results

### 4.1 Profile of Fans Who Unfollowed

**Gender distribution:** Among the 387 respondents, the majority were female (99.7%, 386 people), with only 0.3% (1 person) being male.

**Age distribution:** Most respondents were aged 18 to 22 years (76.2%, 295 people), followed by those under 18 years old (17.6%, 68 people), with fewer respondents aged 23 and above. Those aged 18 to 22 primarily represent university students, while those 23 and older include graduate students and working youth. Respondents under 18 are typically in compulsory education.

**Fan identity involvement:** Respondents rated their level of involvement in fan activities on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. The average score was 3.36, indicating a moderately high level of emotional engagement in fan activities.

### 4.2 Types of Idols Fans Unfollowed

**Idol types:** All respondents followed "idol" types, specifically performers involved in singing and dancing. Other types such as actors (37.5%), singers (37.7%), and rappers (20.2%) were also popular.

**Idol activity regions:** Most respondents followed idols active in South Korea (99%, 384 people), followed by those active in China (44.4%, 172 people) and Japan (38.5%, 149 people). A small number of respondents mentioned simultaneously following idols in Western countries alongside Asian idols.

### 4.3 Psychology and Behaviors of Fans Who Unfollowed

**Experience of unfollowing:** 91.5% of respondents (354

people) reported having unfollowed an idol, while 8.5% (33 people) had not. This indicates that unfollowing is a common phenomenon among fans.

**Retaliatory behavior submissions:** Among those who unfollowed, 10.7% (38 people) had posted negative comments on social media or dedicated "retaliatory bot" platforms to express dissatisfaction or vent emotions.

**Expressing negative emotions:** About 4.8% of respondents (17 people) indicated that their submissions were primarily to vent their disappointment with the idol or dissatisfaction with the idol's behavior or work. These respondents used public expressions of negative emotions to alleviate inner turmoil, seeking emotional release and understanding.

**Revenge by exposing scandals:** About 0.6% of respondents (2 people) stated their submissions aimed to exact revenge by exposing the idol's negative news or scandals. This behavior reflects extreme emotional responses in some fans, who may feel betrayed or disappointed and choose to expose the idol's inappropriate behavior as a way to achieve psychological balance.

**Recording personal emotions for closure:** About 3.4% of respondents (12 people) said their submissions were meant to document their emotions and provide themselves with psychological closure. This behavior served as a form of self-healing, using writing to process inner emotional fluctuations and make it easier to let go of the idol.

**Objectively explaining reasons for unfollowing:** About 1.7% of respondents (6 people) aimed to rationally analyze and articulate the reasons behind their unfollowing. These fans tended to maintain a calm demeanor when unfollowing on and strived to express their feelings rationally, avoiding overly emotional expressions.

**Other reasons:** A few respondents (1 person) mentioned their submissions reflected opinions about the chaotic nature of fan circles, emphasizing personal perspectives that did not fully align with popular views. These submissions likely stemmed from reflections on fan culture as a whole rather than dissatisfaction with a specific idol.

**Emotional fluctuations when unfollowing:** Emotional reactions varied among respondents. Most (55.2%, 195 people) reported no significant emotional changes, while 22.5% (119 people) felt angry, 20.6% (141 people) felt sad, and a small portion (6.2%, 22 people) reported feeling happy or disgusted.

**No specific actions:** About 31.5% of respondents (116 people) indicated they did not engage in any particular actions when unfollowing, suggesting a more detached or rational attitude toward their idols.

**Talking to friends:** Approximately 34.2% of respondents (132 people) said they chose to vent their disappointment

or dissatisfaction by talking to friends, which may serve as a form of emotional release and social support.

Recording emotional fluctuations: About 16.5% of respondents (57 people) recorded their emotions through writing or journaling to process their feelings. This behavior reflects emotional investment in the idol, with some fans opting for self-reflection to manage their emotions.

Sharing opinions online: About 11.5% of respondents (42 people) posted their opinions on social media or forums, openly expressing disappointment or explaining their reasons for unfollowing.

Other behaviors: Approximately 2% of respondents (7 people) adopted “decluttering” actions, such as unfollowing idols on Weibo, deleting photos, or cutting ties with idol-related content entirely.

Emotional changes after unfollowing: The emotional changes following unfollowing showed diversity. Around 43.2% (153 respondents) reported feeling relief, 26.3% (93 respondents) felt a sense of loss, and 31.1% (110 respondents) felt exhausted. Some respondents, about 48.3% (171 people), expressed indifference, stating that they were unaffected emotionally.

Following new idols: A majority of respondents (96.7%, 344 people) indicated that they would follow new idols after unfollowing in a previous one, while 10 respondents said they would not continue following any idols.

Exploring other interests: Among the respondents, 45.3% (164 people) reported that they shifted their focus to other areas after unfollowing, such as anime, TV shows, movies, or music.

#### 4.4 Reasons for Unfollowing

Personal reasons (e.g., life, study): Approximately 48.6% (172 respondents) indicated that personal reasons led them to stop following idols.

Changes in idol appearance or personality: 84.5% (299 respondents) reported that changes in the idol’s appearance or personality were significant factors.

Changes in work style or quality: 81.6% (289 respondents) mentioned that changes in the idol’s work style or quality were reasons for unfollowing.

Idol behavior issues: Around 77% (272 respondents) stated that the idol’s scandals or negative behaviors, such as relationship rumors, directly influenced their unfollowing.

Conflict with personal values: 79.4% (281 respondents) felt that inconsistencies between their personal values and the idol’s values were critical factors.

Unpleasant interactions with other fans (e.g., fan disputes): Approximately 72.3% (256 respondents) cited negative interactions with other fans as a reason for unfollowing.

#### 4.5 Views on Other Fan Groups After Unfollowing

Impact on perceptions of other fan groups: After unfollowing, 36.7% (136 respondents) said their perceptions of other fan groups were affected, 51% (198 respondents) said they were unaffected, and 47.2% (167 respondents) stated that their views depended on specific situations.

Reactions to seeing posts from other fans: The majority of respondents (45.2%, 175 people) reported a neutral attitude, observing without taking sides. About 33.4% (129 respondents) empathized and agreed with other fans’ opinions, while a minority (2.8%, 11 respondents) felt disapproval, believing that other fans’ comments were not entirely accurate.

### 5. Discussion

This study found that changes in idol appearance, work quality, and behavior were the primary reasons for unfollowing interest. Unlike earlier research, which mainly attributed unfollowing to negative news about idols, this study uncovered a broader range of causes. Unfollowing is often an emotional reaction to changes in an idol’s image or value conflicts. Fans’ expectations of idols extend beyond emotional dependency to include cultural and social value recognition.

In Asian idol markets, female consumers make up the majority. However, this may also reflect limitations in sample size or research methods. Future studies should collect samples from diverse locations and groups to ensure comprehensive findings.

After unfollowing, fans displayed diverse emotional reactions. While some reported feeling relieved, others experienced loss and exhaustion, indicating that unfollowing involves both emotional detachment and psychological adaptation.

Post-unfollowing behaviors were similarly varied. Some fans turned to new idols or communities, while others remained connected to their previous fan circles. Most fans continued to engage in other cultural and entertainment activities, reflecting the diversity and broad entertainment needs of the fan community.

The findings suggest that youth exhibit significant emotional fluctuations and behavioral shifts after unfollowing from idols. Major factors for unfollowing include changes in idols’ personal behavior, work style, and conflicts in values. Despite unfollowing, many fans maintained their interest in the entertainment industry, often shifting their focus to new idols or circles.

Given the ongoing development of the entertainment industry in Asia, new reasons for unfollowing are likely to



emerge. Currently, research on unfollowing and retaliatory actions targeting Western artists remains limited, offering unexplored opportunities for comparison with Asian contexts. Future studies could also explore unfollowing behaviors among older or middle-aged groups, highlighting differences from younger demographics and contributing to understanding online activities and social positions across age groups.

## 6. Conclusion

By investigating the psychology and reasons behind unfollowing and retaliatory actions among youth toward Asian idols, this study conducted an in-depth analysis of fans' profiles, emotions during unfollowing, and underlying causes through a questionnaire survey. The findings revealed diverse psychological and behavioral factors that go beyond previous studies, emphasizing the multifaceted reasons for unfollowing.

The typical profile of fans engaging in retaliatory actions includes females aged 18 to 22. Analysis of the questionnaire results showed that unfollowing stemmed from idol-related and personal reasons, with associated emotions ranging from joy to anger, sadness, and frustration. The study highlights fans' strong emotional fluctuations and need for entertainment during the unfollowing process.

These findings provide a foundation for understanding public opinion on online platforms, offering insights into fan economic models and cultural phenomena. In the future, expanding the sample collection to include more diverse groups will ensure more accurate and reliable gender proportions within the fan community.

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