

# Research on Fan Identity Behavior from the Perspective of Pseudo-social Relationship

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## Abstract

"Youth With You 3" "beating the list and pouring milk" deformed star chasing incident presented a chaos in the "fan circle", arousing strong social concern and public condemnation. In recent years, the idol-cultivation-related music reality show represented by "Youth With You 3" has rapidly gathered fans, media resources and commercial capital in a short period of time, becoming a cultural phenomenon that really detonated the "cultivation-related" idol boom. Different from the traditional star-making logic, the "cultivation system" idol-making mechanism focuses on the companionship of social relationships such as mimicry "intimacy" and "emotional", so that the fan group has great control and decision power over the program, and then completes the Self-identity and emotional satisfaction. Fan groups experience themselves, establish themselves in their interactions with others, and realize the projection of "ideal self" through virtual identities and background roles. Therefore, the fan group will not only form an idealized sense of self-identity under the pseudo-social relationship, but also easily develop a mentality of "protection" and "competition" for the ideal role. A good and healthy online fan circle culture urgently needs to form a management system that takes both the government and the platform, and the various social entities work together.

## Keywords

Pseudo-social relationship, Identity behavior, Deformed star chasing, Fan circle culture

## 1. Introduction

In May 2021, a video of a large number of lactic acid bacteria drinks being dismantled and dumped was widely circulated on the Internet, triggering heated public debate and condemnation. The drinks that were dumped were the products of the sponsoring brands of the idol development program "Youth With You 3". Fans' "beating" is like a kind of KPI, adopting the logic of quantitative piece-counting, fans can't help but fall into some kind of crazy "fight". China's fan culture is driven by competition from talent shows and variety shows. Platforms, media, producers, and advertisers have clearly formed a community of capital interests. Therefore, this article starts from the mimetic social relationship behind idol development programs to discuss the program production logic and fans' identity behavior behind "beating

the list and pouring milk", reflecting on the drawbacks and then putting forward feasible suggestions.

## **2. Pseudo-social relations and self-identification behavior**

### **2.1 Pseudo-social relations**

Pseudo-social social relations originated from the research of Donald Horton and Wall (R. Richard Wohl) in 1956. They observed that with the popularity of mass media such as television, people involuntarily feel a sense of interaction with the people on television. And many people will feel that there is a real social relationship between themselves and the stars, forming a "virtual, one-sided, continuous illusion". Therefore, they define this "one-way social relationship fantasy" as "quasi-social relationship", which refers to the lasting, long-term, one-sided intimate relationship between the audience and the media role or task under the repeated exposure of the media (Horton D. & Wohl R R, 1956) Pseudo-social relations are considered to be the distinctive personality of new media, that is, the unique relationship between the audience and the characters on the screen. This one-way relationship between viewers and screen characters, including news anchors and TV characters. And these relationships generate quasi-social interactions, allowing viewers to interact frequently and continuously with media characters. As a result, the audience develops a collective intimacy with the media characters. In 1957, they further defined the mimetic social relationship as an asymmetric relationship, that is, an asymmetric relationship between audiences and media roles or tasks in any single media exposure environment (Horton, D. & A. Strauss, 1957). Some researchers believe that humans have an intrinsic need, the need for connection, but if this need is not met in real life, these individuals will seek to connect with media characters on television. In Kimmt's 2006 article, mimetic social relations were conceptualized as relatively stable, persistent, cross-situational virtual social relations or social-emotional bonds between audiences and media characters (Klimmt C, Hartmann T, & Schramm H, 2006). From the definition, it is clear that the mimic social relationship is a one-sided, asymmetric, long-term relationship form. This relationship needs to be maintained long-term with the help of a certain exposure environment.

### **2.2 Self-identification behavior**

The issue of identity is one of the mainstream issues in today's society and culture, and as an important part of sub-culture, fan culture has also aroused extensive discussions in academia. Identity refers to an individual's emotional and valued perception of himself as a member of a group or society through psychological identification. Scholars divide "identity" into conferred identity and self-generated identity, that is, the identity that is born with and the identity that is acquired. "Identity" in the field of sociology has two meanings of "individual" and "society". The individual level is the level of self-identity, which refers to the idealized self-identification of people's hearts; the social level is the level of group identity, which refers to the sharing and sharing of beliefs and emotions among people in a common group (Livingstone S M, 1998). The two influence and reinforce each other. The first is self-identification behavior; due to the advent of the era of individualization, the adhesion of traditional individuals has gradually decreased, and the personal sense of theme is mainly expressed as a sense of identity and identity through the construction of self-identity. The second is group identity behavior; social identity theory was proposed by Teffer et al. in the 1970s, which believes that individuals identify with their groups through social classification, and generate internal preferences and external prejudices (Perse E M & Rubin R B, 1989). Fan groups gather around the same star due to similar preferences, and establish their online and offline fan communities. Through the internal norms of the community and resistance to the external society, it plays a role in strengthening the identity of the fan group.

## **3. The production logic of idol variety shows**

### **3.1 From "amateur" to "idol" company, establish a fixed emotional bond**

Using python to crawl Weibo comments to make a word cloud map, we can see that the keywords hotly discussed by netizens mainly focus on keywords such as "fans", "draft", and "waste". From the word cloud map, we can see that the focus of public opinion is on the irrational consumption and wasteful behavior of fans in talent shows. In recent years, idol variety shows have emerged one after another, but the production logic and guidance logic behind them are roughly similar. The environmentalization of mimetic social relations has led to online public opinion thinking in virtual social reality when it is expressed, and acting on the practice of reality expression.

The program involved in this "pour milk and hit the list" event is "Youth with You 3". The program gathered more than 100 contestants, and finally selected 9 contestants to form a group through a series of assessments and training. The whole program mainly revolves around the logic of "how amateur players can successfully form a group through

layer-by-layer selection". The program was officially broadcast on February 18 until it was suspended on May 9 due to the "milk casting" incident, which lasted for nearly 3 months. Previous studies generally believed that media use time was positively proportional to the emotional relationship between audience establishment and media roles (Rubin R B, & Mchugh M P, 1987). In the past 3 months, the audience has easily formed a mimetic social relationship with the media character, the idol, by watching idol development programs, thereby becoming fans. This social relationship is continuously consolidated in the continuous output of the program. The emotional devotion of fans in this mimetic social relationship makes them very persistent in "forming a group" of idols. When idols form a group, they not only gain a sense of accomplishment from "sending their idols to debut with their own hands", but also close the mimetic social relationship with idols, thereby establishing a deeper emotional bond (Chen Xinling & Yu Yang, 2020). In addition, the mimetic social relationship also has the characteristics of cross-situation. This kind of social relationship not only exists in a specific situation, but also appears in other platform spaces such as Weibo and Douyin with the help of the Internet. The technological breakthrough brought by the Internet has further pulled the spatial distance between fans and idols, making this virtual social relationship more real.

### **3.2 The emotional identity of the media role and the strengthening of the emotional bond**

After the broadcast of "Youth With You 3", many of the trainees have their own "personal settings" (character settings based on characters' personalities) and "labels". In order to better present the variety show effect, the program producers will also magnify the characters' personalities and guide the audience to strengthen this label memory. Freud believed that psychological projection is a psychological protection mechanism for discovering one's own emotions, thoughts or desires in others. Through the program mode from "amateur" to "idol", after establishing a fixed emotional bond, the characteristics displayed by idols in the program will become their "label". Fans will project their emotional identity on the corresponding idol. After emotional identification with media characters, fans can easily empathize with idols. "Tags" lay a fan base for idols to have more regular followers, and to a certain extent strengthen the emotional connection and intimacy of virtual social networking.

It is worth noting that this kind of virtual social relationship is one-way, and fans' recognition, longing, and expectation of idols only exist in the spotlight and media platforms. In other words, this kind of social relationship is virtual and exists on the basis of imagination, not real social relationship. Non-real social relationships need to be strengthened by maintaining the emotional identity of media characters, so the "personality" of idols in the show will be constantly highlighted.

### **3.3 Spread across scenarios to stimulate a "protection and competition" mentality**

Mimic social relationships across contexts allow this virtual social interaction to begin with media character understanding, but not end when the media leaves. This virtual social relationship extends from online to offline, and exists in the daily life of fans. Fans will spare no effort to recommend their idols to their friends and family members, so that more people will pay attention to their idols. During the broadcast of the "Youth With You 3" program, the program's Weibo, Douyin, and Station B all had very high click-through rates and comments. This cross-scenario mimetic social relies on the advanced technology of the Internet to "get out of the circle". Cyberspace has brought the distance of this virtual social relationship, and it is also more conducive to the shaping of idol images. Fans are easily immersed in this virtual social relationship. The "power generation" and "listing" set by idol programs have given fans an immersive "realism". In the process of making the list, fans called for calls on multiple media platforms, forming a fan circle with each other. The opening of the Internet has made this appeal more transparent. The competition between idols in the show has also spread among fans, forming a mentality among fans to "protect" idols from constant competition with his fans. Under this "protection and competition" mentality, fans continue to invest more energy and financial resources to help their idols, which can easily lead to irrational consumption behavior. The "pour milk and hit the list" in "Youth With You 3" is a representative of this irrational consumption behavior.

## **4. Fan identity behavior under the perspective of pseudo-social relations**

### **4.1 Fans' Idealized Self-Identity Psychology**

Drawing on the related theories of Freud's psychoanalysis, the emotions that fans have towards media characters are personal subconscious fantasies that become reality in someone. This also reflects the fans' desire for fusion, completeness, unity, and a complete portion of the self. On the one hand, fantasies about idols can help fans indirectly make up for their missing parts and help fans express their suppressed desires. At the same time, there is a mirror-like "narcissistic self-mapping" psychological mechanism between fans and idols, that is, fans touch the "self in the mirror" through

idols, and fans' identification with idols is also an extension of fans' self-identification. On the other hand, when fans become members of the community, in the fan community, fans gain a sense of identity by sharing a set of unique concepts, symbols, meanings and values of idols. "Youth With You 3" is a representative of the idol faction of "cultivation idols", and the "cultivation idols" created by it have become the projection of fans' self ideals. Although fans cannot stand on the stage in person, after projecting this dream on the star, they support the "ideal self" by supporting the star's acting path. On the one hand, stars can gain the support of fans through their projections and make their acting career smoother; on the other hand, while stars continue to improve themselves, fans also see the possibility of realizing their dreams. There is an alternative satisfaction in being constantly created in one's own hands.

#### **4.2 Fans' group "protection" and "competition" psychology**

Under the mimetic social relationship, fans' one-way emotions towards idols tend to form a "protective" mentality. By means of "assistance", idol development programs have created a strong connection between the audience and the development of media roles. It also makes fans willing to pay for their idols under the influence of this mimetic relationship. For the better development of idols, many fans bought drinks designated by sponsors and scanned the QR code to make the list. Sponsors and platforms bind fans' consumption to idol debuts, and use emotional bonds to make fans "pay for love". However, irrational consumption is prone to occur in such idol development programs. In order to allow idols to debut, many fans have experienced consumption that exceeds their actual ability (Wu Yue, Sun Yuannan, Zhu Ning, & Shi Xiaowei, 2020). Fans and idols establish a one-way mimetic social relationship through the program, and fans also consume for idols in this one-way mimetic social relationship. This kind of consumption is based on mimetic social relations, and has the characteristics of virtuality, persistence and cross-situation. If it is not properly guided, it will easily lead to irrational consumption and impulsive consumption psychology of fans, ignoring their own consumption situation. The audiences of idol development programs are mostly teenagers. Adolescence is a critical stage in the formation of personal values, and the network subculture and social environment have a profound impact on youth values.

The popularity of "Youth With You 3" is not only on the broadcast platform, but also has a high degree of attention and discussion on major social platforms. After sponsors and platforms guide fans to consume through the "protective" psychology of fans, social platforms further stimulate "competition" among fans. The boost value will affect the ranking of idols in the show, and idols in the same show will inevitably have a competitive relationship. The competitive relationship is well conveyed to social platforms through text consumption, and it has become a "secret rivalry" among fans. If fans want their idols to have a higher "assistance value" than other players, they need to vote on the list by purchasing products from sponsors. "Competition" made this idol ranking slip even further into the abyss of irrational consumption and food waste. The competition mechanism in idol development programs has gradually transformed into a purchasing power competition among fans (Zhu Lili & Han Yichen, 2017).

### **5. Conclusions**

First of all, the government should consolidate the main responsibility of the platform and strengthen the daily management of the network. In accordance with the principle of who runs the management, and who benefits, who is responsible, supervise the website platform, especially the online platform with a relatively concentrated "fan circle" culture. Set up a special team to strengthen daily research and judgment, and deal with and clean up harmful information. Combined with the "Qinglang Special" action, we will further strengthen the detailed research on the behavior patterns and governance strategies of fan groups behind the "fan circle culture", guide online platforms to formulate community rules, regulate the behavior of fan groups from the source, and guide young people to pursue stars rationally and healthily. Second, the platform should actively respond to the call for governance of the fan circle and actively undertake social responsibilities. The Weibo platform should actively cooperate with governance actions, and jointly establish an authoritative evaluation system with the media, creators, stars and brokers to guide fans to pursue stars rationally and promote the healthy and orderly development of the industry. At the same time, the platform must form the correct production logic and improve the voting and promotion mechanism. In terms of production logic, idol development programs should focus on "the growth and experience of idols starting from amateurs", and convey correct values and moral qualities from them. The focus of production and promotion should not be on "traffic". In addition, sponsors should correctly guide fans' consumption, impose strict regulations on fans' consumption methods and consumption limits, resolutely resist the "wind of waste", shoulder social responsibilities, and establish a corporate image. Finally, the audience must establish a correct outlook on life, morality, and values, recognize the distance between the virtual world and the real world, and have a certain ability to distinguish and recognize network subcultures.

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