

Through a beam of light to see oneself: from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory on young people's rational idol worship

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Abstract. Nowadays, the behavior of young people to pursuit of celebrities is no longer only a kind of entertainment; rather, it has become a deeply integrated social practice, which is closely linked to individual self-construction and the satisfaction of psychological needs. This article uses the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the analytical framework. Additionally, we combine SDT with field observations of the offline fans group in Hengdian to explore how idols and celebrities, acting like psychological symbols, meet the three basic psychological needs of young people—autonomy, competence, and belonging—in order to complete the projection of the ideal self and promote self-growth. The research finds that positive pursuit of idols can provide emotional support, value reference, and active motivation for young people, but idol worship does not mean blind attachment. This is because positive transformation of pursuing idols has boundaries, and the existing practical materials cannot prove that pursuing idols leads to long-term and stable personality changes. Based on this, this article distinguishes three groups of concepts: idol worship and blind pursuit, emotional value and reality avoidance, imitation of idols and internalization of values, proposing a rational pursuit of idols as a practical path to guide and encourage young people to transform their yearning for idols into an internal driving force for self-development.

Keywords: rational pursuit of idols, Self-Determination Theory, youth psychology, fan culture, projection of ideal self

1. Introduction

Chasing stars had become an important cultural lifestyle for contemporary young people. Public opinion often relates chasing stars with blind fanaticism and irrational consumption, which labels the fan groups as impulsive and emotional groups.

However, it tends to overlook the true psychological demands of young people behind their behaviors. For many young people, an idol is not only a product produced by the entertainment industry, but also a mirror and a reference light that allows them to see, construct, and motivate themselves.

Why do young people chase stars? How does chasing stars play a role in young people's self-growth? Which kind of media the stars use to participate in the shaping of young people's self-identity? This article is based on the onsite fan research scenario in Hengdian, introduces the Self-Determination Theory, breaks away from the binary opposition of "criticizing chasing stars" or "praising chasing stars", and analyzes the internal mechanism of the behavior of chasing star from the perspective of basic psychological needs.

This article first sorts out the relevant literature on idol worship and young people's self-development. Then, the article presents the real chasing star practices of the onsite fan group in Hengdian. Additionally, it disassembles the three paths through which idols satisfy the psychological needs of young people by relying on the Self-Determination Theory. Finally, it summarizes the practical implications of rational chasing stars and explores how to transform the love for idols into the power of self-improvement, achieving "seeing oneself through a beam of light".

2. Literature review: idol worship has long been a hot topic in the study of youth culture

Early research tended to view idol worship as a psychological phenomenon during the transitional stage of teenagers. Some studies linked intense idol worship with addiction, escapism, and impulsive consumption, regarding fan behavior as an irrational emotional release [1]. However, as fan culture research was shifted, more scholars have proposed that idol worship does not equal to blind dependence.

From psychological perspective, idols have the function of psychological projection. The theory of ideal self-projecting suggests that individuals will project the personality traits and life goals they yearn for onto the idol, and the idol becomes the concrete carrier of the individual's "ideal self" [2]. The youth stage is a period of rapid formation of self-concept, and the self-identity has not yet been fully established. They urgently seek reference objects to answer questions about "what kind of person so I want to be?" Fortunately, idols provide ready-made models for young people.

From the perspective of positive psychology, positive idol worship can bring positive psychological resources, providing emotional support and value identification [3]. However, existing literature still has limitations: most studies focus on online fan texts, and there is less observation of offline field scenarios [4]; more descriptions of the psychological phenomena brought by chasing stars, and less use of mature motivation theories to explain "why chasing stars can promote self-growth"; at the same time, many promotional materials emphasize that chasing stars can achieve self-improvement, but there is still a lack of evidence at the empirical level to prove that chasing stars can bring long-term and stable personality changes.

The Self-Determination Theory offers a useful framework for this study [5]. It suggests that people's inner drive comes from three basic psychological needs, which are autonomy, competence, and belonging. When these needs are satisfied, individuals tend to show self-motivation and positive development. However, when these needs are not met, they may easily fall into blind conformity or other negative conditions. Teenagers' idol-chasing behavior can be seen as a process in which they try to fulfill these three kinds of needs, and idols [6].

3. Field observation of office fan practices in Hengdian

Hengdian was chosen as the main site for this fieldwork. It serves as a concentrated center for film and television production, so it draws a large number of offline fans. Many young visitors show up every day. They come to see their favorite celebrities in person. They also organize fan support activities and watch the

filming process. This kind of setting gives researchers a good chance to observe fan behavior in a real environment. Self-determination theory was used as the analytical framework for making sense of the collected observations.

The first part deals with emotional release and replenishment. Fans reported strong emotional responses as their most immediate experience. Traveling to the site and meeting idols face to face brought them joy and excitement. Many participants talked about feeling stressed from school or work. This activity gave them a temporary break from those pressures. The research did not find that participants were using this experience to escape their real-life duties, though. Most fans could tell the difference between these short emotional breaks and their larger life commitments. The whole interaction seemed to work as a kind of psychological recovery. After that, they generally went back to their daily routines with more energy.

The second part looks at community and belonging. Offline fandom was rarely done alone. Participants often formed temporary groups without much planning. Strangers connected with each other because they admired the same celebrity. These groups made it easier to share information, help one another out, and talk about feelings. In this group setting, personal emotions got recognized and echoed by other people. A sense of belonging often developed, and social networks expanded as well. But the research also pointed out some possible downsides. Group dynamics sometimes pushed people to follow the crowd. This could lead to competitive behavior or spending more money than they normally would.

The third part covers self-reflection through reference to idols. During interviews, some fans brought up their idols' career paths. They mentioned qualities like persistence, self-discipline, and continued effort. A few participants said they wanted to copy these traits in their own lives. They talked about doing better in school or at work. The fieldwork showed, however, that these aspirations did not always turn into steady self-development. Most fans could recognize good qualities in their idols, but only a smaller number actually changed their behavior over time. Media stories often present fandom as a life-changing experience, yet the observational data did not support that claim in most cases.

To sum up, the findings suggest that fandom is neither good nor bad by itself. It can give people positive psychological resources and social connections. But it also comes with the risk of going too far or acting without much thought. What really matters is not whether someone takes part in fandom. It is more about how the whole experience meets the three core psychological needs from self-determination theory. This framework helps explain why fan behaviors vary so much from one person to another.

Two distinct pathways were observed. In the healthy pattern, emotional companionship came from the community. Independent judgment stayed intact, however, Group pressure was also resisted. The risky pattern looked quite different. Self-worth got placed entirely into the fan group. Group norms were followed without question. Independent thinking gradually disappeared. This showed up in uncritical online comments. Excessive support activities also appeared. When relatedness rests on blind conformity, it turns into excessive dependence. Both the group and the idol become objects of this dependence. Sensible fandom gets left behind. Idol admiration should not be confused with psychological dependence. Relatedness ought to supplement the self. It should not consume the self.

Self-determination theory points to three basic psychological needs. These needs push people to grow. They are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Constructive fandom works through activities that center on idols. These activities respond to the three needs one by one. In this process, internal motivation gets strengthened. Self-construction also moves forward.

3.1. The relatedness need: fan communities as emotional bonds

The need for relatedness is about a basic psychological want. People look for connection. They look for acceptance. They want to feel they belong. There are many young people today who feel lonely. Being a fan creates a space for emotional ties.

In Hengdian, fans formed communities on site. They liked the same celebrity. This gave them common ground. Shared topics gave them things to talk about. Group members understood each other's feelings. Individuals were no longer alone in their interest. They became part of a larger group. Other people confirmed their feelings. This also helped ease their loneliness.

But there are two ways to satisfy this need. In a healthy pattern, people get emotional support from the group. They still keep their own judgment. They resist pressure from others. The risky pattern works differently. People put all their self-worth into the fan group. They follow group rules without thinking. Independent judgment fades away. This shows up in blind online comments. It also shows up in extreme support activities. When belonging depends on blindly following others, people become too dependent on the group and the celebrity. This is not sensible worship. Admiring a celebrity should not mean depending on them completely. Belonging should add to the self. It should not swallow the self up.

3.2. The competence need: celebrities as role models and sources of confidence

The competence need is about feeling capable. People want to believe they can improve and achieve something. There are qualities that young people see as ideals in celebrities, and these qualities become concrete examples. Young fans project their ideal selves onto celebrities by admiring hard work, talent, and self-discipline. This admiration becomes a reference point. They think, "I want these qualities too." Watching celebrities overcome difficulties gives fans indirect encouragement. They start to feel, "I can also push myself to get better." There are some fans who use celebrities to motivate themselves in studying, exercising, or learning new skills. They turn the stories of their idols' struggles into mental resources for their own efforts.

A distinction must be made here. Being influenced by an idol is one thing. Attempting to replicate an idol entirely is quite another. Healthy satisfaction of the competence need involves internalization. Fans take in the values and qualities embodied by the idol. They then apply these to their own lives. Copying the idol's life path wholesale is not the goal. Forcing oneself into an imitation of the idol's lifestyle should also be avoided. An idol's life belongs to another person.

Young people need to draw strength from it. Their own stories, however, must be written by themselves. Blind imitation tends to negate one's own reality. Frustration often follows. The research also indicated something about motivational effects from idols. These effects tend to be short-term. They are emotionally driven. Translating them into lasting self-efficacy still depends on concrete actions. These actions must take place in real life. Fandom alone cannot directly produce skill improvement.

3.3. Autonomy need about reconstructing personal choice and distinguishing boundaries

The need for autonomy concerns personal volition. Individuals need to act from their own choices. Independent decision-making should be exercised. A clear distinction must be maintained between one's own life and the idol's life. This capacity forms the most essential part of sensible fandom. Unhealthy fandom has a core problem. The autonomy need gets impaired in such cases. The idol's life becomes the center of the fan's own existence. Excessive time gets devoted to the idol. Financial resources are also spent in large amounts. Emotional states become entirely tied to the idol's schedule. Public reception of the idol also determines how the fan feels. Self-direction is lost under these conditions. Personal worth becomes attached to the idol's

success or failure. Fandom transforms into external control at this point. Intrinsic motivation and voluntary choice no longer drive the behavior.

Adequate satisfaction of the autonomy need produces a different outcome. Fandom becomes one of many life choices. It no longer dominates everything else. Affection for the idol remains genuine. The fan recognizes the idol as an external reference point, however. Life goals and value judgments come from within. The individual defines these things personally. To admire an idol means to actively choose light from that person. Surrendering one's entire self is not part of this choice. There is a phrase: "borrowing a beam of light to see oneself." This phrase places emphasis on the act of self-recognition. The light itself matters less. Idols supply illumination. The subject who perceives and constructs the self, however, is always the young person themselves.

Coordinated satisfaction of all three needs allows fandom to generate positive psychological effects. These three needs are relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Absence of the autonomy need changes the picture. Pursuit becomes limited to relatedness or fleeting feelings of competence. Fandom readily slides into fervent obsession under these conditions. Uncritical attitudes also take over.

4. Practical insights from rational star-watching

According to these theories, we can find out three important concepts: idol adoration is not equal to blind dependence, emotional value is not equal to negative avoidance of reality, and influence by idol is not equal to competently copying it. Because of this, from the two aspects of individual youth and social publicity, we can give practical insights of rational fan follow.

First, for individual youth, keep our own main core state, build clear self border, fan follow can be used in to satisfy the psychological needs of belonging and competence, but can't sacrifice our own personal need. We can enjoy the fan communities' accompany, but refuse to being held hostage by public opinion. Can appreciate the shining aspects of their idols and draw inspiration from them, but not place all their hopes for life on the idols. Allow ourselves to experience the emotional joy from fan follow, but need to distinguish between entertainment comfort and actual avoidance of reality. The power of emotions ultimately needs to be applied to our own real life.

Second, for social publicity, giving up those black-and-white judgment logic, not just deny fan follow, and don't be over react to the magical transfer power of idol worship. Instead of simply telling young people to "Not idolize stars", we should guide them to distinguish that what is healthy affection, and what is the kind of attachment that is overly obsessive. The promote materials should reduce narratives like "being a fan completely changes people's life". Fan follow can provide psychological motivation, but it is difficult to let people independently make long-term personal transform. Growth depends on the individual's continuous actions in reality.

Third, in fan base, we can create an inclusive and rational community environment, communities can give emotional support, but we need to resist group pressure such as competitive support, forced conformity of positions and so on. Encourage fans to turn the qualities of their idols inside and translate them into actions in their studies and daily lives, rather than spending their energy on conflicts.

Fourth and final, face up to limitations. Fan follows' positive psychological effects of idol have border. The courage brought by idols are mostly short-term psychological resources.

5. Conclusion

To achieve long-term self development, we still need to be part in activities in real life. Fan Follow is a special way for modern young people to seek self aware. According to the theory of self decision, it can be seen that fan follow itself is not totally right or wrong, its impact depends on how the three basic need of autonomy, competence, and belonging are fulfill in fan follow process. As a light, the idol can be as a mirror and model for young people to understand themselves and encourage themselves. However, true growth is not just living as an idol, but by the light to see clearly about out direction, and finally build our own life power.

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