

Avoiding emotional overload: exploring irrational behaviors in online fandom communities and positive guidance strategies

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Abstract. In contemporary digital culture, fan–idol relationships have developed beyond traditional forms of entertainment consumption. These relationships now involve more complex emotional and social interactions shaped by psychological attachment and symbolic participation. This study examines the causes and effects of emotional overload in online fandom communities. It also looks at ways to encourage healthier forms of fan engagement. Through an analysis of parasocial relationships and fan behavior in Hengdian, this research examines how emotional identification, group participation, and perceived intimacy affect fans' experiences. Interviews with local workers and fans in Hengdian show how fans create connections with idols. These connections include visiting filming locations, copying idols' makeup and styles, following their activities, and bringing their values into daily life. The study also examines how strong emotional investment, peer pressure, and unclear psychological boundaries can lead to unhealthy behaviors and emotional stress. At the same time, positive emotional identification and healthy boundaries can make fan engagement a source of motivation and personal growth.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, fan–idol relationships, fan culture, emotional attachment, Hengdian

1. Introduction

Idol industries and social media grow very fast. Fans no longer only watch shows. Fan culture becomes a full interactive system between fans and idols. Hengdian Film and Television City is a typical place for offline fan activities. This paper applies parasocial relationship theories to show how modern fans develop emotional connections with idols. Fieldwork in Hengdian shows that fans' participation goes beyond purchasing entertainment content by visiting filming locations, imitating idols' styles, and following their activities. Interviews with fans and local workers reveal two major factors behind strong emotional attachment and unreasonable behaviors. Individually, parasocial relationships, time and financial investment, and information bubbles can distort fans' perceptions, while fan-group identity and peer pressure can intensify collective emotions. The paper therefore emphasizes the importance of rational fan engagement, suggesting that

balanced emotional attachment can support personal growth while excessive investment may lead to anxiety and online conflict.

2. Factors contributing to fan emotional engagement

2.1. Factors contributed to unhealthy behaviors of fans

Fans' feelings do not come by themselves. Personal emotional thoughts and group atmosphere work together. They make feelings stronger and finally create extreme group feelings. Personal-side factors create these emotional behaviors. Three main factors are parasocial relationships, sunk costs, and information cocoons.

First, parasocial relationships are one-sided virtual close links between fans and idols. Fans watch idols' shows, daily posts and interviews. They learn about idols' growth and life stories. They feel idols are close virtual friends. But idols almost never know these fans. Fans have strong emotional recognition in this situation. They connect idols' success or failure with their own feelings. When idols get praise or make good progress, fans feel proud and happy. When idols face public bad comments or online attacks, fans feel wronged, angry and sad. Fans often use idols to show their own ideal self. Some people feel empty or do not know what to do in life. They look to idols to fill that empty feeling and find life goals [1]. People put their hopes for beauty, success and strength on idols. This deep inner attachment makes fans care too much about news of their idols. Small changes in public opinions get bigger because of personal feelings. This creates inner conditions for strong group feelings.

Second, sunk costs are another main cause. Fans keep giving time and energy in fandom. One source says these emotional links can take up fans' whole life. Fans give lots of time and resources to their idols [1]. Fans spend time, energy and money for a long time. They learn to edit photos and make short videos. They buy fan goods and albums. They join charity activities and manage online public opinions for idols. The sunk-cost fallacy works here. People's emotional attachment becomes stronger, when they spend more on one thing. They cannot judge this thing in objective ways. Long-time fandom stops fans from seeing idols' good sides and bad sides. They refuse bad information by instinct. Their emotional bias and fixation become stronger. This inner state may make fans do stalking-like things. Fans follow stars' moves, collect private personal information and even do real-world stalking [2]. We can take Teen Times Group fan groups as an example. Some fans get private information in illegal ways. This information includes travel plans, home addresses, ID numbers and medical insurance records. These fans only want to get closer to idols. This action is unreasonable and hurts other people.

Third, limited thinking and information cocoons make fans think in one-sided ways. Internet algorithms make special information bubbles for fans. Fans mostly see positive materials and good comments filtered by fan groups. Platform algorithms keep pushing content fans like. They hide neutral or bad information. Fans' thinking becomes wrong, after they only see positive content for a long time. Fans think idols are perfect. They ignore common human weaknesses and real arguments about idols. They cannot accept any bad comments. This is a kind of cognitive bias [1]. When other people give fair criticism or useful advice, fans see these words as bad lies. They will defend their idols and lose the ability to think objectively.

2.2. Correlation between parasocial relationship and fan-idol interactions

The participation of fans in Hengdian shows a change in how emotional connections with idols are built within contemporary fan culture. Instead of only admiration in the past, now fan-idol relationships are strongly influenced by emotional identification, active participation, and perceived intimacy. This relationship can be support through par asocial relationship theory, which explains how audiences develop feelings of familiarity

and emotional attachment towards public figures even when there is limited direct contact. Parasocial relationships occur when one person becomes familiar with a public figure, while this one-way relationship is not responded or recognized by the other side. This relationship allows audiences to form meaningful emotional attachments even with the lack of a conventional interpersonal relationship [3]. By paying continuous attention toward idols' characteristics and activities, fans create a sense of closeness and incorporate idols' values into their own lives. The interview conducted in Hengdian show that fans view idols not only as entertainers but also as a source of emotional support, motivation of life, and personal inspiration.

The behaviors of fans who were interviewed at Hengdian show that their relationship with idols is created through active participation rather than passive observation. Research on fan behavior indicates that fandom contains aspects such as active engagement, social interaction, and emotional investment rather than only financial supporting the idols [4]. Interviews with local workers in Hengdian claim that fan activities have become a visible and common part of the local environment. Driver 1, who has worked in Hengdian for three years, estimated that approximately 95% of his passengers are young female fans traveling to Hengdian solely because they want to follow their idol who is currently working at Hengdian and shows idol-related travel is not simply tourism. This travel plan represents a form of physical and emotional participation of fans by entering spaces connected to their idols. Fans try to experience the same environment that is surrounding the idols by visiting filming locations and create a stronger connection with their idol's world.

This active participation can also be seen in idol-inspired consumption and makeup imitation. A makeup artist explained that many customers who look for makeup services are young women between 15 and 22 years old. These customers often ask for makeup styles that are similar to those of their favorite idols. The owner of a store that also provides clothing rental services said that many fans purchase or rent clothes that copy the styles worn by actors. These behaviors show that fans are not only consuming an idol's performances. They are also copying parts of the idol's identity. Fans show their commitment through actions that let them take part in and express their connection with idols [3]. By copying an idol's clothing and makeup styles, fans turn admiration into a physical connection. This can make fans feel closer to their idols and increase their sense of intimacy.

Fans' desire for information about idols also shows this emotional relationship. The makeup artist said that some fans ask if the store knows the filming schedules or upcoming activities of idols working in Hengdian. These fans may not have direct communication with the idols. Their efforts to learn about idols' lives show that they want to feel closer to them. Parasocial relationships often need repeated exposure and attention. This can create feelings of familiarity toward public figures [3]. Information about an idol's activities is important to fans. Fans may interpret this information as a way to feel closer to the idol and learn more about their lives.

The interviews with Shuxin Yu's fans also show how fans understand their emotional connections with idols. One fan explained that she became interested in Shuxin Yu because of her "cute and optimistic" personality. This personality encouraged the fan to face difficulties with more confidence. Another fan said that Shuxin Yu's personality motivated her to become a better version of herself. It also affected her daily behavior. These examples show that modern fan-idol relationships involve more than simple admiration. They also involve emotional identification with the idol. Parasocial attachment suggests that emotional bonds with public figures can provide psychological meaning and meet emotional needs similar to other forms of attachment [3].

At the same time, fans often feel their relationship with idols through ideas of emotional exchange and mutual support. Several fans described their relationship with Shuxin Yu as "two-way support," holding the idea that idols provide engagement to fans while fans support idols through consuming products and participating in fan activities. One fan who is a student said that although she could not participate heavily in

online activities or spend large amounts of money, she continued supporting the idol through her own methods, like editing videos or creating posters. This shows that fans define their relationship with idols in various ways rather than only through financial contributions. These actions also allow fans to feel that their support has meaning and value. By creating content and sharing it with other fans, they can express their feelings and show their connection to the idol. This process can also make fans feel more involved in the fandom community. In this way, support becomes both a personal expression and a social activity.

Overall, Hengdian's fan culture illustrates the idea that modern fan-idol relationships are actively constructed through repeated interaction, participation, and interpretation. Fans do not simply purchase idol-related products, on the other hand, they create meaningful personal experience through visiting filming locations, makeup imitation, following idol activities, and incorporating idol's values into their identities. Together, these studies show that parasocial relationships are meaningful emotional and social experiences shaped by attachment, devotion, and participation [3, 4]. The Hengdian case shows that idols can become sources of emotional support and motivation, changing admiration into deeper emotional engagement.

2.3. Psychological boundaries and healthy fan engagement

In the era of social media, fan behavior has become increasingly common in daily life, but it has also given rise to many problems. Some fans closely link their idols' emotions with their own, feeling happy when the idol is happy and sad or angry when the idol is criticized, even engaging in online conflicts with other users. Others go to great lengths to support their idols by boosting rankings and purchasing merchandise, often overspending beyond their means. According to a 2019 survey by the People's Forum Questionnaire Research Center, approximately 9.5% of fans invest significant energy into their fandom, and about 66% of fan groups experience intense emotional fluctuations due to their idols' activities. These are some of the serious issues arising from modern fan culture [5].

Many psychological studies on fan behavior indicate that excessive fan activities that cross psychological boundaries can lead to various mental health issues. Fans who engage in such behaviors are also significantly more likely to experience depression and anxiety when facing setbacks compared to ordinary fans [6]. Conversely, relevant data show that fans who regularly receive positive fan guidance are less likely to participate in fan circle conflicts or online quarrels [7]. During field research in Hengdian, some fans interviewed expressed that watching their idols from afar brings them happiness. However, when overly immersed, they feel distressed upon parting. Therefore, to reduce the occurrence of psychological problems, fans should establish healthy psychological boundaries with their idols.

Psychological boundaries can be established with idols through several ways. First, recognition of boundaries between oneself and the idol must be clear, understanding that one's emotions, fate, and psychology are different from the idol's. A major cause of unhealthy fandom is when some fans excessively "glorify" their idols, constantly amplifying their strengths while forgetting that idols are merely highly publicized ordinary people who can make mistakes and have flaws. Fans should not view idols as perfect beings. Furthermore, choose the good in others and follow it; for the bad, correct yourself. Fans should learn from their idols' virtues and, upon noticing areas where idols have drawbacks, self-reflect and improve. Here is how to do it specifically: First, establishing healthy psychological boundaries requires clear self-awareness. To be blunt, although idols are highly publicized ordinary people, there is still a significant distance between them and their fans, with most fans being just passersby in the idols' lives. Second, building healthy boundaries involves learning emotional independence. Fans should not put most of their emotions on their idols. They need to think for themselves and rationally approach fan activities. Third, healthy interaction with idols and maintaining appropriate boundaries are essential. Distance creates beauty, and do not pry into idols' private

lives; participating in their public offline events is sufficient. Finally, breaking the one-way nature of fandom and instead gaining energy from it to make it more meaningful, transforming idols into role models, is crucial for establishing healthy boundaries.

There are indeed many fans who pursue fandom healthily. These individuals often turn fandom into a motivation for life and study, achieving self-improvement and growth, the 'highest realm' of fandom. The general public can like idols for their virtues and draw positive strength from their films, songs, and personal experiences. Reasonably supporting idols and buying idol-related content within one's capacity and without affecting oneself draws the healthy psychological boundary between fans and idols. However, if this boundary is crossed and irrational behaviors are engaged in, fandom can become a burden and even lead to mental health issues. Fandom itself is neither right nor wrong, but it becomes problematic when it goes too far and crosses the line.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study relates to sociology, psychology, and media environments. It primarily observes from three aspects: the relationship between fans and idols, interactions with idols, and psychological boundaries when participating in activities related to idols, while also incorporating our field research in Hengdian. Based on the parasocial relationship theory, during our field research, we found that even though most fans have never met their idols, and even if they barely form a mutual intimate relationship with them, simply connecting with idols through actions like watching shows on mobile phones, computers, going to offline fan activities, purchasing merchandise could still provide fans with strong emotional support and gain spiritual comfort from it. Many fans often imagine this one-way emotional investment as a close relationship with their idols.

To avoid irrational behaviors and emotional loss of control, and to pursue healthy fan behaviors, it requires not only the efforts of the majority of fans but also supervision from parents and friends around them, as well as positive guidance from idols' teams and platforms. Only by understanding the nature of fandom and balancing real life can fandom become meaningful, serving as a resting place for the mind and life.

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