

A Study of the Phenomenon of Celebrity Idols Among Adolescent Students in Chinese Popular Culture

Xuyang Zhou^{1, a, *}

¹ Shanghai International Studies University, 1550 Wenxiang Road, Shanghai, China

a. email: nyxl_young@shisu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: With the continuous development of economic globalisation, social informatisation and cultural diversification, pop culture has greatly impacted people's daily lives. Cultural diversity, the celebrity effect and celebrity worships are important and significant expressions and carriers of pop culture and an indispensable part of pop culture. The spread and popularity of popular culture have become possible along with it. People are the carriers of culture, which in turn means that culture has the function of shaping people. Celebrity worship is a transitional behaviour in the process of adolescent growth; most adolescents, since China's reform and opening up, have seen themselves as carriers of culture and have taken celebrities as their idols. Today the worship of celebrity idols in Chinese popular culture has become a part of people's daily lives. The study of the phenomenon of idol worship among Chinese adolescents itself is therefore of great sociological and cultural importance. Therefore, this thesis aims to promote the development of the study of idol worship among Chinese adolescents. It will also be able to explore the idolatry of adolescents and their values in today's society.

Keywords: Idolatry, Celebrity, Adolescents, Pop culture

1. Introduction

Since China's reform and opening up, pop culture has gradually become one of the important social and cultural phenomena in contemporary Chinese social life, existing in all areas of social life, its permeability and universality influencing all aspects of society and being a driving force for the development and changes in social structure, social organisation, social changes, social classes and social lifestyles.

In terms of the temporal structure of the spread of popular culture, the period of celebrity demonstration is an indispensable part of the process, and it is through the demonstration effect of celebrities that popular culture is able to maintain its vitality and spread. It can be said that the celebrity effect and celebrity idolatry in pop culture, as an important expression and carrier of pop culture, make it possible to spread and popularise pop culture and are an indispensable and important part of pop culture. Without celebrity idol worship, the values and meanings of the relevant popular non-objects would not be well spread and expressed [1]. While carrying part of the meaning, a stable connection is established with a certain meaning, which is made to be given to this carrier (celebrity, idol worship) itself. Based on the psychological and physiological characteristics of adolescents, the majority of celebrity idol worshippers are teenagers, who are the

main 'actors' of the pop culture phenomenon of idol worship. The phenomenon of adolescent celebrity worship, especially the external behavioural manifestations, internal psychological states and interactions among members of adolescent celebrity worship groups, makes celebrity idol worship and pop culture play a practical function and effect and plays a more important role in the spread and development of pop culture [2].

As for adolescent idolatry, scholars basically agree that "idolatry, as a special psychological behaviour, is a stage of adolescents' behaviour in the process of individual growth and a transitional behaviour of adolescents towards adulthood, essentially reflecting adolescents' social identity and emotional attachment to ideal figures in self-affirmation, and is an 'accessory' to their age-specific psychological. It is an 'appendage' of their psychological development at a particular age" [3]. Therefore, in the face of the complex internal meaning and external environment of youth idol worship in today's popular culture, only by making appropriate adjustments to the misconduct and phenomenon from the different roles and functions of the government, society and individuals, and exploring the path of reconstructing contemporary youth celebrity idol worship, can the positive meaning and value in youth subculture have unlimited possibilities to flourish.

2. Literature Review

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, sociology began its comprehensive study of 'popular culture' as a result of the development of productivity and consumer power. During the paradigm phase of his theoretical research, Spencer was the first to identify the social significance of popular fashion rituals. "He saw fashion as a performative activity of social relations, in which human nature led to the pursuit of fashionable forms in social life, and in which, through the elaboration and constant change of fashionable appearance, people of all classes and levels achieved mutual simulation and differentiation from one another"[4].

The study of idolatry, which focuses on 'fan studies', emerged in the early 1990s in British and American scholarship. "Its rise is closely related to the paradigm shift in the study of popular culture. Since the 1980s, the focus of popular culture research has gradually shifted from texts to audiences, from text production (coding) to text consumption (decoding) [5]. Instead of analysing texts and assuming they have a predictable impact on their audiences, researchers have focused on their ability to interpret texts and produce meaning. The third wave focused on new ways of consumption by fans [6].

One of the first sociologists to investigate the question of worship was the Frenchman Charles Turgot. In his book *The Basic Forms of Religious Life*, he describes in detail the early forms of worship - totem worship and religious worship [7]. Idolatry gradually developed on this basis, breaking away from the types of totem worship and religious worship, constantly influencing and conditioning human emotions and behaviour, and more. As society progressed and developed, the objects of human worship gradually moved from the abstract and illusory of the transcendent to the real and realistic of the human and secular, and the connotations of idol worship began to change.

In Andrea Macdonald's 'Uncertain Utopia - Science Fiction's Mediated Fandust and Computer-Mediated Communication', Macdonald gives his own definition of fans, which differs from the conceptual definitions of mainstream scholars in that he believes that fans are actually those who pay closer attention to the content of idols, texts and so on than the average person. The common focus on objects and content makes fans identify more with the fan group they belong to and may also impact fans' values and outlook on life [8]. A study of the fan base of science fiction television shows argues that the computer network, as a medium of fan communication, is not as free as one might think [9]. However, there are hierarchies and constraints, and when behaviours that are not in line with fan behaviour or violate the civilised conventions of online communication, they are rejected, blamed or even punished by other group members. This hierarchy is often

determined by knowledge, fan level, access, leadership, and place. These different hierarchies are important in certain arenas; for example, the higher-ranking fans have a higher level of voice and dominance in certain places [10].

3. Method

This study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The two main sociological research methods to be used are the documentary method and the questionnaire method. A questionnaire was used for data collection.

The research will be conducted by means of a self-administered questionnaire on adolescent idolatry, which will be distributed in real life, and an online survey (Questionnaire Star software). A small sample of adolescent students was tested before the questionnaire was distributed, and some of the unreasonable questions or expressions were modified and improved, resulting in the final version of the questionnaire, the Idolatry Questionnaire for Adolescent Students, which can be seen in the appendix. The questionnaire is divided into three main parts: firstly, the basic situation of adolescents and the phenomenon of idol worship; secondly, the extent and behaviour of adolescent idol worship; and thirdly, the attitude towards idol worship, especially celebrity idol worship.

There were 5666 completed web questionnaires, of which 4711 were valid, with a return rate of 83.15%. The valid data of the questionnaire survey were entered, analysed and counted using EXCEL office software, Questionnaire Star software and SPSS software. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha of the questionnaire is 0.901, which means it is valid and reliable. Thus, the study's results can be analysed to summarise the similarities and differences of idol worship among different groups of adolescent students and to show the current situation of contemporary adolescent idol worship.

4. Results and Discussion

Idol worship shows generalisation and a high degree of involvement in the teenage group. The phenomenon of idol worship is still widespread among the teenage population, with 68.85% of teenagers (3,243) having idol worship, as shown by the questionnaire data in general. In terms of the degree of adolescent idol worship, it is divided into levels 1-5, with level 1 being the lightest, among which the number of adoring to very adoring, i.e. levels 3 to 5 is 1530, accounting for 79.96% of the number of idol worshippers (3243), i.e. most of the adolescents who have idol worshipped consider themselves to have a moderate degree of adoration for their idols and above, and the degree of adoration is more in-depth.

In terms of worship behaviour, both teenagers' access to information about their idols and their participation in celebrity-chasing activities are characterised by modern technology use, while spending on their idols has become more common behaviour among fan groups. According to the survey, the mobile internet is the most important medium for young people to access information about their idols; they use video, live streaming, social networking and search engine platforms to follow their idols most often. The most popular fan activity is "voting for idol-related lists". More than half of the teenagers who worship idols have spent money on their idols, and the most expensive spending is on idol peripherals and endorsement products, as well as a higher proportion of spending on "online paid programmes and digital albums", which also shows the impact of the development of the internet on the content of teenage idol worship. Regarding age comparison, there is no significant difference between the age groups of 15-19 years old, with an average of 65% of teenagers having idol worship and only 90% of 12-14 year-olds having idol worship.

In terms of the types of idols adored by young people of all ages, acting (film, TV and song) stars are the most adored category in all ages. It is noteworthy that the 12-14-year-olds have the

highest number of acting (film, TV and song) stars, but not an absolute majority, while the business elite also has more idols. In the 19-year-old age group, apart from acting (film, TV and song) stars, political and military leaders are also overrepresented.

The top three idols admired by male teenagers are: "political and military leaders" (25.91%), "acting (film and song) stars" (19.72%) and "Athletes, sports stars" (16.06%); the top three idols admired by female teenagers were: "acting (film and song) stars" (63.97%), "second generation " (5.93%), and "writers and other cultural scholars" (4.78%).

In terms of attitudes towards celebrity idol worship by gender, 20.62% of male teenagers expressed a supportive attitude, while 35.86% of female teenagers expressed a supportive attitude. In terms of the most important reason for worshipping or liking idols, the proportion of female teenagers choosing "idols are my emotional support and spiritual pillar" was significantly higher than that of male teenagers.

In terms of educational attainment, 86.52% of junior high school students, 74.33% of senior high school students and 68.28% of university students had idol worship.

In terms of the types of idol worship among teenagers of different ages, acting (film, TV and song) stars are the most worshipped category among all education levels. Although junior high school adolescents have the highest proportion of acting (film and song) stars, it is significantly lower than the proportion of high school and college students in the proportion of acting (film and song) stars, while junior high school adolescents worship a significantly higher proportion of social and business elites than high school and college adolescents, while college adolescents worship a significantly higher proportion of political and military leaders than junior high school and high school students, which is consistent with the aforementioned age differences in adolescents' worship. This is consistent with the differences in the age of adolescents' objects of worship described earlier.

Overall, adolescents' idolatry, in terms of age comparison. Idolatry is more common among young people, with the highest proportion of idolatry occurring between the ages of 12 and 14, with 'acting stars' being the most popular type of idol worshipped by young people of all ages. The difference between the lower age group (12-14 years old) and the higher age group (19 years old) is clear, showing the pattern of development between the early stages of cultural values formation and the relative maturity of adolescents and the significance of the role and influence of celebrity idols on adolescents during this period. In line with this pattern, there are also differences in the types of idols that young people aspire to be at different ages, with the younger age group (12-14 years old) wanting to be 'acting stars' and 'internet celebrities', while many young people in the older age group (19 years old) want to be 'political and military leaders'.

Secondly, the proportion of female teenagers who idolise is slightly higher than that of male teenagers, but there is no significant difference in the degree of idolisation. There are significant differences in the choice of idols between the genders, with males preferring "political and military leaders" and females having an overwhelming preference for "acting stars". Females are also more likely to worship virtual characters such as "secondary characters". Male adolescents are most likely to want to be "political and military leaders", while females are most likely to want to be "acting stars". Female adolescents also show more emotional characteristics in idol worship; for example, a higher proportion of female adolescents than male adolescents choose to support celebrity idol worship and the reasons for idol worship as "emotional support and spiritual expenditure".

Finally, regarding the comparison in terms of educational attainment, The proportion of adolescents' idol worship decreases as their education level rises. While the proportion of idols of "acting stars" is the highest among adolescents with different education levels, it also shows different education preferences; for example, more junior high school students choose "social and business elites", while more university students choose "political and military. More junior high

school students chose "social and business elites", while more university students chose "political and military leaders". In terms of the type of idol they want to be, the gap between junior high school students and high school and university students is larger, with junior high school students preferring to be "acting stars" and "internet celebrities", which is consistent with the findings of the age analysis in the previous section.

5. Conclusions

With the advent of the consumer society, consumption has replaced production as the main driving force for socio-economic development. The arrival of a consumer society has not only transformed the way of thinking and living of the masses, but as a popular culture of idol worship, the production of its products, whether from the selection of topics or the process of operation, has a deep commercial dimension. However, at the same time, as a form of popular culture, the positive function of celebrity idolatry for social and cultural development and for the public itself cannot be ignored. The emergence of celebrity idol worship promotes the development of popular culture and provides technical support, as well as the right guidance for fans to shape their personalities, and the development of a celebrity culture objectively promotes the development of a fan economy and a flow economy. Idol worship is a double-edged sword that can have an endless influence on society, but before it can play to its strengths, it needs to be regulated by the government and the industry to avoid the recurrence of idol misconduct. For young people, rational and healthy youth celebrity idol worship requires not only breaking free from the extreme obsession of losing oneself but also the lack of self-esteem.

Through the aura and image of celebrity projection constructed by commercial and celebrity idols, they should embark on a path of continuous self-search and self-improvement, grow psychologically while receiving mainstream cultural education, cultivate positive qualities, develop values and behaviour, and successfully pass through. They are socialised into adults with correct values, independence and self-awareness, and positive social behaviour. Young people should not accept celebrity idols without thinking, simply imitate them regardless of good or bad, or support them regardless of right or wrong, but should remain as sober and rational as possible on the basis of their own education and be aware of the positive and negative functions of celebrity idol worship.

References

- [1] Anthony Giddens. (1998). *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern period*.
- [2] Chris Rojek. (2002). *Celebrity: a cultural study of the phenomenon of celebrity*.
- [3] Yue Xiaodong, Yan Fei. (2006). *Exploring the psychological mechanism of adolescent idolatry*. *China Moral Education*. 11-16.
- [4] Gao Xuan Yang. (2015). *Sociology of popular culture*.
- [5] Yang Ling. (2011) *Research on Fan Culture in the Perspective of Western Consumerism*. *Changjiang Academic*. 29-38.
- [6] Deng Weijia. (2009). *An analysis of the three waves of "fan studies" in the West and the new development direction*. *International Journalism*. 32-35.
- [7] Emile Hulgau. (2011). *The basic forms of religious life*.
- [8] Larry A. Somerwa, Richard E. Porter. (2005). *Cross-cultural communication*.
- [9] Laurence Grossberg. (2014). *Media constructs: mass media in popular culture*.
- [10] Guo Xiaolan. (2015). *A study of the social psychology of Internet rumors in contemporary China*.

Appendix

Questionnaire on Idolatry for Young Students

Hello, students. This questionnaire is designed to understand the current situation of idolatry among teenage students. It is divided into three parts: firstly, the basic situation of teenagers and the phenomenon of idol worship; secondly, the extent and behaviour of teenagers' idol worship; thirdly, the attitude towards idol worship, especially celebrity idol worship. The third is the attitude towards idol worship, especially celebrity idol worship. Through the results of the study and analysis, we aim to The purpose of this study is to summarise the similarities and differences of idol worship among different groups of adolescent students, as well as the new characteristics and problems of contemporary adolescent celebrity idol worship. The findings of the study are intended to summarise the similarities and differences in idol worship among different groups of adolescent students, as well as the new characteristics and problems of contemporary adolescent celebrity idol worship.

The results of this survey are for scientific research purposes only and will not be The survey results are for scientific research purposes only and will not be delivered to any other organisation or individual.

Please read the questions carefully and fill them in as required. Thank you for your cooperation!

1. Your age (in years): [Multiple choice] *

- ☐ 11 years old and below
- ☐ 12-14
- ☐ 15
- ☐ 16
- ☐ 17
- ☐ 18
- ☐ 19
- ☐ 20 years old and above (Please skip to the end of the questionnaire and submit your answer)

2. Your gender: [Multiple choice] *

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

3. The school you are currently attending is: [radio] *

- ☐ Junior Secondary School (Middle School)
- ☐ Senior Secondary School (High School)
- ☐ Vocational high school
- ☐ Undergraduate
- ☐ University college
- ☐ Other, please specify _____

4. The location of your school is: [Single-choice] *

- ☐ City
- ☐ County
- ☐ Countryside

5. Do you have or have you ever had a particular idol you admire (hereinafter referred to as "Ta"): [Multiple choice] *

- ☐ Always have
- ☐ Now, but not before
- ☐ Used to have, but not now
- ☐ Never (Please skip to question 26)

The following questions are for the idols you admire most now or at one time

6. to which of the following areas does he/she belong: [Multiple Choice] *

- ☐ Political and military leaders
- ☐ Social and business elites

- Ancient sages and historical figures
- Performing arts (film and song) stars
- Experts in the field of science and technology
- Writers and other cultural scholars
- Athletes and sports stars
- Netizens and representatives of self-media personalities
- Social heroes and role models
- Classmates, parents or teachers or family relatives
- Second generation (virtual characters from movies, anime, TV or books)
- Other, please specify _____

7. What do you think is most important about the one (multiple answers allowed): [Multiple choice] *

- ☐ Outstanding appearance (e.g. beautiful, handsome, etc.)
- ☐ Charismatic personality (e.g. straightforward, elegant, humorous, etc.)
- ☐ Personal achievement and contribution (e.g. outstanding talent, outstanding career achievement and social contribution, etc.)
- ☐ Social status and prestige (e.g. high social status, wealth, power, etc.)
- ☐ Excellent ideological qualities (e.g. patriotism and professionalism, honesty and trustworthiness, courage in the name of justice, etc.)
- ☐ Others, please specify _____

8. The most important reason for you to admire or like the one is: [单选题] *

- Admire the idol's own appearance, temperament, personal achievement or social prestige, etc
- I can find my own reflection in my idol
- My idols are my emotional support and spiritual pillar, and they bring me motivation in my studies and life
- Idol worship can enrich my life
- Influenced and motivated by people around me
- Can't say exactly
- Other, please specify _____

9. On a scale of 1-5, with level 1 being the mildest, how would you rate your level of worship: [Multiple choice] *

Not at all ○ 1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ○ 4 ○ 5 Very much

10. How well do you know all aspects of the one: [Multiple choice] *

Not at all ○ 1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ○ 4 ○ 5 Very well

11. What do you think of the one as an icon: [Multiple choice] *

Very imperfect ○ 1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ○ 4 ○ 5 Very perfect

12. how consistently do you think the one is with the way he is portrayed in the media: [Multiple choice] *

Not at all consistent ○ 1 ○ 2 ○ 3 ○ 4 ○ 5 Completely consistent

13. In which of the following ways do you usually follow the one's activities (multiple answers allowed): [Multiple answers] *

- ☐ Traditional paper media (books, newspapers, magazines, etc.)
- ☐ TV
- ☐ Computer (including iPad)
- ☐ Mobile phone
- ☐ Face-to-face communication with others
- ☐ Other, please specify _____

14. What type of online platform do you usually use to access Ta's resources and information (multiple answers allowed): [Multiple answers] *

- ☐ Search engines (e.g. Google, Baidu, etc.)
- ☐ Portal, information category (entertainment website portal, celebrity homepage, etc.)
- ☐ Social category (e.g. posting, Weibo, WeChat, QQ, Facebook, ins, Douban, Zhihu, etc.)
- ☐ Video, live streaming (e.g. Akiyay, Youku, Tencent Video, B-site, Jitterbug, Racer, etc.)
- ☐ Star-following (Super Star Rice Group, Aizou, Rice Circle, etc.)
- ☐ Shopping (Taobao, Jingdong, Idlefish, Xiaohongshu, etc.)
- ☐ Online games
- ☐ Others, please specify _____

15. Do you value information about Ta's access to resources, business development, industry reputation, award-winning achievements, etc.? Value: [Single-choice] *

- ☐ Very much
- ☐ Somewhat
- ☐ Not very much
- ☐ Not important
- ☐ Don't care

16. You have participated in the following fan activities (multiple choice): [Multiple choice] *

- ☐ Calling for idols or their works, promotion
- ☐ Voting for idol-related charts
- ☐ creating idol texts (poems, web articles, pictures, emojis, videos, etc.)
- ☐ Join fan groups
- ☐ Fan support (with spending)
- ☐ Participating in offline activities organised by fans
- ☐ Others, please specify _____
- ☐ Neither

17. Have you ever spent money on Ta: [单选题] *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No (Please skip to question 20)

18. Do you spend about \$100 per month on celebrity hunting: [单选题] * ☐ Yes

- ☐ Less than \$100
- ☐ \$100-\$500
- ☐ \$501-\$1000
- ☐ Over \$1000

19. You have spent money on Ta mainly (multiple choice): [Multiple choice] *

- ☐ Purchase of physical peripherals (posters, albums)
- ☐ Purchase of products endorsed by Ta
- ☐ Support expenses (including voting, charting, etc.)
- ☐ Internet pay-per-views, digital albums
- ☐ Concerts, meet-and-greets and other events
- ☐ Fan-organised parties and booster events
- ☐ Celebrity or fan charity donations
- ☐ Other, please specify _____

20. Overall, how do you think idol worship has affected your study and life: [Single-choice] *

- ☐ Almost all positive
- ☐ Somewhat negative, but more positive than negative
- ☐ Half positive and half negative
- ☐ Somewhat positive, but more negative than positive

- Almost all negative impact (Please skip to question 22)
- No impact (skip to Q23)

21. What are the main positive effects (multiple choice): [Multiple choice] *

- ☐ Interpersonal interaction (e.g. making friends, etc.)
- ☐ Academic work
- ☐ Lifestyle and attitude
- ☐ Personal emotional choices
- ☐ Career choice and planning direction
- ☐ state of mind and values
- ☐ Others, please specify _____

22. Negative influences are mainly manifested in those areas (multiple answers allowed): [Multiple choice] *

- ☐ Interpersonal interactions (e.g. friendships, etc.)
- ☐ Academic coursework
- ☐ Lifestyles and attitudes
- ☐ Personal emotional choices
- ☐ Career choice and planning direction
- ☐ state of mind and values
- ☐ Others, please specify _____

23. How often do you change your idols: [Single-choice] *

- Change frequently
- Change once in a while
- Say no
- Not for a long time
- Almost never

24. When Ta is criticised for her image, behaviour and work, how do you react: [multiple choice] *

- Fight back strongly, denounce the criticism, support the criticism
- Argue strongly against it
- Don't care
- Speak for yourself and support your idol
- Don't say anything, ignore

25. How do your parents or teachers feel about your worship of Ta: [Multiple choice] *

- Strongly oppose
- Oppose
- Don't care
- Support
 - Particularly supportive

26. Your attitude towards teenage celebrity idol worship is: [Single-choice] *

- Strongly oppose
- Oppose
- Don't care
- Support
 - Particularly supportive

27. Do the teenagers around you have any extreme phenomenon of celebrity idol worship, or excessive behavior (e.g. private fans, excessive consumption, delaying schooling, etc.): [One-choice question Do you have any teenagers around you who worship celebrity idols to extremes or engage in excessive behaviors (e.g. private fans, excessive consumption, delaying their studies): [Single-choice] * Yes

- Yes
- No

28. Do you have any attitude towards the extreme phenomenon and excessive behaviour of teenage fans (e.g. illegitimate fans, excessive consumption, delaying schooling, etc.)? 28. What is your attitude towards the extreme phenomenon and excessive behaviour of teenage fans (e.g. illegitimate fans, excessive consumption, delaying schooling, etc.): [Multiple choice]

- Unreasonable
- Mostly incomprehensible
- I don't think so
- Mostly understandable
- Completely understandable

29. How do you feel about celebrities having negative moral and legal problems (e.g. cheating, tax evasion, drug abuse, etc.)? Do you have an attitude towards: [Single-choice] *

- Inexcusable
- Mostly inexcusable
- Not good
- Mostly forgivable
- Totally forgivable

30. What is your attitude towards the following statement on "celebrity idolatry" (multiple choice): [Multiple choice] * ☐ It is normal behaviour.

☐ It is a normal behaviour
☐ It increases the sense of identity and belonging, widens the social circle and adapts to social development

- ☐ Seeing idols as role models and urging oneself to advance
- ☐ It helps to establish a correct outlook on life and values
- ☐ It is an expression of being fashionable and immature
- ☐ a sign of losing oneself and spiritual emptiness
- ☐ It is a waste of time and energy and can lead to the wastage of studies
- ☐ It affects the relationship with family members or other people
- ☐ It is wrong behaviour and needs more guidance
- ☐ Other, please specify _____

31. Regarding the social problems or phenomena arising from the phenomenon of "star-struck" teenagers, such as forced hugs, secretly filming in hotels, detention at airports, etc., do you think it is a good idea to take a look at the situation? Which aspect do you think needs to be adjusted (multiple answers allowed): [Multiple answers] *

- ☐ The relevant legal system needs to be improved
- ☐ The social and cultural environment needs to be improved
- ☐ Active guidance from the mass media
- ☐ School education