

Virtual Idols as "New Totems" — A Study on Adolescents' Faith-Based Identification with Luo Tianyi and Hatsune Miku

Yiran Lang

*Xi'an Gaoxin No.1 High School, Xi'an, China
13991350523@163.com*

Abstract. This study examines the phenomenon of faith-based identification among adolescents with virtual idols, focusing on Luo Tianyi and Hatsune Miku as case studies. Against the backdrop of digital culture and youth subcultures, virtual idols have evolved beyond entertainment into “new totems,” shaping identity formation, emotional attachment, and community belonging. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating content analysis of fan creations, surveys of adolescent engagement patterns, and theoretical frameworks from media studies and developmental psychology. Findings reveal that virtual idols fulfill three key functions: (1) serving as vessels for idealized self-projection, (2) fostering ritualistic fan communities, and (3) providing psychological comfort in unstable life stages. While this identification enhances creativity, cultural preservation, and social inclusion, it also carries risks of escapism, commercial exploitation, and weakened real-world ties. The study concludes with recommendations for balanced engagement, including value-driven content integration, media literacy education, and ethical industry regulation. These measures aim to transform virtual idols into constructive forces in adolescent development, aligning digital subcultures with broader societal well-being.

Keywords: Virtual idols, faith-based identification, adolescents, digital totem, youth culture

1. Introduction

Emerging from the intersection of digital technology and subculture, virtual idols have transformed into 'new totems,' profoundly influencing adolescents' spiritual and cultural spheres. Luo Tianyi, with her iconic integration of traditional Chinese elements, and Hatsune Miku, through her global musical influence, are no longer just entertainment symbols—they embody a form of faith-based identification among youth, characterized by emotional depth and psychological investment that transcends ordinary fandom.

Industry data underscores their significance: 80.6% of Chinese virtual idol followers are post-1990s generationk [1], and 92.3% of global enthusiasts fall between 19-30 years old [2]. This demographic concentration reflects a unique alignment between virtual idols and adolescent needs, from identity formation to emotional expression. Luo Tianyi's appearance at the Beijing Winter Olympics Cultural Festival and Hatsune Miku's globally sold-out holographic concerts exemplify

their ascension from niche subculture to mainstream cultural influencers, shaping youth consumption, creation, and world engagement.

This study explores the mechanisms driving adolescents' faith-based identification with these virtual figures, analyzes its dual impacts on their development, and proposes strategies for constructive guidance. By examining Luo Tianyi and Hatsune Miku as case studies, it aims to unravel the complex interplay between technology, youth culture, and identity in the digital age.

2. The formation of faith-based identification

2.1. Individual projection: idealized self in virtual form

Adolescence, a pivotal stage for identity construction (Erikson's "identity crisis" phase), compels youth to explore and define their sense of self. The malleable and idealized characteristics of virtual idols facilitate this developmental process [3]. Luo Tianyi's design—"gray hair, green pupils, and a waist-hung Chinese knot"—is not merely aesthetic but symbolic: it encapsulates adolescents' desire to reimagine traditional culture for the modern era. Fans engage in cultural production through traditional Chinese music creation and historical reinterpretations, utilizing the idol as a symbolic resource.

Hatsune Miku's technological infrastructure enables participatory cultural production. Her open-source VOCALOID engine allows anyone, regardless of musical training, to compose songs, fulfilling the adolescent need for self-expression without fear of judgment. This low-barrier creative platform aligns with contemporary adolescents' emphasis on self-actualization [1]. For instance, the Bilibili creator "ilem" gained over 1.5 million followers through works like *Dala Beng Ba* for Hatsune Miku and Luo Tianyi, demonstrating how virtual idols enable fans to transform latent talents into tangible achievements. Such experiences reinforce the belief that virtual idols are not just objects of admiration but partners in self-actualization.

2.2. Group rituals: community as a "faith collective"

Faith-based identification is amplified within fan communities, which function as "faith collectives" bound by shared symbols and rituals. Luo Tianyi's fan groups, centered on "national style creation," organize online competitions for composing lyrics or designing costumes, with winners receiving recognition and collaboration opportunities. These activities are more than hobbies—they are communal rituals that reinforce members' identity as "cultural inheritors." Similarly, Hatsune Miku's global fanbase collaborates on multilingual projects, such as translating lyrics or syncing dance routines across time zones, creating a sense of belonging that transcends geographical boundaries [4,5].

Wang & Xi observe that these communities "encourage youth to showcase their skills, with creators earning praise and validation from peers," fostering a strong sense of group identity that elevates virtual idols to totemic status [3]. Post-2000s fans, in particular, construct "new tribal cultures" with distinct codes: Hatsune Miku's followers use terms like "Princess-sama" to express endearment and adopt the "onion dance" as a collective gesture, while Luo Tianyi's fans refer to themselves as "Jinyi Guard" (brocade guards) and create inside jokes about her "love for food" to strengthen group cohesion [2]. These shared practices create a sense of "we-ness" that makes virtual idols not just personal symbols but communal ones, deepening the faith-like bond.

2.3. Psychological comfort: stability in an uncertain world

During the developmental stage characterized by emotional lability, virtual idols emerge as stable psychological anchors. Unlike real celebrities, whose images can collapse due to scandals, virtual idols offer "consistent personas that provide endless security and emotional reassurance" [1]. This stability is particularly valued by youth navigating academic pressures, family conflicts, or social anxiety. Luo Tianyi's soothing voice in songs like *Rainbow Biscuits* and Hatsune Miku's uplifting anthems like *Ievan Polkka* serve as emotional anchors, with fans reporting that listening to these tracks helps alleviate stress.

Technological advancements further enhance this comfort. AR filters allow fans to "take photos" with virtual idols, making them feel physically present; AI chatbots simulate conversations, providing a sense of companionship for those struggling with loneliness. Wang & Xi note that this interaction can evolve into "quasi-religious emotional dependence," as adolescents increasingly turn to virtual idols for solace [3]. The "perfection" of these figures—Luo Tianyi's eternal youth, Hatsune Miku's unwavering optimism—also offers a respite from the messiness of real life, reinforcing the belief that they are "better" than human idols, worthy of deep devotion.

3. Dual impacts of faith-based identification

3.1. Positive empowerment: creativity, community, and growth

Culturally, virtual idols inspire innovation and heritage preservation. Fandom communities surrounding Luo Tianyi systematically integrate traditional elements (e.g., Peking opera melodies and classical poetry) with contemporary pop music, as evidenced by viral productions such as Quanyu Tianxia [3]. This synthesis demonstrates effective cultural transmission mechanisms among digital-native audiences. Hatsune Miku's ecosystem encourages interdisciplinary learning: fans study music theory to compose, video editing to produce PVs, and even foreign languages to engage with global communities, developing skills that benefit academic and professional growth.

Socially, fan communities foster inclusivity. Shy or marginalized youth find acceptance in these groups, where shared admiration for virtual idols overrides differences in background or personality. "In school, I'm quiet, but in Tianyi's fan group, I host weekly discussions," one adolescent shared, highlighting improved confidence and communication skills [3]. These communities also teach collaboration, as members work together on projects like organizing online concerts or translating content, building teamwork abilities vital for adulthood.

3.2. Potential risks: obsession, alienation, and materialism

Excessive engagement may induce cognitive dissonance between virtual and physical realities. Some adolescents prioritize virtual idol activities—like streaming concerts or voting in online polls—over homework, chores, or face-to-face interactions, leading to academic decline and strained family relationships. Tang warns that this "deep online addiction" can turn virtual worlds into "escape hatches" where youth "avoid real responsibilities," hindering their ability to cope with life's challenges [3].

Commercialization exacerbates another risk: materialism. Market actors employ artificial scarcity strategies through limited-edition merchandise and tiered pricing structures, creating secondary markets with significant price inflation. This fosters "commodity fetishism," where youth equate love for virtual idols with owning expensive items, leading to impulsive spending or even debt [3].

Pan adds that such consumption can reduce youth to "passive consumers," diverting energy from meaningful real-world engagement, like volunteering or community service [2].

4. Guiding strategies for healthy engagement

4.1. Cultural integration: aligning with positive values

Virtual idols demonstrate potential as value transmission channels when incorporating normative sociocultural frameworks. For example, Luo Tianyi could collaborate with museums to create songs about cultural heritage, linking her image to "patriotism" and "innovation." Cross-cultural analyses indicate virtual idols' efficacy in global advocacy campaigns, particularly regarding environmental awareness initiatives. Such initiatives—like Luo Tianyi's "Great Power Craftsmen", which celebrates skilled workers—make values relatable by embedding them in youth culture [1].

Mainstream institutions should also embrace virtual idols as cultural bridges. Schools could invite Luo Tianyi to "perform" at cultural festivals via hologram, making traditional music engaging; museums might partner with Hatsune Miku to create interactive exhibits on technology and art. These efforts help youth see virtual idols as more than entertainers—they become tools for learning and cultural appreciation.

4.2. Media literacy education: fostering critical thinking

Schools and families must teach youth to engage with virtual idols mindfully. Pedagogical frameworks should incorporate technical deconstruction modules addressing CGI rendering and machine learning algorithms underlying virtual personas. For example, analyzing how Luo Tianyi's "foodie" persona is designed to boost merchandise sales can cultivate discernment [3].

Longitudinal studies indicate parental mediation strategies emphasizing co-engagement yield superior outcomes compared to restrictive approaches. This balance helps youth enjoy their interests without neglecting real-life responsibilities.

4.3. Industry regulation: curbing exploitation

Regulatory interventions targeting price elasticity thresholds and minor expenditure controls represent viable policy instruments. Industry associations could develop ethical guidelines, requiring companies to allocate profits to youth programs—like Luo Tianyi's "creativity scholarships" or Hatsune Miku's "mental health awareness" campaigns. Such measures ensure the virtual idol industry prioritizes youth well-being over profit.

5. Conclusion

This study elucidates the complex phenomenon of faith-based identification with virtual idols among adolescents, revealing its dual role as both a developmental catalyst and a potential risk factor. Through case studies of Luo Tianyi and Hatsune Miku, the research demonstrates that virtual idols serve as vessels for idealized self-projection, fostering creativity and cultural preservation while also nurturing ritualistic fan communities that enhance social inclusion. However, excessive engagement may lead to cognitive dissonance, escapism, and materialistic consumption, particularly when commercial interests exploit adolescent devotion. The findings highlight the need for balanced interventions, including value-driven content integration, media literacy education, and ethical industry regulation, to harness virtual idols' positive potential while mitigating risks.

Despite these insights, this study has limitations. First, the focus on two prominent virtual idols may limit generalizability to lesser-known figures. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential response bias. Future research should expand to diverse virtual idols, incorporate longitudinal designs to track developmental impacts, and employ mixed-methods approaches to deepen understanding of cultural and psychological mechanisms. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons could reveal how sociocultural contexts shape engagement patterns. Addressing these gaps will refine strategies for fostering healthy digital subcultures.

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