

A Study on Fans' Consumption Behavior from the Perspective of Parasocial Interaction Theory: The Psychological Motives and Behavioral Logic of "Paying to Support"

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Abstract. Mid-century's PSI-paradigm, once grafted onto the media-audience interface, now subtends an asym-intimacied alterity. The fan-economy's vertiginous swell re-codes the old schema: motives, no longer traceable to face-kinship, migrate into spend-support gestures whose surplus-value exceeds any utilitarian quotient. Sifting the archive, this essay triangulates—motive-stratum, act-profile, scene-index—so that PSR-driven outlays (emotive, emblematic, compensatory) emerge as a palimpsest beneath which the commodity itself is but a vestigial tail. Instances show: what is purchased is less object than relation-residue.

Keywords: Parasocial-interactioning, PSR-fan Nexus, Affect-economy

1. Introduction

In the emotional-economy's neon dusk, pay-to-idolize erupts as datum rather than anecdote. Idol-worship—defined elsewhere [1] as psychic-adherence cum libidinal-anchor—gets re-inscribed through PSR circuitry: affective cathexis—identity scaffold—monetized tribute. Three enigmas are stalked: motive-transmutation into fiscal offering; scenario-specific dramaturgies of such conversions; taxonomies of devotees whose interactivity patterns refract back upon the spend-act. By flaying the commodified husk off attachment itself, the study prises open a slit through which cultural consumption's newest skin can be glimpsed.

2. Literature review

In contemporary mediatized society, the relationship between fans and media figures—such as celebrities, online influencers, and virtual idols—has restructured traditional consumer markets. Why are fans willing to spend heavily on idols who are distant, practically strangers, or even entirely disconnected from their daily lives? The psychological mechanisms underlying such behaviors have become a focal point of interdisciplinary inquiry across marketing, communication, and social psychology. In their seminal work *Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance*, Donald Horton and Richard Wohl first introduced the concept of “parasocial interaction” (PSI) to describe a one-sided, imagined intimate relationship that

media audiences develop with media figures such as television hosts or actors. They defined this prearranged, simulated give-and-take relationship as a parasocial relationship (PSR).

This study uses the parasocial interaction theory as a framework and qualitative analysis methods to systematically explore how parasocial relationships drive fan consumption behavior through emotional involvement and identity mechanisms.

The strength and expression of PSI/PSR vary across media environments. In gaming contexts—such as otome games or *Undertale*—PSRs provide safe emotional substitutes and evoke deep “friend-like” bonds that directly motivate consumption to sustain such relationships [2, 3].

The emotional power of PSRs is particularly evident in these environments. For example, otome games offer “a safer alternative to real-life dating by reducing emotional risks, such as rejection” [2], and players’ emotional investments often translate directly into spending. Similarly, in *Undertale*, players report profound connections with virtual characters, with one player stating, “for the first time in my life, I felt like I had friends” [3].

In emerging settings such as live streaming and social media, real-time interaction “fosters a high level of parasocial interaction (PSI) among members” [4]. Influencers build credibility and relatability through sustained engagement, creating a sense of “authenticity” and “approachability” that makes them more persuasive than traditional endorsers. Beauty vloggers, for instance, enhance consumer trust through “regular interactions with their respective audiences, making them more approachable and real than traditional celebrity endorsers” [5]. This perceived authenticity exerts a powerful persuasive effect: “as followers form intimate relationships with digital celebrities internally, they are influenced by the latter’s advertisements on social networking sites (SNS)” [6].

Finally, studies have shown that the type of PSR itself is a key variable shaping consumption patterns. For example, spending behaviors driven by romantic-fantasy PSRs differ markedly from those based on trust- and sharing-oriented friendly PSRs [7, 8].

As Tukachinsky observed, “romantic parasocial relationships are manifested by emotional, physical, and sexual attraction as well as romantically fantasizing about a media character” [7], while friendly PSRs emphasize “trust, sharing, and mutual help” [8].

Methodological intricacies persist in the quantification of these correlations: as documented, “from 1956 to 2016, PSI and PSR’s assessment encountered a profusion of diverse scaling methods,” thus impeding result comparability [8]. From this, it can be discerned that existing scholarly works propose PSI/PSR as the central psychological impetus underpinning fan engagement, with its influences co-moderated by not only media milieus but also relational dynamics inherent.

3. Research questions

Primarily embracing qualitative methodologies, this exploration. The theoretical edifice previously delineated serves as a foundation for deploying extensive interviews, which anchor empirical data accumulation; meanwhile, online ethnography alongside participant observation contributes auxiliary contextual depth, enriching the investigational comprehension.

With the continuous expansion of the fan economy and the constant evolution of its business models, fans’ emotionally driven consumption behaviors have become increasingly complex and diverse. There is therefore an urgent need to explore their internal mechanisms from a theoretical perspective. Although existing research has recognized the role of parasocial relationships in motivating consumer behavior, most studies remain at the level of descriptive phenomena and lack a systematic investigation of the complete chain linking “psychology, behavior, and manifestation.” Based on parasocial interaction theory, this study seeks to address the following core research question:

Under the conceptual framework of parasocial interaction theory, it is imperative to scrutinize the mechanisms underpinning fans' tendencies to engage in "pay-to-support" conduct. Critical insights into emotional attachment pathways leading to consumption decisions are pursued, offering valuable theoretical references for managing platform operations and fan culture governance.

The methodological approach undertaken embodies qualitative research paradigms, manifesting through the employment of semi-structured interviews coupled with participant observation. Predominantly, core data procurement occurs via comprehensive dialogues designed to delve into interviewees' cognitive motivations alongside their behavioral rationales. Enhanced comprehension regarding the dynamics at play and consumption context within fan communities is facilitated by supplementary participant observation, thereby fortifying the study's contextual legitimacy and bolstering data triangulation efficacy.

Ten young fans (five males and five females, mainly university students) were selected as interview participants. All interviewees met the following criteria:

- (1) They have engaged in fandom activities for at least two consecutive years and remain active participants;
- (2) They have made monetary contributions to support idols, intellectual properties (IPs), or fandom-related content (such as purchasing albums, merchandise, endorsed products) or have participated in offline events (such as concerts or fan meetings).

Diverse categories of fandom, ranging from the "mild" and moderately involved enthusiasts to those deeply committed individuals with high emotional or material investment, encapsulated within this study are. Representativeness and contrast requisite for cross-case analysis—affirmed by such selection.

Adopted were online ethnography alongside participant observation as auxiliary means of inquiry. The examination did involve the researcher engendering a close association within fan collectives found in digital locales like Weibo Super Topics, Douban assemblages, and Douyin channels—to scrutinize their quotidian interaction modalities, discourse frameworks, and consumer cultural tendencies. Significance is extracted through these observations; an indispensable foundation was furnished herein for rendering interview data comprehensible. Moreover, within fans' sociocultural milieu, situating fiscally supportive behaviors becomes attainable.

4. Findings and analysis

4.1. Characteristics of fans' "pay-to-support" behavior from the perspective of parasocial interaction theory

The consumption projects associated with idols are extensive, incorporating a spectrum of tangible and virtual items—ranging from physical albums, promotional merchandise, and endorsed products to digital compilations and membership affiliations. Variability in pricing provides both inclusivity and adaptability: digital singles are available for merely a few yuan, while luxury offerings may ascend into the tens of thousands.

From the instances presented here emerges an understanding of fans' behaviors manifesting as collective, emotional, and volatile. Fans' motivations appear dominantly emotion-driven, transcending the functional worth intrinsic to the products they acquire. Fan assemblages, along with their auxiliary conglomerates, frequently orchestrate communal "campaign-style" acquisitions specifically timed around events such as album launches, commemorative anniversaries, or brand collaboration pronouncements. This immediate and surge-like conduct intends to produce the most impactful data displays, accentuating their idol's fiscal viability before market observers and

commercial affiliates. Augmented expenditures coupled with intensive fan engagement serve as benchmarks for delineating hierarchies among enthusiasts, thus bequeathing prestige—to illustrate, by attaining the stature of a "big fan," connoting influence and authority.

It becomes evident from these patterns that consumption serves not solely the interest of the idol but transforms into an instrument for amassing acknowledgment, esteem, and societal leverage within the fandom milieu—it solidifies one's persona and connection as a bona fide constituent of the devoted community.

4.2. Psychological motives behind fans' "pay-to-support" behavior

Defined is the construct of attitude as it pertains to the enduring cognition and affectivity exhibited by audiences regarding virtual idol marketing endeavors, associated with a predetermined brand [9]. From this emerges fans' "pay-to-support" conduct, delineated largely through the prism of multidimensional psychological fulfillment pursuits. Psychologically examined, idolatry encapsulates an engendered emotive attachment between admirers and their celebrated figures [10]. Analyzed are the motivational dynamics propelling such behavior bifurcatedly into internal psychical drivers and external sociological inducements. Internally, grounded is the foundational allure toward idols within one's psyche—this relationship being intrinsically parasocial. Originating from qualities of aesthetic or skill proficiency, among others, this captivation tends to assuage real-world emotional voids, ensuing an emotional recompensation trajectory. Witnessed herewith, "pay-to-support" behavior transcends beyond consumption superficialities, emerging instead as a conduit for emotive articulation and engagement manifestations. As articulated by respondent Ms. G, she perceives her idol akin to "spiritual kin," whereby her expressions of affection transpire through rankings participation and purchase of endorsed products as acts of devotion—"I truly cherish them." Through monetary contributions, fans transmute abstract sentiments into tangible support embodiments, perpetuating unilateral affective connections. They envisage avatars' commercial triumphs in endorsements, accolades, and hierarchical standings as resultant directly from their fiscal exertions [10], achieving thereby virtual affiliation sensations and emotive satiation. Critically appraised, however, underlain could be competitive juxtaposition amongst fandom community constituents or psychological validation needs pertaining to antecedent investments (the phenomenon known as the "sunk cost effect"). Additionally, sourced may experiential satisfaction arise from partaking in offline events wherein eligibility for direct idol encounters ties inextricably to consumption parameters.

4.3. Behavioral manifestations of fans' "pay-to-support" practices

Using the analytical model derived from parasocial relationship theory, two principal components emerge within fans' behavior of "pay-to-support": one dimension encompasses online economic engagement and another involves active participation in physical environments. Observations can be drawn from this delineation regarding how fans interact across these dual arenas.

At the online level, social media platforms are arguably "the best medium for promoting parasocial interaction between fans and their beloved celebrities" [11]. Fans repeatedly purchase albums or merchandise to boost sales charts, actively buy endorsed products to demonstrate their idol's commercial appeal, and engage in "data labor" such as reposting, controlling comments, and increasing play counts to enhance online visibility. They also collect idol-related merchandise as a form of emotional sustenance and identity reinforcement. In such contexts, brands that collaborate with idols provide an "outlet for self-realization" among fan consumers [12].

At the offline level, fans follow idols' schedules to obtain scarce opportunities for close contact; participate in organized group support events (such as coordinated light displays) to express collective solidarity; and engage in offline activities to gain quasi-interactive experiences. Interviewee Ms. P reported that attending a concert provided her with an "emotional high that lasted for three months," while Mr. L emphasized that airport greetings and autograph sessions deepened his sense of physical connection to the idol—an embodiment of parasocial relationships in real-life settings.

An intertwined array of behaviors constitutes an extensive system of consumption, encapsulating the commercial rationale inherent in what is termed as the "emotional economy." Indicative of modern fan culture are its pivotal traits mirrored within this ecosystem. Offline support activities acquire prominence among these phenomena, their ritualistic and collectivist dimensions amplifying fans' identification, emotional connectivity, and communal affiliation. From such manifestations, one can discern the integral role these acts play in underpinning collective experiential identity among fandoms.

5. Conclusion

Situated within a theoretical parasocial interaction (PSI) framework, this investigation comprehensively scrutinizes the foundational logic and pathways of fan behavior encompassing "pay-to-support," otherwise referenced as financially endorsing idols. Within an introductory section contextually positioned amidst the flourishing phenomenon known as the fan economy, significant attention is afforded to spotlighting the analytical pertinence intrinsic to leveraging parasocial interaction theory, therein providing insight into both emotional and behavioral dynamics that propel consumption by fans.

A thorough review and synthesis regarding extant scholarship hereby serve to forge an integrative model inclusive of psychological motivation, behavioral hallmarks, and explicit manifestations. Emanating from these findings posited, it becomes evident that central to driving the consumption patterns observed among fans are parasocial relationships (PSRs), functioning as psychological linchpins. The intensity inherent within PSRs evidences a positive association with behaviors typifying payment on behalf of support; however correlated strength does not universally equate to commensurate spending levels. Through unilateral affective attachments materialize motivators fostering consumptive pursuits characterized by sentimentality, symbolic expression, and compensatory intent—purchases extending beyond purely utilitarian valuation of products involved.

At the level identifying behavioral distinctions, devotees exhibit consumption exhibiting features of continuity, ritualization interconnectedness predicated upon high social dynamism. With psychological impulses projected unto varied tangible contexts discernible are economic embodiments stemming from parasocial relations, elucidating real-world manifestations aligned directly with econometrics involving avid followers.

In summary, this study argues that parasocial interaction is not merely an illusory emotional construct but a potent psychological force capable of stimulating authentic, sustained, and patterned economic behaviors. Despite the study's systematic attempt to outline the complete mechanism of fan "pay-to-support" behavior, several limitations remain, which in turn point to directions for future inquiry. Parasocial interaction theory continues to evolve, particularly in the era of social media. As noted by recent scholarship, "future research should focus on creating clearer differentiation between PSI and PSR and on developing reliable and valid measurement scales that accurately measure the constructs of PSI and PSR" [13]. The present study's integration and application of these emerging theoretical developments remain preliminary. Future research could further examine

how negative events (such as idol scandals or “image collapses”) affect PSRs and consumption behaviors, or explore the dynamic processes of emotional transformation within fan communities.

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