

Co-Creating Authenticity: Theoretical Analysis of How the Operations of Virtual Idols Culture Work: Using PLAVE and Its Fan Community as an Example

Yifei Wang

*School of Cultural Industry and Management, Communication University of Zhejiang, Jiaxing,
China*

babyblue7979@outlook.com

Abstract. Virtual idols are one of the characteristic cultural trends of the times of digital age. They have succeeded because of the carefully designed working plans that create an effect of reality and attachment under their virtual disguise and identity, resulting in a strong attachment of the fans. The purpose of this paper is to conduct a systematical review and examination of a theoretical framework on which this phenomenon is based. With PLAVE, the newest phenomenon-level virtual idol group, and its fan community PLAYER as the main case studies and storylines, this paper revisits and combines the above categories of theoretical approaches. This indicates that the concept of cultural authenticity of virtual idols is manifested as a dynamic process, which is the synergistic effect of three factors: content narrative, interactive rituals, and community co-creation. The complex interdependence between virtual and reality, labor and emotion, and business and culture will also be demonstrated in the PLAVE case. Lastly, this paper will be a critical reflection of this operational model that will help to offer a more comprehensive and critical theoretical lens to the structure of digital cultural production and identity construction.

Keywords: Virtual Idol, Authenticity, Interactive Ritual, Backstage Content Foregrounding, Participatory Culture

1. Introduction

The radical development of digital media has not just revolutionized the manner of transmitting information but it has essentially transformed the ecosystem of the production and consumption of culture. It is against this background that the emergence of virtual idols is more than just a technological spectacle but is a new model or a new cultural operation that combines media technology, cultural symbols, and commercial logic. The key to its charm is the rather contradictory suggestion: How can a non-human image constructed by digital technology inspire stronger and more sincere emotional investment and cultural identity than most real-life stars? It lies in a systematic body of cultural functioning strategies, which are thoroughly effective in forming a sensory and participatory, sense of cultural authenticity.

The existing studies are centered on the symbolic interactionism approach. Tang Jingwen summarized that virtual idols create character roles at the individual level through the construction process, and engage in "recreation" at the social level [1]. The other studies focus on communication approaches when it comes to live streaming. Jia Zimu discovered that virtual idols have contributed to fans' emotional dependence and recognition through clever performances and emotional interactions [2]. In addition, Wu Chunxiaoyu examined the dynamics of interaction between virtual idols and their fan groups and found that the role of fans is not just about being a net consumer of content; they are also creators and build the culture of virtual idols [3]. However, current research has fragmented the causal cycle between content strategy design, media interaction experience, and fan cultural identity.

To overcome this fragmented perspective, this article innovatively uses the practices of the Korean virtual idol group PLAVE and its fan community PLAYER as examples throughout the entire text. The central argument of this paper will be the following question: How do virtual idols specifically create the image of cultural authenticity based on the interaction of content strategy, interaction strategy, and community strategy? Finally, what are the new relations between reality and the virtual, emotion and labor, commerce and culture that this unveils in cultural operations in the digital age?

2. Theoretical framework: forging a three-dimensional analytical approach

2.1. Establishing the perspective

In an attempt to circumvent the shortcomings of the single-dimensional analysis, this paper will develop a three-dimensional synergistic analytical model focusing on Content-Interaction - Community. This model shall attempt to explain: the content dimension is the textual basis of identity construction; the interaction dimension is the process of relationship that converts a text into a collective emotion; and the community dimension is the productive basis that converts emotion into a lasting cultural practice. The combination of the three elements constitutes a vicious circle which starts with the stage of constructing narrations to the stage of producing relationships, and finally tackles the main problem of how virtuality can and does trigger the perception of authenticity.

2.2. Dimensions introduction and analysis

2.2.1. Content dimension: the transformation of symbolic vehicle to narrative-driven backstage

Content dimension is used to describe how virtual idols make use of semiotics to construct personas and dramaturgy to make use of contrast effects and bridge the gap with viewers to increase their own authenticity as virtual figures. According to Jean Baudrillard, the object of consumption does not exist as the object but rather represents a social identity, relationships, and meanings [4]. It has led virtual idols to make the construction of their personas their priority. The construction of personas takes place in two aspects, as expressed by the dramaturgical theory developed by Erving Goffman. Goffman compared social behavior with dramatic behavior, where dramatic behavior refers to a person presenting their image as expected in the foreground, while backstage behavior refers to secretly preparing in a relaxed state in the background [5]. Consistency in frontstage and backstage displays of a performer leads to increased trust; even in cases where discrepancies are created, they

can produce a cute contrast effect to psychologically reduce the distance [6]. This is what underlies the development of so-called Para-social interaction, an imagined intimacy that the audiences of the media establish with the media figures, held in one-way communication [7]. This relationship is pegged in a physical fantasy of togetherness by the use of strategic backstages uninterrupted through virtual idols. This creates a feeling that fans have that they know the actual him/her thus expanding emotional connections.

2.2.2. Interactive dimension: moving between communication channels and ritualized on relationship fields

The interactive aspect is concerned with the dependency of virtual idols on established, streamlined interactions to develop ritualized relationship fields. The theory of the ritual chain of interaction created by Collins provides a more explanatory view. According to Collins, the main ingredients to the success of a ritual are: assembly of a group, the exclusion of outsiders, a shared generalizing point, and common emotional conditions [8]. The virtual idol live shows are the stereotypical digital interactive practices: the viewers and the content stream merge into one mutualistic epicenter, with the bullets aligned in real time, which generates collective feelings by adjusting the intensity of collective moods. This ritual, on and on, creates a sense of confidence, passion, and initiative of action that is crystallized into community symbols. It has been found that this very persona of virtual idols is a symbol that is created and strengthened in the course of interaction, and its attractiveness directly affects the level of Para-social interaction and the level of fan identification [9]. This means that the worthiness of interactive channels is not in technical capability; it is in the design format as ritualized spaces of generation of emotion and belongingness.

2.2.3. Community dimension: the audience to digital co-create emotional economy

The community aspect means that the fans cannot be passive receivers but are active distributors. The notion of participatory culture, given by Henry Jenkins, presents fans as content creators and distributors. The studies show that virtual idol listeners are increasingly becoming less passive, more productive as fans turn into text poachers and text producers forming productive fan communities [10]. The essence of fan emotional labor lies in its non-contractual voluntary investment, which is systematically transformed into the economic value of the platform and capital in the identity desire cycle [11].

Translation, the promotion, data analysis and artistic work of the fans are part of passionate participatory logics; at the same time, they are unpaid digital labor, which increases the popularity and commercial value of the idols. Fan identities pass between the identities of cultural co-creators and emotional laborers. Connecting the process of data generation of their idols on an emotional level, they slowly create a homogenized sense of belonging in unique production processes, creating a complex emotional and value exchange network [12].

3. PLAVE as a model of theoretical consolidation: the three-dimensional synergy mechanisms operation

PLAVE is a virtual boy group formed by VLAST, which is an internal venture of the MBC of South Korea, on March 12, 2023. Their activities involve creating virtual characters by using technology to record their movements and expressions. They have capitalized on their stage presence of such

magnitude and their own charisma to gain massively popular followings in several different nations such as the United States and South Korea.

3.1. Content strategy: deliberate revealing of the backstage and building of a growth narrative

PLAVE goes beyond the classical reasoning of looking at the radical perfection of an idol archetype on stage and actively sees emotional vulnerability as a key backstage strategy. The most illustrative one is the personal communication supported by the paid subscription programme called Bubble. As an example, member EUNHO told members of the Bubble site that the A Hour sleep produces over eight nightmares. It is this kind of sharing that breaks the wall of virtual characters, instantly giving them a flesh-and-blood aspect and making them emotionally rich. This emotional form of backstage exposure is intended to rapidly engage the empathy and protective behavior of fans, establishing the pseudo-social relationship between the fans as emotional attachment, like that of human affection, psychologically compressing the distance. They unveiled all the aspects of their backstage, and created their virtual characters to enable fans enjoy more of their originality and authenticity [13].

Even more innovative, however, is that the company, which PLAVE is a part of, VLAST, has been providing an active disclosure of the technical creation process on social sites. This means that PLAVE is not a finished and flawless product but a kind of ongoing project that fans observe and can even co-create jointly. Consequently, the position of fans changes from a consumer to a more specific position of a witness to technological development and a critic, which strongly attaches the attention and emotional stakes of the fans over the long run.

3.2. Interactive design: intimate rituals of high-frequency interaction

The emergence of group livestreaming is the main activity in the operations of the PLAVE, and it has been developed into a highly fixed ritual rhythm. The company announces the weekly schedule beforehand, which creates anticipation and cultural rhythms in the community and makes people reliable. Definite pauses in livestreams, such as games, reading letters, reading song performances, etc., form observable points of collective focus, while a large number of real-time comment rolls allow for a lot of emotional synchronization and connection. As an example, in one of the livestreams, members experienced a model malfunction that immediately caused everyone to laugh together in the comments section and produced an unanticipated but most unanimous experience of pitchy jubilation. This live streaming has completed the chain function of the ritual of being interactive in an ideal way, and it kept creating a feeling of belonging to the group and the emotional power towards the idol.

Building of Bubble- made intimacy as pseudo-dual intimacy. In the example of the application Bubble, the idol delivers content in a point-to-point manner to fans daily through subscription so as to establish a pseudo-dual interaction. This role played simulation of the rhythm and the privacy of intimate interpersonal communication transforms the simulated social relationship into a significantly higher level of a Para-social Interaction that produces a strong sense of exclusivity and emotional reliance. This is the very end commercial practice of the Para-social interaction theory. It achieves this through technology, by building a persistent and seamless pseudo-dual relationship, producing the most intensely sticky emotional and readiness to pay.

3.3. Community mobilization: identity, labor, and co-creation by the emotional economy

The technical fault is essentially a failure or technical constraint. Nevertheless, in the framework of PLAVE, it has been imaginatively emulated by the fan culture. On such platforms as Bilibili and Douyin, model clipping compilations can be shared and remixed by the fans extensively, turning them into inside jokes and community memes. This is the reproduction of official content (live-streamed footage), which is the most iconic of participatory culture. It supports the internal community identity, exclusive enjoyment, and humour, and even appeals to the mass spectators with its sense of contrast. It is frequently the place of entry of a large number of fans, accomplishing the cultural translation value addition of negative technical problems.

The fans organize translation teams, sell and popularize goods on various platforms, and rank and vote on streaming data in a structured way. This is transforming emotional identification into actual and highly valuable digital work with a clearly marketable nature. The motivation of this form of labour is not by coercion; it is motivated by emotions of supportiveness, like; I hope they will improve; it belongs to their performances, and as the labour process continues, a stable loop in terms of labour and identity reinforcement in the collective identity of PLAYER (the name of the fans) is always strengthened.

4. Discussion

4.1. Building up cultural authenticity with a triple dimensional approach

Concerning content strategy, at PLAVE, he focuses on front-end and backstage exposure. It creates a story about the development of a relationship and makes fans a co-witness by strategically unveiling the emotional and technical processes in the backstage.

PLAVE applies an interactive ritual chain mechanism in terms of interactive strategy. It creates an atmosphere of emotional strength by connecting via a two-track system between high-intensity group livestreams and daily private chats, resulting in a feeling of belonging.

As far as community strategy is concerned, the PLAVE takes the so-called participatory culture as a driving force. It triggers textual reproduction and emotional work by fans by creating a circle of supporters of emotion investment-labor practice-identity reinvention, making them become so-called digital co-creators.

As shown in Figure 1, these three components create a self-sustaining cycle, collectively creating a sense of cultural authenticity.

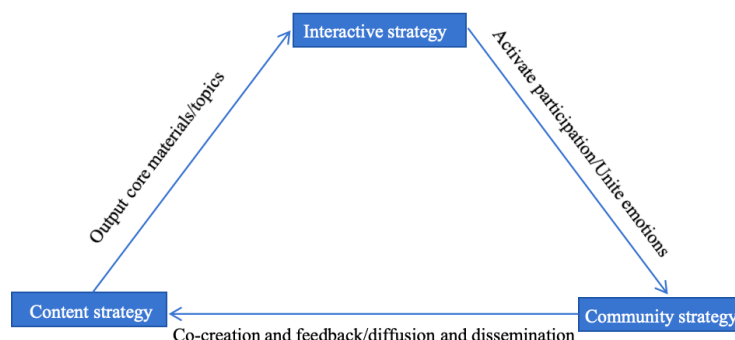


Figure 1. Diagram 3D perspective analysis

4.2. The new types of relations in the cultural operation in the digital age

Authenticity Reconstruction Both the basis of the concept of authenticity is no longer based on the factor of physical presence, but on the factor of narrative identification and emotional sharing. These two aspects should be the key focus of operations so as to avoid the loss of authenticity to over-commercialization.

Emotional labor - Fans' feelings are directly transformed into strength, enabling them to engage in unpaid digital labor. Emotion is the central mode of production, which further develops from the labor process and forms a bidirectional cycle. It should establish an emotional feedback mechanism to be vigilant against the emotional overdraft and imbalance of rights caused by one-dimensional labor.

Symbiosis and Mutual Embedding Commercial rationality procedurally takes on the cultural energy of fans to produce consumption and commerce, and in return puts the emotional energy and communal vitality of fan culture into commerciality. The two entities co-exist and exploit each other. It is necessary to find a middle ground between the commercialization and the autonomy of the fan culture to avoid the risk of immature co-optation, the depletion of creativity of the fans, and the loss of community identity.

5. Conclusion

The paper has provided a three-dimensional model that analyzes the interrelationship between content, interaction, and community. Through a combination of theoretical material and case studies, it elaborately examines the synergy between these elements to make the virtual into the real and the emotion into labor to reestablish the logic of cultural production within a commercial context. It provides a comprehensive theoretical angle to the interpretation of cultural production, fan identity, and media consumption during the digital age, as well as showcasing some underlying paradoxes of authenticity, risks of emotional exploitation, and the underlying tensions of cultural appropriation.

The future research directions can be as follows: First, it is possible to fortify the protective side and take into consideration the question of the ownership of the copyright to virtual idols. Second, investigating the process of localization adaptation and cross-cultural dissemination of the culture of virtual idols in a globalized environment. These deliberations will help in making more detailed insights into the legal roles and sequence of development of cultural production in the digital era.

References

- [1] Tang, J. (2025). Identity Construction of Virtual Idols from the Perspective of Symbolic Interaction Theory. Master's Thesis, Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences.
- [2] Jia, Z. (2025). Exploring the dissemination path of virtual idol live streaming from the perspective of empathy. *Voice Screen World*, (18), 52-54.
- [3] Wu, C. (2026). Research on the Multi-Subject Co-construction Mechanism of Virtual Idol Images: An Analysis of Quasi-Social Interaction Practices Based on PLAVE Fan Communities.
- [4] Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The consumer society* (C. Turner, trans.).
- [5] Books, A., & Goffman, E. (1969). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Allen Lane.
- [6] Li, X. (2021). A Brief Discussion on Front-End Presentation of Back-end Content. *Journal of News Research*, 12(01), 78-79.
- [7] Wu, J., & Gao, B. (2024). From Interactive Medium to Relationship Subject: The Dynamic Transformation of Personal Value from the Perspective of Pseudo-Social Relations. *Youth Journalist*, (08), 45-49.
- [8] Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction Ritual Chains*.
- [9] Li, J., & Chen, F. (2018). A Study on the Network Interaction of Virtual Idols and Their Fan Groups: A Case Study of Virtual Singer "Luo Tianyi". *China Youth Studies*, (06), 20-25.

- [10] Li, S. (2023). From "poacher" to "producer": The role transformation and internal mechanism of virtual idol fans. *Audiovisual*, (02), 129-132.
- [11] Zhang, Y. (2024). From emotional labor to emotional economy: the production, circulation, and transformation of fan emotions from the perspective of field capital. *Journal of Hubei University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 51 (05), 156-166+179.
- [12] Zhuang, X., & Dong, S. (2019). Consensus-building and labor exploitation in emotional labor: an analysis based on a dataset of Weibo celebrity fans. *Journal of Nanjing University (Philosophy, Humanities, and Social Sciences)*, 56 (06), 32-42.
- [13] Ahn, D., Park, S., Lee, S., Cho, J., & Lim, H. (2025, April). I Stan Alien Idols and Also the People Behind Them: Understanding How Seams Between Virtual and Real Identities Engage VTuber Fans—A Case Study of PLAVE. In *Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1-13).