

The Research on the Factors and Influence of Adolescent Idol Worship

Meiwing Tsang^{1,a,*}

¹*St. Michaels University School, Victoria, BC, V8P 4P5, Canada*

a. queenie.tsang@smus.ca

**corresponding author*

Abstract: With the increasing exposure to social media, appreciating celebrities and artists is becoming increasingly common among teenagers, who have formed patterns and actions to “worship” their idols. Therefore, exploring the series of characteristics and influences of teenagers in the process of idol worship is of certain importance. This article takes teenagers as the research object and uses literature research method to explore the characteristics of idol worship and the impact that teenagers are affected during this process, as well as to improve relevant strategies for negative impacts. Through research results, it was found that the reasons behind idol worship include seeking recognition, idealizing character images, the need for emotional attachment, and the constantly expanding internet network. The negative impact of idol worship on teenagers, including their mental health and the formation of aesthetic standards. Subsequently, the author suggests addressing or reducing the impact of idol worship from three aspects: parents, schools, and the media, in order to optimize idol worship and its impact on youth communities.

Keywords: adolescents, idol worshipping, social media representation, factor, strategies

1. Introduction

The Korean popular culture, “Hallyu”, has been rampantly spreading worldwide in recent decades, exporting related products for almost twelve billion U.S. dollars, which was able to balance out the loss from tourism during the coronavirus pandemic [1]. Following the widespread of “Hallyu”, an increasing number of celebrities and artists are noticed by audiences. Additionally, the fandom culture that is closely connected to Hallyu has also been introduced to audiences globally. Thus, the introduction of Hallyu to new audiences has resulted in the formation of a global trend—idol worship, which has been significantly increasing in the past twenty years [2]. Idol, historically referring to an image or representation of a god used as an object of worship, has now broadened its definition. It also represents a person whose talents, achievements, status, or physical appearance are extensively recognized and admired [3]. Idol worship is considered a psychological identification with and emotional attachment to a figure [4], where the worshippers, also called fans, claim a social identity [5]. Adolescents are more likely to become idolaters based on the characteristics of their growth cycle. Therefore, based on the characteristics and influence of adolescents in the process of idol worship, this article will analyze the characteristics of idol worship and the positive and negative impacts that adolescents are subjected to during this process, as well as a series of measures to optimize negative impacts. The author hopes to make relevant contributions through this research.

2. Characteristics and Overview of Adolescent Idol Worship

Idol worship is identified into three conditions through the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS): entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological [6]. Entertainment-social is a normal degree of interest in the life of the worshipper's favorite idol [7]. Reading news about idols and discussing them are behaviors considered entertainment-social. Intense-personal "involves the worshippers feeling that they have a strong personal connection with the idol". Lastly, borderline-pathological has the greatest extent of idol worship among the three conditions, which is believed to be associated closely with mental disorders. Nowadays, most worshippers of idols are categorized as intense-personal worship, who are strongly emotionally attached to their idols and are willing to spend large amounts of time and money on them. Behaviors such as catching up with their idols' daily schedules, participating in in-person fan activities, and purchasing related products and content are all considered actions of idol worship. Meanwhile, psychological behaviors, including idealizing and imagining idols, are also believed to be idol worship as they involve emotional attachment and admiration to a figure.

In between age groups of worshippers, statistics support that the proportion of adolescents retain the highest; Among sports and athletes supporters, the age group of 16-24 is found to have the highest number of fans following athletes on social media in 2021 [8]; Among Korean popular culture fans, the age group 15-19 largely dominated the fandoms [9]; Among listeners of a famous singer from U.S. Billie Eilish, most of them are in the age group of 13-24 [10]. Accordingly, adolescence is a stage where idol worship happens the most, no matter which field of idols people are worshipping.

3. Factors and Effect of Idol Worship

3.1. Factors

Idol worship among adolescents is provoked by uncountable factors. In this paper, three main causes are concluded to explain the motive of adolescent idol worship. During the stage of identification, as suggested by Erikson, adolescents' uncertainty and confusion about the present and future struggle them a lot [11]. Through role modeling figures that they can observe, adolescents are able to imitate behaviors that are considered "rewarding" and to gain experience from what their role models have done. Meanwhile, they also develop their basic human values, doctrines and aesthetics when perceiving figures as their idols. Moreover, idols provide imagination space for adolescents to idealize a figure. Idols, such as movie actors, are usually figures presented on screens and on the internet, where people cannot truly get in touch with them. When adolescents perceive facets of a person or figure, thus, they tend to fantasize about the whole character that matches their expectations, which results in admiration towards the idol. Lastly, the emotional attachment between idols and worshippers is crucial to adolescents. Monaco researcher and their team studied attachment among adolescents, claiming that emotional attachment acts as a protective factor against stress and health symptoms [12]. The attachment between idols and worshippers is connected through the admiration of worshippers, where worshippers usually are spiritually and emotionally supported by the existence of the idols. Hence, adolescents would choose to worship idols that provide them with powers and models that allow them to imitate.

In addition to the primary factors mentioned, forming basic incentives for idol worship, adolescents are eased by the developed internet to access their idols online and reach the fan communities more effortlessly. Formed after the 2000s, Social media—such as Twitter, Instagram, Sina Weibo, and other interactive applications—is one type of media platform for audiences to connect with celebrities and artists. The increased formation of social media has boosted

communication between worshippers and idols and provided detailed celebrity lives, building up a strong sense of intimacy between them [13]. Feeling closely connected to the idols, worshippers tend to experience a higher score of CAS or just simply a stronger admiration. It may consequently result in more physical actions for supporting their idols such as participating in airport pickups, voting for idols online, and purchasing brands that are endorsed by idols. Besides the change in the relationship between idols and worshippers, the bonding among worshippers has also been facilitated through social media platforms. Adolescence, especially, is a stage that seeks recognition and acceptance from peers. Discovering and connecting with a group of peers who have the same perception as themselves positively correlates with their worship of idols [14], indicating that the more adolescent worshippers from different locations are connected to each other, the more emotional attachment they have towards their idols. This is because through worshipping the same idols, they gain recognition from peers who act similarly, reinforcing them to “worship” more to gain more recognition. As a result, media, particularly social media, fosters adolescent idol worship as it links the idols with worshippers and their communities.

3.2. The Influence of Idol Worship

Psychological Well-Being Impacts: while idol worship is able to fulfill adolescents’ spiritual needs, the association between idol worship and worshippers’ psychological well-being, including self-esteem, remains unclear. According to Zsila and her team, it is found that idol worship is negatively associated with worshippers’ self-esteem [15]. On the other hand, North et al. found that entertainment-social and intense-personal idol worship were positively related to self-esteem [7]. Additionally, worshippers entertain themselves within the process of admiration, increasing their long-term happiness and life satisfaction, which potentially enhances their psychological well-being. Whereas, mental illness always occurs as the result of idol worship. For instance, entertainment-social idol worship correlated strongly with anxiety, social dysfunction, and depressive symptoms [16]. Therefore, there are various effects of idol worship on one’s psychological well-being, depending on how the worshipper copes with it and the extent of their idol worship.

Aesthetics Impact: recognizing and admiring idols, worshippers are influenced by idols on their standards of beauty. Celebrities and artists, who are conventionally “well presented” in media, are crucially involved in shaping teenagers’ aesthetics, creating trends and beauty standards that teenagers urge to follow. Found by Swami et al., the association between worshippers’ dissatisfaction with physical appearance and their scores on CAS is significantly positive [17]. It is believed to be a result of the misconception of teenagers’ beauty standards due to the representation of the physical appearance of celebrities in media. Moreover, deriving from the high dissatisfaction with body and appearance, disordered eating attitudes occur among worshippers [18], where they want to be as physically attractive as the idols they perceive in media. Hence, with the standards created by idols, people begin to pursue physical appearance and shape that are potentially unrealistic and unideal, causing both mental and physical health problems.

Problematic Internet Use: since adolescents are completely dependent on the internet to receive information about their idols, uncontrollable internet use may frequently happen among them. Activities that adolescents are involved in—watching idols’ reality shows, catching up with their daily schedules, and communicating with friends from the same fandom—are mostly online and time-consuming, which may potentially lead adolescents to be addicted to phones and computers, just trying to get connected with their idols every day. Meanwhile, the more media the adolescents use, the more information they get from their idols, being more attached to them, which forms a vicious cycle that both mentally and physically harms adolescents. Psychologically, when one is over-immersed into the internet, feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and other mental health issues

would come along [19]. For physical health, symptoms including restrained visions, stiff neck, and headaches would appear after overuse of the internet.

4. Strategies for Improving Adolescent Idol Worship

To promote a better way of idol worship and reduce the harm brought by it, actions can be taken to assist adolescents.

Beginning within families, emotional attachment between parents and children is crucial to reducing adolescents' potential occurrence of borderline-pathological idol worship. Lack of emotional attachment among adolescents contributes to their involvement in idol worship, where the stronger the demand for spiritual support from adolescents, the higher their sense of worship towards idols they would own. Hence, parents are encouraged to be thoughtful with their children's psychological aspects. Firstly, understanding the reasons behind idol worship would ease daily conversation within the family, making both children and parents more willing to share inner thoughts with each other. Then, setting boundaries between parents and children would assist in leaving private space within a family, whereas parents could support their children's worshipping with rational conditions, such as building up a budget of spending for their idols a month or an internet use limit. This action would create a safe space for adolescents to gain recognition and a sense of belonging from worshipping idols while correctly balancing between their life and idol worship, preventing them from diagnosing mental illness—obsessive-addictive disorder and borderline personality disorder.

In schools, promoting positive aesthetics and teaching critical thinking skills should be valued. Especially with peers around, adolescents are easily influenced by “what others agree” to gain a sense of acceptance. The role of the school can act as a protective factor against building up detrimental beauty standards by educating students, such as holding lectures about beauty standards and providing resources to let students get access to therapies. With an inclusive school environment, students would hold a wider perspective on “what people should look like” and “what is beauty”, which would also pull them back to the reality of what they receive on the internet shown by their idols.

With the increasing number of adolescents being exposed to media, the representation of idols in media can be limited and restricted to construct better platforms for them to receive information. For example, Douyin, a Chinese short video media platform, requires users's posts to be approved by professional auditors before publishing. Meanwhile, people can also report immediately when they think the content of posts is offensive or sensitive. This restriction should be promoted to other social media platforms as well, where everything has to be reviewed before sharing. It can help monitor the information idols share online and prevent adolescents from imitating negative behaviors from their idols. Moreover, to utilize the well-developed internet, online counseling, an alternate path for adolescents to access mental health services, should be largely introduced to adolescents. Firstly, it is time-saving and adolescents do not have to be limited to geographical factors, creating an undemanding way for adolescents to reach out to therapists. Besides, some of the online counseling can be requested to remain confidential, meaning that if adolescents are concerned about “other people's perceptions”, then that would be beneficial to them. Thus, online counseling may assist adolescents extensively.

5. Conclusions

With the emergence of idol worship, it is more important to pay attention to the psychological characteristics and impacts of teenagers in this process. By analyzing the concept and characteristics of idol worship, the factors that lead to idol worship among teenagers, and strategies to improve the

negative impact of idol worship, people can continuously establish correct values during the growth process of teenagers and actively use idol images to guide positive energy for reality and cyberspace.

In conclusion, the characteristics, factors, effects and strategies of idol worship among adolescents have been explored in this paper. Although idol worship could largely fulfill adolescents' demands, negative side effects might come along. Hence, the implementation of specific actions is crucial to be done by parents, schools, and social media platforms. Parents can consider their children's psychological aspects, such as understanding the reasons behind idol worship, setting boundaries with their children, or supporting their children's worship under reasonable conditions. Schools can prioritize promoting positive aesthetics and teaching critical thinking skills. Social media platforms can limit idol performance on the media, help monitor the information shared by idols online and prevent teenagers from imitating their idols' negative behavior. In addition, utilizing the developed internet and online consultation can also become an alternative way for teenagers to access mental health services.

This article lacks certain data to examine the limitations of the research, in the future, investigating deeper into idol worship among adolescents could be examined by collecting data from adolescents from different countries. The author hopes to investigate the statistics that show the proportion of idol worship among adolescents in different countries. The data would suggest which country has the most obvious adolescent idol worship, which might provide us with facts to identify the reasons behind the differences and how it is correlated with the factors of idol worshipping, giving insights into improving the condition of idol worshipping among adolescents.

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