Dimensional Interaction, Intimacy Building: Roles of Perceived Intimacy and Parasocial Effects on Fans' Relations with Virtual Idols

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Abstract: The appearance of virtual idols has introduced discussions about the connection with fans, even though their idols are always disembodied and fictitious. To some degree, the theory of parasocial interaction can have academic value in the virtual characters, extending beyond the impact on the real stars and fans. This study emphasizes particularly on exploring the role of intimacy in the parasocial relationship, which contains the perspective of fan psychology and youth subculture. By exerting structured interview, the survey collects records from 7 college students who are fans of popular virtual idols including A-SOUL, Luxiem, LASER, etc. The results provide insights into how fans perceive the presence of intimacy and what factors influence the levels of intimacy based on the behaviors of online media usage. Compared with the real idols and life, there are some findings showcasing characteristics of virtual idol-fan intimacy when fans have developed the parasocial interaction.

Keywords: virtual idols, fandom, parasocial interaction, intimate relationship, communication.

1. Introduction

Through a glimpse of the current technical advancements and what the future might hold, it becomes clear that digital technical applications can assist us in daily operations [1]. Released in November 2022, OpenAI's ChatGPT offers opportunities for individuals to attain human-created 'ideal' responses and moderate their satisfaction in interacting processes. Since the concept of the 'metaverse' became a futuristic craze, it has offered to revolutionise social networking, producing a sophisticated environment for interaction and engagement [2]. Alternatively, virtual humans, as the avatar of real humans in the metaverse world, are typically seen as human-like characters on a computer screen or speakers without organic behaviours [3, 4]. However, recent years have seen a rise in virtual idols - artificial creations with a high level of anthropomorphism. Such virtual idols have been spotlighted on social media and include virtual singers, such as Hatsune Miku, virtual anchor VTubers, such as Zuai and Lil miquela and the evolution of virtual bloggers like Liu Yexi and virtual idol groups, such as A-SOUL. These virtual idols have gradually attained legions of fans and provide an ideal model to these fans, partly because of their versatile talents created by digital technology [5].

The timeliness of the Internet and the availability of media allows fans to have emotional connections with their idols that are 'engaging' and 'companionable' [6]. Moreover, the large scale of the fan economy proves that fans have a burning desire for intimacy and identification with their idol [7, 8]. Some studies have emphasised lasting interpersonal effects conveyed from real idols to their fans. However, with the development of AI-driven entertainment industries, youth subcultures have undergone a transformation regarding relations between virtual idols and their fans [9]. While some studies have extensively examined parasocial relationships and intimacy development between real idols and fans, there is a paucity of research about the characteristics and motivations regarding intimacy in the interactions of virtual idols.

This research provides insights into how intimacy can be constructed, especially between virtual idols and their fans. It will also explore how parasocial relationships are cultivated between fans of virtual idols and investigate the characteristics of para-intimate interactions. Additionally, this research will analyse how interactions foster fans' perception and emotional attachment to their virtual idols.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Virtual Idols

The concept of virtual idols originated from the Japanese animation in 1987 called 'Super Dimension Fortress Macross and Robotech', in which a virtual character was known as Lynn Minmei [10]. Since then, the appearance of Hatsune Miku between late 2007 and early 2008 has reached an important milestone and has been welcomed by the public [11]. In general, virtual idols are virtual characters generated by animation and computer technology, who impress the audience with their outstanding performances. They still depend on aspects of biological bodies, for example, a human voice produced by synthesising technology, gestures collected by motion capture, as well as facial expressions created by computer-generated imagery (CGI) technology. Previous studies have illustrated humans' inherent tendency to accept and engage in reality we know to be fictitious [12]. Therefore, virtual idols are avatars, equated with 'perfect images' that can be constructed by fans for their sake [5]. In the case of a match between a need and a feature of the virtual idols, reality substitution will occur because unsatisfied needs drive all human beings [13].

2.2. Intimacy

The development of intimacy can be traced from Anthony Giddens who used the term 'the pure relationship' to describe a sharing of inner thoughts and feelings [14]. This concept emphasises the value of underlying sentiment for individual references, extending beyond the consanguineous domain. Therefore, people can claim and achieve intimacy with literal crowds of strangers, generating a fleeting sense of intimacy between strangers mediated by digital communication technology. In terms of interpersonal intimacy, studies commonly describe an intimate state as being at the core of the most fulfilling, affirming, and gratifying human social exchanges, which also include digital relationships with embodied conversational agents [15].

Currently, technical devices of media themselves are exploited to create illusions of intimacy [16]. It is possible for fans to video chat one-to-one with idols and regard themselves as a 'lover of the idol'. One of these forms can involve sexual fantasies and the other form relates to fans treating their favourite characters as daughters or little sisters [17]. This phenomenon demonstrates the dwindling disparity compared to embodied relationships, which is described as a 'para-intimate relationship' between fans and idols in cyberspace [18].

2.3. Parasocial Relationships (PSRs)

The term 'parasocial relationship' describes the way an audience develops emotional dependence on the media characters they know and love, maintaining a one-sided social relationship similar to that between friends or lovers in reality [19]. Though the concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) proposed by Horton and Wohl referred to mass media like radio and television, such as newscasters and show hosts, this 'personae' was later expanded to idols [20] and even virtual influencers [21]. Previous findings have shown that people recognise the information and change their attitudes in response to high trust when a strong parasocial relationship is manifested [22, 23]. It also has been justified that PSRs can strengthen the feeling of connection and community and promote the thoughts of personal identity with less prejudice [24].

Some findings have linked fans' motives behind their parasocial relationships to 'escapism and compensation', 'identity acquisition' and 'self-achievement' [25]. According to the reality substitution model, people are occupied with a large portion of virtual engagement so that they can transfer their attention away from reality [13]. Furthermore, some studies have focused on how the perceived interpersonal attractiveness of virtual idols and the loneliness caused by fans directly contribute to fan community participation through the mediating effect of parasocial relationships (PSRs) [26].

Empowered by virtual reality technology, discussions about interactive rituals in the context of virtual idols and fans have received significant attention. Modern intimacy has undergone a revolution in the development of young groups in Chinese subculture. In general, parasocial interactions have been applied to define a series of real-life media celebrities while they have rarely been applied to virtual idols. At present, academic studies continue to investigate multi-faceted perspectives on virtual idols such as fan economy, new media and cultural communication [27]. However, there is insufficient research describing the relationship between idols and their fans, and the connection between intimacy and parasocial interaction. Therefore, this paper aims to elucidate these relationships and their implications through qualitative methods. After sifting through in-depth interview transcripts, this study seeks to fill the niche in the sociocultural field and inspire further academic interest in the drivers of fans' emotional responses.

3. Research Design

The approach used in this study includes a qualitative method formed based on the technique of collecting relevant data obtained from the natural situation. This structured interview reveals the thoughts of virtual idols' fans and explains what motivations are behind their worship behaviours. In this study, the researcher chose 7 university students as representatives of young fans' groups and figured out the uniqueness of the individuals that can be difficult to quantify. The participants present a mixture of following periods, from the entry level fan who has followed their idol for six months to the senior level fan who has followed their idol for five years. The virtual idols included A-SOUL, Lueixm, SIXIWANZI, TINGCHAOGE, LASER and MANTA. Table 1 shows the frequency and the platform the participants used for watching their virtual idols:

Table 1: Respondent information

Order	Sex	Age	Education	Favourite virtual idols	Follow period	Frequency	Platform
1	female	21	undergraduate	A-SOUL-Jiaran	3 years	everyday	Bilibili
2	female	20	undergraduate	A-SOUL-Nailin	Over 3 years	everyday	

Table 1: (continued).

3	male	22	undergraduate	SIXIWANZI	1 year	almost everyday	
4	female	19	undergraduate	LASER, MANTA	Three and a half years	the same as the idol's updates	Cat ear FM
5	female	21	undergraduate	Luxiem	2 years	everyday	YouTube Bilibili
6	female	19	undergraduate	Luxiem-VOX, IKE	Over 5 years	everyday	YouTube Bilibili
7	female	21	undergraduate	TINGCHAOGE	6 months	6 days a week	TikTok

4.   Research Findings

4.1.   The Formation of Fans' Parasocial Interactions

In our research, fans pointed out different ideas about virtual idols, which also correspond to previous studies. There are five major factors that influence PSIs: attraction, uses and gratifications, loneliness, individual differences and viewing time [28]. One participant noted that 'Actually, I start watching Lueixm for the practical purpose of learning English on YouTube. When I first browsed video clips about them, I was surprised at their perfect looks and talents in singing and dancing.' This quotation links to how fans often attach the greatest importance to virtual idols' attractiveness, especially for those with a pleasing appearance or an appealing voice, qualities that are rare in people. Additionally, most fans are inclined to stay connected with their virtual idols at a high frequency; one participant noted 'Since I fall in love with them, I always check their updated news every day. The link is quite tight. I can share everything with him and keep no secrets from each other. I also love their interesting personalities when they share some videos when playing games and joking with other members.'

Every fan treats their virtual idol as a multifaceted subject; fans consider their virtual idol with depth and wit, mainly being influenced by the personality of their idol, which plays an essential role in para-social relationships. One participant stated 'We meet each other via live streaming four times a week. Every time I see her, it means exchanging our hearts for sincerity. She is just like my careful sister. I can watch her playing electronic games and eating a meal.' Another fan said 'My idol is assigned to be a law student who has a pursuit on dreams. One member of the virtual group is a boy who suffered from being bullied by classmates but he is very nice.' It can also be seen that virtual idols sustain closer interactions with fans because of plots primarily related to reality, for example, one fan related: 'I think it's more like an one-sided interaction. I also need real-life friends to company and relax together.' Regarding the parasocial interacting process, fans are actually conscious about being an outsider, with one participant noting 'I once felt painful that she never became my girlfriend and supported my whole life. After a struggle for a long time, I gradually come to persuade myself of accepting this truth.'

4.2.   The Virtual Idols' Influence on Fans' Real Lives

Some survey results indicate that individuals who have online, virtual relationships feel less intimacy in their face-to-face relationships [29]. However, in these interviews, individuals remarked that 'Whether I am entirely obsessed with virtual idols or not, my roommates and I always get along very well. I would like to recommend some amazing videos showing my idols' performances to people

around me.' Another participant said 'Maybe virtual idols can be a good topic when I get in touch with others. In this respect, I think it can promote relationship in real life.' No fans tried to escape from reality or regarded virtual idols as a remedy for a solitary life. This evidence contradicts the argument that individuals are driven by loneliness to interact with their virtual lovers [26].

Due to other real-life activities, fans may also be occupied with activities, such as school assignments, and find life too busy, for example one participant stated 'I remember I did not have spare time to catch virtual idols when I was in high school.' Most of the interviewed participants indicated occasionally feeling bored when being in a state of isolation for a long time; this situation should be a major motivation for fans to approach their virtual idols and seek satisfaction. Moreover, one participant shared her concerns about real relationships, finding it inevitable she would have to deal with interpersonal conflicts. Others presented an unwillingness to communicate with real-life people, for example, noting 'I am not passionate about social contacts in real life.' Another said 'I think I am a person who draws energy from innermost being.' Yet another participant stated 'For me, I do not mind staying alone or joining a group of friends. If I do not intend to be out, I just watch virtual idols on my phone at that moment.'

Therefore, these causes can be attributed to personality preference and the schedule varying from person to person. Additionally, the characteristics of channels also satisfy various targeted communities. Based on observation, virtual idols groups have different orientations: (1) Focus on radio programs on the platform of Cat ear FM e.g. MANTA, LASER (2) Focus on dancing and singing videos on the platform of Bilibili or YouTube e.g. A-SOUL, SIXIWANZI, Lueixm (3) Focus on live streaming on the platform of TikTok e.g. TINGCHAOGE.

When it comes to further interaction, a fan expressed that 'I do not want a devirtualization for virtual idols. They'd better not show up in reality.' It is a similar opinion to another fan, who said 'I always divide the two-dimensional and three-dimensional world clearly so I have no interest in maintaining private connection with virtual idols.' Most fans posit that the reason they are captivated by virtual idols lies in a feeling of unconstrained fiction.

4.3. Features of Para-Intimate Relationships

People are able to build relationships with virtual objects and 'feel authentic love' [30]. Taking A-SOUL as an example, their fans are accustomed to giving an intimate appellation, such as 'my wife' or 'my sister', reflecting a familial level of intimacy. Fans are allowed to appreciate the sexual traits of their virtual idols, in line with their ideal identities, and thus respond more to emotional appeals. Therefore, a fan-idol relationship refers to a relationship in which the fan regards the idol as his or her partner and lavishes attention on their idols. These romantic attachments are produced and developed in the imagination of the fan and exhibit the characteristics of lust, in line with the work of Giddens [31]. However, this sort of close intimacy between fans and their idols can encounter threats, sometimes showcasing their vulnerability.

This investigation has shown how some fans express concerns about trusting virtual idols when scandals involving their idols are exposed. One fan noted 'At first, I believe in A-SOUL very much. It is so moving to see how they practise dancing and aim for a super idol group. But since 2022, there are some reliability problems happening continuously.' Another said 'A member of the A-SOUL called Xiangwan announced withdrawal from the group in April in this year. Actually, I also know that virtual idols may not always show up in the public eye, which brings me a huge shock and take virtual idols with a grain of salt and scepticism.'

Another veteran fan represented her surprise at how suddenly virtual idols receive criticism overnight; they cited that 'I can remember a virtual idol abused his fans because of some matters related to CP fans.' Here CP refers to the pairing of two or more figures as lovers in fans' romantic fantasies [32]. A fan noted that 'When I was a CP fan of VOX and IKE, some people saying they

were not a true couple made me so annoyed.' This study can confirm that fans involved in parasocial relationships experience negative impacts, such as obsessive behaviour and stress from negative comments by other users on the platform [33].

5.   Discussion

5.1.   Ritualised Interaction: Virtual Idols' Worship and Attachment

In a sense, two-dimensional characters seem more inclusive for fans than three-dimensional people. Interacting with virtual idols not only raises no concerns about the stability of idols' good looks and performance standard, but also avoids conflicts with real people. When describing bonding with their virtual idols, one fan said that 'A-SOUL-Nailin often care about us, interacting with fans in the comment section and bullet screen. That makes me feel a mutual connection and reliability. I trust her more deeply!' This proves that the more celebrities share with their fans, the higher the level of fan participation in para-social relationships [34], which presents similarities with real-life idols.

Moreover, virtual idols may not be equipped with a solution to the problem of scepticism [35], which can become an external risk to intimacy. There are three aspects that can weaken intimacy: (1) dishonourable incidents by the virtual idols' agents e.g. identity exposure (2) disrespect for fans e.g. verbal abuse (3) uncomfortable fanbase communities e.g. dark humour. Among these situations, the toughest challenge to confront is an 'Open Box' - the divulging of all information about the virtual idols' agents, namely the voice cast. This external factor demonstrates the impact of traumatic events which promotes the process of 'breaking up' [36].

5.2.   Virtual Idols: Self-Awareness Projection

Every fan in this study has developed a regular browsing habit of their idols' information, normally staying connected with their newest creations. One reason for this habit is to maintain a mistaken type of love, which makes them feel 'in love with love', or 'in love with the feeling of being in love' [37]. It is noticeable that fans' intrinsic personalities are a dominant factor which controls the intensity of the parasocial interaction. Even though participants in this study spent an average total of 500 RMB on their virtual idols, one fan notes how some fans have competed with fellow fans and spent almost one million for a personal concert by their favourite virtual singer. This competition to encourage fan consumption has been termed 'emotional capitalism', targeting an active fan community, which can provide lucrative business opportunities [38]. However, how virtual idols shape their behaviours depends on the person.

Additionally, virtual idols who attract audience groups, especially groups of fans aged roughly 20, may not be considered an important way to project self-image, obtain identity marks and create self-value [39]. Fans from younger generations consider that leisure time spent on their idols seldom occupies their core emotional and cognitive system, for example, one participant noted 'I think my mind is complete and I do not need virtual idols to give in-depth supports.' Additionally, several fans describe the importance of virtual idols when they feel bored or depressed. Moreover, a number of participants noted that if their favourite virtual idol were to quit show business, they would feel saddened for a while and seek alternatives. This concern results from a certainty that every virtual idol will confront an ending, namely 'Graduation'.

6.   Conclusion

The intimate interaction between idols and their fans is mainly influenced by the virtual idols' exhibited characteristics, ranging from their appearance to their voice, which offers fans different imaginary identities towards their idols such as lover or sister. Based on the reactions of fans, this

study believes that a fan's sense of intimacy is affected by the platform types and their idols' role. Virtual idols not only dance or sing via video channels, they also transform into actors or actresses in online plays. In a fan's eyes, the barrier between the virtual world behind the screen and reality cannot reduce the sense of intimacy. Instead, they tend to enjoy leaving comments, watching video clips or live streaming within a two-dimensional space. It seems unnecessary for them to extend interaction into the offline world, which has no effect on intimacy acquisition.

Virtual idols' fans can recognise authentic social identities and distinguish boundaries whenever they become enthusiastic for a virtual idol. All fans agree that virtual idols cannot replace physical interaction in daily life. Even though they may call an idol 'Wife' or see them as friends, much discussion of this topic is confined to the entertainment value of the idol. As operated by the cast, the emotions spreading over from virtual idols' agents are influential, combining physical reality with the virtual world. The study presents several arguments and discoveries into the role intimacy plays in shaping fans' perceptions towards virtual idols and how parasocial interaction is cultivated within the scope of virtual idols. Integrated into current academic development, these findings help to explore the psychological changes emerging from the fans of virtual idols, and links back to findings from previous studies.

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