From the Phenomenon of Virtual Idol Overconsumption in Generation Z - The Simple Mediating Role of Fear of Missing out in Parasocial Attachment

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Abstract. In a highly technologized society, the development of virtual technology has become a key point of competition in various countries. In recent years, virtual technology has gradually replaced the life mode that the public has been living in, and the commercial marketing of virtual idols is a derivative product based on the resource reintegration of "virtual technology + idol industry". However, as far as the current academic research and discussion on virtual idols are concerned, most of them still stay on the cultural interpretation of virtual idols. Therefore, this paper analyzes the data by collecting the consumption data of virtual idols from the Generation Z group and applying the Cognitive-Affective-Conative theory to the data. It is found that in the prevalence of virtual idols, the proposed social relationship gradually promotes fans' over-consumption behavior through various marketing means, and the proposed social relationship is also directly related to the fear of missing out due to the factor of personal imaginative coloring; The glue that holds fans and virtual idols together is the fear of missing out on the suggested social relationship, which leads to excessive consumption behaviors that followers believe are appropriate. The study's findings will be able to further examine the conflicts between marketing and payment in the virtual world while also reflecting the youthful population's acceptance, psychological traits, and behavioral reactions to extreme technology and virtualization.

Keywords: Virtual Idol Overspending, Parasocial Relationships, Missing Out On Fear, Generation Z

1 Introduction

As the concept of meta-universes takes the world by storm, in China, virtual technology is merging into the realm of popular entertainment culture at an alarming rate. From paper comics, TV animation to virtual idols taking the world by storm, the marketing strategies of the entertainment market have gradually made contemporary young people

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place great value expectations on mass media. In China, the government has emphasized the need for virtual technology applications to meet the "new needs and expectations" of a large number of people, and thus the popularity of virtual idols has made breakthroughs in response to the trend of the times [1]. As of 2023, the core market size of China's virtual idol was 20.52 billion yuan, and the market size driven by it grew to 333.47 billion yuan, according to the pertinent statistics. This indicates that virtual technology has brought China's enormous development potential [2]. In the future virtual technology will become a powerful cornerstone of innovation in China's entertainment sector, and the commercial value of virtual idols will further reach record highs.

At present, a relatively complete virtual idol industry system has been formed in China, and virtual idols, as the object of worship for many Generation Z youth, can provide a lot of emotional value attached to products on the basis of creating marketing revenue. From upstream manufacturers running virtual technology to midstream merchants' social media marketing of virtual idols to downstream ports' means of deriving cash from virtual idols. A large fan base gets the same satisfaction as a physical idol and experiences different visual effects under the "packaging and marketing" of virtual idols. Compared to the risk of "collapse" that may exist for real-life idols, China's current virtual idol industry has achieved better results, with "Sixi Wanzi_Official, A-SOUL_Official & EOE" all emphasizing and highlighting the differences between virtual idols and real idols, while businessmen's "emotional marketing" has invariably influenced fan groups' awareness of and reliance on virtual idols and their consumption behaviors. The differences between virtual idols and real idols have been emphasized and highlighted, and the "emotional marketing" of businesses has gradually and invisibly influenced the fan base's understanding of, reliance on, and consumption behavior towards virtual idols.

In contemporary society, the volume of research on the consumption psychology of fan groups in the virtual idol industry is relatively small. There is a dearth of research and discussion on the phenomenon of overconsumption that occurs among the audience of the virtual idol industry in order to pursue more of the emotional value provided by the idols, and many studies are still at the level of discussing the development of virtual idol culture. Observing the speed of development of the current virtual idol industry, one can understand the importance and necessity of studying the consumer psychology of this fan base. This paper is based on Cognitive-Affective-Conative theory, a theory that has in-depth examples of application in the fields of education, marketing, and counseling. Based on the emotional marketing strategy of the virtual idol industry, customers' "fear of missing out" and "over-consumption behavior" are examined, as well as the effects of the suggested socializing phenomena on consumers, to sort out the logic of the young people of Generation Z's emotional payment experience. For the administration and marketing model of the virtual idol sector in China and even globally, this method of comprehending the logic of Generation Z youth's emotional paying experience will be extremely important.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Virtual Idol Research

Since virtual idol research is an emerging field in the last five years, there is less relevant literature or research, and there is currently more attention on virtual idols in China and Japan. Among them, most of the studies are related to the cultural construction of fan communities and anthropomorphic social interactions between virtual idols and users. The behavioural perspective of the majority of the literature on virtual idol audience behaviour is mostly limited to purchase intention and intention to use (e.g., Gerlich; Kim et al.) [3,4]. As for emotional attachment, Liu & Wang combined brand attachment and media role attachment scales in their study to design a relevant scale for Chinese Vtuber fan communities and fan psychology [5]. As for the research between virtual idols and user consumption behavior, there is still a certain gap, although there are also studies on the consumption behavior of virtual idol users, but most of the studies set, for example, the design of bounty interactions and anchor interactions as moderating variables to study the role of the moderating variables, for example, Dibble analyzes the user's willingness to pay on Twitch platform by taking the bounty special effects and pop-up special effects as moderating variables to study their role in promoting user consumption behavior [6].

2.2 Development of Virtual Idol Culture Industry

Since the rapid development of the idol industry, most of the companies that have created mass stars have utilized industry combination to accelerate the speed of idol marketing. The same is true for the development of the virtual idol culture industry, as Dow & Yang show in their study that digital culture combined with multiple industries will be able to create new types of technology and business models [7]. From the virtual idol building strategy, In order to boost the effect of virtual idols, Yu et al. contended that the following traits of virtual idols—physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, homogeneity, and exposure—are crucial in evoking fans' emotional and social reactions [8].

2.3 The Emotional Attachment of Idol Fans

Emotional bonding is an important element between idols and fans, which drives merchandising or a broader collective response. Zhang focused on the emotional differences between idol dolls and male and female fans in her study. This author found that most female buyers were mom fans who viewed their roles with their idols like a mother and a son, and that male fans who purchased idol dolls were. It may be subjected to more externally given judgment because it is different from society's expectations of masculinity [9]. For the creation of brand loyalty, Chen et al. argued that idol association is a channel to accelerate the brand to build awareness, fans will connect emotionally by following their idols, this emotional attachment will be able to provide fans to

imitate the idol's behaviors, and the brand will be able to achieve greater gains with the interaction of these factors [10].

2.4 Research on theFear of Missing Out among Celebrity Fans

A related study by Novalika & Kartasasmita stated that fear of missing out is not positively associated with quality of life in Korean pop music fan base, the higher the level of fear of missing out of idols by fans, the lower their quality of life instead, and vice versa, which may be related to the development of the fans during adolescence [11]. Ciersya et al. study indicated that the higher the fan's contribution in the fan circle will have a deeper fear of missing out of information related to the idol [12].

2.5 Cognitive-Affective-Conative theory

In their study, Ding & Lee verified that consumers' "perceptions" and "values" influence their intention to purchase goods and demonstrated that consumer-centered services would enhance consumer psychological empowerment [13]. Kim & Chen interpreted the theory in terms of the experience of tourists in holy places, and the results showed that people's spirituality and initiatives would change the satisfaction and loyalty of the pilgrimage experience [14]. This shows the influence of the cognitive-emotional intentionality theory in life when it comes to individuals performing many behaviors.

3 Method

3.1 Research Objects

The object of this research was the virtual idol audience on the Bilibili website with birth years between 1995 and 2005. This research distributed questionnaires to the virtual idol fan community on the Bilibili website.

3.2 Questionnaire Designs

Parasocial Emotional Attachment. Parasocial relationship is considered to be a psychological phenomenon of one-way emotional connection, which usually occurs between an individual and a media figure through the media [15]. This relationship is characterised by a lack of two-way interaction. On the basis of parasocial relationship theory, Cohen proposed media role attachment in his study. Media role attachment refers to an individual's strong emotional identification with and dependence on a fictional media role, which is specifically expressed as empathy for the fate of this role [16].

The research used the Media Role Attachment Scale developed by Cohen scale of virtual Youtuber parasocial interaction. Since the object of this study was virtual idols,

which were consistent with the concept of media roles, all the entries in the reference scale were replaced with virtual idols in the research for the accuracy.

There were 6 questions on this variable, 3 measuring parasocial interactions and 3 measuring attachment. It was scored on a 5-point scale with subjects reporting on themselves. Scores ranged from 1 to 5 from strongly disagree to fully agree respectively. The mean of the scores for each dimension was calculated. The higher the mean score, the higher the subject's level of parasocial attachment.

Fear of Missing Out. Przybylski et al explained fear of missing out as a widespread anxiety [17]. This anxiety arises from the character's fear that others are experiencing some valuable or meaningful experience.

The fear of missing out scale developed by Przybylski et al was used in the research. In order to be consistent with the research objects, the entry 'friends' was replaced with 'virtual idol' in all questions.

There were 5 questions on this variable. It was scored on a 5-point scale with subjects reporting on themselves. Scores ranged from 1 to 5 strongly disagree to fully agree respectively. The meaning of the scores for each dimension was calculated. The higher the fear of missing out, the more the test takers showed high mean scores.

Excessive Buying Intentions. Excessive buying intention refers to a strong desire to consume that arises in an individual, especially when it is non-essential and exceeds actual needs [18]. It is characterised by irrational drive and the accompanying use of consumer credit products.

The Impulse Buying tendency scale proposed by Rook & Fisker and the Consumer credit usage scale proposed by Norvilitis were used [19,20]. In order to better fit the research object, the research adjusted the entry of 'consumption behaviour' in the original scale to 'rewarding for virtual idols'. Rewarding virtual idols is the most common of virtual idol consumption behaviours.

There were 4 questions on this variable. It was scored on a 5-point scale with subjects reporting on themselves. Scores ranged from 1 to 5 strongly disagree to fully agree respectively. The meaning of the scores for each dimension was calculated. The level of subjects' excessive buying intentions was proportional to the mean score.

Demographic Variables. A background investigation of the subjects was carried out through a questionnaire. Demographic information such as gender and education level of the subjects was known, where males were 0 and females were 1.

The questionnaire was divided into 2 parts: questions corresponding to variables and demographic information. The first part was the questions corresponding to 3 variables and consists of 15 questions (Table 1).

Table 1. The Questionnaire Design and Reference

Variable	Code	Question	Resources
Parasocial emotional attachment	YL1	I browse the posting of the virtual idol activily.	Parasocial Interaction with YouTubers: Does Sensory Appeal in the YouTubers' Video Influences Purchase Intention? [21] Parasocial break-up from favorite television characters: The role of attachment styles and relationship intensity [16]
	YL2	I like the posting of the virtual idol.	
	YL3	I comment on the postings of the virtual idol.	
	YL4	I watch the virtual idol's live broadcast.	
	YL5	I feel happy or sad about what happened to the idol.	
	YL6	The virtual idol makes me feel less lonely.	
Fear of missing out	CS1	I'm afraid that other fans will have more exciting experiences, rewards than me.	Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. Computers in Human Behavior [17]
	CS2	I feel annoyed when I miss a live streaming of the virtual idol.	
	CS3	I continue to follow the virtual idol's news during weekdays.	
	CS4	I am upset when I don't get all the information I need about the idol.	
	CS5	I can't live well when I'm not sure about the idol's current situation.	
Excessive buying intentions	CQ1	I often reward the idol.	Normative influences on impulsive buying behavior [19] Personality Factors, Money Attitudes, Financial Knowledge, and Credit-Card Debt in College Students [20]
	CQ2	I often reward the idol on impulse.	
	CQ3	I may still reward the idol for important live streaming (e.g. birthday parties) even if I am short of money.	
	CQ4	I will use consumer credit products to reward the idol.	

3.3 Research Model

The questionnaire design was based on the Cognitive-Affective-Conative theory model proposed by Rosenberg et al. [22]. The theory suggested that attitudes consist of 3 core dimensions: cognitive, affective and intentional. These 3 core dimensions interact with each other to influence the final behaviour. This theoretical model was used in marketing as well as in consumer behaviour research currently, especially for analysing user decisions such as purchasing behaviour.

3.4 Research Process and Data Analysis

SPSS was used for data pre-processing, descriptive statistics, and to perform t-tests and correlation analyses on the variables. Finally, mediation between variables was analysed.

3.5 Research Hypothesis

According to the Cognitive-Affective-Conative theory model, 3 hypotheses were proposed.

h1: Positive correlation between virtual idol parasocial emotional attachment and excessive buying intentions.

h2: Positive correlation between virtual idol parasocial emotional attachment and fear of missing out.

h3: Virtual idol parasocial emotional attachment influences excessive buying intentions through the mediation of fear of missing out.

Combining the 3 hypotheses, the theoretical model was completed (Fig. 1).

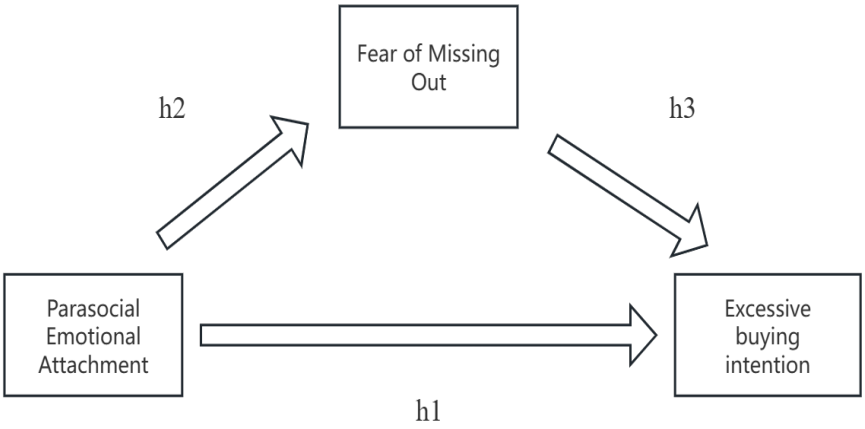

Fig. 1. The Theoretical Model

4 Results and Data Analysis

4.1 Data Collection

Questionnaires were distributed and collected through SoJump. A total of 205 questionnaires were distributed, 159 after excluding invalid questionnaires. The recovery rate of the questionnaires was 77.6%. The questionnaire showed that the majority of respondents were students, with little difference in the number of males and females. The results were consistent with the characteristics of the actual target group of virtual idol fan communities and could better achieve the purpose of the research (Table 2).

Table 2. Sample Descriptive Statistics

Basic Characteristic		Sample statistics	Percentage / %
Genders	Male	78	49.1
	Female	81	50.9
Ages	20-21	26	16.3
	22-24	52	32.7
	25-27	59	37.1
	28-30	22	13.8
Education attainment	Junior high school and below	2	1.3
	Junior to senior high school	30	18.9
	University	101	63.5
	Postgraduate and above	26	16.4
Careers	Students	78	49.1
	Public servant	9	0.05
	Employee	19	0.1
	Else	53	0.3

4.2 Reliability and Validity Analyses

The research used SPSS to conduct the reliability test (Table 3). The data was shown as: KMO=0.929>0.9, bartlett's test of sphericity (P<0.001) passed. The cronbach's alpha of the Questionnaire is 0.943>0.7. The good reliability of the questionnaire was verified.

Table 3. Reliability Test

KMO	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Cronbach's Alpha
0.929	<0.001	0.943

4.3 Correlation Test

The correlation test table (Table 4) showed that parasocial emotional attachment was significantly correlated with both fear of missing out and excessive buying intentions.

Among them, fear of missing out and excessive buying intentions have the highest Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.750 with a significance of 0.000. The results indicated a strong positive correlation between them.

Table 4. The Correlation Test

		Parasocial emotional attachment	Fear of missing out	Excessive buying intentions
Parasocial emotional attachment	Pearson Correlation	1	.746	.660
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000	.000

Fear of missing out	Pearson Correlation	.746	1	.750
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000		.000
Excessive buying intentions	Pearson Correlation	.660	.750	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.000	

4.4 Mediation Effects Test

The model in the Process plug-in developed by Hayes was used to standardise the variables. The research put them into equations to test the mediating effect of the mediating variable between the variables. The regression coefficients were tested for significance using the Bootstrapping method (5000 repeated samples). Estimates of the parameters were obtained along with 95% confidence intervals, with the effect being significant if the confidence interval did not contain 0 (Table 5).

The results showed that parasocial emotional attachment significantly and positively predicted excessive buying intentions (β=0.946, t=11.014, p<0.001). In addition, parasocial emotional attachment significantly and positively predicted fear of missing out (β=0.995, t=14.061, p<0.001). When both parasocial emotional attachment and fear of missing out were added, parasocial emotional attachment still had a significant predictive effect on excessive buying intentions (β=0.324, t=2.949, p<0.001). Fear of missing out was a significant positive predictor of accessive buying intentions (β=0.622, t=7.488, p<0.001).

Table 5. Bootstrap Intermediary Effects Test1

Regression equation（N=159）				Significance of coefficients		
		R	R^2	F	β	T
Excessive buying intentions	Parasocial emotional attachment	0.660	0.436	121.306	0.946	11.014
Fear of missing out	Parasocial emotional attachment	0.746	0.556	196.478	0.995	14.016
Excessive buying intentions	Parasocial emotional attachment	0.765	0.585	109.969	0.324	2.949
	Fear of missing out				0.622	7.488

4.5 Hypotheses

The research used the Bootstrap method to conduct the test for mediating effects (Table 6).

The total effect of parasocial emotional attachment on excessive buying intentions was significant with an effect value of 0.946(BootLLCI 0.776, BootULCI 1.116). h1 was verified. The effect of Fear of missing out on Excessive buying intentions was significant with an effect value of 0.327（BootLLCI 0.108, BootULCI 0.546). h2 was verified. Parasocial emotional attachment →fear of missing out →excessive buying intentions was significant with an effect value of 0.619(BootLLCI 0.435, BootULCI 0.818). h3 was verified.

This result led to the conclusion that all 3 hypotheses (h1, h2, h3) proposed in this research were valid.

Table 6. Bootstrap Intermediary Effects Test2

Hypothesis	Effects	Roots	Effect size	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	P
h1	Total effect	Parasocial emotional attachment →Excessive buying intentions	0.946	0.776	1.116	0.000
h2	Direct effect	Fear of missing out →Excessive buying intentions	0.327	0.108	0.546	0.004
h3	Indirect effect	Parasocial emotional attachment →Fear of missing out →Excessive buying intentions	0.619	0.435	0.818	0.000

5 Conclusion

According to this study centered on the impact of virtual idols on Generation Z youth, the numerical value of the results of this research can be observed that for Generation Z youth who follow virtual idols, the paid products related to virtual idols may generate a direct or indirect willingness to over-consume in terms of the effect of the anthropomorphic socio-emotional attachments. Some consumers may also be influenced by the psychological dimension of fear of missing out and therefore have overspending behaviors. These two behavioral phenomena can be reasonably explained by the following social facts. First of all, the virtual idol is an emerging entertainment mode combining high-tech and social entertainment, and the characteristics and operation mode of a virtual idol can be seen in the shadow of a real idol in the already popular idol industry chain. The same marketing model gives Gen Z youth a familiar yet novel paying experience, and creates the same psychological impact and consumer behavior that has been seen in the real idol experience. This study bridges the gap between consumer behavior and the heart of virtual idols in the academic world, firstly, it verifies the value of virtual idols for the youth of Generation Z. From the level of fear of missing out, we can get that the desire of the youth of Generation Z for emotional products has risen to the level of virtual technology, and it is beneficial for academics to study the acceptance degree

of the youth group for high technology and high virtualization and predict their willingness to pay, which will be of great help to academics. This study will help academics to study the acceptance of high technology and high virtualization among the youth and predict their willingness to pay. Lastly, there are still some survey limitations in this study. For example, it revealed that virtual idol followers are generally ashamed of using borrowing and lending products and are not glad to reveal their inner thoughts and secrets, so when filling out the questionnaire, it does not naturally reflect the characteristics of the fans when they are overconsuming here, which will be further investigated in the future based on the foundation of over-consumption. They might also answer the questionnaire wrongly or dodge the questions. In addition, this study is based on research and surveys in China, so the same testing method may produce different results in other regions or countries, and the emergence of more internationally representative virtual idol groups in the future will provide a broader application of the results of this research field.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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